

# Take 5

read  
these  
lips

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Edited by

Evecho  
and  
Linda Lorenzo

read  
these  
lips

Volume Five

August 2011



Painting  
John George Brown 1831-1913

Cover painting by  
Sir William Orpen 1878-1931

# Take 5

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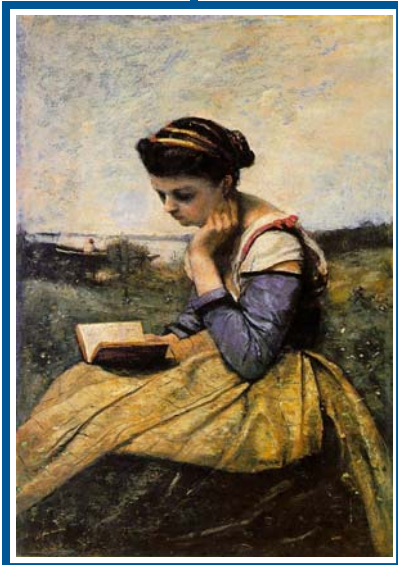
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**Edited by Evecho and Linda Lorenzo**

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Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot 1796-1875

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Ramon Casas i Carbo 1866-1932



## Foreword

We're delighted to be here in our fifth year, with a new and stunningly beautiful volume of *Read These Lips*. As with previous volumes, in *Take 5* we will travel through all kinds of stories from lesbians with a point of view. We will discover and rediscover ways in which women connect—through identity, through pleasure or through shared experience—as we continue to relay lesbian experiences through our own literature.

It's impossible to know our boundaries until we have tested them. Frequently, we're astonished at how easily we move past them, but only when we look back. In making *Read These Lips*, we feel lucky to be able to receive and present more lesbian stories each year and with such variety.

In *Take 5*, we welcome the entertaining and thought-provoking writings of Adrienne Fleming, Angel Propps, Deborah La Garbanza, Doreen Perrine, Elaine Burnes, Gill McKnight, Ina Bak, Joan Annsfire, J.E. Knowles, Lee Lynch, Natasha Carthew, Rachel Green, R.G. Emanuelle and Vanessa Stewart.

The gorgeous paintings in this volume invite you to take a moment to enjoy women and literature, together. The team at RTL wish you good reading.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emeche".

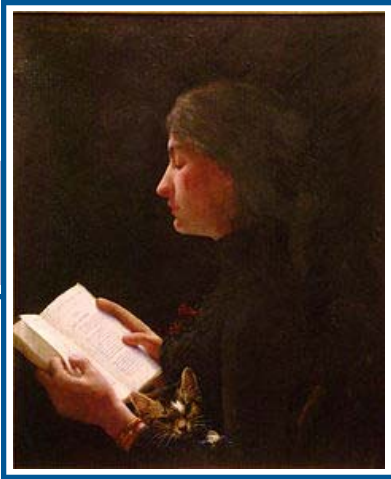
Editor-in-Chief, August 2011

*For my darling Carol, who teaches me to enjoy life in spite of myself.*



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## *Amputated Finger of Fate*

*Vanessa Stewart*

As usual, I inhaled a bottle of wine  
while I cooked the mac 'n cheese  
with the cut-up hot dogs  
that looked like chubby little men  
bobbing helplessly in an orange pond.  
*Orange you glad I didn't say wieners? The kids laugh.*

Alone in my despair  
I puffed puffed away in secret.  
When 8 pm came  
I would run to the bathroom  
spritz my hair  
scrub my hands  
change my clothes  
hold my breath  
close my eyes  
and for a blissful moment  
it all disappeared.  
Myself included. Myself excluded.



## *Amputated Finger of Fate*

Then, when the garage door opened  
I wanted to jump in the silver Jag  
they called it platinum because it's so much more  
pretentious than just saying silver,  
and drive down Vasco Road going 90 miles per hour  
and jerk my birthday present off a cliff  
screaming my brains out in terror and relief  
all the way to the shattered bottom.  
Hell waited for me. Heaven waited for me.

I longed for a life different than the one  
I had vowed to live until my death  
while over three thousand nights  
I was held captive by the shackle on my finger.  
Too damn scared to take it off and see if I still had a  
fucking finger left in that spot. Too much of a pussy  
to find out if any part of me was alive. Until the day  
My amputated finger pointed to you.

I poked you—*Hey, hey you! I feel like I  
know you. Like I've met you in my future.*  
And I was right. Here you are.  
With your mossy stoned-looking eyes  
you faced the camera, challenging it  
with a look of smirky boredom,

## *Amputated Finger of Fate*

*What-the-fuck-ever, world,  
take the picture already.*

*Oh, hello there, Fine Ass.*

And you heard me when I frowned.  
You loved me before you even knew my name, or  
if I was real.

You let me thaw out your giant stone,  
although it held together your rib cage  
with your ruin and your salvation.  
And then, on bended knee you presented me with  
your hopes, so neatly layered on soft silken pillows.

You carried me on your strong shoulders  
while you placed petals under my falling tears.  
You charged in like a Trojan  
a rose in one hand  
a machete in the other.  
You set me free.

## *Vanessa Stewart*



Vanessa Stewart is pursuing an MFA in creative nonfiction at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. She is a mother to two teenage boys, Taylor and Connor. Vanessa works as a freelance editor and substitute elementary school teacher and will begin a teaching fellowship in the English Department at Saint Mary's College in the Fall of 2011. She is currently working on a book of nonfiction.

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## Where

Adrienne Fleming

You shall leave everything you love most dearly:  
this is the arrow that the bow of exile  
shoots first. You are to know the bitter taste  
of others' bread, how salt it is, and know  
how hard a path it is for one who goes  
descending and ascending others' stairs.  
And what will be most hard for you to bear  
will be the scheming, senseless company  
that is to share your fall into this valley.

(Alighieri, Dante. *Divine Comedy*,  
Para. XVII 55-63, trans. Mandelbaum)

She opened the window in the front room of the house and listened to the night's traffic. She'd had sex with a woman, for God's sake. Where are the rules anyway? Where is it written that Landscape and Still Life are the legitimate forms of Art? Her shoulder hurt like hell. South Africa had trounced Australia at cricket once again last evening. What did it all matter? Where would it all end?

#

Margo had misunderstood love. It was not until it had gone, long gone, that she realised perhaps, that you had to work at it. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had presumed that once given, you had it for life. Her perceptions, she realised, were narrow, naïve, outmoded...but more than that.

The intimacy and respect she had for her husband were not returned with integrity. There was no way of knowing that the relationship had been a farce on his part for a long time, and no matter how hard she tried to build upon it, secure it for their future, she was wasting her time. She had misjudged love alto-

gether. Now she had to learn how not to love.

Back in the house again after tumbling from place to place, bed to bed, she realised how much this place actually defined her. It was a landmark in her life—something she had as hers for the first time in her life, not to be shared. She liked the sound of her own footsteps across the empty floorboards. The distant rumble of grinding gears of trucks making their way up the near escarpment was the night traffic. Occasionally a siren would pierce the night air and a succession of dogs in the neighbourhood would howl. Her small terrier slept comfortably under Margo's blanket. She wrapped herself in these sounds and declared defiantly, triumphantly that she was home. Living the life of a nomad seemed romantic enough at the time, but now she felt an empathy with those who were completely dispossessed; through whatever turmoil had caused their state—political, environmental, love or lack of it—she felt a closer understanding of what it meant to have nothing. Not a romantic notion at all.

#

The coffee was the best in town—strong, warm with a delightful thick crema that patterned itself beautifully across the surface of her cup. Jane ordered a mug. She was a well-framed woman, tall without being tall, shapely with small delicate breasts, balanced hair that sat correctly about her face, high cheek bones, eyes that sat closely together separated by a somewhat large nose, and the most delightful lips, full blossomed, ripe for the picking. She noticed her hands. They were large, shaped over strong bones, but no indicators of the softness and deftness of her caressing touch that would become a familiar part of their existence together.

Over my shoulder  
Friends followed me whenever  
The sun shone brightly

She watched comfortably as Jane's hands encompassed the mug of flat white so suitably and listened to her animated conversation. Jane had lived here for many years and was pleased to meet someone her own age and hopefully like

mind. Margo pondered on this expression. She had heard it many times before, but this time the words seemed to hover and wait for her to ingest and process for meaning.

#

The beachside backwater was probably one of the last places on the East Coast that had not been seized by developers from the south or abroad. It lay couched between tidal muddy creeks to the north and south, which during monsoonal rains became gorging torrents of silt and misappropriated detritus from a colonial past. To the west it was low-lying salt flats intermingled with tidal swamp, occasional crocodile, abundant mosquitoes and sandflies, and crabs measured by buckets. It was primarily a fishing village that lay idle most of the week but had become a haven now for miners from inland who sought solace in piscatorial pursuits on weekends. But as the rabid resources boom gripped much of the inland, working conditions changed and they worked varying shifts. There was now a constant stream of visitors in town. Rains had also failed. No crops were planted. Ecological changes implanted themselves in the psyche of these people and they wrought vengeance on localised coastal habitats such as this. Noisy exhausts, thumping music, wide tyres ran up and down the main street daily.

“There have always been permanent residents, leftovers from the Second World War. It was an American base, established at the mouth of the creek and in the sand hills.

“You have noticed probably the sand hills have gone. The Yanks bulldozed them for easy access to the Creek. The mouth entrance now changes with every tide and nothing has been the same since. The pub was built then, and the picture theatre. Still use it occasionally, mostly for fundraising for Sea Rescue or the kids’ school,” declared Jane. She went on to disclose that her parents had owned the Paradise, although the projector and screen had long gone. She could not recall when.

Thank God for the digital age. Margo thought for a moment and expressed agreement and realised that neither would be here without their engage-

ment with technology, Internet, computers, virtual world, call it what you will.

“Why don’t you come down and have a look at the Creek’s history?” Jane asked.

The conversation ebbed and flowed. Each idea was met with another—click, just like in their online chat room where they had met. She examined her thoughts momentarily. A coffee meeting had sounded safe enough, but the extension of an invitation into places unknown dragged up a thousand doubts embedded in her past history of Presbyterian sanctuary.

“That would be nice,” Margo said reluctantly.

#

Margo listened in awe at the ease with which Jane told her stories. Both women were fifty-seven years of age but had constructed themselves differently. Margo had lived within a façade of normal social conventions, never daring to step outside for fear of falling over, being on her own. Her framework was one of compliance and servitude. But now there was realisation that it had really counted for nought, as here she was. On the other hand, Jane had stood up to convention. She had divorced early after meeting a woman whom she remained with for twenty-five years. Together they had structured their idea of family, raising their children, working, playing, and building a home. Jane’s parents had been torn apart by her decision to live with a woman and they struggled with it to their deaths. With that said and some simple directions, each paid her own bill and went to her own vehicle.

Margo made her way down the street to her car, carefully recalling the directions from Jane.

“Straight down the main street, retrace your steps out of the village and take the first turn to the right. Last right, turn again. Can’t miss it,” Jane instructed enthusiastically.

As she belted herself into her seat, she sheepishly stole a glance in her

rear vision mirror, noticing a white Toyota Hilux behind. Following the instructions as she recalled them, she easily found the old theatre. Flashes of a past dream intersected with what and where she was. For some reason she found it difficult to listen and recall carefully laid-out instructions. In her recurring dream she found herself in the largest underground car park unable to recall where she had parked the car.

#

It was a large, imposing, weatherboard structure, not unlike many country halls. Its height impressed her. The sidewalls were timber weatherboards intersected at intervals by timber louvres from ground to rooftop. She guessed that this was a climatic consideration allowing good draught to move the close tropical heat. She thought she might ask about how sandflies and mosquitoes were dealt with during movie sessions, but only when and if the time was right. She parked the car at a forty-five-degree angle to the footpath as suggested by the other cars in the street. Jane had driven into what could only be called a makeshift drive and called for her to come this way. Double-checking that she had locked the car, a habit that now befell her, no matter where she was, she caught up with Jane at the side of this large double-decker barn.

Margo's nostrils filled with an acrid smell.

"The timber has been creosoted to inhibit the local termites," Jane explained.

The front of the building, with an unusual lean, was graced with large individually panelled letters, black on white ground—PARADISE. Dante and Virgil must have got it all wrong, she chuckled to herself. Thoughts repeated through once more. In this small, coastal hamlet on the remote eastern coast of Terra Australis, she felt decidedly estranged from her past: her safety net and reality all in one. The standard "what ifs" flooded through, but she ignored them all. She had never really been one for being "in control", making responsible decisions. She had always left that to someone else, although she enjoyed input and debate. She had always blamed it on being a Libran—hamstrung really. But she

did love to do things spontaneously now, without premeditation, and analyse the consequences later.

“Sorry about the smell. It’s just been redone. Hard to get the stuff these days, I suspect it is illegal—cancers et cetera, but it does the job. Locals swear by it. Helps against the salt as well. Can’t smell it inside. Anyway—Welcome to Paradise,” Jane announced and they both laughed.

The space inside was cavernous with massive tree beams hewn out of the distant coastal ranges spanning the width of the hall.

“All timber,” continued Jane.

#

The Capricornia sun smacked the western wall and light filtered through the dried openings in the buckled weatherboards. Patterns unlike any Margo had seen fell across the floorboards, mesmerising her beyond the conversation.

Recall was something Margo thought she had lost, but suddenly she was back in her classroom.

She sat in a chair that only just qualified by definition, leaned against a small brown desk that carried untold cuts and piercings across the surface to match those of the girls she had instructed in some time, some place before. But she did recall. And location came flooding back. Motherhood, wife, daughter, sister, teacher. To one side of the well-lit room sat a discarded drum kit, crudely constructed cardboard villages, cascading piles of texts and an assortment of old chairs. To the other side sat an assortment of desks and chairs that carried as many scars as the front table. A small white electric clock sat timidly against the pale blue wall at the rear of the room. Outside to the north, white metal louvres circumvented the windows. These hung precariously, tormented by juveniles swinging from them at intervals. The girls sat at their respective places. Each wore royal blue, chocolate brown, and white uniforms, some with care and distinction, others circumspectly suggesting that the uniform had attached itself to them involuntarily. Ring-encrusted fingers bedecked with brightly coloured, lacquered nails

continuously caressed all manner of hairstyles in multiple states of cleanliness. The constant stroking of their locks suggested their predetermined roles as future spouses, stroking and satisfying the male of the species. They worked diligently and attentively to the programmed learning tasks that had been set before them. A tick and flick approach that evidenced the transference of knowledge from one container to another was the strategy. She wondered what true learning was, why we bothered to measure it. What difference had she made? So many questions. Forget it. Why had this flooded her mind now?

#

The sound of their footsteps resonated across the boards of the hall. At the end were sets of stairs that once led to the projection room but now housed a small, self-contained flat that Jane called home. Small talk ensued. They danced around each other, pointing out this and that until they reached the bottom of the stairs when Jane said quite simply, “Come on up.”

They were solid planks of hardwood, thirteen in all. A small sliding door was pushed to one side and they stepped into a small but well-lit kitchen. Pieces of flotsam and jetsam had been used to construct the kitchen, but out of this disarray came a functional and curiously aesthetic, quirky space.

“It is amazing what you find washed up on the beach here, particularly after heavy rains up north. The origins of the driftwood fascinate me the most. They could be from anywhere. Some are obviously softwood and easily tempered by the seas, but it is hard to imagine for how long and what ferocity is needed to shape the hardwood. It’s my favourite.”

Jane handed her a piece that had been rejected as a cupboard handle. It reminded Margo of the upturned root system of a black wattle. Gnarled and twisted by the resistance of hard ground, black wattle shaped itself accordingly, intricately interwoven and twisted like the complicated patterns of early Viking carvings.

From there they moved through a sliding door to a larger room which

housed a large sofa and queen-sized bed. White walls made the space appear much larger than it really was. The muted tones of polished wooden floors, as well as Jane's affable manner, added to the warmth of the space.

My eyes following  
Until the bird was lost at sea  
Found a small island

They walked around the space, enjoyed the waving leaves of a guava tree against the window frame, and moved towards the sofa. Jane sat tucked into the end of the couch, naturally, with one leg folded under her lengthy frame; arms stretched full length along the shoulders of the couch. Margo felt warm. She could hear magpies practicing their calls in the distance, the gurgling of a local fisherman testing his outboard, a healthy ocean breeze whistling through the weatherboards and louvres in the main hall. But she did not hear anything else. No voice or previous recall of experience spoke to her, so she felt comfortable and enjoyed being swallowed by the sofa as she fell back into it. Cavernous, like the hall.

#

"Do the flyscreens keep everything out?" Margo clumsily blurted.

They had enjoyed searching conversation and now she was surprised at how pragmatic the question seemed.

"Everything unless invited," Jane said as their eyes met solidly for the first time.

Margo felt warmth that she thought had deserted her, but did not smile. Nor did she change her gaze. An engagement occurred that she had not had before. Jane asked her to come closer. Without question or recall, she moved strongly towards her and Jane enveloped her in her strong arms. With eyes examining, searching, flickering she moved closer again. Jane raised her hands to Margo's face, pushed her fringe softly back from her forehead, brushed down the sides of her face, then held her head firmly.

Still no ideas, thoughts, the screen was blank.

Jane approached her and slowly placed her lips against hers. The screen flickered. White noise. Connection. She became conscious of so many things, but nothing prevented her from continuing to feel the warmth, moistness, softness, and volume of the kiss of this woman. Searching her database, she realised she had never been so aware of a kiss before. Jane's lips were soft, warm and engulfed hers comfortably. Suction formed and there they sat. No contortions, but a gentle rocking of heads. Margo closed her eyes, afraid of the gaze that now penetrated to her soul. A tongue penetrated her searchingly, slowly over her lips, titillating the corners of her mouth. Heart rate elevated, ears warmed, and a pulsating in her groin that she had not felt for many years took hold of her. What was the time? No kids to collect from school, no one to go home to, no one really knew where she was. She liked what she felt. Raising her left arm from the sofa, she placed it slowly about Jane, placed her right arm at the back of Jane's neck, just below her nape. She felt her smooth olive complexion, the warmth of the summers upon her flesh, and enjoyed this moment. It was more than a moment. It continued for several. What should she say now? Instinctively they separated. A quiet consumed them. Jane encouraged Margo to place her head in the nest of her shoulder and they sat quietly looking out to the reef islands that could be seen through the window's screen.

[Haiku by Matsuo Basho, 17th century Japanese poet]

## *Adrienne Fleming*



After graduating, travelling, marriage, I moved to an Australian rural centre, Rockhampton, for twenty-two years, teaching and painting. This was a place that sustained itself by rejecting the exotic and protecting and storing the known. Tradition abounded. But significant life changes in 2004 provided for me a point of intersection, a nexus between then and now, here and there.

When I have worked primarily as a painter, my work has always been narrative, obsessed with the very nature of the way we construct our existence. While the story has changed only slightly, it is my sense of place in the world that has had significant realignment.

I returned to Brisbane to live and now engage with diverse communities in the larger metropolis to build narratives across media. This is my first published writing other than curatorial works aligned to my exhibitions.



## *My Rock*

*Angel Propps*

Summer in the deepest South. The syrupy heat lies over everything early in the day, the sun shines down, and spreading rays that look like lemonhead candy strike the baking surfaces. Then comes afternoon and the sun goes nuclear. Everything loses its color, goes bleached and white. It hurts to look at anything directly, the sidewalk shimmers, and the dogs groan as they run kids out of their tepid shallow pools and slosh around in there in some doggy-type bliss. It is so humid the walls drip with mold-bearing moisture and the streets stink because the tar melts into slimy pools that run across the scorched asphalt.

Everyone sits inside, huddled under air conditioners and wishing for the winter that they will hate the same way they hate the heat. The perfect example of human nature; nobody wants summer when it comes and nobody wants the winter either. I sometimes wonder if the days and nights of the Old South died out because of air conditioning. If all the stories we know of the Old South are just explanations of what life was like when there was no escape from the heat and the bugs and the smell of red clay baked to a hard, dusty crust.

To hear the old folks tell it, the old days were insane. The juke joints were still up and running back then, and I had heard all the stories about them I could stand. How they were hidden in the woods. How all the women would have their Saturday-night clothes on, how the men would come in smelling like bay rum and homemade whiskey. The way the lights that they strung up over everything would twinkle through the tree branches, leading them into the dirt clearing where all the cars, polished to a high shine and sitting pretty on fat tires, would be parked. How the music would blare through the night. I was fed those stories as a kid and heard over and over again the way it was when the sound of heartbroken men and sinful women belting out the blues and people laughing in the hot magnolia-laden air was a sound that meant it was the weekend.

My Nanna used to say back then there were two things important in life. Jukes on Saturday and church on Sunday. They had a saying that went, “Sin on Saturday, repent on Sunday.” Since she met my preacher granddaddy in a juke joint down on the banks of the Chattahoochee one hot August Saturday evening, I guess that went for everybody.

Sometimes I would look at the old scrapbooks, but all I ever saw was faces that belonged to people I didn’t know, and when they talked to me about stuff like jukes and Civil Rights marches and that Kennedy that got killed in Texas or the students who died in Mississippi, I listened but none of it meant anything to me.

I grew up here in the New South where folks are mostly mixed or date black folks or have a lot of black friends. I had never seen prejudice face to face. Sure every once in a while there would be some redneck that wanted to holler stuff or whatever, or some kid in school would be mean, but I never knew prejudice still existed until that evening. What I mean to say is I never knew it deep down where truth lives. I knew it but I only knew it on the top of my skin. I knew that people could hate other people for their skin or for the fact that they loved people of their own gender, because of their religion or just for no reason at all, but I didn’t know it where it comes down to the bones. But I found out.

Near dark in the South. Heat doesn’t die, it just softens and the breeze comes off the river smelling like mineral-rich mud and fish. The sound of bass booming from cars and the buzz of crickets in the grass meld into a long chorus. The magnolias open wider, the camellias sigh and leak their perfume into the night. The sound of kids playing in the purple-tinted yards and the smell of collard greens cooking rise toward the sky. Those things are twilight in the South.

Kenyetta was sitting beside me on the swings on the empty playground. We were not really swinging, just sort of kicking our feet and stirring up a small breeze. The day we met, I looked at her and was never able to stop looking. She was the most handsome thing I had ever seen. I was sitting there that dusk and peeking at her out of the corner of my eyes. I loved the way she looked, loved her

bright gold-tinted skin that had a sheen to it that made me think of things that get polished for long hours with soft cloth.

The sun was setting and she was limned in a hard, dime-store-gold shine. The red streaks that ate away the western edge of the sky and bloodied the blue-jean-faded-to-indigo horizon looked violent and frightening. A few clouds were a brilliant scarlet, some wept pink. Kenyetta sat in her swing and I could hear the chain as it creaked. Her hand held mine, and we were just swaying there and sort of tied together by the umbilical cord made up of our joined palms. Her shaved head gleamed, her shoulders and arms were muscular and tough from years of basketball. She had won a scholarship to college for that game of hers, and I was sitting there looking at her arms, at the proof that she was strong and trying not to cry because she would be leaving in a matter of weeks, and I was not sure where that would leave me.

Actually I knew exactly where that would leave me—there in that small Alabama town while she went on to a city far from me. She was leaving, and she was leaving me.

“What do you get when you mix a white dyke with a black dyke?” a voice said from the dark shadows near the swings and both of us jumped in our seats as it continued. “A zebra-swirl dyke.”

I flinched involuntarily. I knew people did not like seeing two women holding hands, and that to do so in public was sometimes dangerous. Being called that ridiculously childish thing was not nearly as bad as some of the other things they said about women like us, but it was the malice that lay under those words that scared me, made me move away from the blow that landed without a hand being raised.

“Watch how you talkin’ ’bout my girl.” Kenyetta was fast, it was one of her defining abilities. She was fast and she was silent when she moved, she could come into a room and breathe down the back of my neck before I even knew she was there. That night I sat there in that sticky rubber swing and stared at her, stared at her hard and perfect golden-toned body and felt the heat of her in my

hand. She had left so fast I still had her imprint on my skin, like she had left some part of herself safe upon my skin. But she wasn't safe, she was in the face of a grown and drunken man.

"Make me," came the slurred reply.

I was so afraid, my heart felt like it was going to explode right through my skin. I looked down at myself and was honestly surprised to see my chest was unsplit and unopened. I stood and my legs felt like someone had emptied everything out of them, like they were nothing more than long, slim tubes of skin with nothing to support them. I could feel the wobble in my kneecaps as I walked to her, to Kenyetta, and her hand came out in a sweeping movement, halted me, and pressed me behind her. I felt myself moving away from that drunken man and understood what chivalry and courage meant in one clear moment. And I knew that she had it.

"Mister, you need to get on home now."

"Yeah, cause I got a home. Where you live nigger, down in those damn projects the government built? Y'all should all be thrown out of there, they should make you get jobs instead of living on welfare."

Kenyetta was the daughter of a schoolteacher mother and former soldier father. They had never lived in the projects or been on welfare. I felt the same horror and disgust every white person feels when a bigot voices their opinion, but worse because he was talking about the woman that I loved.

"Go away, Mister," Kenyetta said in her strong clear voice and I forgot to breathe at the sound of it. She didn't sound like herself, she sounded like a grownup, one I didn't know.

He laughed and his teeth showed black and rotted to the gum line. I felt the fear rising in me, my heartbeat was literally so fast it was making me dizzy. I could feel sweat pooling in my armpits and a cold chill clung to the base of my spine. The words had come from her mouth in an almost kind tone, but there was something about the tilt of her shoulders and the way she planted her feet that

said quite clearly she was not at all inclined to behave kindly.

“You faggots make me sick.” The words were harsh and stunning. I stared at him, at the ripped knee of his jeans dusted with gritty red clay, at the greasy T-shirt, and the bad teeth. I stared at his face and the way his lip hung and the discontent written large upon his features and I knew he wanted to hurt us. He wanted to and he would if he got the chance.

“Don’t say that kinda stuff ’round my girl,” Kenyetta said and she moved forward in that quick and powerful way she had of moving. I always thought of lions hunting when she moved that way and I could feel the terror accelerate as she went forward. He was a guy, and no matter how strong she was, she was still just a woman, a young and handsome woman, and he could, would hurt her badly if he managed to get his hands on her, and I knew it.

“Bet you two dykes like to get it on don’cha?” He accompanied that with a rude gesture of his hips and then licked his fingers in a motion that made me both sick and ashamed to have seen it. And it made me angry.

I closed my eyes for a second and saw again the expression on my love’s face when we had stood there in my bedroom looking down at the thing we had bought and neither of us knew how to use. The way she had been so frightened that she would harm me with it and the way it had looked against her flat belly and hips. The one we had bought was ebony and too dark to match her skin and it had looked so alien but yet so right, it had been such a perfect fit. I thought of the way she cried afterwards and how I had cried during and how both of us had asked, sometime in the middle, if the other was okay. It was one of the sweetest things I owned and that man, that pathetic redneck was taking it from me, was making me feel ashamed of having had that moment and it angered me beyond reason.

I bent over and picked up two rocks. One was a jagged hunk of broken asphalt, the other was a smooth rounded thing. The heat trapped within burned my hands, then faded to nothing but a calming warmth. I moved closer and Kenyetta held her hand out to stop me, to protect me, and I put the hard chunk of as-

phalt into her palm. I stepped up beside her and saw her expression: fear and anger and pain and a hint of laughter around her mouth. I felt that laughter and it made me calm.

We stood there, the three of us. The crickets whirred and sang, the grass sighed and the small animals in it scurried away from us. The smell of someone's cornbread came on the tiny gust of wind that rattled the leaves of the high old tree that rose above our heads. I was no longer afraid and, looking at him, I saw nothing. I saw a thing who hated us, not because we were queer or because she was black and I was white. He hated us because we were young, unbeaten and still hopeful. We were starting and he...he had finished because he had given up somewhere along the line. He was nothing, a loser, a loss to himself and everyone else, and I was determined not to let him make me what he was, to take me from myself with his nasty mouth and filthy hips in their dirty jeans.

"Yeah, you would pick up rocks!" The words were the pouting cry of the schoolyard bully and he staggered off into the gloom of the playground, heading into whatever it was that passed for his life and we stood there, side by side and shoulder to shoulder, unmoving and unspeaking.

Kenyetta finally said, "You know you are a femme, right?" And then she pressed me into her shoulder. I put my mouth on her sweaty skin, right there in the spot where her neck and shoulder met and licked the taste of her from it. I wanted to keep her forever and knew it, but she belonged elsewhere, belonged to a wider world. That man had hurt me, but he had also made me see what happens when people become sad and disappointed.

"I might be femme but that don't mean I can't swing a mean rock, baby," I whispered into her neck and felt tears trickle down my cheeks. That was the moment I really got it. No matter how grave the danger, it is better to face it with someone you love. It is better to pick your weapons and go ahead and speak up than it is to stand by silently while someone takes away everything you love and find sweet.

"Will you miss me?"

That question was edged with all the things we had been unable to talk about or say since her acceptance had come in. We had fallen in love at fourteen and we were both nearly nineteen and on the verge of facing life on our own. We had made no promises, made no plans to reunite in some rose-colored future. I think we knew that would never happen; that it was not in the cosmic plan. We were in love and always had been, but she was leaving to play basketball in some far away college while I was staying there to attend the local college's nursing program. I knew without a doubt that she wanted to protect me from harm, that she was afraid she was hurting me and that if I had said to her that I needed her to stay she would have. But I had seen first-hand, in the face of an angry man, what bitterness and disappointment looked like. Kenyetta was built for speed, she was built to feel the earth moving quickly under her feet and I could not take that away from her, no matter how much I wanted to. Because I could not see her hurt either.

"Only until I find some nice man to marry," I joked into her body heat and she burst into those light and clear giggles that always made me laugh until I thought I would have to pee.

"C'mon, on the way home I'll buy you an ice cream," she said and we moved out of the playground and onto the streets. The dark had fallen down and the silence was nearly complete. The heat had become a small garment on our shoulders and arms; we walked quietly and the ice cream parlor came into my vision far too soon. I stood outside the glowing windows and looked at her, at her sherry-colored eyes and her full mouth, at her muscular toughness and her slouchy jeans and wanted to weep, but instead I held her hand and she opened the door for me.

When she left for college, she took her rock with her. I kept mine as well. For many years I would take it out and turn it over in my hands to feel the smoothness of it and wonder how she was doing. I lost it somewhere during a move and forgot about it, to tell you the truth. Until a few minutes ago when I was coming out of a grocery store and saw a young black stud with creamy, caramel skin opening the door for her pretty, white femme. I saw that and it all came back again.

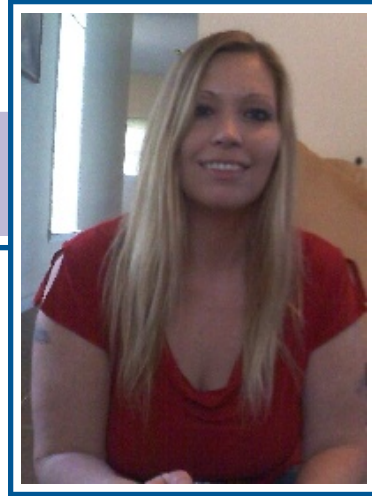
## *My Rock*

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I wonder how she is doing. If she has her rock and her own memories. If she ever remembers that day or the way my hand looked cradled inside hers. If she remembers the way I gasped the first time she said she wanted to kiss me, kiss her best friend, and how I had burst into tears and said that was exactly what I wanted too. The way I stood at the side of her driveway and waved goodbye while she went with her face in a resolute smile and her hand in an upraised wave of goodbye. If she knows she was my rock and my love and my protection and that I never felt as safe ever again no matter who I loved. That I miss her sometimes still.

I wish I had never lost that rock.

## Angel Propps



Angel Propps is a femme leatherdyke who travels often with her dyke Daddy OB. Her writing has been accepted in the Xcite! anthologies *Bad Girl's Sweet Kiss*, *Power Play*, *Kinky Girls*, *Sex At Work*; the Ravenous Romance *Sugar and Spice* anthology; *Tales from The Erotic Feast* anthology; and the horror anthologies *The Psyche Corrupted*, *Sinisterotica*, and *Soup Of Souls*. Her collection of horror, *Night Songs of the South*, is due to be released by an indie press later this year. Her nonfiction and poetry can be found in *Black Heart Magazine* and various anthologies, and she can be read online at Every Night Erotica, MicroHorror, Southern Grit, and Flashes In The Dark. Her article on puppy play will appear on Leatherati.com, and she was a member of the Seduction Team at the International Miss Leather in San Francisco in April.



## *How to Go From Tourist to Lover*

*Ina Bak*

“What is it—‘see you again’ in Hindi? *Phara-manga*?”

“*Phir-milenge*, and that’s a *Lonely Planet* term you know,” she said, with a flip of her big, black eyelashes which always broke my heart.

I felt that I ridiculed myself by stupidly saying the *manga* word. We saw Mumbai-Howrah Express open its hundreds of mouths, swallowing tiny people.

“You should be going by now.”

“It’s fucking hot out there,” I said, staring at her sweating forehead, feeling my cheeks turning piggy pink, knowing it is partly because of Mumbai’s unbearable summer heat.

“If you’d stopped saying ‘it’s fucking hot’ every three minutes, we’d have had more conversation.”

My eyes were still on her forehead, wondering how this heat made her skin so shiny, mine piggy.

Down to platform twenty-two, I grabbed her hand. Feeling that we just attracted fifty more eyes upon us, I wished I were the one who stayed. I didn’t know what to say before the train started.

#

I sometimes messed up everything by imposing an impeccable silence everywhere I went. When I got to the post office where no one had small money except her, there was the silence. There were four counters, but only one I could see occupied by an officer. Four people were standing behind me when the officer lady refused to take my bill. I withdrew from the counter and stepped to the opened

## *How to Go From Tourist to Lover*

door. The three o'clock sunshine brought a handful of dust from outside. She was the fourth person, noticed a desert in my face. She loaned me twenty-seven rupees to get my postcards to Germany and saved me having to search for a shop to change my five-hundred-rupee bill. I thanked her generosity and God for providing me with no small money.

"Are you a German?" she asked me in an auto rickshaw we shared to Malad Station.

"No, do I look like a German?"

"You look like a European."

"Well, yes, I am."

I told her that she was the first woman who ever started a conversation with me during my three months stay in India.

"I can't believe why women didn't approach you."

"I can't believe that you did."

She could have thought of me as a fraud or an ill-tempered tourist who complained about every Indian food I've eaten, but she didn't.

I should have asked her if she was married or had a boyfriend or both; I didn't. In fact, I only complained about the weather and asked her if she could accompany me to Juhu Beach.

The heat and light from both the sky and sand were enormous. I covered my eyes with sunglasses so I could observe her better. She seemed to have no problem with staring at me. We squatted under the shadow of an abandoned merry-go-round.

"There's nothing special here." I poked my fingers into warm sand, expecting cool, moist soil.

"Of course, people come here after sunset. This merry-go-round will work by then," she said.

## *How to Go From Tourist to Lover*

She bought me some jamuns from a black-bearded fruit hawker and we ate them together. I tried to lose my tourist look by not taking pictures, but soon realized we were the only people who didn't make a clicking sound on this beach.

I kept talking because I was afraid she would tell me she had to go. And I also was afraid the curse of impeccable silence might ruin my conversation. I really tried not to say how hot it was, which I was sure she already knew. We may have wanted to go someplace else, but I couldn't find a more perfect place for us.

“So, how many days do you have left?”

I read nothing in her eyes, just a reflection of my covered eyes and pink face. “About a month.”

“Then you go back to your country?”

“Well, Kolkata first, from there I take my flight.” Again I mutely thanked her for not asking me how I liked India and what I'll do for the thirty days. I scratched mosquito bites on the back of my arm, wondering how my next thirty days would be if I didn't make a plan.

#

I carry a charm made out of a small piece of snake skin. These cold-blooded snakes make love for more than twenty-four hours. I saw them mating mutely and slowly in a NGC documentary. This charm will bring me a long-lasting love story some day. She examined the triangle-shaped charm and sniffed.

“It's just vinyl, no?”

But she believed me about mating snakes.

In the daytime, I loved to hear the flip-flip of her sandals. Her skirt smelled of mosquito coil smoke in my room. I stopped pretending to be a resident of India.

Whenever local people asked my name and origin, I told them my name is Asha, from far away, from East Asia.

## *How to Go From Tourist to Lover*

“Why Asha? Did you think of Aishwarya Rai?”

“Cause Asha sounds like snake and Asia. Maybe snakes in Asia.”

“Oh, snakes are more likely to be found in Africa.”

“They are everywhere!”

“Why do you lie?”

Sometimes she tossed me out of her world. I would glide back in there like a snake. I wished I were a cold-blooded creature, able to die when the thermometer went up. I had too good an immune system—my heart kept pumping.

#

You can buy anything in this country. If you'd like to get a permanent residency, just let me know. Well, it costs some bucks of course. This guy from Jordan stayed in the room next to mine for god knows how long. And he'd worn his flower-print Goan pants for a month.

“Will you go out with me tonight?” He spoke to my boobs, not me. It reminded me that we never made an appointment to meet, she and I. I knew where she was, and she knew where she could find me.

“That's what people expect from a tourist,” she said.

“No, that's a condition for a lover, isn't it?”

“Oh yes! A tourist seems so perfect to fall in love with.”

“You know what we'll do?”

Silence from her.

“We are going to Canada and get married there.”

Still very silent.

“Well, and then adopt a baby from India. What do you think?”

## *How to Go From Tourist to Lover*

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“Neither of us is Canadian.”

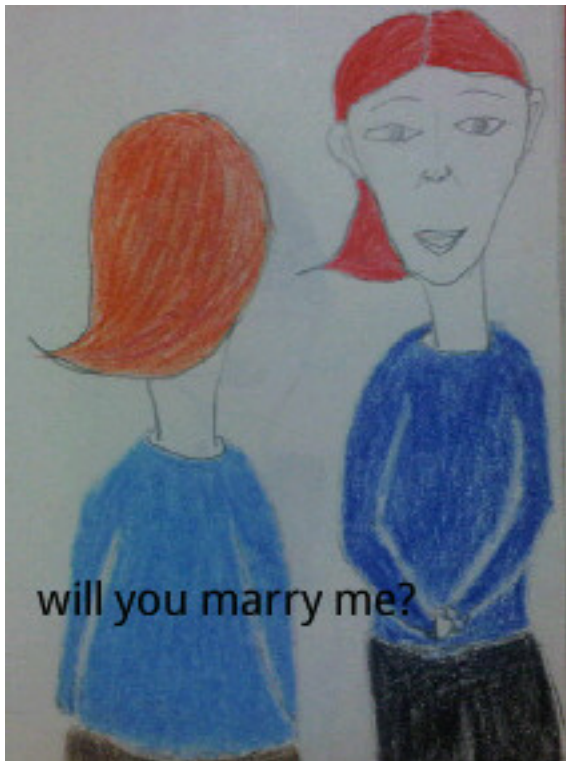
“That’s no matter. If I were a Julia Roberts, we could go on the front page of *Times of India*, and everything would be possible. The marriage, baby too.”

“Then try hard to be famous like her.”

I thought she was very right, and was happy because I found something I possibly could achieve not by money. So I decided to do that.

## *How to Go From Tourist to Lover*

A scene which always occurs in movies or catalogs, perhaps in your mind, or in other countries, but I believe it is more than realistic.



*Ina Bak*



Born and raised in Seoul, South Korea, Ina majored in mass communication and philosophy while tap dancing and making small-budget short films and documentaries.

She is currently working at a small IT company, but doesn't know for how long. She can be reached at [molkokoko@gmail.com](mailto:molkokoko@gmail.com)



## *Coyote*

*Deborah La Garbanza*

The Greyhound farts black smoke as it heads north from San Francisco.

“I love the bus,” the woman with red hair sitting next to me exclaims. “I’m a cab driver, so letting someone else drive is a real vacation.”

She turns to me. The vertical lines etched between her eyes deepen as she squints. She is wearing a battered cowboy hat. She stands up to stretch. Her baggy pants are hitched up by a wide belt, a top shirt unbuttoned to reveal a grayish undershirt, and her mud-crusted hiking boots have laces undone. A cracked brown leather jacket is crumpled into a ball under the seat in front of her.

“I have more to offer the world than being a cab driver,” she begins again, “but that’s bullshit too.”

She has a loose, crazy grin. I look out past her through the window of the bus. The burnt, straw-yellow hills of summer roll by in the afternoon shadows. Soon it will be dusk, my favorite time of day. The world will be lit to rosy perfection. Happiness descends on me. I glance at the woman next to me. Once a baby, I think, a sweet-faced baby with tufts of red hair and splotches of freckles.

She notices me looking. “One day, it’ll all change, just like that.” She snaps her fingers. “The world is frozen now and might never wake up at the rate we are destroying it.”

“You know these things?” I ask.

She nods. “Being different is a gift,” she says matter-of-factly. “A gift from the Goddess. But if you don’t use this gift to try and change the world, then you suffer more.”

“Sure you do.” I learn fast.

Maybe she has inspired me. I spread my arms and stretch.

“What’s your name?” I say it like I’m going to report her.

“To the Native Americans, I am a coyote,” she says solemnly.

She pauses to let the full weight of this revelation dawn on me.

“Do you know what that means?”

“The coyote is the troublemaker.” I try to remember my Native American mythology.

She snorts. “You’re wrong, partner. The coyote is the truth teller. The only trouble she encounters is when people like you don’t want to hear the painful truths about themselves. They’d rather hate the coyote than try to change.”

She moves her hands rapidly and in front of my face and, for a second, I think I see fur.

“What makes you think there is something about me that needs changing?” I ask.

“Oh, I can smell it all over you. Yup, I have a very keen sense of smell. The minute you got on the bus, I thought there’s an old hen about to lay a rotten egg. This girl needs some good coyote medicine.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“Think nothing of it, partner.”

“But no thanks.”

Coyote turns towards me with a grin and her cowgirl identity wiped clean from her face. It is a startling transformation, one that catches me up before I can dismiss it.

“We’ll see.” She closes her eyes.

I notice our arms are lined up with only molecules separating us. Yet nei-

ther of us moves away.

#

I look out the window towards the darkening hills. They have turned a flat, resigned brown. The sun, the bright blond child, is peeking above the tops on its way down. All the critters are getting ready to crawl into their hollows for the night. The sheep huddle together, the bunnies snuggle, the birds nest. Coyote's eyes are closed and she seems to be quietly chanting two high pitched syllables. My feelings about her keep shifting as quickly as the shadows on the hills. I don't know if I want to be sitting next to her all night on this bus. I look around. People are in every seat. They too are burrowing in for the night.

"Hey, I don't hate you." I shake her arm.

"Of course you don't," she answers.

"But I don't think you were very nice to call me a hen."

"Just your friendly coyote telling you where it's at. Yup, right about now, you should be getting back into the hen house. Back on your shitty perch, back to that ammonia stench. It's uncomfortable but safe. You'll sit there with your cackling hen buddies and then start trying to lay some rotten eggs. You think your lives are so worthwhile. All that egg laying. But all you'll have in the morning are omelets." She is grinning ear to ear the whole time she is saying this.

"Honestly, this is too much," I say, but she doesn't seem to hear me.

"Coyotes eat hens. Remember that."

"Really. Too much."

"OK. I'm sorry. You're right. Most people aren't ready."

I know I should get angry. I shouldn't just get depressed. I should tell this woman who I am. But who am I? Conflicting identities jostle just under my skin.

Coyote's face drops back. For a minute, I think I see a black line around

the gums in her mouth and pointed yellow teeth. A chill goes through me. I notice that somehow our shoulders are lined up again, almost touching. Our hands continue to rest close together on the armrest. I can feel the animal heat she's radiating. Maybe she's right. People have told me I'm a coward, that I give my love out in teaspoons not dollops, that I measure and subtract what I give from what I get. I pat her hand. She opens one shrewd eye.

"I wouldn't recommend me," she says.

"Oh?"

"A lot of women have seen me flipped out and violent. I've done a lot of damage."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

"Well, I just wanted to say that maybe it was okay what you told me. Maybe it's even good for me to hear."

"Think nothing of it, partner."

"It sounds like you spent a lot of time in the Southwest?"

"Yup."

"Born there? You know, in the mountains with the other pups?"

"Lived in Gallup till I was ten."

"Gallup? Kind of like giddy up?"

"You think you're real smart, don't you? Let me tell you, your smartness doesn't amount to a hill of beans where I come from..."

"Sorry."

"Sure you are," she says and turns away.

"Look, if you want to talk about it..."

She sighs. “OK. A bedtime story. There was once a coyote pup whose mother and brothers and sisters were killed by crackerjacks. Those very same crackerjacks took the pup into captivity and trained her like a dog. They shackled her up to a tree all day and night, fed her pellet food. The pup grew up almost forgetting the wild. Until one night when the moon was like tonight, she remembered and started howling like this...”

Coyote begins a loud pitched scream. People turn and start shouting at her. Kids start crying. My hands go over my ears.

“Please! Stop! I won’t ask anything else!”

She does and turns to the window, intently scanning the hills. There is a silence between us. Night has fallen.

#

We reach Santa Rosa, the first stopover. The Dog gasps at the gate and exhaust fans out into the already clogged air before the driver turns the engine off. People are milling around the terminal, sullen and grumbling about the long delay. Coyote jumps out of her seat with a burst of unexpected energy and rushes to greet the crowd.

“We made it folks!” she exclaims from the top step of the bus.

A few men chuckle. A few women attempt wan smiles. Most glance away.

“Are you getting off or not, lady?” the uniformed driver growls.

Coyote descends the steps and I follow behind. I don’t know why. We walk to the center of the terminal and she stops. I look around and suddenly feel great sadness for all those destined to wait for buses. They deserve a better life. Coyote is muttering something under her breath.

“What did you say?”

“A gift from the Goddess,” she incants.

I am standing beside her. Her nose is beaked like the profile of the Indian on the nickel. She spreads her arms and the crowd seems to swirl around us.

Suddenly I am sure that we are somewhere else, some holy place where the spirits can do more than just poke through the cracks in the pavement. We are in the Southwest, where the mountains rise up purple and majestic from long desert basins. There the Spirits live. Or we're living far above the material plane where nothing of this world can hurt us. I feel invincible beside her, this woman with red hair. I spread my arms just like her. I decide to purge the crowd of their disappointments, exorcise their discontents.

“HEY, ASSHOLES! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? DON'T YOU HAVE CARS TO GET YOU WHERE YOU WANT TO GO?”

People look at me angrily. Let them come at me. They can't hurt me. Later, they'll thank me. It will be a mass catharsis. This I know.

Like fat on fire, my incantation sizzles in the eyes of the crowd but doesn't transform them. I'm surprised. A big man with lumberjack arms comes towards me.

“REDNECK JERK!” I scream.

I marvel at how brave I am for calling things by their true names. I haven't been so forthright since I was a child.

Coyote drags me out of the terminal and back onto the waiting bus. The lumberjack follows us just as the driver shuts the door and starts the engine. His fists bang on the window. His mouth curses me with the same names I called him and a few others. I slide down in my seat and bury my head in Coyote's arm. The driver is slow pulling out of the terminal, but when I look back, the lumberjack is being bathed in fumes. I lie back in the seat.

“That was incredibly stupid!” Coyote explodes. “You nearly got us killed back there. That was one crowd that you don't try magic spells on. You're lucky I was there to rescue you.”

“I don’t know what came over me. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“Well, take my advice, don’t dump negative energy on an unenlightened crowd until you have the warrior training you need.”

“And I suppose you know all that stuff?” I ask defensively.

Coyote refuses to answer.

“About women warriors? Spirit guides? Auras?”

“Look. What you tried to do back there was comparable to trying to stop the sun from setting. It was that stupid because, first of all, it’s impossible. But most of all, a real warrior would never do it because she has an innate sense of her own limits and boundaries. Something you are sadly lacking.”

She leans forward and takes out a red bandana from her backpack. She unwraps a shiny gold ring and holds it up to the weak reading light overhead.

“Where did you get that?” I ask, remembering a jewelry stand in the terminal.

“Let’s just say that the Goddess provides for her own.”

“You stole that ring at the bus terminal!”

“Don’t be silly.”

“When did you have time for that?”

“I’ve had this ring for years.”

“You stole it! I’ll report you!”

“This is my grandmother’s ring. It’s been in my family for years.”

She puts a restraining hand on my chest and pushes in. I feel a burning sensation. It begins to really hurt.

“Enough?” she asks.

The bus turns off the main highway onto a winding country road. The driver puts on speed to make up for lost time. Taking hairpin turns, the bus throws my body against Coyote's. A small sigh escapes from my lips. The Dog has become my friend. Coyote seems unaware of my body pressed against hers. Maybe she just accepts that I'm still there.

On a long, slow bend in the road, the pressure seems to grow greater. I tilt my head so that it rests on her shoulder. She remains stone-like.

"Is this OK?" I break the long silence.

"Feels wonderful," she says and places her hand lightly on my knee.

I start to giggle.

"What are you cackling about now, Hen?"

"I was just thinking about relationships," I say.

"Everything about relationships is silly," she retorts.

"I suppose you never have any silly feelings about women?"

"Oh sure I do. I'm human. But I don't wallow in them. I transform them into positive spiritual symbols. You are your own reality."

"Yeah. Sure."

"Just your friendly Coyote telling you where it's at. Remember that."

"Thanks."

"I warned you." Her eyes gleam with delight.

"So you don't approve of relationships?"

"Not lesbian ones."

I must look confused.

"Lesbians are angry people who are very difficult to get along with."

“Not any more difficult than straight people. Just more oppressed,” I suggest.

Coyote is silent.

“So, you don’t consider yourself a lesbian?”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t. I’m a celibate who is planning only to marry my own body.”

She smiles. I shift myself away from her. I have had just about enough of being jerked around by this woman.

“Why did you put your hand on my knee?” I ask.

“Because I’m going to marry my body through you,” she says.

I like that. The bus does a quick turn and suddenly she is out of her seat and on top of me full force with her tongue down my throat. Her hands go over me for one long body sweep.

I only have time to gasp, “I thought you weren’t a lesbian! I thought you were celibate!”

“Never trust a coyote,” is her only reply.

After that, spoken words are impossible but Coyote still speaks with her tongue. And how her tongue could speak! It mimics the turns of the bus. Long, exquisite and quick sharp jabs that cause my nipples to stand to attention and pangs to shoot through my cunt. Her tongue works me over, licking, sucking, kissing until the person I was no longer exists. And I’ve stopped caring because I’m not a fixed entity anymore. I’m the Goddess of love. I’m the Fool from the Tarot deck. I’m a red-tailed hawk soaring over the hills.

#

“Albion! All out for Albion!” the driver yells.

The only response is a soft moaning from the back of the bus where we are.

“Isn’t someone getting out at Albion?”

He shuts off the engine, turns on the weak yellow lights and starts moving towards us. When he gets there, I’m amazed to find that I have congealed back to my former self. Nothing is unbuttoned. No feathers are in sight. Coyote is back looking out the window.

“Are you getting out here, lady?” he asks her.

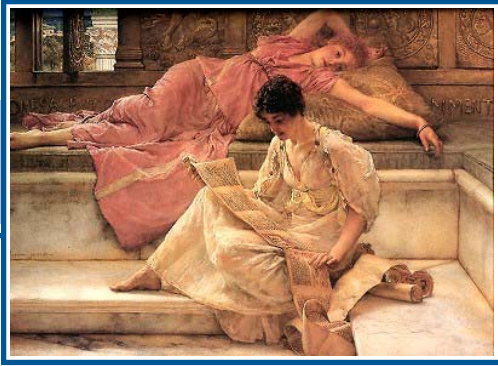
The dim light casts unappetizing shadows on his face. His Greyhound uniform mimics military tack. I shudder to think of what he would do if he had found us kissing. Coyote rises from the seat. She looks at neither of us. I watch as she glides off the bus without even saying goodbye. I press my face against the window to watch her walk into the hills alone. I look down next to me at her seat. She’s left her red bandana wadded up in a ball. I start banging on the window but she’s already too far away. I unwrap it. Inside, Coyote’s gold ring shines up at me.

## Deborah La Garbanza



Deborah La Garbanza's work has appeared in *Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly* and in *Identity Envy: Wanting to Be Who We're Not: Creative Nonfiction by Queer Writers*.

She lives in a cottage in the Oakland foothills but is always looking for new ways out of town.



## *The Stranger*

*Elaine Burnes*

From the shadow of the trees, Lin watched her house, not with an assessing eye, but with a wary one. A woman sat on her porch, and she'd been sitting or standing or pacing there for three hours now. Lin hadn't seen her arrive; she'd been in the woods. From the trees, across a small meadow she'd carefully cultivated to look wild, beyond the vegetable patch where weeds needed pulling and tomatoes harvesting, Lin had a clear view to the porch and the stranger.

A veery called, high and flutelike. If the sound reached the stranger, she didn't appear to care. But Lin paused in her wary watching to enjoy the birdsong. August woods tend more toward quiet than the cacophony of spring, with all the shouts and posturing of courtship. By August, most of the chores of raising a family are done, as they were for Lin, who was well beyond her own August.

Cicadas buzzed while a soft breeze rustled the oak leaves and whispered through the pines, cooling the sweat of sitting still. A small, stifled sound reminded Lin of why she was sitting on a log, her legs falling asleep. A sneeze. The woman, the stranger, had sneezed. Lin watched her get up from the steps where she must have grown hot in the sun. Her details were indistinct at this distance. Long limbs, dark hair, jeans, white T-shirt. She dug a tissue from a pocket and wiped her nose. Then she moved onto the porch, under the shading roof. Lin's roof.

*Why won't she give up and leave?* This had happened before. A reporter had once camped out on Lin's porch, forcing her back into the woods to spend the night in her blind. For a time, the newspapers had been all over her story, and she had been willing to tell it. But it hadn't done any good, so now she shut up about it. Eventually the reporters had stopped coming around, except on certain anniversaries—one year, five years. Ten had been the last. After that, they'd moved on to the next headline. So why now? Quick mental math calculated out to sixteen years. No



significance to that. Sure, the child would be twenty-one now. Lin squinted at the stranger, wishing she had her binoculars with her. That would have solved this easily. She could hope that was Emma waiting there for her, but knew that was unlikely. She hadn't shown up when she'd turned sixteen and could drive, nor at eighteen when she was emancipated. Why would she now?

*She's probably not even called Emma anymore.* Emma had been Lin's idea. They hadn't been able to settle on a name. During labor, the deadline loomed. "She needs a name," Jan had panted between contractions.

Lin ran down the list again, but neither felt comfortable with any of them. "She'll have it her whole life," Lin said. "It has to be something we'll like forever, not some trendy, latest starlet name."

Jan nodded, then squeezed Lin's arm as another contraction hit. Nothing gets your attention quite like deadlines and the risk of your arm being broken. "How about Emma?" Lin asked tentatively.

Jan finished her breaths and sank back on the pillow, her dark curls plastered to her neck by sweat. "Huh," she said. A few more pants. "Maybe."

Further debate was interrupted by a command from the doctor at the other end of the bed. "Time to push, Janice."

Later, when things calmed down, after Lin had held her new, wrinkled daughter, had kissed Jan who slept from exhaustion, and had returned from taking a break to get something to eat, they learned that "Emma" had been entered on the birth certificate. Neither was sure they'd given the authorization, but amid the confusion it was certainly possible, so it seemed fated and, besides, would make an interesting story. Jan never asked, and Lin never bothered to say how she came up with it. To name their child after a TV character, however obscure Mrs. Peel might be, seemed too much in line with the whole starlet theme. Best to let it go. Instead, she gently drew her calloused finger down the baby's butter-soft cheek and introduced herself. "Hi, Emma," she said softly. "I'm Linda. Everyone calls me Lin, but you'll call me Mama."

Lin stood and stretched, letting the memories drop away like the pine needles from her shirt. She stared across the bright meadow to the figure now in shadow. She debated whether to go forward or retreat back into the woods. She hadn't always been like this, shy as a deer, wary and watchful. It had happened slowly, bit by bit, as her life had been exposed, cross-examined, counter-charged, fund-raised for, and eventually blasted into such small bits that she wasn't sure who she was by the end. Not that there was an end. Closure, her therapist of a few weeks had intoned. That's what she needed but, Lin was convinced, could never have.

Friends had gently suggested she move away, start over, at least clear out Emma's room. But Lin loved this house, this land. They were not the guilty parties. They had done nothing wrong. She had closed Emma's door and whenever she'd tried to open it, to deal with what lay inside—the books, the LEGOs, the absence of Barbies—she was blown back as though by a force field. One that sheared her breath from her and numbed her limbs.

After countless appeals, after she'd lost hope of reversing the decision, the court had ruled in her favor, affirmed that she had been, after all, a parent, an important part of Emma's life, and granted her visits, but by then Jan had vanished with Emma. Only then did she enter the room. She knelt on the floor, pulling books off the shelf and piling them into boxes. Her fingers caressed the frayed spine of Emma's favorite, the one about the duckling, separated from its family, searching among the reeds and lily pads, asking over and over to every creature it encountered, "Are you my mama?" Then Lin cried.

As soon as she had come home from the hospital, Emma was read to. At six months, she chewed through books. Literally. But still, Lin read to her, wiping drool as she turned the pages. At two, Emma pulled them off the shelf and asked in the language that only Mommy and Mama could translate, "Read this one." But no Heather, Disney princess, honey-obsessed bear, or big red dog held her heart like that near-tragic duckling. "Mama," she had said, pointing to the mother duck. "That's you," she had added, poking Lin in the chest. Then she'd giggled in her four-year-old way, astonished that there could be more than one Mama.

Lin turned back toward the house. The shadows had grown and deepened. She was getting hungry. Who was this blocking her way? This stubborn someone. Social worker? Her case had never closed, but priorities had shifted, money was tight, and Emma, everyone assumed, was at least safe. While Jan had leveled plenty of allegations at Lin, she, in turn, had never hinted that Jan was anything but loving toward Emma. Private eye? Lin's money for that had run out years ago. No one had been able to find them. Down south somewhere, they assumed. Cop? Had something happened to Emma or to Jan? Had they been found? That alone almost urged her legs to move toward the house. But the police had long since stopped coming in person. They called occasionally to see if she had heard anything, and there was a warrant for Jan's arrest, of course, but they looked to Lin for breaks in the case. Her answering machine was the only link she needed to law enforcement.

Maybe this was a new generation of reporter for some gay press, anxious to resurrect an old, stale story. Things had changed across the country, she might say, how do you feel about that, she probably wanted to ask. But nothing had changed for Lin. Her story was hardly unique. Had they been allowed to marry back then, it might not have changed anything. Even the Goodridges had divorced, after their eponymous groundbreaking case had etched them into the stone of history. Plenty of straight families broke up and did not make headlines.

In February, Emma had turned twenty-one. Lin blew out a quiet breath. That's how old she had been when she'd met Jan in their last year of college. How had they missed each other over four years? What if they hadn't met that fateful afternoon? They used to joke about that, then laugh as they made up fake lives for each other. Now it was Jan who felt fake. Nine years would be a mere blip in most people's memories, across a span of twenty-plus years, and countless lovers, girlfriends, and, these days, wives, but a child changes everything. They didn't decide to have a child to save the relationship, nor did the child ruin it. Having a child was the logical next step to something that had felt so perfect and so right. Having children wasn't something Lin had thought about before Jan mentioned that it was something she'd thought about. But once the thought was in her head, Lin had no

problem with it. How could she not want to raise a child with this woman she loved?

By some definition, Lin could be considered Emma's father. Though the sperm was not hers, she did push the plunger, impregnating Jan. And while the doctor had said an orgasm was not required for a woman to become pregnant, Lin had found the whole endeavor so arousing that she didn't think twice about including it in the plan. So they made love. Then they made a baby. Afterward, lying spent and entwined, they plotted out their family's future. The name list began, schools were chosen, potential professions considered, and the speck that would become Emma grew inside one belly pressed against the other.

Is there a statute of limitations on parenthood? Are you still considered one if you've been thwarted in the effort for sixteen years, since your daughter was five? Lin never got to say goodbye, to reassure the frightened little girl that her Mama would always be there for her, even if she couldn't live with her. Maybe that was why she never moved away. Could the memory of a five-year-old survive into adulthood and lead her back home? Doubtful.

Lin would never abandon a child. Would never have abandoned Jan. That she might become one who could be abandoned had also never occurred to her. Lin had grown up sure of herself. Jan had grown up afraid—of her demanding parents, of her religion, of society. At first, Lin had found that attractive—this vulnerable, fearful girl who could be protected.

Lin sometimes wondered if it wasn't to her credit that the relationship had fallen apart. If she had only bullied Jan, like her family had all those years, Jan might have stayed. But Lin had showed her how to be independent. She had insisted on it, and had thought Jan had thrived.

A headache formed at the back of her skull. She was thirsty and hungry. She'd spent the morning marking trees for harvesting. Some to sell, some for her woodstove. Rob would come by on the weekend with his chainsaws and they'd make quick work of it. But now, she'd wasted the afternoon watching a stranger sit on her porch, trespass on her property. Why hadn't she just marched across the

field and chased her away? Lin rubbed her temples. The past was gone, the future didn't exist yet, all she had was this moment in time. Was this how she wanted to spend it?

Lin turned her back on the stranger and breathed deeply the scent of sun-warmed pine. Deep, cleansing breaths, as her yoga instructor had taught her. Breathe out the rage. The rage had made her turn to yoga. At first, no longer able to contain it, she had tried to run from it. But it had followed. After Jan and Emma vanished, she raged through her woods, inflicting scars still visible these many years later. With her ax and the darkness of rage, she felled a dozen small trees, completely unaware. When she awoke from a migraine-drenched stupor, some unknown number of hours or days later, she looked around at the carnage and wondered if a tornado had passed through and she'd miraculously survived. She spent the next two days building a loose definition of a cabin, her blind. A place where she could retreat from one world and observe another—track mink in winter, watch birds court and nest in spring, escape mosquitoes in summer, and listen to leaves drop in the autumn chill. Grateful not to have severed a foot, she turned to yoga to tame the rage.

Yoga, however, was no match for the guilt that to this day sat in her like bones, had become the structure of her. Because, of course, Emma didn't know any of this, what Lin had done to hold onto her, then to find her. And that's what bothered Lin most. That Emma grew up thinking Lin had abandoned her.

That was what she would tell the reporter. *I did not abandon her. Make sure she knows that.* Maybe if it were in print, it would find her. Emma could Google herself and see a news article. If she were still called Emma. If she remembered who her Mama was. Lin knew that Emma and Janice Williams no longer existed, that much her money had bought her. And Linda Johnson was too common for Google to be of much use.

Lin bent and wiped her hands on her jeans, then rested, head down, to clear her thoughts. Straightening, she turned. The low sun angled onto the porch and she could see the woman's legs and feet, clad in sandals. The rest of her hidden

in shadow. Time to face the demon. Lin stepped onto the path that led through the meadow and to the house.

She was halfway across the field before the woman stirred. Had she been dozing? Lin's heartbeat quickened when she saw the woman stand, then move to the edge of the porch, into the sun. Passing through the goldenrod, the Queen Anne's lace, the Joe-Pye weed, Lin shoved her hands in her pockets to steady herself. On the porch, the long limbs and dark hair clarified into familiar features. Freckled forearms crossed in front of her white T-shirt, and hips tilted as she shifted her weight to one foot. Lin stopped. Jan stood like that. Jan had long limbs and dark hair that curled around her face. And freckles. It never occurred to her that Jan might be the one who would come looking for her. The woman squinted in the light. Lin was backlit, perhaps anonymous still, so she urged her feet forward.

At the edge of the field, where two stone steps dipped down to a thin ribbon of lawn, Lin shook away the notion that this could be Jan. Unless Jan had not aged in the last twenty years, it did not seem possible that she could look this young and fit. Lin herself, despite a life outdoors chopping wood and tramping up hills, had grown gray and paunchy, now well into her forties. Could this be some ghost of Jan? Was she hallucinating after so many hours of dehydration?

The woman, clearly nervous now, unfolded her arms and shoved her hands in her pockets, mimicking Lin. She stepped off the porch and raised a hand to shade her eyes. The two women stopped a few feet from each other. No further territory could be crossed without some acknowledgement. But who goes first? The intruder or the intruded upon?

Lin waited. The stranger coughed to clear her throat, then spoke in a soft southern drawl. "Are you my mama?"

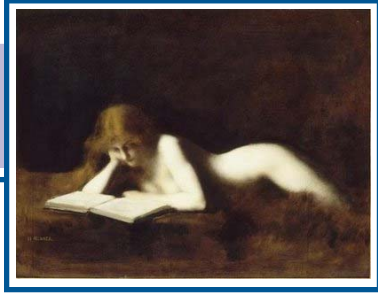
## Elaine Burnes



Elaine Burnes lives in Massachusetts with her wife and two cats. Her first short story, “A Perfect Life,” was published in the *Skulls and Crossbones* pirate anthology. “The Gift” and “Tracy Arm” appeared in *Khimairal Ink*, and “The Game” in *Best Lesbian Romance 2011*.

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## *Faith Is an Island*

*R.G. Emanuelle*

It was only ten o'clock, but the day was already blazing when Alex walked into her bar. She checked the liquor and made sure the beer and soda taps were full and filled the cups of the garnish tray with olives, cocktail onions, and maraschino cherries. A little paring knife was all she needed to prep the garnishes—lime slices, lemon wedges, orange circles, and pineapple chunks. She liked having a fully stocked bar and prided herself on being able to mix any drink. One of these days, she'd conjure up a signature cocktail.

Alex loved it here. When she and Naomi moved to St. Lucia and opened a tiki bar on the beach, they both agreed to leave their life-in-the-jungle attitude behind and approach people with a positive mindset. This was necessary after Naomi's trouble. They'd needed to leave Los Angeles and start a new life.

Alex finished arranging the supplies and went back through the door. She threw a look at the stack of plastic cups and huffed at the no-glass-on-the-beach rule. It just wasn't the same serving a martini or margarita in a plastic cup.

The strands of thatch hanging from the roof of the bar swung lazily in the soft breeze. Alex stepped on a ladder to fix a few that were stuck in a split on one of the poles. A voice from below startled her and made her lose her balance.

"Whoa! Careful." A hand reached up to help her regain her footing. The voice was one she'd gladly fall for, and the hand was one she longed to touch for the rest of her life.

"Suppose you break a leg? Remember," Naomi said, laughing, "the hospital is a half hour away."

"You'd drive me there." Alex stepped down from the ladder.



“On these bumpy roads, that’d be the longest half hour of your life.”

“As long as I’m with you, darling, I can take anything,” Alex said in her sweetest voice, batting her eyelashes.

“Oh, gag me,” Naomi responded in her best Valley Girl voice.

Alex put her arm around Naomi’s waist and pulled her close. Her lips warmed against Naomi’s. “Mmm. Hazelnut. You’ve been drinking that gourmet coffee again.”

“I need to be alert. I got word that a diving club is checking into Le Cha-teau. About thirty people.”

“I’d better make sure I have enough piña colada supplies.”

With a pat on Alex’s ass, Naomi began walking away. “I’m going to check in with Nettie,” she said over her shoulder.

“Kay. Love you.” Alex loved the tapas Nettie made for the bar. With the exception of a few late liquor shipments, the bar had turned out to be a stress-free venture for them. Best of all, they were able to earn a living in a new, peaceful life.

The divers were checking in, which meant they’d be hitting the beach soon. Time to check on the Coco López.

#

That evening, the divers set up camp on the beach for a clam bake.

“Where’d you get the clams?” Alex asked while she mixed up a margarita for a young woman.

“From a local fisherman. Our instructor has great connections.” The woman took her drink and went back to her group.

Ah, yes. The instructor. Alex had spotted her earlier, from a distance, and got the feeling she’d seen her before. She’d shrugged it off at the time, but looking at her now, as she stood a few yards down the beach, Alex got an uneasy

feeling. She'd think about it later, though. Right now, she had a batch of margaritas to make.

Alex never minded keeping the bar open late for these impromptu beach parties. She loved watching the setting sun, loved to feel the sand between her toes, cool and damp instead of hot and abrasive, and sometimes the partiers invited her to join them.

The stars were brilliant in the clear night sky, which was never truly black here, but an inky, speckled indigo, so long as there was a moon. The sounds of merriment spread across the beach and the waves crashing at the shoreline were percussion to the loud music from a boom box. She was gyrating behind the bar to "Takin' Care of Business" and didn't hear anyone approaching.

"Hi, there."

Alex jumped and swung around, hand to her chest. "Oh, Jesus. You scared me. Everyone seems to be doing that to me today." She smiled brightly at the woman. "What can I get you?"

"You don't remember me, do you?"

Alex studied her face a moment. "I'm sorry. You do look familiar, but..."

"Rachel Lowry."

Had the towel in Alex's hand been a glass, they would've had to pick shards out of her palm. "Oh" was all she could muster.

"You don't seem happy to see me."

"Surprised." She'd been reduced to one-word responses.

"I'll have a Chivas, please."

Silently, Alex poured a shot of Chivas and took the twenty-dollar bill Rachel put down. As she rang up the drink, she wondered why the Fates had brought Rachel Lowry here. Looking into Rachel's face, she set the change on the bar.

“Thanks. Listen,” Rachel said, ignoring the change. “I know I caused some trouble for Naomi a while back, but I really didn’t mean for it to go as far as it did. I didn’t think about the consequences.” She downed her shot and carefully placed the glass on the bar. “Anyway, sorry. Really.” She glanced at the money. “Keep the change,” she said before walking away.

*Small compensation for the trouble you caused.*

The water was a little rougher now and the crashing whitecaps became luminescent in the moonlight. The money Rachel left still sat on the bar. It might as well have been covered in anthrax. Alex picked it up with two fingers, put it in the drawer, and made a mental note to add it to her charity donations. Rachel saying that she hadn’t thought about the consequences was putting it mildly. Did she really think that tossing out a “sorry” like that would make it all better?

She prayed that Naomi would not run into Rachel.

The next morning was just as glorious as any other. Outside their little bungalow on the outskirts of town, Naomi was weeding her plants.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Alex said, meandering down the stone path toward her. “I can’t even keep a cactus alive.”

Naomi chuckled.

“No, really. Years ago, I had a couple of cacti in my apartment. They died.” This last she said sardonically, making Naomi snort with laughter.

“Only you, my love, could make a cactus die.”

Alex sat down on a large rock. Naomi had made such a peaceful Zen space for them here. It was exactly what they’d both needed after living in L.A. for ten years.

“Sweetheart, I have to tell you something.” She toed the little stones scattered on the ground. “You know that scene in *Casablanca* where Humphrey Bogart says, ‘Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine?’”

## *Faith Is an Island*

Naomi, still crouched, trowel in hand, looked at her. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Alex looked into her eyes. “Rachel Lowry is on the island.”

Naomi turned to pull a patch of weeds crowding her ginger plant. “I know. I saw her.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t get a chance.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Are you okay?”

With a heavy sigh, Naomi stood up and faced Alex. “Look, I can’t hide forever,” she said, pulling off her gardening gloves. “As big a world as this is, it’s small. Remember? ‘Of all the gins joints in all the towns...?’”

Alex bit her lip. “I know, but I just want to be sure...”

Naomi kissed her on the head. “I’m fine.” She tossed her gloves on a bench by the door and went inside.

The door to their bungalow had been a symbol for their new life. Whenever it closed behind them, it shut out all the ugliness in the world. They had painted it turquoise blue, for the ocean they now considered part of their habitat, and had nailed a wreath of dried sage on it for good luck.

But now, fate had brought Rachel not only to this island but to the hotel closest to their business. Why? Whatever the reason, Alex was afraid for Naomi. And afraid they’d have a repeat of the past.

#

As Alex wiped the bar down, she stared out at the beach and thought of Rachel. Alex had seen her only once before, but her face should’ve burned into her

brain. Rachel was the cause of Naomi's problems. Alex still had trouble calling it what it was: a nervous breakdown. Even thinking the words made her stomach clench. They also made her remember, and she hated remembering. Once again, she saw Naomi stop in the street, her chest heaving in and out, her lungs working hard to get air, her eyes widening with panic. "I can't breathe," she gasped and dropped to her knees. A 911 call got an ambulance on the scene within ten minutes, though it seemed like hours. It was the worst day of Alex's life.

But the next five months were an eternity. Alex spent those months taking care of Naomi as she recuperated. It was painful to see her so vulnerable. Six months after her recovery, they moved to St. Lucia.

It was all Rachel's fault. All because Naomi had refused her advances and Rachel, being the most charming, attractive woman ever born, couldn't abide rejection. Hadn't she ever been rejected before? It didn't matter that Naomi had a partner. Rachel wanted what she wanted. Alex gritted her teeth as she remembered how, out of spite, Rachel told her boss that Naomi had fudged some numbers on the budget.

Naomi's well-being was on shaky ground during most of the investigation. With no evidence, they dropped the charges, and things should have gone back to normal. But during the inquiries, her co-workers found out she was gay, and the ensuing abuse sent her over the edge. Rachel claimed later that she had just wanted to make Naomi squirm for a while. But it had gone way beyond that. Then Rachel just went on her merry way.

Alex shivered with memories. She didn't ever want to go through that again. As strong as Naomi was, like every person, she had her breaking point. Naomi had reached hers, and seeing Rachel might push her there again.

#

Alex sliced lemons and limes for the first of the late-morning drinkers. With those dispatched, she wiped her hands and looked up. Naomi was coming toward her.

“Hi, babe. I must have ESP. I could sense your presence,” she teased, and planted a kiss on Naomi’s cheek.

“Oh, sure.”

The strained look on Naomi’s face worried Alex. “Sweetie, you sure you’re okay with...what we talked about?” She took Naomi’s hand and rubbed the knuckles with her thumb.

“Yes. It’s just hard remembering. You know?”

“Yeah. I know. But I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Not this time.” Tears burned her eyes.

“Hey,” Naomi said, pushing a lock of hair behind Alex’s ear with her free hand. “We’ve gone through this before. Many times. There was nothing you could’ve done.”

“But I could’ve helped you deal with things better.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said, frustrated.

Naomi sighed. “Baby, what else could you have done?”

Alex remained silent. She’d asked herself over and over again during the past three years, *What could I have done?*

As if on cue, and out of nowhere, Rachel Lowry walked up to the bar. “Hi.”

Alex’s heart almost leapt out of her mouth. Speechless, she looked at Naomi, whose face was expressionless. Neither of them responded.

“Look, Naomi, I never really got a chance to apologize to you. I mean—”

“It seems to me you had plenty of opportunities to apologize for ruining her life,” Alex said. Blood pulsed in her temples.

Rachel's cheeks flushed to budding pink. "I guess I learned my lesson."

Alex thought she had let go of her fury a long time ago, but it stayed buried deep inside her and was now making its way back to torment her. She couldn't contain herself. "You learned your lesson? You made up lies about Naomi, accused her of things she didn't do, made her life a living hell, and...and then you just walked away."

"Alex, please. It's okay." Naomi put a hand on her arm. "I've forgiven Rachel."

Rachel's eyes softened and her jaw relaxed. "But it looks like Alex hasn't." She took a step back from the bar. "I understand. My group leaves in two days. I'll try to keep myself scarce until then."

Rachel went back across the sand toward the hotel. Maybe, if nothing else, she'd learned not to play games with people's lives. But Alex wasn't convinced.

After Rachel was completely out of sight, they continued to stand there a moment, the *bbrrrrrrwhoosshh* of the softly crashing waves the only sound.

Then Naomi moved, startling Alex. "Anyway," she said. This told Alex that she wanted to drop the subject. "I just wanted to bring you these." She handed Alex the list of mixers she needed to order. Naomi was switching gears.

"Thanks. I, uh, was going nuts looking for this."

"I know. You had that going-nuts look on your face." Naomi kissed her and headed back up the beach.

Alex watched Naomi as she walked away and looked at her voluptuous figure and golden hair, just as she always did. But at the moment, she couldn't enjoy the view. She felt uneasy, as if a thief were standing in the shadows, ready to take a sledgehammer to the serenity they'd managed to build, and steal everything from them.

Turning back to her lemons and limes, Alex exhaled. Naomi's newfound calmness toward someone who had nearly destroyed her life was disconcerting. Zen went only so far.

#

"Sweetie, I'm home."

She checked each room, but no Naomi.

It was midnight. Alex had closed the bar, secured the drawer in a safe at the hotel, and gone home. She did this every night, and every night Naomi would be up waiting for her. This never varied. Not even when Alex kept the bar open late.

Now, with Naomi nowhere to be seen, Alex's stomach churned.

"Where are you?"

She knocked on the bathroom door and when she got no response, she turned the knob and stepped in. Naomi wasn't in there, either.

Just as Alex was about to step out, she noticed a bottle in the sink. She picked it up and was about to put it in the vanity when she realized it was empty. This was odd because Naomi was a firm believer in simple living. When a pill bottle was empty, out it went. Maybe she was about to throw it out and got distracted.

Alex turned the bottle label up. Xanax. Naomi had stopped taking that two years ago. She always kept a bottle on hand, just in case, but as far as Alex knew, she had never dipped into it. A full bottle always sat in the medicine cabinet, the level never going down.

Now it was empty. Did she take these pills? Alex checked the garbage pail—no pills. Did she flush them?

Dread suffused every inch of her body, her limbs went numb, her skin tightened around her skull. She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and fumbled with the buttons. Her fingers wouldn't cooperate and kept hitting the wrong

numbers.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Alex heard the high-pitched panic of her own voice bouncing off the tiles. Finally, she got the right sequence of numbers.

She was lightheaded and her stomach lurched unmercifully. “C’mon, c’mon! Pick up!”

Alex almost passed out from relief when Naomi’s voice came on the line, loud and clear, sober and alert.

“Oh, thank God,” Alex said in a barely audible exhale of breath. Dropping to her knees, she started crying, but moved the mouthpiece away from her face. No sense getting Naomi upset.

“Babe, what’s wrong? What happened?” Naomi asked.

Alex took a deep breath, cleared her throat, and put the mouthpiece back by her lips. “Um, nothing. I just thought I heard an explosion and I got worried about you.” *Yeah, that’s good.*

“An explosion? Where?”

“I was wrong. It was just a car backfiring.”

Naomi’s voice deepened with concern. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, sweetie. Forget I called. I’ll see you later. Love you.” She flipped her phone closed before Naomi could respond.

Alex was crashing. She walked out of the bathroom on rubber legs and nearly fell onto the sofa. Then the stabbing in her head began. She hadn’t even thought to ask Naomi where she was. Or what she was doing. Or what had happened to the pills. After Naomi’s breakdown, she’d lived in constant fear of a recurrence. And she worried what form it would take. One of her biggest concerns was that one day Naomi would snap and try to get revenge. Naomi had never expressed a desire to do so, but Alex would often catch her staring off into space, and wondered what machinations were going on in her head. Revenge was sometimes a

scenario that Alex considered.

Her phone rang.

A few moments of quiet slowed Alex's heart beat to normal and she answered. "Hi, honey."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. But where are you?"

"I'm at the hotel talking to Raul. Going over the new contract."

"At this hour?"

"Raul said he had an evening engagement and that he would be back around midnight. You know I have to grab these night owls when I can. Didn't you get my note?"

"What note?" Alex looked around the living room.

"On the kitchen table."

Alex quickly went to the table. "There's no note here."

"That's strange. I left it there. Well, that's where I am. Are you sure you're okay?"

Alex's skin prickled. Something wasn't right. "I'm fine. Maybe I should come get you."

"Why? I have my car."

"But it's late."

"So?"

"You shouldn't be alone!"

"Why?"

Alex knew she sounded hysterical, but she also knew she was lucky to be

maintaining her cool as well as she was.

“Alex.” Naomi’s tone was that of an adult soothing an agitated child. “What’s going on?”

Alex paused. *I need to chill the fuck out.*

“I just had a bad day.” The voices in Alex’s head quieted down. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. Look, I’ll see you later, okay?”

#

Alex drove to Le Chateau and quickly made her way to the second floor, down the paisley-carpeted hallway, and knocked on Raul’s door. No answer.

Alex walked back toward the elevator. Maybe she’d just missed them. Maybe Naomi was on her way home now. The elevator doors opened and she stopped short at the sight of Raul.

“Alex,” Raul said. “Naomi just left.”

“Where’d she go?”

“I assume home.”

“Okay, thanks,” Alex mumbled and left.

In the parking lot, Alex looked around. She turned the corner to check the side lot. There it was. Naomi’s Jeep was parked by the side entrance. But where was Naomi?

Her heart sped up again and she began to sweat. Was this how Naomi felt during her breakdown? Alex feared she might find out.

On a whim, Alex went to look in the bar. When she entered, she stopped in her tracks. Her heart pounded and blood rushed in her ears. There, sitting in a booth, were Naomi and Rachel. Rachel was leaning over, looking stricken. Alex dashed to the table.

“Alex. What are you doing here?” Naomi looked startled.

Alex looked around the table for signs of a struggle. There, on the ground was a broken glass. One big shard had blood on it. Immediately, Alex looked over Rachel's body. She was sure that if anyone had been cut in this encounter, it would be Rachel. Sure enough, Rachel's hand was wrapped in a bloody towel.

"Oh, god, Naomi, what did you do?"

"Honey, relax. I didn't do anything. Rachel broke the glass herself—by accident."

It took a moment for this to sink into Alex's brain. As the burn of fear left her, she became lightheaded and sat down. "What are *you* doing here?"

Naomi moved closer and rested her hands on Alex's shoulders. "Sweetie, I didn't want to run away anymore. I didn't want the specter of what happened to haunt me the rest of my life." She wiped the tear of relief from Alex's cheek. "I decided to face Rachel and get out everything I never got to say."

"Boy, did she say plenty," Rachel said. "And I'm glad she did. I've been feeling very guilty the past few years."

"Then, everything's okay?" Alex looked into Naomi's eyes, waiting for her peaceful gaze to soothe her.

"Yes, baby. Everything's okay."

"Well, I'll get going." Rachel slipped out of the booth. "I'm glad we got to talk." Holding up her wounded hand, she looked at both of them. "Take care," she said and walked away.

"Baby," Alex said quietly. "I found an empty Xanax bottle in the sink." She knew her voice held the question she wanted Naomi to answer.

Naomi sighed, then covered Alex's hand with her own. "Okay, so I was a little more freaked out by Rachel than I let on. I didn't want to worry you. But seeing her made me realize that there was still residue clinging to me." She closed her eyes a moment, as if summoning courage. "I was hanging onto the Xanax because I

was afraid I'd have another meltdown. But that was like losing weight and hanging onto your fat clothes in case you gain it again. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I don't ever want to go down that road again, so I threw the pills away. Got rid of the garbage and everything."

Alex felt tears forming and she squeezed her eyes to keep them in. She felt foolish but grateful that Naomi was so strong. Strong enough for both of them sometimes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have doubted you," she said.

Naomi picked her bag up from the seat. "Let's go home."

#

Trying out a new flavored rum, Alex shook a cocktail shaker. She'd come up with a great signature drink yet.

"That looks awesome," Naomi said from behind her.

Alex jumped and nearly lost the entire batch. "Holy shit! Would you stop doing that?"

"I bet it tastes good, too."

Alex grinned and put down a cup and poured a bright red drink. A cherry and an umbrella completed it. "Here, taste."

Naomi took a sip. "Mmm. Yummy. The cherry, though. Too cheesy."

"But it's classic," Alex said playfully.

"Nope. Doesn't work." Naomi grinned, and when Alex pouted, she laughed. "Don't make me beg for your love, darling." She stepped into the bar and kissed Alex for a long moment. Then, with a flourish, she pulled a note from her pocket and held it up. "I knew I wasn't crazy."

"What's that?" Alex took the note.

"It's the note I said I left for you that night. It was outside by my ginger plant."

“So I went crazy looking for a note that wasn’t there?” Alex paused. “Why was it by the ginger plant?”

“Hey, I’m a multi-tasker, but sometimes I confuse my tasks. Okay, so maybe I’m a *little* crazy.”

Alex looked at her as if to say, “A *little*?”

“I’m really sorry. I’m worried about you, though. You’ve never had a *bad day* since we got here. You really went over the edge there.”

Alex played with the little umbrella in the glass. “I got scared. And I guess I never fully recovered from your breakdown. Just the thought of going through that again...”

Naomi caressed Alex’s face. “Do you ever want to go back to the motherland?”

Alex shrugged. “I dunno. I like it here. Let’s just take things as they come.” She pecked Naomi on the lips then stuck a pineapple chunk in her mouth. “How about that?”

“Yes!” Naomi said. “That’s it, baby! That’s your drink.”

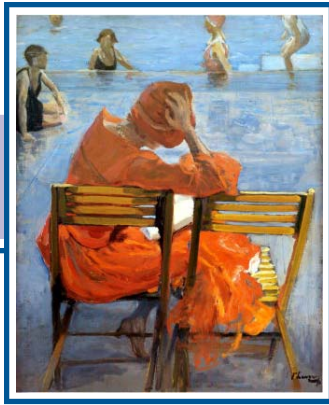
Alex smiled and thanked the goddess for giving her this woman, this island...and now, this drink.

R.G. Emanuelle



R.G. Emanuelle is co-editor of *Skulls and Crossbones: Tales of Women Pirates*, and her short stories can be found in *Best Lesbian Erotica 2010*, *Women in Uniform*, *Lesbian Cops*, *Khimairal Ink*, *Read These Lips: 4Play*, the Goldie Award-winning *Lesbian Lust: Erotic Stories*, and online at Oysters & Chocolate ([www.oystersandchocolate.com](http://www.oystersandchocolate.com))

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## *The Rainbow Scarf*

*Rachel Green*

Margaret half walked, half slid over the frozen cobbles and densely packed snow. Coming into town on a day like today was foolhardy, but she'd had to go to the bank and that was that. Adding insult to injury, the bank was short-staffed as well, leading to a half-hour queue with one teller in the whole line of windows struggling to deal with the customers while three non-counter staff tried to placate the queue and direct customers to the ATMs.

She picked her way through an almost empty market, trying to determine what the man on the fruit and veg stall was actually saying. "Getyourseedlessatsumas. Twelfeforapound" didn't much sound like anything when all the vowels fell prey to a Devon accent. A flash of colour attracted her to the top end of the market where a hopeful trader had braced the cold to set up a stall selling hats, gloves and scarves in a myriad of colours and styles. There was another woman browsing the stall, wearing an impractical, thin, white dress and very little else. Her skin was so pale it was almost blue and she fingered the rainbow cashmere scarf with an almost feral look of desire.

"Lovely, aren't they?" Margaret fingered the rack of iridescent paisley scarves. "I wish I could buy them all."

"They're not worth the money." The girl smiled with whiter-than-white teeth and a north-European accent. "My mother used to make these in a factory in Ukraine. Five roubles for every one she produced on a hand loom and here they are sold for"—she made a quick calculation—"almost a thousand."

Margaret took her hand away. "Well, when you put it like that. It feels like I'd be promoting slave labour to buy one."

"Then you would put Majka out of work. Five roubles is better than none,

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nyet?”

“Oh, I suppose.” Margaret frowned. “Now I don’t know what to do. Should I buy one or not?”

The girl laughed. “I am kidding with you. My mother is dead and does not care if you buy scarf or not.” She closed her hand over Margaret’s. “Save your money. Buy me a coffee instead, da?”

“Da.” Margaret grinned. “Yes, I mean. Coffee it is. Where shall we go? There’s a Nero’s over there or a Costa on the High Street.”

“We go there.” She pointed to a small café with steamed-up windows. Plastic chairs were grouped haphazardly around a table littered with disposable coffee cups and overflowing ash trays.

“Are you sure?” Margaret’s face betrayed her trepidation. “It looks a bit rough.”

“Is good. Common people, real food, da?” She linked arms with Margaret and strode toward the café. Margaret had no choice but to allow herself to be dragged along.

Inside the café was warm and crowded. Market traders and shoppers crowded the tables, the susurrus of conversation rising and falling as they squeezed past patrons standing with coffee cups and bacon rolls. The girl found a table where two women were talking over empty cups and squeezed in next to them, scooping up the empty cups and plates and handing them to Margaret to disperse to other tables. She nudged one of the women, who had paused their conversation in horrified fascination at the interloper. “You don’t mind us sitting here, nyet? We will listen to stories of your husbands and give opinion.”

“I don’t think—”

“How rude!”

The two women stood and gathered their coats and bags. One shot a look

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of pure hatred at Margaret. She twisted her mouth and held up a hand in an apologetic “What am I supposed to do?” gesture. The girl tugged on her sleeve. “Coffee, da? Strong and black. And sausages. Lots of sausages.”

“Erm.” Margaret looked to the counter, where a woman was taking orders and fetching plates from the cook in the room at the back. “All right.” She made her way past several people with multiple cries of “excuse me” and “coming through.” By the time she reached the serving counter she was just shoving past with a muttered apology if someone objected.

The woman looked up. “Yes, love? What can I get you?”

“A pot of Darjeeling, please, and a large black coffee, a toasted teacake and a plate of sausages”

The woman looked past her, craning her neck to scan the room. “Ah, Satya. Right you are, love. Sausages it is.”

“Thank you.” Margaret took a ten-pound note out of her purse . “How much do I owe you?”

“Seven fifty.” The woman took the note and rang it into the till, handing her the change. “I’ll give you a shout when they’re ready.”

“Thank you.” She made her way back to their table. “Satya, is it?” She held out her hand. “I’m Margaret. Margaret Brake.”

“Satya Petravich. How do you do.” She shook Margaret’s hand solemnly, saying the words parrot-fashion as if she’d learned them by rote.

Margaret sat down. “Aren’t you cold? Outside, I mean. You haven’t got a coat.”

Satya gave her that grin again. “Is not so cold. This summer in Serbia.”

“I thought you came from the Ukraine?”

“Majka from Ukraine. Satya from Serbia, da?”

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“Oh, I see. Sorry.” Margaret slipped off her coat. “The lady behind the bar knows you.”

“Julia.” Satya reached for Margaret’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “She gives me sausage.”

“Yes, I see.” Margaret pulled her hand away and took off her scarf. “So are you a student here? Or just passing through?”

“Student, on working holiday. I come to England to look at buildings.”

“Lovely. So you’re an historian, then, or architect?”

“Architect, yes. Draw buildings, make buildings. Someday make great buildings. Cathedrals and palaces!”

“How lovely. I’ve never met an architect before.”

“I not an architect yet. No. Student now. Architect later. Draw you a house, yes?”

“One day. When I can afford it.” Margaret was interrupted by a cry of “Table eight!” and a tray was passed over the heads of those sitting between their table and the counter. Satya unloaded it with the speed of a pieceworker and sent it back. She attacked the sausages without even picking up the fork. “I am stuck here,” she said through a mouthful of pork. “No money, no clothes, no passport.”

“On no! What happened?” Margaret set out her tea cup and added milk before pouring the Darjeeling. “Were you mugged?”

“Mugged, da. They took my money and my”—she made a motion with her hand, as if writing—“walking cheques.”

“Traveller’s cheques.” She buttered her teacake and cut it into quarters. “What did you do? Go to the police?”

“Police? Tch.” She made a dismissive motion. “I go to landlady to explain, but she says, ‘No money, no belongings, no passport.’” She held up her hands, a half-eaten sausage in her right. “Here I remain.”

“But there must be something you could do?”

“Today is Saturday, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Monday, I go to police. Tell them very sorry I not report it earlier and please to send me back to Ukraine.”

“They won’t do that. They’ll only deport you if your visa expires and while you’ve got a valid passport, you’re entitled to work here. Don’t you have insurance?”

“Tch.” Satya clicked her tongue and picked up her coffee, downing half of it in one gulp. “You help me, yes? You let me stay with you? Until Monday?”

“Oh!” Margaret coloured. “But I only have a little flat.”

“Is not a problem. You like me, yes? We keep warm together.”

Margaret’s flat was indeed small, half of the top floor of a three-storey, terraced house, where the ceilings mirrored the shape of the roof and swept down below head height in surprising places. Satya stripped within five minutes of entering the place, handing her clothes to Margaret with an endearing smile. “You have washing machine yes?”

“Yes. I’ll put these through for you.” Her gaze lingered on the pert breasts of the Serbian girl, small and taut, the nipples hardening under her scrutiny.

“You like my titties?” Satya reached for Margaret’s hand and placed it on her breast, controlling it with her own to rub and press against the soft, yielding flesh. “Is good.” Still holding the hand to her breast, she reached forward and cupped the back of Margaret’s head, pulling her forward.

Margaret met the kiss tentatively, closed lips and closed teeth, but Satya was insistent, her tongue snaking past her lips and forcing open the pearly gates of

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her teeth. Margaret melted into the kiss, the clothes under her arm forgotten as Satya released her head, shifting her right arm to press against Margaret's mound under the rough cotton of her skirt.

Satya broke the kiss for a moment. "You like, yes?"

"Oh, yes."

"Good." Still holding Margaret's hand against her breast with her left hand, Satya lifted her right to push Margaret down, crushing her face into the folds of her labia.

Margaret was assailed by the heady scent of soap and peaches, the salty tang of sweat and the sharp aroma of Satya's arousal. The folds of labia were almost as pale as the surrounding skin, and she dropped the clothes in order to steady herself. The eastern girl moaned and shifted her stance, allowing Margaret access to the folds of damp flesh.

Margaret stuck out her tongue, expecting Satya's labia to taste sharp but was pleasantly surprised by the buttery softness of the flesh and the creamy taste of her wet lips. Her tongue travelled up the folds until it reached the cave with its hard little nub of pleasure. She pressed her lips against it, seeing Satya's clitoris in her mind's eye as the centre of a bee's nest, throbbing with activity and surrounded by sweet honey.

Satya moaned again, releasing Margaret's hand to press both of hers against the English girl's head, driving it into her cunt and grunting as Margaret's lips, tongue and teeth ground her clitoris and labia. With a sudden stiffening of her body, she flooded into orgasm, pushing Margaret away as her clitoris became oversensitive and shuddering as her juices ran down her thigh and soaked Margaret's hair. A final shudder swept across her body. She tilted Margaret's head up and leaned down to kiss her again, licking her own juices from her lips and mouth. She grinned as she pulled away. "Is good, da?"

"Da." Margaret smiled, feeling tears prick her eyelids.

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“Good. Now is your turn.”

They spent the rest of the day and night alternately fucking, eating, sleeping, waking up to fuck again, and holding each other in the flickering light of Margaret’s television. She ran a bath and Satya sat on the side, washing Margaret’s hair and then kneeling on the floor next to the bath to fuck her with her fingers, using the soap as a lubricant and twisting up to massage Margaret’s g-spot until she thrashed so much from her subsequent orgasm that they were both sopping wet.

She was gone when Margaret awoke the next morning. Her clothes, along with Margaret’s coat, boots and a pair of jeans, left curiously vacant patches in the tiny apartment, though not as vacant as Margaret’s purse, emptied of cash and left in front of the television with a scribbled “sorry” and an address in the Ukraine. The bathroom, still wet from their activities, sounded hollow and vacant and the kitchen, where Satya had fucked her on the tiny café table and licked soft cheese from her breasts, felt too big for one.

It was only when she went into the living room that she found the rainbow cashmere scarf, tied prettily with one of her own stockings.

## Rachel Green



Rachel Green is a forty-something writer from Derbyshire, England. She lives with her two partners and three dogs. She has published two novels, *An Ungodly Child* in 2008 and *Screaming Yellow* in 2010. She also writes poetry, paints and illustrates.

When not writing, Rachel walks her three dogs, potters in the garden, drinks copious amounts of tea and stabs people with swords. She twitters a haiku daily.

[www.leatherdyke.co.uk](http://www.leatherdyke.co.uk) is a portal site to her books and blogs. She can also be found on Facebook (Rachel Green) and Twitter (@leatherdykeuk)



## *A Damn Job*

*Doreen Perrine*

They were living out of boxes. On the first floor of a three-story brownstone, the apartment had seen too many days of frontier living. It was a cramped studio with low, warped ceilings, and cracking vinyl floors. Frankie didn't care—this was *their* place. Twenty-one years old and, since meeting Suz eight months ago at a queer singles dance—where Frankie couldn't dance—her social security had kicked in. She no longer needed to rely on her mother's support. If her high-school past had been martyred to Kate's addiction, Frankie could begin another, absolved life—with Suz.

Bored with unpacking, she'd cleared a path to the bedroom and kitchen by shoving boxes aside with her good foot. Beside the sparse, second-hand furniture, the space was lined with a cardboard barricade of her procrastination. She simply longed to be settled in.

"If I could blink like a genie, it would all pop into place." Thrusting her chin forward, Frankie blinked at the boxes surrounding the bed. Nothing budged.

That Sunday, Suz's one day off, they'd eaten Chinese take-out, watched a murder mystery, and made love. Then Suz had collapsed on the lumpy mattress. Huddled in a fetal position alongside the wall, she mumbled, "Like a *what?*"

"You know that genie in the magic lamp." Frankie massaged Suz's wide, bare back, spotted with freckles from the Arizona sun.

"Huh?" Suz twisted her head to gape at Frankie. "You're waiting to develop magical powers to put all this crap away?"

Her honey-brown hair falling along her shoulder, Frankie shrugged. "Why not?"

“That’s some plan you got, girlie.” Suz rolled her black, droopy eyes.

Since the move two weeks before, Suz drove two hours each way from the ranch. Getting an apartment near a bus line to the PT clinic had been Frankie’s idea. She knew Suz wasn’t happy with being so far from her beloved mountains. Still, Frankie’s urge to reclaim her independence was overpowering. She couldn’t see past it.

“Wanna hear my *reality-based* plan now?” Suz smirked.

Frankie laughed. “Not really.” She stretched across the husky frame of Suz’s back. It felt like a protective wall bolstering her chest.

Suz craned her neck and looked Frankie in the eye. “My plan is we get up every morning, you make our damn breakfast, then I go to work—you know, that place I can’t magically blink to get to.” Her raven hair spilled across the pillow as she flopped her head back onto it.

“Jesus, Suz!” Frankie huffed into her left ear. “I’m working on it. You see what I’m up against here.” She swept her arm back toward a lopsided box of DVD’s propped against the bed. “It’s like shoveling shit against high tide.”

#

She shouted in her fitful sleep, “You’re too stoned to drive!” Bolting upright, Frankie woke with the metallic screech ringing in her ears.

When she was six, her father had flown back to the Ukraine. For years, Frankie dreamt of him struggling, like some modern Doctor Zhivago, against a howling, foggy wind to find them. It had taken her years to realize he’d wanted to lose, not find, Frankie and her mother. Now, she dreamt Kate sought her out on some perilous quest from the other side.

With zombie-like motion, she turned to the nightstand. The screech in her brain had transformed into the resounding buzz of the alarm. She stared blankly, trying to piece together the angular red of the clock’s glowing numbers.

From where she'd curled between them, the cat leapt onto the floor. Suz stirred under the blanket. Reaching behind Frankie's pillow, she slapped the snooze button.

"Time?" Suz grumbled the question.

"Seven." Frankie rubbed her glassy eyes. "I gotta get going."

A first day of anything tended to knot her up. She recalled starting first grade in midyear, after her parents' divorce. Although she'd dreaded it, she'd bitten her trembling lower lip, refusing to cry.

Her mother had to work long hours to build up her photography business. She'd spoken with a bubbly enthusiasm antithetical to her stoic nature. "You'll be in a real school with a real teacher."

But Frankie had missed out on some, apparently, crucial routines. Secretly, she wondered how the teacher had programmed the kids to be robots. They appeared to raise their hands and bleep in codes of mechanical answers. Well versed in their classroom tasks, they unpacked book bags and set their homework in a tidy bin on the teacher's desk.

Frankie easily mimicked their rote actions. She clasped her hand to her heart to recite a pledge to the stars-and-stripes flag. For her, it was all mindless mumbo jumbo. The child of a foreign couple, she felt alienated from what those rituals meant to "normal" children.

Now, she battled the rage over the isolation resurrected by her mangled limb. The accident had happened over two lost years ago. Still, the ghastly sound of crunching car metal and Kate's phantom form haunted Frankie's nightmares.

Fumbling with her thick fingers, Suz reached for her cigarettes on the nightstand.

Her eyes wide, Frankie grabbed the pack from her hand. "Christ, Suz, I can't smell all smoky on my first day."

“All right ...” Suz grunted. “But I *need* coffee, woman.” She snapped her fingers over Frankie’s head.

“I’ll buy you a cup on the way.” Frankie shook Suz’s broad shoulder. “Now, get the fuck up!” She flicked on the overhead light.

“Calm down, willya?” Suz shielded her eyes with the side of her hand. “It’s not like we’re gonna get rich from your gofer job.”

Frankie slapped her rear end.

“Ow.” Suz rolled over and pulled her down into a playful headlock.

“It’s data entry, asshole.” Frankie wrestled out of her grasp. “And it’s a damn job—I *have* to work!”

“Call me an ‘asshole’ again”—Suz wagged her index finger in Frankie’s face— “and you’ll walk to your *damn* job!”

In her underwear and a T-shirt with the design of a heavy metal band she was no longer into, Frankie shifted to the mattress edge. She slid her brace out from under the bed. Aligning its Velcro squares with her dead, lower leg, she strapped it in place. She fitted the footplate inside her loafer, then adjusted the kneecap. Then she stood and shuffled into the kitchen.

The calico flitted around her feet. “Don’t trip me, baby,” Frankie gently chided the excited creature. She flipped open a can of cat food and set it on the table. A light breeze slapped the tortoise-shell window shade, a trash find Frankie had hung up to block the bland parking-lot view.

Without thinking, she reached for the orange prescription bottle on the sink shelf. She twisted off the cap; then, holding the white pill before her open mouth, stopped. She might feel too spacey to focus on the job. Still, the searing pain in her thigh was sure to flare up if she took nothing. She broke the pill in half, then gulped it back with water cupped in her hand.

She glanced at the stove clock. Seven-fifteen. “Enough time for coffee,”

she mumbled.

She felt a tightness clenching like a fist inside her stomach and exhaled. Moving to the stove, she lit the back burner. She filled the tin coffee pot with water and set it down with a clank.

“You all but have this job,” her mother had phoned a week ago to tell her. “Just show up.” That meant, Frankie guessed, there wouldn’t be an interview. It was only part-time and wouldn’t cut into her physical therapy sessions. If ever she hoped to drive and, miraculously, walk without the brace, she had to keep those up.

Still, she felt a gnawing unease she hadn’t known when job hunting before the accident. In her frazzled attempts to keep Kate clean, a steady job had been the least of her worries. Now, like the crash that had almost taken her life too, it loomed head-on.

Dark brown liquid bubbled up in the glass top of the coffee pot. She brought Suz’s steaming, black coffee to the nightstand. Then she picked up a basket of change near the door on her way back to the kitchen and sat at the table.

“Suz, how much for the bus here?” she called across the threshold as she sifted through quarters, dimes, and nickels. She never saved pennies.

“I’ll drive you,” Suz called back.

“Just get me there.” Frankie eyed the stove clock, inching steadily toward seven-thirty. She’d have to get dressed soon. “I’ll take the bus back.”

She poured herself a cup of coffee and went back to the bedroom. The brace wriggled, shifting as she went. She eased herself onto the mattress to undo the straps and sighed. Would each morning get swallowed up in this same sluggish routine?

Suz lay on her side sipping coffee. Her eyes gleaming in shadow, she peered from beneath the earthy, brown and white blanket her grandmother had woven. “You taking it off?” She jerked her chin at the brace.

“Have to get dressed somehow.” With the ripping sound of Velcro slicing the air, Frankie quickly undid the row of black straps. She was getting good at this.

Suz reached over to steady the loosening brace.

“Leave it alone!” Frankie pushed her hand away.

“Hey.” Suz scowled. “I’m *trying* to help.”

“I got it.” Inhaling a deep, nostril breath, Frankie made a conscious effort to calm herself. With the anxiety of starting a new job, she knew she was getting touchy.

Suz missed nothing. “You know”—she prodded Frankie’s shoulder with her index finger—“it’s not like you have to do *everything* by yourself, girlie.”

“Sure I do.” Frankie’s sarcasm was mounting too.

“Why?”

Suz’s question went unanswered.

Frankie reached for her best, tan chinos slung over the railing at the end of the bed. Nervously, she glanced back at the alarm clock. Seven-thirty. She needed to be dressed and across town by eight forty-five.

“Did she have to make it for an incremental time?” Frankie rolled her eyes. “Why not just one fucking hour *on* the hour, like nine?”

“Well, this career choice looks promising.” Suz snorted a laugh. Then she threw off the blanket and sat up in bed. “Already, you’re bitching about your boss.”

#

Suz drained back the last of her coffee as they climbed into the rusty truck. The job was in a wealthy neighborhood they’d never seen. It was a residential area even Frankie’s mother had called high-falutin’.

Her husky arm draped along the window ledge, Suz stared at the tree-

lined road. “Shit, is it me or are these sidewalks growing into streets?” With one hand on the steering wheel, she gazed out of the window like a big-eyed kid.

Frankie peered through the streaky windshield. Golden-green Palo Verde trees teased a glimpse of the sprawling adobe houses. Before the houses, writhing creosote bushes encircled sweeping gardens. Each house paraded past her eyes, boasting some distinct feature—an arching doorway, a bow window, or an ornate balcony useless at ground level. She thought of the bulletin board on which her mother tacked her photographs. These were the lavish homes it was Natasha’s job to shoot.

“Competitive rock gardening,” Frankie remarked dryly at the Japanese style of one lush garden. Her outsider status—the poor, disabled lesbian—struck her like a lightning bolt. What was she doing here? Did she even exist in this showy, picture-perfect world?

Her eyes fell on the dashboard and a terrifying memory flashed to mind. Instinctively, as if the limb had thought to save her, Frankie flung her leg against the crumpling dashboard of Kate’s car. The old rage resurfaced and she dug her fingers into the truck seat with a claw-like grip. Wasn’t the paralysis sacrifice enough?

“Jesus, Frank.”

Suz’s whistle called her back from her waking nightmare.

“These houses make our town hall look like a frickin’ shed.” Suz shook her head at the manicured landscape surrounding them.

Frankie smiled at Suz. At least here she wasn’t alone in her isolation.

“Bartholomew Street.” Frankie pointed to a hilly road across the intersection.

Her jitters seemed to rise with the climbing road. At the top of the hill, she lifted her eyes to make out the jagged outline of mountain peaks, distant but firm. She thought of Suz driving her up into those mountains after they’d met at

the dance. “This feels freer than dancing,” Frankie had declared, her hair rippling like waves in the open air.

In her left hand, she grasped the wrinkled note with her boss’s name—Vera Tierson, Architect—and address scrawled on it.

“Here!” She pointed her finger at the sidewalk.

Suz slammed on the brakes. A slick, red convertible stopped short behind them and honked.

“It’s a fucking bus stop!” Suz jerked the shift angrily, then rapped Frankie’s shoulder. “You know I just got these goddamn brakes fixed.”

“Sorry, but this is important.” Frankie squinted to read the bus stop sign. “I need to know how to get back ... unless you wanna drive me every day.”

“I’ll tell ya what, girlie”—Suz’s deep smirk rode up the side of her tan cheek—“how’s about you move into one of these princess palaces and grow your hair real long. Then you can throw it over a balcony and wait for me to climb up and get you.” She snatched the note from Frankie’s hand. “One thirty-six? It’s right here.”

Suz veered the truck alongside the curb.

Not budging, Frankie stared numbly down at her braced, paralyzed leg. The helpless moment when she’d awoken from the accident that killed Kate filled her mind. As if the chilling recollection might disappear, she blinked hard. Then she faced the shiny, white mailbox labeled *136*. This would be the first time she’d worked since that hellish day.

“I’m scared.” Frankie’s voice trembled. Just like her first day of school, she bit her lower lip, fighting a sudden urge to cry out loud.

Suz sighed softly, then plunked the paper face down on the dashboard. She leaned over the shift and squeezed Frankie in a snug embrace. “It’s okay, baby,” she whispered in a gentle tone. “It’s just a damn job.”

## Doreen Perrine



Doreen Perrine's first novel, *Clara's Story*, has recently been published through Bedazzled Ink and her novella, *Phendar of the Avila*, was published on Freya's Bower website. Doreen has also been published in numerous anthologies and literary e-zines, including *The Copperfield Review*, *Lacuna*, *Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*, *Queer and Catholic*, *Raving Dove*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Khimairal Ink*. Her short stories will appear in upcoming anthologies *Rockets, Swords, and Rainbows* and *Lesbian Memoirs*. Doreen's plays have been performed at Here Arts Center, WOW, Under St. Marks Theaters, and Manhattan Theatre Source in New York City. Also an artist, she founded a writer's opportunity where she resides in the Catskill region of New York. Doreen's website address is:  
<http://doreenperrine.tripod.com/>



## Maple Beach People

Lee Lynch

Luce had seen *Rebel Without a Cause* three times the year it came out, when she was fifteen. She'd felt like the James Dean character, but when she'd looked in the mirror she'd seen a taller version of the sad-eyed puppy dog Sal Mineo had played. Then, almost as soon as she'd turned eighteen, James Dean was dead. Six months later she was shot down again: her best buddy Betty moved into the city to live with a guy. Tattered as she felt, she was left to pick up the pieces because she worked for Betty's ex, Cora, who'd turned to Luce for understanding because who else did she have? You couldn't run a business on Long Island in 1958 and tell anybody you were gay.

She whistled quietly through the gap in her front teeth as she emptied ashtrays into the answering service's slightly sour-smelling tin waste baskets, some pink with white poodles, some white with pink poodles. Cora wanted a little poodle bad and Luce would have found a way to get her one, but Cora's landlord didn't allow pets. She dumped all the trash into the big can out back, then hauled the broad push broom from the storage closet. If she could only decide what she wanted to be, then she could get a different job and a place and start her own life, but she kind of hated to leave her mom alone with her dad up in their third floor apartment because, when her oversized dad had a few, he got mad and then all hell broke loose and at least with Luce there he had two females to yell at. Her brother was only fourteen and scrawny like her, but maybe one of these days he'd be able to stand up to old pickle-brain himself.

Summer was starting suddenly and scorching hot after a wet and dreary spring. Apple and cherry trees had blossomed as fast as corn popped and left unruly swaths of pink or white petals in their shade. Doc had invited Luce to come along with Cora to swim off her dock further out on the Island. Doc worked at the University. She commuted past I'll Get It!, Cora's answering service and delivery

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storefront, and had stopped one day to sign up as a customer. Cora was still with Betty then, both of them full-breasted, long-haired and live wires. They'd run into Doc at the only gay bar in the area. Since then, Doc had ended up single too.

Luce checked the old pocket watch that hung from her belt—her grandmother had worn it on a red cord around her neck while Luce had it on a brass swivel snap hoop she'd found on the street—and locked up the shop. She was the delivery end of Cora's business and rode her own red Western Flyer bike with whitewalls and a bullet-shaped chrome headlight to drop off documents and small packages all over town. It was easy work except in storms when the ocean seemed to double in size and, chilled through, she biked without brakes along flooding, tide-smelling streets. After she ran out of errands, she did the cleanup and maintenance. There wasn't much she wouldn't do for Cora, she admitted to herself.

Cora had rushed home, her quick, short steps pushing through the un-moving heat, to pack an overnight case. They met back at the Long Island Railroad station where Luce, short-haired and skinny in her tight, cuffed guy's dungarees, led the way onto the train and swung Cora's bag up to the overhead rack. All Luce had stuffed into the pockets of her white nylon windbreaker was a change of underwear, a comb, toothbrush and some of her mother's molasses cookies wrapped in waxed paper. Cora napped on the way out, her hands folded in the lap of her sleeveless sundress, white with yellow and pink flowers all over it. Although she'd been up all night holding the fort because one of her employees hadn't come in to catch calls, Cora looked terrific. Her hair was its usual neat bouffant, processed and set with huge curlers so it curved into her jaw line. Cora was perfect, just perfect.

Luce took the bubble gum out of her mouth and dropped it under the seat. She noshed on the soft cookies, sharp with nutmeg, as she looked at the towns and the backs of businesses along the rail line, the train squealing and swaying, its steel wheels sounding one long anticipatory drum roll against the tracks. She laid her head against the back of her seat, trying to catch a breeze through the open window, and dreaming of learning a trade. She'd been putting money away for a business, as Cora had done. It was cheap living at home. Her

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mother wanted her to pay room and board, but old pickle-brain, the drunken dreamer, said her money was no good in his home. When she saved enough, she could do something along the lines of TV repair; or start a little business like Cora's—maybe a cab company that only took people out to Idlewild or LaGuardia; or she could be discovered by a talent scout as the chick James Dean—she didn't want to be all girly like little Natalie Wood—and get rich and famous. She'd acted in school plays until high school, when, too boyish to play female roles, she'd stopped being picked. That's how she'd learned to handle tools, by building sets and learning lights and sound instead of acting.

Cora sighed in her sleep and Luce knew she must be remembering Betty, maybe how the two of them would sneak underage Luce into the only gay bar on the Island and laugh their heads off at Luce's fascination with other lesbians. Or Cora might be remembering private moments with the handsome Betty, like their first kiss which happened after a V-J Day celebration. Cora had told that story a bunch of times. Luce had been five years old when the war ended and her father came home, sun-burned and half-starved her mother said, and smelling, to Luce, of stinky feet. He'd muscled little Lucy out of her mother's bed and attention. Before that, she didn't remember him even though Mom said that he'd been home on leave just to meet his baby daughter and bounce her so high in the air that her mother had screamed with fright. At age five, she'd stopped believing in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy—and her father. For years she'd thought Dad brought her little brother Victor James Deigh back with him, a war orphan. At least old pickle-brain had taught her to whistle: he had the same space between his front teeth.

Doc picked them up at the station in her shiny black and chrome Buick and took them to a restaurant on the water where even some of the busboys looked at Luce like she would never be allowed in there on her own. Dinner was beefsteak and potatoes for her. Doc insisted she order prime rib and she couldn't believe how delicious it was, like steak in heaven. She left her salad, which had orange stuff poured over it, but dessert was this boss hot fudge sundae. Doc had nothing but coffee for dessert. Luce and Cora had exchanged glances over that one.

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Doc drove them past sidewalks, white and pink with blossoms, along a wide street that ended at the water where she had a house. It was cooler out here.

“Are you,” Luce asked after giving an impressed whistle, “rich?”

Cora touched Doc's arm on a large reddish freckle almost the shade of Doc's tight curls. Her voice sounded kind of shaky as she said, “You didn't tell me you were rich.” Luce had never before seen Cora, whose people had left Cuba a long time ago, scared of anyone.

Doc was forty-four, eleven years older than Cora. She was hefty and tall, wore big round tortoise-shell glasses and dark, pressed slacks or, at work, skirts with man-tailored blouses. She always had a scrubbed smell to her, like she used Boraxo powdered soap to wash her face and hands. Today she was in a short-sleeved blouse with wide, up-and-down green stripes on white and black Bermuda shorts with boat shoes. She noticed that Doc didn't paint her toes like Cora did, although she did shave her legs. Going to work, Doc usually femmed herself out with lipstick, a pretty pin and tiny pearl stud earrings. Doc looked over at Cora and replied in her calm, slow, kind of deep voice, with a shrug and a grin, “Sorry, no. I need a job to keep this place up. My father built it himself back when this area was not much but sea grass. It's got a nice view, but it's not exactly huge. The big places are on the Bay.”

“Is this your dock?” Cora asked as they mounted a weathered but sturdy wooden walkway painted gray and made their clomping way to the back of the house.

She could hear a killdeer's high-pitched “kill-dee, kill-dee, kill-dee!” across the canal. Black ducks swam just past the dock and bobbed in place under it. The cormorants had come in early this year; one sat on a post, wings spread to dry, ignoring the people. The air smelled clean, blue. Spray left salt on her upper lip and she licked it.

“My father's dream: his own boat and his own dock. He was a Navy guy. We're on the tip of a canal here. That's one of the original marinas up the way

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there,” Doc explained, pointing toward a gathering of boats moored at a small network of docks. “More Navy guys. Dad got his land cheap from them. I’m not about to give it up.”

“What a porch!” cried Luce, who had turned her back to the dock and the white wooden motorboat bobbing next to it. The engine at the stern was a dark green Evinrude that looked to have some power from the size of it, but maybe Doc wasn’t so rich: no windscreen and you steered with the engine itself. She ran up the steps and jogged around three sides of the house, tagging pistachio-painted slatted furniture along the way. The wood was warm from the sun.

Doc told them, “The Terrances were big on porches—that’s one reason the house is small. My father was interested in fresh air and,” Doc said, extending an arm toward the canal, “blue sea water. Come on in. Breathe some lively spirits into the old shack.”

“Shack!” Luce laughed and blew a big pink bubble.

“Old?” asked Cora.

“Nineteen twenty-one,” Doc told her.

“My mother wasn’t even born then,” Luce said, then sucked in her breath, trying to swallow her words. Maybe Doc had been.

She didn’t like the inside of the house as much as the exterior. It was kind of spooky, like the place in the movie where James Dean and Sal Mineo and Natalie Woods hung out, full of shadows and sadness. The marina was the nearest neighbor and it was outside hailing distance. The indoor furniture was old brocade stuff in navy blue and burgundy and looked kind of stiff, but Doc lived a chrome-plated life and had a housekeeper who didn’t miss a speck. Lemon-oil was strong in every room. Luce got it on her hand when she touched the dining room table.

“I’m at the lab so late,” explained Doc about the maid, her look shifting toward and away from Cora. She sounded a little apologetic to Luce.

“And nobody lives here except you?” she asked. Back in her family’s

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apartment, she got the tiny second bedroom and they'd rigged up the dining alcove off the kitchen for her little brother's bed. They ate at a table with flaps that folded down when they weren't using it.

"A shame, isn't it?" Doc said, her eyes wandering to Cora.

Luce thought Doc was pretty old and brocaded too. She also knew without being told that Cora was not about to be lured out here to live. Or was she? Cora was looking through the picture window at the sea meadow across the canal. A long-necked duck dove. A big bird took off and flew over them. She wasn't sure anymore if she wished she was Doc or just wanted her house. Luce jammed her fists into the pockets of her dungarees, fingered the bubble gum wrappers she'd stashed in hopes of winning a prize, and squeezed her eyes shut.

She clammed up, just whistled quietly as she followed Doc and Cora on a tour of the house. She half relaxed when she saw the look on Cora's face, the look of swallowed distaste she got when her least favorite clients came in. At the same time, she knew what Cora liked about Doc—how lost she seemed, how desperate for a good woman's love. This shock about Doc owning a place on the water—how much did research scientists earn anyway—could cancel out that appeal. Cora had no use for silver-spoon trimmings. She'd told Luce that she wasn't interested in another high-class girlfriend. Betty, Cora had confided in Luce, had always held some part of herself back, some part that liked the pampering and safety of a lot of money in the bank. Passion, Cora had explained, was like getting drunk: everything got blurry. Differences didn't matter until you woke up in the cold, sober morning, or eleven years later, and noticed that you'd been seduced by a six-eyed, ten-legged pea-green straight from another planet.

On the other hand, when they all jumped into the cool water off the dock at midnight, a little high on wine, Luce wondered if Cora might be kind of fussy. This was a whole lot of fun. She'd donned a black bathing suit Doc had outgrown. The narrow strap cut into the back of her neck and the suit was so big the water made it balloon, but she couldn't swim and the suit maybe made it easier to float. She had a great water fight with Cora, whose white bathing cap glowed against

her face, dark as an acorn, above a strapless pink suit that stayed up who knew how.

Luce tried to coordinate her long, skinny, wan arms and legs the way Doc demonstrated and immediately sank, thrashing, water burning inside her nostrils. Cora's mother, who'd grown up on the ocean, had taught Cora to be a beautiful swimmer, so after some more horse play, Luce abandoned her chaperone role and went up to bed. She lay, clad only in her brother's briefs, hands behind her head, on white sheets in a tiny guest room, and listened to Cora's laughter, Doc's murmurs, the occasional sound of an engine out on the Bay. As far as she knew, they had not yet spent a night together. She guessed the course of her own world could change tonight as sure as if she started up the Evinrude and steered Doc's old boat into a crazy, white-capped sea. Maybe Cora would move here. Maybe Doc needed a handyman. How would that be? A girl handyman.

On Sunday Doc took them into her home office to show them some of her research.

"Don't you get bored?" Luce asked, looking over Cora's shoulders at a page of numbers and Polaroids of squiggly things on glass slides. The whole place smelled like Doc: gritty Boraxo again.

Doc looked surprised, then smiled and shook her head. "Science is extremely exciting. There are whole universes beyond what we can see or hear or touch. It just takes a lot of hard work and schooling to learn about them."

"I like to work hard, but with my whole body. I hated sitting through high school."

She hated almost as much to sit through a posh meal in a restaurant smelling of cigarettes and fish. Doc could have Guy Lombardo's restaurant where, at Cora's request, they ate Sunday dinner with a view of a traffic jam of yachts and powerboats swamping motorboats and sailboats as they returned from weekend jaunts. Doc could have the private beach they walked along where everyone sat so quiet and polite in their chaise lounges reading for pete's sake when they could be

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in the water or on a boat and there was no one interesting to look at. Give her I'll Get It! any day with its floor that always needed cleaning and mirrors clouded from cigarette smoke and operators who laughed and said they were "call girls" and spilled over with gossip gleaned from messages they took. She loved how they jockeyed for her attention. Give her Maple Beach which she knew like the back of her hand and where everybody around the town center knew her, all the down-to-earth people who worked hard to pay the rent and maybe, someday, have a house of their own. Give her Main Street, where there was always something doing even if it was only the 11:54 bringing Yankee and Giants and Dodgers fans home on the Long Island Railroad from night games in the Bronx, or give her that song "It's All in the Game" trumpeting through the door of a late night bar. She'd find work she could do right at home in Maple Beach and never leave.

She whistled "It's All in the Game" in the back seat as Doc took them downtown. It was an okay small city, and the main street was wider than Maple Beach's, which made it safer for someone on a bike.

"The kids had a pet show at the park yesterday," Doc said, "There's a baseball game going on today." It sounded like she was trying to sell Cora on the place.

The back seat was hot in the afternoon sun. The windows rolled only part way down. Luce felt a little bit queasy and sleepy from the rich dinner. She'd never had such a fancy meal before and who knew if she'd ever get the chance again, so she'd dug in and cleaned her plate like her mother told her to.

From far over on the front seat, in a teasing tone, Cora asked, "I know what you do at the bar on Saturday nights, but what do you do on a Sunday?" Cora's arm stretched across the back of the seat and Luce's eyes lingered on her long shaped fingernails in a bright peach-colored coating.

"I work on my outboard," Doc said, her voice sounding a little sad. "Or I stay home and read *The Times*. Before Stephanie left, we'd find an empty estuary and fish or crab. Sometimes now I watch the speedboat races out in the Bay."

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“Speedboat races?” asked Luce.

“And hydroplanes.”

Luce had a thing for boat racing. Her whole family used to go watch them on a Sunday when she was in grade school, the four of them united in cheering and booing and making friends with other spectators. Old pickle-brain bought fish off guys who'd caught something from the pier and the family would go home and have a fish fry, just Mom and Dad and her and her brother. That was before her mom found out old pickle-brain was betting on the boat races. Her brother went out on his friends' boats now, but he had to sneak around so their mom wouldn't know. Luce had caught him once, rolling his hands back and forth on a fresh fish before he came in the house so Mom would think he'd been fishing. Dad told him what a lousy fisherman he was, never to bring back his catch, but then he'd clear his throat like he was in on the joke and knew just what her brother was doing behind Mom's back.

Doc rolled back and forth into a small parking space under a tree. “This is the place that's for rent,” she announced. Luce hadn't realized they were looking for one. In a little spurt of anger, she slammed the car door getting out, but was glad for the air, though it didn't smell as good as it did at Doc's place. Seagulls sat in a row on a roofline down the block. There was a sweet smell to the place, maybe from the blossoming trees. Cora went to peer in the window of the empty shop around the corner from Main Street.

“It's the same size as mine,” said Cora. “Why do you think I'd make more money here?”

Doc was acting like she wasn't doing anything except looking out for Cora's best interests. Luce examined the storefront. She unwrapped the last piece of bubble gum in her pocket and began to chew it soft, sucking in its fruity sweetness. If this spot was so great, how come whatever was in there left. The plate glass window was cool against her nose.

“This would be your second location. You'd promote your best operator to

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manage the Maple Beach office,” Doc answered. “Then you’d charge what the customers out here can afford and, believe me, there are a lot that can pay plenty. With your management you’d build up this branch in no time.”

“I don't know, Doc. I'm still paying off Betty's interest in the shop. And Maple Beach is home. Besides, customers would talk when they found out I lived at your place. A colored Cuban in the Terrance place on the water?”

Doc shook her head. “So let them talk. You do too good a job for them to resist, not to mention that people around here hate Communists with a passion. They’ll assume that’s why your family came over from Cuba. We can say you’re my cousin,” Doc joked. “Because we look so alike.”

Luce couldn’t stifle a laugh.

“Kissing cousins,” Cora replied, her smile like she had a secret with Doc. “I notice the walls are already painted pink.”

“Must be why I thought of you,” said Doc, looking across the street, though nothing was there except the blank side of a brick building painted white.

Luce asked, “You'd move out *here*?”

“And,” Cora said, looking at her, “I'd lose my right arm.”

Doc sidled over and squeezed Luce’s shoulder. Today, Doc was in green walking shorts and a white tennis shirt with a small crocodile patch. “There's no reason to. Luce isn't tied down. You can find a job here if you want, Luce. I know people. Including,” said Doc to Cora, “some bank loan officers...and a poodle breeder.”

Luce pulled away. She’d been studying them all day. The usual signs that two people had begun sleeping together weren't there—the easy touching, the turn of their bodies toward each other, the intimate looks, the flushed faces. Of course, they weren’t about to act like that in public, but there would have been some sign. No, Doc was offering a package to Cora, making a proposal. If Cora slept with Doc tonight, the deal would be clinched.

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Two gulls dropped to the sidewalk and screeched at each other over a pizza crust.

“I have to pee,” Luce announced. “I’m going over to the train station.”

She loped across the empty street and up the block, chanting, “No, no, no,” with every slap of her black sneakers on the pavement. She could stay and try to sway Cora, or she could just split and take care of herself. Her mom needed her, Cora needed her—who could *she* depend on?

She pulled up her shirt to wipe sweat from her eyes. The heck with them. Luce needed Luce most. The train schedule was posted on a large chalkboard. Good, there was one out of town in forty-five minutes. She used the Lysol-smelly bathroom because she hated lying and dawdled on her way back, whistling “It’s All in the Game,” which she couldn’t get out of her mind.

“Cora,” she said, hoping Cora would want to hightail it out of town too. “I know we’re supposed to stay until tomorrow, but I’m antsy. I’ll take the 4:21 home.”

“And leave me alone with this wolf?” Cora joked.

“You saw through my sheep’s clothing?” said Doc with a fake-heartily laugh. “What about your things, Luce?”

“They aren’t anything to fuss over,” she answered. Cora offered to bring them back in the morning. She responded with a shrug. Doc’s passionate hopes melted into certainty in the smile that took over her face.

Once she was sure Cora was staying with Doc, she hadn’t even let them come over to the station. Cora was a big girl. If she hadn’t learned to stick with her own kind by now—Maple Beach people, not house-on-the-water people—there was nothing Luce could do about it. Sometimes she felt older than Cora or Doc or Betty. Right now she felt like someone was squeezing her heart tight.

A lot of people traveled back to the city on a hot Sunday afternoon. Luce stood away from the other passengers on the platform. She always carried a pack

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of cigarettes, though she didn't much like to smoke. She lit one and let it dangle from her lips. She squinted in the smoke like James Dean, but that Sal Mineo character—so nervous, so flipped out over the cute one, in over his head and out of his league—she was scared she was more like him.

She could always move back to Maple Beach if she didn't like it here.

## Lee Lynch



Photo courtesy of  
Dog Ear Audio

Lee Lynch has been writing as an out lesbian since her work appeared in *The Ladder* in the 1960s. She wrote the classic novels *The Swashbuckler* and *Toothpick House*. The most recent of her fourteen books, *Sweet Creek* and *Beggar of Love*, were published by Bold Strokes Books. Her short stories can be found in *Romantic Interludes* and at [www.readtheselips.com](http://www.readtheselips.com). Her reviews and feature articles have been featured in *Lambda Book Report*, *The Advocate*, and many other publications.

Lynch's syndicated column, "The Amazon Trail," has run nationally since 1986. She is a recipient of the Golden Crown Literary Society Trailblazer Award and the Alice B. Readers Award, and was honored with induction into the Saints and Sinners Literary Festival's Hall of Fame in 2006. In 2010 she received the James Duggins Mid-Career Author Award and, for *Beggar of Love*, the Lesbian Fiction Readers Choice Award, the Ann Bannon Popular Choice Award, and the Book of the Year Award from *ForeWord Reviews*.

Books by Lee Lynch are available at women's and gay bookstores and at <http://tinyurl.com/2vtuo9k>



## *My Money Where My Mouth Is*

*Joan Annsfire*

Taylor-Ralston Architects in San Francisco had the ambiance of a fern bar. It could serve as a cautionary tale of what happens when a bunch of yuppie architects and interior designers combine forces and unleash them upon an unsuspecting warehouse. Surrounding the plant forest, there were the de rigueur rustic softwood floors, huge multi-story, warehouse-style windows, tons of exposed brick and, of course, track lighting. Nothing at all like the myriad of places I'd worked in the past. My new luxurious work environment was all due to a government program called CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act), a WPA-style seventies number that provided gainful employment for folks like me, afflicted with the triple onus of being non-male, very queer, and terminally smile deficient.

It is true that my smile ratio has always been on the low side for a female. In retrospect I have come to realize that, in our culture, women's faces are the glue that binds the social fabric. Young women on the street who lack a sunny visage seem to prompt strange men to ask, "Why don't you smile?" My defense became a routine of snappy comebacks like, "My entire family was just murdered!" or "Why don't you say something funny?" Since adjectives like perky and bubbly would never be used to describe me, my job-search history has been rocky and chock-full of employment agency counselors who would just shake their heads and, instead of providing concrete tips on improving my job skills, would give me personality directives that I found impossible to implement short of a frontal lobotomy. Things like: "You don't project enthusiasm." "You need to be more upbeat."

Being a lesbian as well didn't help at all in my job-search scenario. If my butch persona made it through the interview process, the specter would really rear its head after I'd secured the job. The problem is that there is a natural point in workplace chatter where talk about the weather wears thin. With no guys in the dating queue, no biological family to speak of, no interest in team sports, no know-



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ledge or proclivities toward child-rearing, and way too radical politics, finding topics for conversation was perpetually fraught with difficulty. When I would leave a job, co-workers would lament that they never really got to know me. By the time I arrived at Taylor-Ralston, I'd made the decision to change this once and for all.

I didn't anticipate problems running the small library of fabric samples or learning basic drafting techniques. But unlike my previous job experience making hot dogs and French fries or piecing together wind chimes, this job swept me up into the world of corporate culture. Taylor-Ralston was rife with a whole range of social stratification and hierarchies that would baffle the producers of *Wild Kingdom*. A universe of potential faux pas lay before me like an invisible minefield in an undeclared war.

My boss, Antoinette, looked at me askance the moment I arrived. An interior designer and a real girly-girl, she didn't seem like good material for a friend. When on the second day I asked her if she wanted to go to lunch, just to reach a better understanding, she looked at me as though I'd lost my mind.

The receptionist, Vera, on the other hand was easygoing, the type who could shoot the breeze with anyone. However, she came across as fairly conservative when she talked about being "almost engaged" and delved into the endless diversion of planning the wedding. She was around my age (late twenties), but she dressed as though the fifties had never ended. Shirtwaist dresses, checked or striped, and fuzzy, pearl-buttoned sweater sets with full skirts. Once she came to work in a true, classic felt skirt decorated with a woolly poodle. A North Carolina gal, her drawl was fading. It appeared only when she referred to her near fiancé as her "gaah." Yet, when she complained about the "deadly denizens of design" at Taylor-Ralston, we were definitely on the same page.

Nickie, the secretary, was at least sixty, round and motherly. She could type like her fingers were on fire and gossip like nobody's business, literally and figuratively. The area where Vera and Nickie's desks were located provided me a welcome respite from my station amid the inscrutable world of "professionals."

The guy who oversaw my drafting apprenticeship was Will, a skilled

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technician and overly serious type who didn't demand any unnecessary social intercourse. His silence was a welcome respite from the bantering hordes. Many of the interior designers were gay men. But that didn't seem to make them lesbian allies. If anything, it confused them that some of us who reside in female bodies have zero regard for accessorizing. But to them all, I was the CETA worker, a lowly interloper in their tasteful universe.

To say that my social skills were of a limited nature doesn't begin to state the case. In answer to that age-old question: yes, I was raised in a barn. Not a literal barn—I don't know the first thing about cows or hay—but a place where metaphorical dung shoveling was an everyday activity. My parents did not exactly model appropriate work behavior unless there's a job that requires excessive belligerence and a high degree of alcohol consumption.

While silent Will was a blessing, working under Antoinette was a curse. Dark-haired, petite and pretty, she reminded me of all the girls in high school who were warned not to associate with me. Each day she came in decked out in high-heels, fitted designer dresses, and sparkly, dangling earrings that twinkled when she walked. My gut-level feeling was if you wound a string of colored lights around her, she'd make a great Christmas tree. Her focus was trained on the examination of color and texture, the grouping and placement of objects. Everyone claimed she was a rising star of the design world with an "artistic temperament." In other words, a persnickety snob. And ever since my gauche attempt at a lunch date, she seemed to do a lot of whispering to my colleagues at moments when she believed I wasn't looking.

At times, when working with her started to fray my very last nerve, I would go up to Vera and Nickie's desks to complain. Both of them had tons of experience being on the receiving end of her passive-aggressive wrath: "Nickie, didn't you hear me when I said I needed that bid by noon?" "Vera, the client is Doctor Dupont, not Mister Dupont."

Yet, in spite of all the distractions, my drafting was improving. I'd been there almost three months and was turning out useful, if not impressive, finished

## *My Money Where My Mouth Is*

drawings. But I sensed it was not enough to come in and sit down and work. I had to find some way to get them, if not to like me, at least to have a quasi-human impression of me. So I tried being more open and revealing. It was true that, as a late-twenty-something dyke, my life had a lot of socializing in it. Unfortunately it also had quite a bit of drugs, alcohol, and sexual experimentation. OK, so in retrospect, I admit that cocaine, Quaaludes and one-night stands weren't the best topics of conversation. But I felt at least I was educating them to a different way of life. If I could make them laugh, it made me feel engaging, even entertaining.

My interactions with Vera the receptionist became increasingly strained as she got wind of my exploits. I should have noticed her growing discomfort. One day, when I complimented her on the teal blue color of her sweater set, she became really quiet. I just assumed that she wasn't feeling well. Later that week, I came in and told her offhandedly that she had been in my dream the night before. This was an actual fact. In my dream she had played the role of receptionist in a severely skewed version of our workplace. But before I could tell her the specifics, Antoinette, who had been overhearing the conversation, said sharply, "Gail, you're needed over in architecture." That same afternoon, when I approached Vera's desk, she turned away and started pecking diligently at her typewriter.

Now, more and more, Antoinette seemed to be regarding me with a certain amount of derision. I gave her some sample fabrics for a living room she was working on, even suggested some for the couch and loveseat. "It's not a couch, it's a sofa," she huffed. She would get set off by trifles. I began to wonder if it was my clothes. Naturally, I didn't dress the way she did, but my daily attire was tasteful, what could be considered basic "office dyke." My wardrobe was color-coordinated, practical, gender-neutral and, above all, comfortable. Mostly, it consisted of pants (not jeans), printed striped or patterned button-front shirts and, of course, sensible shoes.

One day I was assigned to go with her out into "the field" to take some measurements. This field turned out to be a renovation project on Market Street near the ferry terminal. We rode the bus together in silence and arrived at a gutted office building where construction workers were knocking down walls. Antoinette's

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tiny, pointed shoes could barely maneuver through the broken sheetrock, nails and other debris. I watched, spellbound, as she wielded her measuring tape with the imperious manner of a queen, barely stopping for air as she stumbled over loose bricks. I could clearly visualize her earlier French incarnation waving her hand and declaring, “Let them eat cake.”

There had been a small earthquake the night before and I was schmoozing with one of the carpenters. As we were speculating on the magnitude, size, and location of the tremor, Antoinette pulled me aside and whispered, “It isn’t professional to fraternize with the hired help.”

“I thought we were here to work with them,” was all I could say in baffled response.

The following day was a Friday. The minute I arrived at work, I felt a wave of apprehension. The architects and designers seemed to be gathering in clumps on either side of the aisle to my desk. When Steve, the top banana, called me into his office, they all moved to let me pass like a great parting of the Red Sea. I reassured myself with the idea that perhaps the big boss had noticed that my drafting skills were improving. But as soon as I walked into his lair, I knew better.

“Gail, you just don’t fit in here,” he began in brutal honesty, presenting one naked fact that I couldn’t possibly contradict. But even dyke misfits need to eat, so I pressed on.

“What about my work?” I countered with a logical defense.

“Your work is fine, you just don’t fit in,” he replied with the definitive certainty of one who was born to his niche and would never have to spend a single second worrying about this sort of thing. Before I could speak again, he started laying payroll checks on the table.

“Here is your final paycheck. This one is for unused sick time. And this last one is for accrued vacation time.”

It seemed like a lot of money for someone in a gofer internship like mine.

## *My Money Where My Mouth Is*

As I collected my payoff and headed out of his office, Steve was still speaking. The last thing I heard from him was, “Pack up your things and be out of here in twenty minutes.”

The designers and architects had, by this time, either tactfully returned to some really pressing work on their desks or disappeared on coffee break. My footfalls were silent as I walked the gauntlet to my desk. I put on my glasses to try and obscure the tears that were forming uncontrollably. After grabbing an empty shoebox from the library, I began piling my drafting tools inside. Five minutes later, as I was making my way to the front exit, Nickie’s were the only eyes that met mine. But to my astonishment when I passed Vera and headed out to the great unknown, she touched my shoulder and mouthed *Screw them!*

Once outside the sun hit my face and my tears began to dry. I took a deep breath and walked to the bus stop. I pulled the three checks out of my pocket to tabulate the totals. Wow, they had given me well over a thousand dollars! Suddenly, it dawned on me that I would never have to see Antoinette, Will, Steve or any of that nasty bunch, ever again. I took a seat on the bus, pondering my new reality. My heart rate was slowing a bit, approximating a normal pace. Inhaling deeply, I watched the streets of the Design District fade from view, replaced by the funky coffee houses and thrift stores of the Mission, the neighborhood I called home. It was then, without warning, that I felt something new and a bit strange happening to my face. Reflexively, the muscles around my mouth had begun to draw upward in a slightly unfamiliar way until it became undeniably obvious—I was smiling. And my grin grew wider and brighter with every block of increasing distance between me and that nefarious den of design demons.

## Joan Annsfire



Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, Joan Annsfire has lived in the Bay Area for more than thirty years and makes her home in Berkeley.

Her work has appeared in the *Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*, *Sinister Wisdom* (many issues), the *SoMa Literary Review*, *13th Moon*, *Bridges*, *Evergreen Chronicles* and others, as well as in the following anthologies: *The Other Side of the Postcard* edited by devorah major, *Queer Collection 2007* edited by Gregory A. Kompes, *The Cancer Poetry Project* edited by Karin B. Miller, *The Venomed Kiss* edited by Anita M. Barnard and Michelle Rhea, and *Milk and Honey* edited by Julie R. Enszer.

Her short stories have appeared in the online *Read These Lips: 4Play* edited by Evecho, and *Identity Envy* edited by Jim Tushinski and Jim Van Buskirk.



## 5 Poems

*Natasha Carthew*

### BRILLIANT DISGUISE

As a child  
still  
like washing on the line  
she remembers Mother's frozen fingers  
sticking to winter sheets  
like moth dust  
imprinting memories.

As a face that does not fit  
eyes brimming with too much thought  
pressed into dresses shouting  
hand-me-down  
the smell, worn corners, loose thread.

As a girl  
still  
in Father's work boots  
worn laces that are too long  
gone  
like his memory  
tying around in knots.

As a woman  
still  
boys don't cry  
nothing fits  
but the oddments of skin  
things that memories surprise  
a glove  
a hat  
a handshake  
comes a brilliant disguise.

X

Triple tequila  
slammer  
a one-nighter  
on off  
two-year, open-ended offer  
x  
she comes with a yellow liver  
lungs of hot air whatever  
heart as cold as too cool  
to see her  
tightened into underground smoke land  
café-latté club culture  
it suits her.

She marks the spot  
where treasure was found and lost  
cutting into heaven with hatchet hell  
more beautiful still if left as green  
not red or black or blue  
to feel her  
well heeled and versed  
in the art of loser language  
she mimes get lost  
in a memory  
friend lover enemy  
triple headache  
xxxx off  
get over it.

## OTHER COUNTRIES

Born on a lunar eclipse  
townsfolk knew she'd take to running  
with the wind  
dirt tailing her skirts  
until they became shorts  
suddenly  
on a coming-of-age night.

She ran rings around the County  
kept it up until worn to the knees  
fixed herself with no abode  
to keep the closet ghosts at bay  
chanced it across the border  
heaven country.

To start a new life  
kissing clouds with deadwood bay travellers  
this girl walked so far south  
north came rising  
her imagination easily influenced  
setting sails at full catch.

Keeping afloat  
islands and lovers tried to hold her  
down in unknown territory  
marshland  
until she took to running  
her own one-woman show  
in all other countries  
would she then return home.

**NIGHT SWIMMING**

She is one head bobbing  
perhaps smiling  
laughing over fields of green  
she is the stars in a halo  
the moon in a trance  
hanging on to the dear dark sky  
night swimming.

She is two feet splashing  
perhaps dancing  
about the silver darts of fish  
she is the horizon closing  
the cliff face rising  
following  
further than a stone throw from the shore.

She is two arms moving  
perhaps waving  
drawing me in by a thread  
she is the warm salt water  
the cold night air  
gathering me about her  
turning me under  
night swimming.

## DEPRESSION CONFESSION

It is night  
not your kind of night  
this is daylight  
but darker  
something akin to dread.

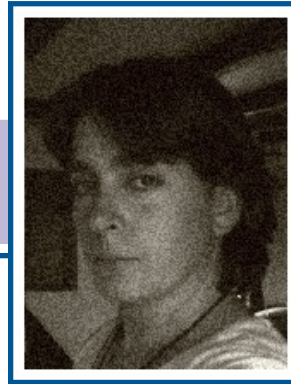
This is petrol-pelting sky  
the wet burns my skin  
I make haste  
close all known routes  
but it gets in.

Beneath the covers  
the clock stops at twelve o'clock shock  
I hold my breath to the beating roof tiles  
lean to press my ear to the chimney breast  
mad as birds  
nesting.

This is one stop away from drinking in the moon  
not your kind of moon  
a distant light sparks up, shines  
as happy as a sweet  
fleeting.

It is night  
it has come around to your kind of night  
we cuddle close and sip the stars  
lighthouse love  
drifting  
as you guide me safely back in.

## Natasha Carthew



Natasha Carthew is an accomplished country poet from Cornwall in the UK and has been published in hundreds of UK and international magazines.

She has garnered awards for poetry and has had three books of poetry published, the latest being *Flash Reckless* which was published by internationally acclaimed lesbian/feminist publisher Onlywomen Press.

Natasha lives in the country and has just finished writing her first work of fiction.

For latest news and readings, contact her through <http://natashacarthew.tripod.com/>



## *The Risk Not Taken*

*J. E. Knowles*

*How beautiful is your backside.*

It's the oldest "chat-up line" in recorded history, as I learned from an eager Egyptologist on my second trip to London. That second trip was my classical period. The first trip was mediaeval and Renaissance, which is how I came to think of my personal history of London as a triptych. Because this trip, the third, I'm finally in the modern period, the now.

I met the Egyptologist on my second trip. Her name was Buffy Bradshaw, and I never saw her without a hat on. This was probably my fault. There was a time, perhaps just that one night, when Buffy would have been glad to let her hair down for me, and more, but I was hesitant in those days, at all the wrong moments. I would rush headlong out of a Tube car, failing to "mind the gap," then hesitate on the escalator, impatient behind those standing on the right, not quite willing to commit to walking on the left. Dizzy with disorientation, emerging from the great depths of the Northern line, I would feel about London as Dr Johnson described it: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of living."

Only I was a woman, and so was Buffy, and that was fifteen years ago. Fifteen years is no time at all on the scale of ancient history, but it is in the life of a modern woman and, above all, of a queer. I understand not everybody likes that term, but we were academics then, all queer studies and queer history, "we're here, we're queer and we're not going shopping." My Egyptologist, hat firmly planted on her head, would lead me by the hand through the grounds of her college or the masses in Hyde Park, where we readied ourselves for the Pride Parade. It was twenty-five years after the Stonewall Rebellion in New York. Here in London, we were protesting the unequal age of consent for gay men. We were also protesting

Section 28, which outlawed education about homosexuality, calling it promotion.

Or at least I thought that was what we were protesting. “Here, carry a sign,” Buffy urged me and I proudly hoisted my poster, something about the tax code. Hers was about immigration. I didn’t know what was wrong with Britain’s tax or immigration policies, only that they must be unfair and, probably, homophobic. After all, everyone was against us. If you were queer, you were hated, and you had to chant slogans and watch *Absolutely Fabulous* with all your might.

A lifetime, fifteen years.

The first time I saw Buffy Bradshaw, she was looking for her mail in the porter’s lodge. I saw her from behind, but even so I noticed her hat and its jaunty angle. She rummaged through the “B” box, muttering hieroglyphics or something to herself. If I had had the words that Buffy later taught me, I would have thought, silently, *How beautiful is your backside*.

She stood up, abruptly, which is how she did everything, and beamed at me, an envelope held aloft. “Foreign stamps!” she said. “I love getting a letter with foreign stamps.” Then, as an afterthought, she introduced herself. Although we had never met before, I was struck by Buffy, not least by how she said that, “foreign stamps.” It seemed that where the letter came from, the symbols on its outside, were more important than who wrote it or what it said inside. And I came to see that this was true of Buffy too. She was a symbol of herself, and she left clues that an astute anthropologist, at such a close remove, would easily have picked up.

But I wasn’t an anthropologist, nor am I particularly astute. So when Buffy asked me for coffee, that’s all I thought we were having. And when, over said coffee, she explained that she was single, and bi, and that there was a “Bop” on Friday with the LGB Soc and wouldn’t I like to go, I heard the *B* in the Soc and explained that I really didn’t know how to Bop, any more than I knew how to inter-

pret hieroglyphics. But I thanked her for asking and said perhaps we could do something else another time.

Then I went away and thought about her backside, her profile, understanding Buffy the Egyptologist in only two dimensions. I could not read her signals; they were as opaque to me as the Renaissance paintings I'd failed to interpret on my first pass through London, as a consequence of which I'd switched to classics. Why I thought a period even longer ago in history would be easier to understand, I'm not sure. Perhaps it was the abundance of cute classicists with promisingly short hair, many of whom did their bit to put the *B* in LGB Soc. They wore skirts and talked about their boyfriends. Everyone still smoked in those days. I was not certain how to be a dyke in that environment.

But Buffy was a shining star of the Oriental Studies faculty, and she did not give up. She actually had a job sorting antiquities, which was unusual because there were still student grants at that time; the English had not yet taken on the American habit of mortgaging students' futures for a dubious degree. I went to meet Buffy at work once, and saw her colleague, a man of imposing physicality (I was instantly jealous), picking up tiny pieces of ceramic and labelling them. Buffy, barely five feet tall under her hat, went by with a filing cabinet on her back and a fierce look on her face that said "I lift heavy furniture!"

I loved her. I knew it in that instant. But I didn't say it, and nothing in my behaviour throughout that autumn said it either, though I allowed her to hold my hand everywhere, even in Marks & Spencer. I never asked her out. I waited to see what she would do.

And sure enough, one December day she asked me to dinner; she was cooking. This was something. I'd never been asked to a woman's house for dinner, never mind that I was only twenty-one. I didn't even realise women our age *could* cook; somehow I'd made it by on rice and beans, a bit of pasta, whenever I wasn't eating in college.

And I'd never been to Buffy's place. How did this work? Did she share her kitchen with dozens of housemates? Would they all pile in at exactly the wrong mo-

ment, filling the place with tuna smells, drinking my Portuguese wine? The bottle of wine, disgracefully cheap at the off-licence, was all I could afford. I knew nothing about wine and am not certain how I knew I was supposed to bring it. A hostess gift was one of those fragments of etiquette I'd picked up somewhere, half a social skill, with which I bluffed my way through life.

Buffy's bedsit was a room with a sink, two floors above where the kitchen was located. There was a bath and toilet on yet another floor. No shower. She wore trousers, and I didn't see an ashtray. Two unusual clues that sent me confusing signals about her sexuality: butch? Oral? I didn't know what to make of it, so I smiled and handed her the bottle.

It was too cold to take off my jacket. Someone once asked one of the Arctic explorers "What's the coldest place you've ever been?" and he replied, "A British bedroom."

"I'm sorry, I didn't have time to cook," Buffy said, in a way that meant she wasn't sorry at all. I realised I had no idea what she could have spent her day doing. I knew very little about her, and had the disconcerting feeling I would still feel that way if I knew Buffy Bradshaw for the rest of my life. Which I had some desire to do.

She'd got Chinese takeaway instead. It smelled of garlic and lemon grass. She offered me chopsticks from the bag and, since I didn't want to venture two floors down to the kitchen to look for a fork, I did my best to eat with them. I am not the most delicate person; I would have been hopeless at her colleague's job, with the tiny artefacts. Buffy ate quickly and neatly, pausing between bites or sentences to look at me intently over her chopsticks, as though there was so much more to say.

We talked. About what we were studying, in that joyous way of young scholars, not questioning why we were learning things or whether it would ever pay the bills. About the age of consent and Section 28. Sex hovered around the edges of our conversation, a political act, the ghosts of Wilde and Orwell making ironic comments over our shoulders. Buffy told me that she used to drink more,

and be Catholic.

We sipped the Portuguese wine, more for warmth than for taste, but the room continued to feel chilly. Buffy announced that she was going to change out of her clothes, and emerged in a dressing gown, still wearing her hat. I should have removed it, heard what she wasn't saying. Instead, I took my leave, as awkward at the door as I would have been in bed.

She did not return subsequent calls.

And so I'm back here, on my third trip to London, committed to the present, to finding what I've lost. In my mind, of course, Buffy is still twenty-one, and has the same expression on her face as the last time I saw her: half smile, half hurt. It's not her face I see, though. It's her beautiful backside I see in every crowd, a haircut like hers, a youthful scholar hustling by, though both of us have aged.

Or has she? I don't, after all, know if Buffy Bradshaw is any longer living, or at least living in London. For all the Web-based ways we now have of connecting with one another, I have never felt so isolated. And Buffy is a cipher. She can't be Googled. We could, for all I know, be on the same train, even the same platform, and never connect with one another, she too busy peering into a tome on Egyptology, I peering into the wasted years of my life.

There is a sign on the Underground now that says, "Do not take any risks." I don't remember that sign from fifteen years ago. We have become risk-averse people, all too aware of the dangers of subway cars, of white-water rafting, of going to bed with a girl just because the night, and we, are young. Buffy was not the only risk I've failed to take.

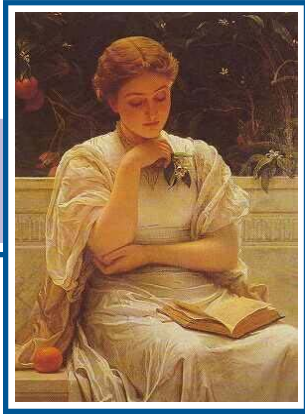
I regret every single one.

## J. E. Knowles



J. E. Knowles is a native Tennessean now based in London. Her first novel, *Arusha* (Spinsters Ink), was a Lambda Literary Award finalist. *The Trees in the Field* will be published in 2012.

Please visit [jeknowles.com](http://jeknowles.com)



# Apple

Gill McKnight

“You can’t eat that.”

“Can too. It’s one of my five a day.”

“Your what?”

“My five a day. Five servings of fruit and veg a day for a healthy, active lifestyle. It’s the kingdom’s health recommendation.” Snow White gave her apple a quick rub on her sleeve to shine it up, and eyed it with satisfaction.

“It looks dangerous, all red and shiny like that. Where’d you get it?”

“Honestly, Red Cape, you’re such a worry wart. It’s an apple. I found it on the windowsill. Probably a present from a passing bluebird or something.”

Red Cape’s frown deepened and she chewed on her lip. “A bluebird couldn’t carry an apple that size,” she finally said.

“A squirrel then.” Snow White was running out of patience.

“Squirrels are too greedy to share.”

Snow White bit into the apple with relish. “Mmmm. Delish—ack!” She sank to the floor.

“I knew it!” Red Cape leapt to her feet. “Poison. It’s always poison. Oh, Snowy.” She shook her friend. “Speak to me, Snowy.”

It was futile. Snow White was out for the count.

“I’m going for help,” Red Cape announced to the empty room. “I’m going to find the Huntsman.” And she ran out the door.

She found the Huntsman not too far away in a shady grove in the woods.

He was slumped on a fallen log sullenly contemplating the edge of his axe. He looked tired and defeated. As Red Cape crashed through the foliage, his posture changed and he straightened up, his thin face sharpening with interest at the blundering intrusion.

“What are you doing off the beaten track, little girl?” he asked.

Red Cape was confused by the question. She was twenty-four, hardly a little girl, and hardly lost. She looked back over her shoulder. “I’m only a few yards off the track. It’s over there, look.”

“A yard is sometimes enough,” he said.

Red Cape had no time for cryptic comments and got straight to the point, “My friend has been poisoned. I need help.”

“Has she been eating wild berries, or maybe mushrooms?”

“No. Huge red apples.”

He frowned. “The King’s orchards are miles from here.”

“It was left on her windowsill. She thinks by bluebirds?”

His smile was twisted and bitter. “Sounds like the work of an evil step-mother to me.”

“Damn! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Where is she?” He rose to his feet. His smile more genuine.

Red Cape couldn’t help but peep from the corner of her eye. Something about the Huntsman didn’t add up. He was tall and broad shouldered, and the leathers he wore curved in interesting places. As he stooped to collect his quiver, a long plait of ebony hair spilled over his shoulder.

“You’re a woman!” Red Cape gawped.

“Indeed.”

“But I thought—”

“Never mind what you thought. Nothing is as it seems in the forest. Now, where is your friend?”

“In her cottage by the Silver Mines in the deepest darkest part of the woods.”

“The Silver Mines. Are the dwarves there?” There was a note of caution in her voice.

“They’re all out working in the mines.”

“Excellent. After you.” And the Huntsman followed Red Cape all the way to Snow White’s cottage.

Several times Red Cape glanced over her shoulder to make sure the Huntsman was still there. Her footsteps were so light Red Cape couldn’t hear her at all, but she was always right behind her, smiling bemusedly at Red Cape’s anxious looks.

“I’m still here,” she even whispered once.

They crossed a sunlit meadow and Red Cape noticed how the Huntsman’s posture changed. She stood straighter in the sunlight, her face raised to the sky, nostrils quivering.

“What are you doing?”

“Smelling the day. I’m a hunter after all.”

When they re-entered the shadow of the forest, the Huntsman became hunched. Her body tensed and her brow darkened. Her eyes slid this way and that, bright and alert. She smacked her lips often as if hungry and swallowed noisily.

“What are you doing?” Red Cape asked again, nervously.

“Looking for company.”

Red Cape took this to mean the Huntsman was making sure nothing

dangerous was creeping up on them. The woods were full of wolves and wild boar. But being with the Huntsman somehow didn't make her feel any more secure. If anything she felt even edgier when they were alone in the shadows.

Snow White's cottage opened up like a theatre setting. They stepped through a pool of sunbeams into a magical summer's day. White cotton sheets wafted on the washing line. Pink roses festooned the open door. Blue jays chattered and swooped around a wishing well. The grassy slope before the cottage was thick with wild flowers and lazy honey bees.

"Here we are." Red Cape ran ahead. Snow White was as she had left her, flat on the floor. Some baby rabbits and a fawn had gathered around her in a concerned huddle, but Red Cape soon chased them out.

"It's not poison." The Huntsman knelt over Snow White. "The apple is lodged in her throat. She's choked herself."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"It's not all good. Her lips are blue," the Huntsman said. "She may have brain damage."

Red Cape shrugged. "She's a fairy princess."

"Okay. I'm going to do the Heimlich manoeuvre. I need you to go outside and stay there."

"But why? It's only the Hei—"

"Move along, please. Nothing to see here."

Red Cape reluctantly went outside. She was fretful and uncertain. This was not what she had expected. After a moment of hesitation, she peeked through the window. The Huntsman did indeed have Snow White in the Heimlich manoeuvre, or some variant of it. As she watched, the Huntsman growled and licked Snow White's ear with a tongue that seemed abnormally long. Snow White moaned and then giggled. Her eyelids fluttered as she began to regain consciousness. Red Cape

ducked out of sight, repelled yet curiously excited at what she had seen.

What exactly had she seen? Certainly nothing in any first aid manual she had ever read.

The door opened and the Huntsman stepped out. From her crouch, Red Cape was level with her big black boots. She grabbed at some nearby flowers, yanking them out by the roots.

“I was picking some flowers for Snowy. How is she?” She tried to sound innocent and composed in equal measures, but standing to face the Huntsman shattered both illusions. She blushed furiously and knew she looked guilty of spying, which she was. The Huntsman’s face had altered slightly. It looked leaner, her eyebrows were darker and heavier, and her ears more pointed. She was still a very handsome woman, but her beauty now seemed to shine through a veneer of menace.

“She’s fine. She needs to sleep, though. I put her to bed.”

“I’ll...I’ll just give her these flowers. Thank you so much for saving her.” Red Cape backed into the cottage, relieved the Huntsman stayed outside.

“Snowy, are you all right?” she hissed in her friend’s ear. Snow White opened her eyes and stared dreamily from her gossamer pillow, a small satisfied smile on her lips.

“Mmm. I’m fine, honey. Tell your friend thanks.”

“She’s not really my friend. I found her in the woods and asked her to come help.” Red Cape fretted. “I think there’s something odd about her.”

Snow White gave a croaky laugh, her hand fluttered to her throat and she gave a grimace of pain. “Hurts to talk.”

“The baby rabbits were in the house again, so I chased them outside. It’s unhygienic,” Red Cape said anxiously. “One of them told me Prince Charming was on his way with a prescription. Oh, and I brought you flowers.” She held up the

drooping blossoms complete with clods of earth sticking to the root balls.

Snow White gave a tiny nod and her eyelids drifted shut.

“Okay. I’ll leave you to rest. Maybe I’ll drop by tomorrow to see how you are.” There was no answer. “I’ll pop these in water, shall I?” Still no answer. Snow White was sleeping.

With a sigh, Red Cape plopped the flowers in a nearby jug; the water immediately muddied. She smoothed the covers over her friend, plumped her pillow and, having run out of things to do, turned slowly for the door. As she feared, the Huntsman still lurked outside shuffling from foot to foot. Red Cape felt uneasy. She had no coins or charms to pay her with. There was no food in the cottage either; Snow White was an atrocious cook and relied on the dwarves to feed her. How was she going to pay the sinister Huntsman? She had saved Snowy’s life after all, and deserved some sort of reward.

“Hi, thanks again for helping,” she said, unsure what to do next.

The Huntsman shrugged. “Happy to help. What are you doing now?”

“I suppose I’ll go over to Grandma’s. I was on my way there when I dropped by to see Snow White.”

“Anyone else we could help? I sort of liked being useful,” the Huntsman asked hopefully.

“Well...” Red Cape was surprised she was even contemplating an answer. Part of her wanted to be rid of the Huntsman as soon as possible; another part, the bigger part, was fascinated by her and wanted her to stick around. She was bold and exciting, but then she was a hunter by trade and everyone knew they lived in the deepest parts of the wildest woods and did a dangerous job. “My friend Rappers is sort of agoraphobic. She’s not been out of her tower for months. Just sits in, washing her hair.”

“Weird,” said the Huntsman. “Shall we go see if she needs anything?”

“Okay. But her tower is well off the beaten track.”

“Excellent.”

“I mean Grandma always told me not to go there.”

“But you do anyway. And this time you’ll be with a Huntsman; that’s got to be safe, right?”

They took off towards the heart of the forest where only the eagles flew high enough to see the turrets of Rapunzel’s tower looming over the treetops.

The Huntsman’s back curved, and she stooped more and more as they weaved through the thickening trees. Her breathing became heavy and she stopped every so often to make crude scratches on the tree trunks with her nails.

“What are you doing?” Red Cape asked, fascinated by the claw marks. Her nails would rip off and her fingers be torn to the bone if she tried to gouge the wood like that.

“Marking our way.”

“So we won’t get lost? I know the way back, I’ve come this way before.”

The Huntsman laughed bitterly. “So we’ll be respected,” she answered.

They came to a sunny meadow and as Red Cape made to walk across, the Huntsman grabbed at her. Her grip was strong and her fingers bit into the scrawny muscles of Red Cape’s arm.

“Let’s go around.” She indicated they keep to the edge of the forest and avoid the clearing.

“It’s quicker to go straight across,” Red Cape said. The Huntsman’s eyes gleamed from the shadows she had retreated to. Her smile was tight and her teeth showed white and long against blood red lips.

“The light will hurt my eyes,” she said, almost apologetically.

“We walked in the sunlight before.”

“Ah, but things have changed.”

“Okay,” Red Cape conceded out of good manners. She gazed at the sky anxiously. They were minutes from Rapunzel’s tower, but in a few hours night would fall, and she had better get to Grandma’s house long before then.

“Wow, that’s tall.”

They craned their heads back as far as possible until their necks hurt, but still the top of the tower was not visible, lost in the clouds.

“Told you it was a big tower. It scrapes the sky,” Red Cape said.

“How do we get in?” The Huntsman looked for a door.

“Depends if Rappers wants company. She can be moody sometimes. Rappers! Rappers!” Red Cape cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted.

Above them a blond head peeped out of a small window.

“It’s me!” Red Cape continued to holler. “Guess what happened to Snow White? She nearly choked to death on an apple!”

The head disappeared and a coil of hair as thick as a galleon’s mooring line fell down the side of the tower towards them. The Huntsman looked at Red Cape enquiringly.

Red Cape waved a hand at the enormous plait. “After you. We have to go up one at a time or her scalp gets tender.”

“We climb this?”

“Yes. She’s been growing out her bob forever.”

The Huntsman shook her head in disbelief and took a fistful of hair and heaved herself up.

“Oh,” Red Cape called after the rapidly ascending body, “remember to compliment her on the shine when you reach the top.”

The Huntsman reached the window in no time at all and disappeared inside. Before Red Cape could take a hold, the plait was suddenly whisked upwards and pulled inside the tower, leaving her marooned on the forest floor.

“Hey,” she called out, hurt.

The forest around her grew cool as dusk fell. She sat hunkered against the tower wall, glumly drawing circles in the dust. This was not how she had planned the visit to go. Rappers had always been a self-centred and spiteful girl, but she had no right to steal Red Cape’s new friend.

Was she a friend? Red Cape thought about the Huntsman. She barely knew her, so perhaps not a friend then, perhaps merely a companion. Wasn’t that what the Huntsman had said earlier when she was sniffing the forest air, that she was looking for company too? Perhaps she was lonely? Red Cape knew what that felt like; she had often been an outsider. She was the only village girl in a world of fairy princesses. She tried to be a good friend but often found herself left out. She was never invited to banquets and balls and polo matches. She had never set foot inside a magic castle.

Before she could slide any further into self-pity, the plait tumbled to the ground just missing her by inches.

*That could have given me a nasty concussion.* She stood up and dusted down her peasant dress. High above her she could just make out the Huntsman clambering out the window and rapidly descending the plait. Rapunzel’s head stuck out the window after her, watching her descent.

“You beast!” she screeched.

“Oh no. What’s happened now?” Red Cape muttered.

“Come back here this minute!” Rapunzel shouted again.

Red Cape’s eyes widened as she watched in disbelief as Rapunzel began to saw at her hair with a kitchen knife. “Good grief! Rappers is cutting her hair? Oooh, there’ll be stink to pay with her stylist.”

The last few strands gave way and the plait fell to the ground, landing with a thump that shook nearby bushes and raised a huge cloud of dust. The Huntsman, only halfway down the tower, leapt free and landed on her feet several yards away as agilely as a cat. Red Cape was amazed.

“You fell on your feet. From about fifty feet up.”

“Nah, more like twenty.” The Huntsman grinned at her. Her teeth were long and sharp. Her ears were pointed and furry. Her hands and bare feet were misshapen into huge claws. Explaining why she had landed like a cat.

Red Cape sighed. “You’re a werewolf, aren’t you.” It was more a statement than a question. She turned away in disappointment.

“I’m afraid so.” The Huntsman came after her and fell into step beside her. She was very hunched now and plucked every so often at her clothes as if they irritated her skin. Around them, the forest fell into early evening gloom; above, the final rays of a scarlet sun settled in the west.

“I guess I sort of knew,” Red Cape muttered. She was angry at her own stupidity.

“Why didn’t you run away? Most people would.”

“I suppose I was so frantic about Snow White. After all I did go looking for a Huntsman for help and there you were. How did you become one?”

“Become what? I’m a Huntsman because my father was one and taught me the trade, and I’m a werewolf because I was bitten by one while out hunting many years ago.”

“Do you like being one?”

“Like being what? A Huntsman is a lonely life. Trailing game can take you away from home for many weeks. And a werewolf has no home. Werewolves are unnatural and are shunned by the creatures of the forest. They are always alone, unless, if one is lucky enough, it finds a mate.”

“That’s so sad.” Red Cape felt momentarily sorry for the Huntsman, and then remembered her own situation. “Are you going to eat me now?”

“Not necessarily,” said the Huntsman.

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “I’ve had fun today. Please don’t be offended if I don’t eat you.” Laughter bubbled under her words.

“You didn’t worry when you offended Rappers enough to make her cut her hair off. She’ll have no visitors at all now.”

“Then she’ll have to go outside to meet people, won’t she?”

“Was that your plan?” If it was, then it was a rubbish plan, Red Cape decided.

“No.”

“So what did you do to upset her so much?”

“I did nothing but leave. Otherwise I’d be in that damned tower forever. She’s lonely too, but greedy and selfish with it.”

“No Heimlich manoeuvres then?”

The Huntsman looked at her. “So you peeked.”

“I always peek. I was worried.”

“Worried that I’d harm her?”

They were walking in darkness now, the sun having set. Through the branches above, stars began to twinkle coldly in the night sky. Far away a full moon crested the Glass Mountains. The smell of the forest subtly changed as the heat of the day receded. Night birds called to each other; the beat of their wings haunted the air.

“Worried...” Red Cape drew a deep breath. “Worried when you licked

Snow White that you'd like her more than me." There, she'd said it.

"Ah, the taste test." The Huntsman nodded. "She failed. Fairy princesses always fail. They taste sharp and nasty." Her bones crunched with every step.

"Rappers failed too?"

"She tasted like goat's feet."

Red Cape giggled at that. "What are you looking for in a taste test?"

"A companion."

Red Cape considered this. "You sniff for them too. And you can tell with just a lick?"

"Um hum." This came out as a growl. Red Cape looked at her. The Huntsman was a full werewolf now. She had pulled off her clothes and stood immense and naked in the moonlight. Her skin was dark and leathery and covered with a soft brown pelt. Her eyes glowed with a warm amber light and danced with energy.

Hesitantly, Red Cape held out her hand to the huge shaggy jaws.

"Taste me," she said quietly.

The moist maw opened and her hand slipped inside a wet cavern rimmed with the sharpest teeth imaginable. A thick, heavy tongue caressed her fingers one at a time. She was released with a warm, wet plop.

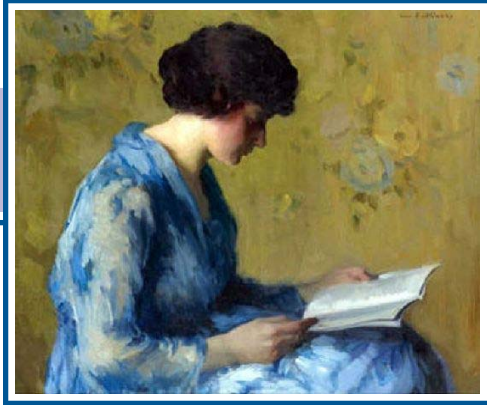
"What do I taste like?"

The Huntsman considered this for a while, then said, "You taste like happily ever after."

## *Gill McKnight*



Gill McKnight moves between Ireland, England, and Greece in an eclectic mix of work, rest, and play. When not scribbling in a notepad or pecking away at her laptop, Gill likes sailing, DIY, pottering about the garden, and running away from wasps.



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Evecho prefers cross-genre fiction and contemporary non-fiction in her daily reading. In her downtime, she trips across the internet for lesbian news and lesbian literature, and events that affect LGBTQs. She believes the future is bright for queer girls exploring expression in all media and wants to see more of them. Evecho, in her real life persona, has been involved in local, regional and international LGBTQ events for almost 20 years. You may contact her at [editor@readtheselips.com](mailto:editor@readtheselips.com)

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In her former work life, Linda Lorenzo was variously a high school English teacher and department chairman, a teaching associate at Brown University, and adjunct faculty teaching the much maligned freshman writing course at the University of Rhode Island. Her current work is all about lesbian fiction. In addition to serving as editor for Read These Lips, she is a freelance editor of lesbian novels, poetry, short stories. She also has had her own work published in Read These Lips: Openings, Fantasy: Untrue Stories of Lesbian Passion (Bella), and Lesbian Lust (Cleis). Linda's email is [proofdr@readtheselips.com](mailto:proofdr@readtheselips.com)

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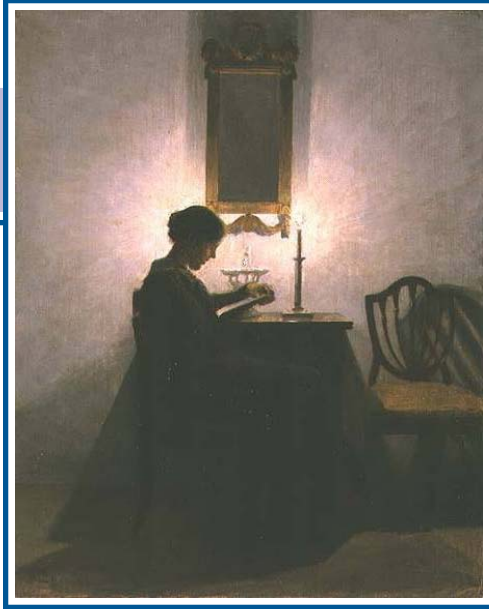
Besides copy editing and compiling bibliographies for RTL, Renée also enjoys translating and writing stories, some of which have been published in anthologies from Alyson, Bedazzled Ink, Bella, Bold Strokes, Cleis, and RTL. She lives in Canada on a Great Lake with her partner and their dog Bella, whose name has nothing to do with the publishing house and is short for Belle Amie. Renée can be contacted at [bibliographer@readtheselips.com](mailto:bibliographer@readtheselips.com) or [reneelf@cogeco.ca](mailto:reneelf@cogeco.ca)

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Ann can more regularly be found in the scene shop of a theatre creating many of the visual elements for live entertainment or business productions. Not a writer but an avid reader, Ann is an accomplished artist, designer, carpenter, props builder, sculptor, but a downright crummy seamstress. She is happiest backstage in the sawdust, paint and darkness, and would rather eat live cockroaches than go onstage and perform. Ann lives in Florida which, about half the time, isn't all that dark. She can be contacted at [design@readtheselips.com](mailto:design@readtheselips.com)

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