

Time to Think

Eight Short Stories

by

Rigby Taylor

Smashwords Edition

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Also by Rigby Taylor

The Price of Freedom

Dome of Death

Dancing Bare

Sebastian

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Spreading the Word

Sebastian turned on his side and gazed out at the sun filled garden. With an impatient sigh he rolled over and faced the wall. He sat up and dusted imaginary crumbs off the divan then lay on his back with his hands by his side and practiced relaxation exercises. After a few seconds he lost concentration and stared vacantly up at cobwebs on the verandah rafters.

‘Your tendons will never repair if you’re always on the go,’ the doctor had snapped only an hour before. ‘Why can’t you just lie back and relax?’

‘Because it’s not my nature,’ Sebastian had answered with a fetching sigh. ‘Perhaps if you were to massage me...?’

‘And risk Reginald’s wrath? Not bloody likely.’

‘Wouldn’t it be worth a broken arm?’ Sebastian grinned.

‘Not even you are worth that, Sebastian. Shut up and let the sounds of nature lull you to somnolence.’

But Sebastian couldn’t. Time plodded. He began to fidget. Struggled to his feet and leaned over the rail. Turned and smiled at his reflection in the lounge-room windows, then returned to the divan Reggie had dragged out onto the verandah and arranged himself in an artistic pose; not much fun when there was no one to admire the result. Where was Reggie?

The whine of a vehicle crawling up the steep drive sounded promising. Raising himself on an elbow he watched a beige car turn in under the trees and fall silent. The humid air throbbed to the raucous stridor of a million Cicadas.

‘Reggie,’ he called to a rustle in the shrubbery beside the verandah, ‘we have visitors. Stop massacring those plants and go make them welcome.’

A few minutes later, virility artlessly accentuated by torn-off jeans, a gold nipple ring and heavy work boots, Reginald was trailed onto the verandah by a middle-aged, portly gentleman in a wide-brimmed straw hat, grey suit, white shirt and dark tie. Scarlet and white trainers on tiny feet rendered the vision ridiculous rather than eccentric. Panting audibly, the man gazed back towards his car and dabbed his forehead with a large, damp handkerchief.

Fallen arches, Sebastian surmised, wondering what surprises were in the briefcase the fellow was clutching to his sweaty bosom.

The flat-footed man’s companion mounted the steps. Sebastian sucked in his stomach, arched his neck ever so slightly and beamed a winning smile at the dark, slim, handsome and hatless youth in white cotton slacks and open-necked shirt whose sun-dazzled eyes were blind to the apparition in the shadowy interior of the deep verandah.

Reginald waved the guests to low wicker chairs. Before they could sit, however, a discreet cough from the shadows made them jump and peer into the gloom where a charmingly arranged young man sprawled elegantly. A tiny wisp of silk on his groin fluttered in the light breeze like a turquoise butterfly impatient to escape. As an ornament to accentuate the golden hue of the satiny skin it was perfect; as a garment it failed exquisitely.

‘Lovely weather,’ Sebastian murmured, lavishing a seductive smile on the startled youth. ‘How thoughtful of you to visit us. Forgive my not rising to greet you, but I have a gammy heel. Are you lost? Tourists? Selling something?’

‘No... no... we’re...’ Apparently mesmerised by his host’s groin the young man’s voice faded to a whisper.

‘We’re not selling anything — we’re giving it away!’ flatfoot interrupted, eyes studiously avoiding that which his companion seemed unable to drag his gaze from.

‘Why? Isn’t it any good?’ Sebastian’s smile was innocent.

‘On the contrary! It is the greatest gift offered to mankind.’

‘My mother told me never to accept gifts from older men,’ Reggie frowned. ‘They always want something in exchange.’ He gestured irritably. ‘Please! Sit down, both of you.’

The youth concealed a grin and plonked himself down.

The older man lowered himself suspiciously into his chair, coughed twice, stood up and gazed around as if checking the exits, changed his mind, sat again heavily, clutched his briefcase even closer to his chest, stared fixedly at Reginald and announced, 'I am referring to the gift of joy one experiences when one truly knows and lives with God.'

'That must be you,' burred Sebastian to the handsome adolescent. 'You're like a young god.'

'No... No I'm only William.'

'Well, Only-William, I'm Sebastian and this is Reggie. Do you live with God, William?'

'Yes... No... I mean... yes but... I live with Dad.' He nodded towards the older man.

'Your mother must be exceptionally good looking?'

'Why?'

'You bear no resemblance to your father.'

William had time to flash a smile before succumbing to a choking cough.

'My name is Henry Shatter,' the homely and sweating father announced brusquely, 'and we are here to offer you everlasting happiness.'

'How nice of you, Henry.'

.....

'Now, let's see if I've understood everything,' Sebastian recapitulated. 'When God's sick of watching us muck everything up, he'll let us live in peace, love, health and harmony with everyone and everything for ever and ever... as long as we're part of your flock.'

'Yes.'

'Imagine, Reggie, you and me—lovers for eternity.'

Reginald's expression was enigmatic.

Henry turned an unattractive shade of grey. 'No, no! There will be none of that!'

'What?'

'Sodom and Gomorrah!'

'Blessed if I know them.'

'Cities of evil punished by God!'

Sebastian leaned forward and patted the old man's knee. 'No worries, Henry, we're not evil. You'd be hard put to find anyone more law-abiding and honest than us. Isn't that so, Reggie?'

Reginald rumbled assent.

'You may be honest and law-abiding, but you've just admitted you are a homosexual!' Henry paused and pulled a face as if merely saying the word had somehow polluted his throat. 'It is against God's law.'

'So god hates us?'

'No! He loves you but hates your actions.'

'Goodness! Then why did he make us like this?'

'To test you. To see if you could overcome your affliction and be worthy of his love.'

'I don't feel afflicted.'

'God sends troubles to test our worth.'

'Like plagues, pestilence, war and death?' Sebastian smiled brightly.

'Yes.'

Sebastian's smile dissolved into a frown. 'Are you sure he's a loving god, Henry? Maiming, laming, murdering and spreading dread-diseases—just to test us? To see if we are worthy of his love?'

'Well...'

'Did you hear that, Reggie. God sits up in heaven organising his own snuff-movies.' Sebastian turned to a drop-jawed William. 'Doesn't it strike you as the teeniest little bit perverted, Only-William?'

'I... don't think it is meant to be...'

‘We are not here to question God’s works!’ thundered Henry. ‘The bible says that homosexuals may never go to heaven.’

‘Homosexual is an adjective, not a noun, Henry, and it carries such a lot of baggage. Reggie and I are same-sex-oriented men.’ He smiled winningly. ‘And remarkably fine specimens—don’t you think?’ He stretched and the wisp of blue silk trembled precariously. ‘Also, Henry, a statement that begins ‘All homosexuals...’ will be both false and meaningless

‘It won’t.’

‘No? Are you the same as all heterosexual men?’

‘Of course I am!’

‘Most murderers and child molesters are heterosexual.’

‘Well... yes.’

‘That one word, heterosexual. Does it adequately describe you, Henry Shatter?’

‘I repeat, God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.’

‘Parried like a politician. So, you love me, but hate what you think I do?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do I do?’

‘All homosexuals are unhappy because they reject god’s love, subvert young boys into their foul practices, undermine family values, indulge in promiscuous sex with multiple partners... like...like... dogs!’ Henry glared at his silent hosts, paused indecisively, then, drawing strength from faces which were the picture of concentrated interest and credulity, He dared the final lunge— ‘and then God punishes them with AIDS.’

An appreciative silence, then....

‘Does that describe us, Reggie?’

‘Nope! Always preferred it from the front, myself. Never cared for the ‘doggy’ position. Like to see who’s doing what to whom.’

A thoughtful silence followed this revelation.

‘You will never attain eternal life and happiness unless you renounce your evil ways and beg God’s forgiveness,’ Henry asserted with only slightly less conviction.

‘Oh, Reggie, we can’t go to heaven, ‘ Sebastian wailed whipping off the tiny bit of silk and dabbing at his eyes. ‘It’s unfair, Henry. You must have misunderstood God’s intentions.’

Henry shrivelled back into his seat. William slithered forward.

‘Cover yourself!’ Henry ordered. ‘God hates perverts!’

‘Oh, but so do I! We only indulge in good clean fun, don’t we, Reggie?’

‘Sexual congress with another man is unnatural!’

‘It’s perfectly natural for me! Don’t forget Christians were stoning left-handed people not so long ago and burning women who spoke in church.’

‘Sex between men is wrong!’

‘Poor Henry. You’re obsessed with sex! Don’t you know the Bible has no sexual ethic? But it does have a ‘love’ ethic. What do you mean when you say you ‘love’ me, Henry?’

‘I love you as Jesus loves—in purity.’

‘According to Luke, Jesus told us ‘to judge for ourselves what is right.’

‘You think that you, a sinner, can ever know God’s intentions?’

‘Know thy enemy, Henry.’

‘God’s purpose for sexual union is children.’

‘Is William your youngest?’

‘Yes.’

Sebastian turned his brilliant smile on William. ‘How old are you, William?’

‘Nineteen.’

‘Then, Henry,’ gasped Sebastian in horror, ‘you haven’t had sex for over nineteen years! Poor darling!’

Henry’s eyes glazed. ‘William! We are going.’

‘But, you can’t go! You came to save us!’

‘You must want to be saved.’

‘I do!’ cried Sebastian, leaping to his feet. ‘I do! I do!’

Henry struggled to his feet.

‘I insist you save me,’ ordered Sebastian petulantly, placing both hands on Henry’s shoulders and pressing him firmly back into the chair. ‘Especially since you have accepted our hospitality.’

Positioned directly in front of the older man, hands on slim, evenly bronzed hips, Sebastian stared sorrowfully at the averted eyes of his guest. ‘Do you realise, Henry, that hundreds of people regularly pay a great deal of money to see me like this, and you are turning away your gaze? What on earth’s the matter with you? Don’t you like God’s handiwork?’

‘You have sold yourself to the devil and are perverting God’s plan. A good man would cover his unclean parts.’

‘Speak for yourself! I showered minutes before you arrived. You despise God’s handiwork and are obsessed by sex, whereas I am content with the life God gave me.’

‘You twist my meaning. God doesn’t hate you, he hates your actions.’

‘I am my actions, just as you are yours.’

‘No! You can be changed. You can become like me, pure in mind and body.’

‘Quite frankly, the offer doesn’t appeal. I think I enjoy this world rather more than you and certainly do less harm to my fellow men.’

‘How dare you!’

‘How dare you? Your assertion that my life is evil, is an attempt to destroy my self-respect, contentment and love of life!’ Sebastian’s voice had attained the cutting edge of a practiced tub-thumper. In vain did Henry plug his ears. ‘Everyone is different. You surely didn’t choose to be a creepy fat maggot. Reggie didn’t choose to be a gorgeous hunk and William was born cute, curious and lively. Unless you accept people as they are you are doomed to die as you live - a moral and mental cripple.’

Sebastian paused for effect, threw himself onto the divan in a pose evoking Michelangelo’s Adam receiving the gift of life, and beamed a winning smile. ‘No offence, Henry, but I hope you rot in hell for a thousand years for every young man who kills himself because of your mind-poisoning lies and malignant dissemination of guilt.’ He sighed sorrowfully into the ensuing silence and, with a sensuous stroke of flanks and a fluttering of lashes at William, threw back his head, the better to expose a fine neck.

Henry, as thick-skinned as the next salesman, took up the gauntlet. ‘Guilt is it? The guilt is in wrong action! I point out the action to allow the sinner to meet God!’

‘Let God tell me himself.’

‘I am his messenger.’

‘If God is infinitely smart, then he would choose someone infinitely more attractive than you as his messenger.’

‘St. Paul, in his letters to the Romans...’

‘According to Gore Vidal, St Paul was bonking Timothy and, preferring his young men cut, had him circumcised. A dangerous operation at that age. He made him Bishop of Antioch as a reward. No! Don’t interrupt!’

Henry subsided in horror as his inquisitor stood again and leaned over him.

‘Even you, Henry, must know that the Bible’s a tendentious translation from Greek and Hebrew texts. Even the word homosexuality was invented in the nineteen-fifties. Prurient pastors, no longer able to rail against women and other races, turned their persecutory talents to sexual orientation, rendering millions miserable and causing thousands of suicides.’

With a supreme effort Henry surged forward knocking Sebastian back onto the divan, grabbed his son’s wrist and hauled him down the steps and along the leaf-strewn path to his car.

‘Oh well, can’t convert ’em all,’ sighed Sebastian philosophically. ‘Pity about William, though.’

‘Henry was in such a rush to escape contamination he left his briefcase.’

William ran back and, smiling shyly, bravely faced Sebastian who was standing at the bottom of the steps with the briefcase.

‘One day you may want to talk to someone,’ Sebastian murmured, slipping a card into William’s hand. ‘That’s our address and phone number. We’d be delighted to see you—any time at all.’

William took the briefcase, lightly brushing his hosts’ fingers before racing back to God’s messenger of mercy and grace.

Free Will

I reckon there's no such thing as free will. We're manipulated from birth to be obedient conformists who never rock boats, take risks or think for ourselves. It doesn't matter who you talk to, pretty soon you realise their ideas, opinions and actions are copied from videos, TV, newspapers, magazines, books... There's nothing original in their heads. People don't think—they respond to prodding. When we were kids, my best friend and I were always pretending we were heroes from the movies or comics. All kids do and it doesn't matter. What matters is that it doesn't stop when they grow up. Adults should be independent, clear-thinking role models for kids, but instead they adopt the latest fads, buy all the crap advertisements tell them to, and holiday in places that resemble the resorts of the rich and famous, always hoping they'll be taken for a celebrity. And old people are no better! Pathetic.

It may seem pretentious for a fifteen year-old to be so cynical, but I reckon I've earned the right because I was one of the deluded masses until a tragedy made me realise what a dangerous fool I'd become. That I'm able to write this now in my bedroom instead of a Borstal dormitory is thanks to Robert, Mum's favourite brother. He's twenty-three; twelve years younger than Mum, eight years older than me, but although he's my uncle he never took much notice of me until last summer.

Robert left school at fifteen to be general dogsbody for Mr Bavistok. I was seven, and when we visited them I was a bit frightened because the old man's bald head and dark, deep-set eyes made him look like a skull. But he always treated me as if I was important—listening to me and asking my opinion on all sorts of things, so I liked him more than I was frightened. When the old man died suddenly last year, Robert got totally depressed and just moped around the place, letting it go to rack and ruin, Mum said. When we visited Robert and saw the beautiful old place looking derelict she got really angry and told him to stop being so selfish and snap out of it because he was only twenty-two, bloody rich now he'd inherited everything, and could have any girl he wanted. Robert told her to shut the fuck up because she didn't know what she was talking about. Then Mum cried, so he had to apologise. She's good at that, crying to get her own way.

Robert finally got his act together and took an extended holiday in Greece, because he's keen on classical ruins and art, then spent the rest of the northern summer hiking in the Balkan Mountains and lazing on the Adriatic coast. Mum and I never mentioned him at home because Dad would only sneer that Robert must have been a very special secretary to have been left a fortune after only eight years. Mum would tell him to be nice because I was Robert's only nephew and if I played my cards right, I might inherit something eventually.

'Huh!' he'd snort, 'Pete's not like your precious Robert!'

I had no idea what he was talking about so kept my mouth shut.

Although Robert had usually more or less ignored me when we visited, he'd always been my hero. Tall and sort of tough and rough, but handsome too, he did all the work for Mr. Bavistok so he had a great body—like a Greek god people used to say. I figured he'd be looking for a friend when he got home, and I was determined to be it! All I had to do was get him to notice me. My plans were well in hand when the letter came with his return flight details.

Robert had left his Mercedes Sports for Mum, so we used it to pick him up. It was hot enough to put the hood down and Mum got her usual wolf whistles along with envious stares from a few guys. Even though she's thirty-five, she's still a looker. I don't know who was more excited, Mum or me when he appeared through the arrivals door. She gave him a big hug and told him he was too thin—I thought he looked perfect and envied his tan. To my surprise we were the same height—I'd grown more than I realised. He shook my hand and smiled at me, which I took for a good omen.

Back home Dad grunted a minimum welcome before shutting himself in his shed. When Mum finally stopped asking Robert questions and telling all about us, I dragged him to my room. I had exactly fifteen minutes to make him notice me before he left.

While he was away, I'd followed a rigid fitness program that was guaranteed to bulk up chest and shoulders with structured weight lifting and press-ups, and improve my legs by running ten kilometres a day. I used to get really exhausted at the beginning, but after a week I reckon I got addicted. Anyway, it worked and I hoped my plan would be as successful. My bait was Robert's interest in classical art and sculpture. I'd practised posing in the same poses as Ancient Greek statues. All I had to do was get him into my room, close the door and... I stopped thinking at that point. If nothing else he'd have to notice me; acknowledge my existence. Depending on his reaction I'd modify things as I went along. At least he'd realise we had an interest in common—classical art.

I'd prepared the room by closing the windows and curtains, placing a low box draped with a sheet against the far wall and arranging the reading lamp so it threw a sort of spotlight onto it.

'Phew! It's like a sauna in here, and dark, open a window.'

'No, please. I want to show you something. Take off your shirt if you're too hot. Won't take long. Just lie on the bed and watch'

Robert grunted something, but didn't sound irritated, then dragged his shirt over his head and lay on my bed, hands behind his head, grey eyes watching. A tiny gold medallion glinting against his smooth brown chest, triggered a crisis of confidence—his body was much better than mine! Before I could wimp out I passed him a photo of Praxiteles' Apollo Sauroktonos and while he was distracted, stripped; not difficult as I was only wearing a pair of shorts.

Robert frowned, then heaved himself upright onto his elbow as if to leave. I'd blown it! Before he could move I leaped onto the draped box and took up the well-practised pose. 'What do you reckon? Have I got it right?'

No response. Hot with shame and embarrassment I moved to jump down but Robert held up his hand.

'No, don't move.' He got off the bed and walked around the room studying me, then threw himself back on the bed with a sort of barking laugh. 'Where's the scrawny kid who used to live in this room?'

I'd never felt such an utter idiot. What could he be thinking? 'Shall I get down?'

'No. I haven't finished comparing you yet.' He got up and for a few more seconds walked around looking from me to the photo, then nodded and said casually, 'You look better than Sauroktonos, I've always been a bit disappointed by his wide waist. How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen?'

'Fifteen.'

'The cusp of manhood,' he said softly. 'You look and seem much older.' Robert pulled the curtains back, swung round to look at me, frowned and stood quietly staring for a long minute.

Dreams of friendship faded and I began to feel pretty stupid standing naked on the box, so I jumped down and slipped on my shorts. 'Should I try to become really muscled like Hermes?' I asked to break the silence.

'Definitely not. Athletic youth is enchanting; virile manhood merely admirable.'

Suddenly, he stood up to go. I'd failed. At the door he turned, frowned, then asked as if he had no interest in my reply, 'Wanna spend the summer at my place?'

I choked.

'Well?'

Mum was thrilled, chattering about clean air, healthy exercise, how good it was of Robert to take an interest in me, telling me to behave, not annoy, do as I was told, not get in the way.....

Dad was his usual sour self. 'Do you really want to go?' he demanded with curled lip as if no one in their right mind would consider the offer.

'Yes!' I almost shouted.

Dad's smile was twisted. 'Play your cards right and you could become his private secretary,' he sneered, and with a snort of derision retreated to his shed as we purred away—hood down, spirits up.

‘You must read ‘The Vatican Cellars’ by André Gide,’ Robert said when we stopped beside a river to eat Mum’s sandwiches.

‘What’s it about?’

‘It’s a satire poking ridicule at people who change their morals to suit their desires. The story revolves around Lafcadio, an exceedingly handsome young fellow with whom both men and women fall in love—or lust, and this gives him an exaggerated sense of his own worth. He’s a Romanian, who, when he was the same age as you, stayed with his mother and her wealthy lover in a villa near Duino on the Adriatic, where they entertained a stream of guests. Wearing not a stitch of clothing the entire summer, because it was believed that an all-over tan was essential for both beauty and health, Lafcadio ran wild, spending his days under the pines, among rocks and creeks, or swimming or canoeing in the sea.’ Robert’s smile was guileless. ‘I spent a month in Duino... and I’ve decided that this summer you’ll be Lafcadio!’

‘But...’

‘No buts!’

We raced each other back to the car and powered away. For the next half hour Robert carefully explained his plans and my part in them. I was nervous, certain I’d fail, but incredibly excited and determined not to disappoint.

The low stone house glowed pale gold in the sunlight. Flanked by towering eucalypts and fronted by sun-slashed lawns, flowering shrubs and ornamental urns, it flickered into view between the gigantic old trees lining the drive. We pulled up in front and switched off the engine. Country peace. Bird calls, leaf-rustles, insect hums were the only things that dared break the silence. With a shout of relief that nothing had changed since my last visit I threw off my clothes, raced for the lake, paddled the kayak till my arms ached, swam till I chilled, then raced back to the house where Robert had thrown the windows wide, placed a substantial meal on the sunny end of the verandah—and hidden my clothes. While we ate he gave me my instructions. I was to have at least five hours of vigorous physical exercise every day, and three hours of mind-enlarging intellectual exercise every evening.

‘Intellectual exercise?’

‘That’s right.’

‘With you?’

‘The friends I told you we always have to stay during the summer are intellectually stimulating.’

‘And I’m to be part of this... this intellectually stimulating social scene... naked... day and night... like Lafcadio? Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘But...’

‘Be yourself ‘

‘But...’

‘You’re a young god, remember?’

‘But...’

‘Anyone who is shocked may go.’

As the first guests’ cars appeared on the drive I panicked and hid in the forest behind the house, watching them. They looked pleasant, chatted with Robert and laughed a lot, and after unloading their car went for a swim. Robert and a couple of the younger guys skinny-dipped and no one protested, so I conquered my fear of ridicule, slipped unnoticed into the far end of the lake and swam to join them.

After sunbathing the others put on their clothes and we wandered back up to the house. I braced myself for some comment but to my relief no one appeared to think I was doing anything strange. Instead I was complimented on my fitness and all-over tan. According to the handsome husband of a pretty blond woman who kept reciting poetry, I was a ‘child of nature’. One of the others—a

short, fat, hairy bloke kept insisting he had been transported to Arcadia, and I was a sexy satyr. He patted my bum but I didn't mind because he was so pleasant.

During the entire seven weeks, open-mindedness, liberality, and a welcoming acceptance of difference reigned supreme. No one criticised anyone else. There was no gossip, backbiting, bitching or arguments. There were discussions a plenty, sometimes heated, but never did anyone try to score points by unpleasantness. By the end of the first week I was Lafcadio in nature as well as name.

How Robert and Mr. Bavistok had found so many decent, intelligent, easy-going people to visit them every summer remains a mystery. Friends and acquaintances from all over the world arrived to stay and drift through house and grounds throughout the summer. Some remained for days, others weeks, choosing their own rooms in the vast old house, and bringing their own food; preparing and sharing with everyone else at mealtimes. There was no roster, but it all seemed to work. One bloke spring-cleaned the house for fun. Two old women painted all the shutters. The place ran like clockwork and there was always music, laughter and conversation.

Each morning at sunrise Robert would drag me out of our bed and we'd race down to the lake for a dip. He has a great body. Not a wrestler's like me, more a marathon type. Evenly tanned, lean, long-legged, fit and strong. The swim was followed by a long, hard jog, then he'd throw on a pair of shorts for breakfast. Usually I'd spend the morning swimming, tramping, and canoeing—sometimes with Robert, sometimes with one of the younger men—often alone, which I preferred.

It was a long, hot summer with not enough daylight hours. The guests did as they pleased. Sometimes I took a group of the younger ones into the National Park that abutted the rear of the property. One particular stand of ancient eucalypts always silenced them, as did the enormous buttresses of the rainforest giants. Sometimes we saw platypus in the stream that fed our lake, and there were always screeching flocks of parrots in the canopy. The cool damp silence affects people differently—but no one escaped the atmosphere. I could have sat there for hours dreaming away if it wasn't for the mosquitoes. When alone in the forest, exploring the stream or swimming in the lake, I was Narcissus, Pan, a satyr... never one of the big-name gods; I valued my freedom too much to shoulder that responsibility.

Despite all the activity I found time to read 'The Vatican Cellars'. It excited me; especially Lafcadio's 'motiveless crime'. His 'puzzle for the police'. I loved the idea of living on the brink. I marvelled when, just for the hell of it, he shoved Fleurissoire off the train to his death—a move he couldn't take back, as in chess. I discovered I was surprisingly like Lafcadio, being more curious about myself than events. I couldn't help feeling the book had been written expressly for me. It burned into my heart—too special to talk about, even with Robert.

Afternoons were for artists to sketch and paint, writers to compose, philosophers to think, musicians to practice for the evening recitals. I posed for artists; pretending I was Caravaggio's Amore, Titian's Apollo, Cellini's Perseus.

Directly after the evening meal there'd be a short concert with poetry reading, some acting, instrumentalists, singing accompanied by Robert who played the piano beautifully. One week there were enough musicians to make a small orchestra. It seemed that I was the only one without a talent to perform until they struck up a dance from Petruska. A touring company had brought the ballet to school and I was surprised to discover I loved both the dance and Stravinsky's music. As soon as they began to play I couldn't help myself and leaped onto the small stage and danced like the puppet; jerky but athletic and graceful at the same time. At least that's what I aimed at. There was too much spontaneous applause for it to have been motivated entirely by kindness, so at someone's suggestion I made up a short dance most afternoons and performed at night.

The concerts seldom lasted more than an hour and then the evenings became talk-fests when everything from morality to monetary policy; ethics to environment, lithographs to literature was argued about, discussed, dissected. I was too over awed to ask questions or offer opinions unless asked, but on the odd occasion I did say something they would consider it seriously. No one ever made me feel foolish or embarrassed, even when artists pinned their drawings of me on the walls of

the drawing room, some of which were blatantly sexual. In fact I seemed to spend the entire summer holiday buoyed on a sea of compliments. I was a living artwork—Young Bacchus revelling with the mortals. Untouchable. Chosen by the gods.

No one told me about hubris.

And suddenly the holiday ended, guests departed, the house echoed its emptiness and the spectre of school loomed. I'm not dumb; schoolwork presented no problems; it was the humans I hated. Never did I feel at ease. Always it seemed that my existence depended on a secret I didn't know. I kept myself apart from everyone as much as possible and was more or less ignored—neither popular nor unpopular, in a sort of limbo with no real friends, knowing no one who was like me, no one I would be able to share thoughts, hopes and desires with—certainly not confide what I'd done this holiday. I begged Robert to let me quit school and stay and help him on the farm as he had with Mr. Bavistok. He shook his head and I felt betrayed. I asked why he'd ignored me all my life.

'Because you were a boy.'

'What do you mean?'

I've never made a secret of the fact that I'm gay, so if I'd been friendly with you everyone would have assumed I was a pederast, when the truth's the opposite; like most gays I'm not sexually interested in boys.'

'So you didn't dislike me?'

'On the contrary, I thought you were a great kid. And now you're a sexy and personable and intelligent and handsome and loveable young man.'

'Legally I'm still a boy.'

'Which is why you've got to keep this under your hat. The law treats all teenagers the same to protect the vulnerable—a good thing too considering some of the fuckwits out there. In a couple of years you'll wonder why you fussed. Physically and mentally you're a man, an attractive and personable young man, as I realised when you took me to your room. I also realised you wanted more than just friendship from me, which is why it took me a while to decide to invite you. At first I thought you were too inexperienced to know what you wanted, then remembered I was your age when I met Marc Bavistok and fell in love.'

'So...'

'So nothing. I had been kicked out of school. You're oversensitive but there's nothing wrong with your brain, so think about it. This is your first love affair so you need to go away and think deeply before making an irrevocable choice. See how you feel next holidays and if you want to come and stay again, you're welcome. If you decide you want to explore other things, other men... that's fine too. Understood?'

And so I returned to a silent and sneering father and gossiping mother, becoming the morose and irritating son of parents too busy to care.

School. Mundane, predictable, drear. Wrapped in a cocoon of summer memories too precious to share, I withdrew completely. My fellow students and teachers were mere mortals. Superficial. Boring!

Nine weeks into the term, increasingly miserable at the monotony of existence, I trudged one afternoon up to the library after a depressing day. Angry at everything. Heart aching for Robert's barking laughter.

The place was empty except for Mr Egas, the ancient Librarian who was standing before an open window gazing down at the ant-like comings and goings two stories below. I stood beside him and peered down. Sunlight reflected dully off the crinkled parchment of his cancer-spotted cranium, quivering on a neck seemingly too scrawny to support it. He glanced at me. A death's-head. An insult to the living. A cough shook his scrawny frame. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his lips, and mumbled an apology.

Revulsion welled, overflowing into arms and hands. Avoiding his eyes I shoved him through the open window. He made a great sweep with his arm to save himself; his left hand clutched at the smooth framework of the window, while, as he half turned round, he flung out his right. A horrible claw scratched the back of my neck. I gave another push, more impatient than the first. His nails scraped through my flesh. After that, nothing was left for the old man to catch hold of but the air and he fell without uttering a sound, like Fleurissoire.

I left the school by the back gate—unseen—or at least unnoticed, confident that what I'd done was no different from a man stepping on a bug. A natural instinct. I stood to gain nothing from my action, so strictly speaking it wasn't morally wrong, merely the act of someone obeying natural instincts.

By the time I reached home my buoyant mood had dissipated, dissolving into an incomprehensible torpor that lay heavy. Fatigue, perhaps; at any rate I gave up thinking and lay on my bed.

I wasn't intending to go, but Robert insisted I accompany him to the funeral. Mr. Egas, he informed me with great seriousness, was the only teacher who'd shown an interest in him at school, so he was determined to pay his respects. There were hundreds of mourners and I endured the service in a state of expectancy—of vague fear.

Afterwards, Robert shouted me to a meal in a swank restaurant, but I couldn't eat. The need to confide my dreadful secret had become a desperate, silent screaming in my head.

'Robert...'

'Yes?'

'I... I re-read 'The Vatican Cellars' ... I'm... I'm Lafcadio.' My voice betrayed me.

Robert stopped eating, put down his fork, wiped his lips carefully, then said quietly, 'So, it wasn't an accident.'

I couldn't speak.

'But... don't you remember? I explained that the book is a satire, deriding people who modify their morals to suit their desires?'

Cold dread gripped my guts. I began to shake uncontrollably.

We left the restaurant; my food untouched, and sat in Robert's car. There was no condemnation. No recrimination; only an intolerable silence. Finally, he sighed and told me to do and say nothing to anyone. What was done was done and a confession would only break more hearts. Egas's family had accepted it was an accident because the old man was ill and suffered from dizzy spells. To be told it had been murder would open up a far greater, and possibly incurable emotional wound. And my parents! Why would I put them through the horror of having their cherished only son exposed as a mad murderer? Obviously, I had done wrong, gravely wrong, but clearly I was repentant. My punishment would be to think about it for the rest of my life.

The sentence was too harsh. The rest of my life, I determined, would be very, very short.

Robert drove me home and parked at the gate. We sat in lengthening silence. Several times Robert started to speak, but the words seemed to choke in his throat. Eventually, unable to bear it any longer I opened my door, tears streaming, willing him to look at me but he continued to stare straight ahead. I got out and turned to close the door. Suddenly, he swung round in his seat and stared, an odd expression in his eyes.

'You can't go back to school,' he said pensively. 'You'll give yourself away.'

'I know,' I whispered, unable to see Robert through my tears. 'I'm sorry, Robert, so sorry.'

'Have you thought about us over the last couple of months?'

'Nothing else.'

'And?'

'I still feel the same.'

'Me too, so go and pack your bags. I need a secretary.'

Time to think

Sprawled over the lounge on the verandah like one of Henry Moore's gargantuan sculptures, my visitor, who obviously considered his taciturn company sufficient reward for three sugar-laden cups of tea, five cup cakes and my increasingly laboured efforts to entertain, farted softly.

As I could think of no suitable reply, the already lengthy silence lengthened further and I began to wonder if his essential self had slipped away when with a grunt and a shudder he yawned himself back to the present, hauled up his shirt, scratched sluggishly at an alarmingly distended, hairy white belly and declared, 'You're lucky to be retired.'

'Why?' I sighed, wondering if the great lump was ever going to go.

'All that time to yourself. Doing whatever you want. No deadlines. No pressure to conform. No false expectations...'

'Mmm.'

How long have you been retired?'

'Ten years.'

'And you're...what? Sixty?'

'Sixty-nine.'

'You see? It shows. You look much younger. It's all that freedom from stress. Having time to keep yourself slim and fit.'

'Perhaps.'

'No need to sound so enthusiastic.'

'OK.'

'It can't be all that bad.'

'You reckon? The trouble with being free of those things you mentioned, is that I'm also free to think.'

'So?'

'Thinking too much is counter productive; one eventually enters a metaphysical maze of insoluble questions such as: Who am I? What am I? Why am I?'

'Serious stuff,' he acknowledged with a ponderous nod.

As that was the extent of his contribution and the sound of my own voice seemed preferable to another prolonged silence, I decided to elaborate on my newfound theory. 'While actively engaged in my career,' I began solemnly, 'pitting my wits against competitors, interacting, planning, preparing and anticipating, I knew exactly who and what I was by observing other people's reactions to me. The why was equally straightforward—to get a better car and house, take holidays, pay off loans and so on. However, now I no longer go to work the 'mirror' of other people's reactions is no longer available. I'm forced to seek inside myself for proof of my existence.'

'You've got Jon—surely he's your 'mirror', as you call it?'

'He should be, but after forty-four years our reactions to each other are more predictable than our reactions to ourselves. We've reflected each other for so long that sometimes I'm not sure whether I'm talking to Jon or myself. Don't you find that with your wife? You do have a wife I suppose?'

A protracted sigh. 'Twenty-one years. It seems longer. We don't talk much. Sometimes we hardly see each other from one week's end to the next. Margaret's always out doing something or other. Or I am. We're social butterflies,' he added with a smirk.'

I suppressed a smile. Hippopotamus? Yes. Butterfly? No. 'Anyway,' I continued when the desire to laugh had abated, 'thinking has led me to some extremely depressing conclusions.'

'Such as?'

'Well... I imagined that as I grew older I would eventually become the sum of my past actions. If I achieved a string of successes, did the requisite number of good works and produced a few things of worth, then in my dotage I could relax—swathed in the splendid 'garment' of my

achievements. Contentedly encased in the ‘hammock’ of past deeds, so to speak. But it’s not like that. Not at all!’

‘It isn’t?’

‘No! I’ve discovered that we are not a collection of our past successes, not even those of yesterday. We are simply the person we are at the time of thinking about it. Our character and worth are defined by our most recent actions, thoughts and words. Whatever we have done in the past is irrelevant! We have to proclaim ourselves anew every second of our existence, and... and I’m tired of it!’

‘It certainly sounds exhausting. But the people who knew you before you retired; surely they know your worth?’

‘It doesn’t work like that. Try making a mistake at work on Monday and see who isn’t ready to pronounce you no longer capable of running the show. Even after twenty years—or whatever it is you’ve given them—of faultless service.’

‘You’re right. Horrible thought.’ His gaze drifted from navel to wristwatch, and my spirits rose, only to be dashed as he flicked a wad of lint from his navel and settled back.

I was beginning to enjoy this instant philosophising, so elaborated artistically. ‘The real horror comes when I think about some of the not so wonderful things I’ve done, or worse, haven’t done. While I was a busy little bee with no time to mope, I told myself I was having a wonderful life. Everything that happened was for the best in the best of all possible worlds—to paraphrase Dr Pangloss.’

‘Dr who?’ he interjected

‘No, Dr Pangloss,’ I repeated as if to a slow pupil.

‘I mean who’s Dr whatshisnamegloss?’

‘A character in a story by Voltaire. It doesn’t matter, stop interrupting.’

‘Sorry.’

‘In other words,’ I continued pedantically, ‘If the bad things didn’t happen, then neither would the good.’

‘Sounds sensible.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! It’s a load of crap! To convince myself that my life was all roses I simply blanked out the bad bits—pretending they never happened, or had been good for me. You know... stiffening the backbone, character-building?’

‘Well, surely that’s true?’ My guest failed to stifle a yawn.

‘Not always,’ I snapped at his rudeness. ‘Life’s normal hardships prevent us becoming soft, but when the unpleasantness is irrational; when it destroys pleasure in living and forces one to adopt modes of behaviour unsuited to one’s character, then it is most decidedly bad!’

‘Did that happen to you?’

‘Yes! When reviewing my early life I don’t like what I see. I reached puberty at the age of eleven—two years before my peers. A small kid with over-developed genitals and a moustache. That was traumatic, especially with a mother who railed against God for making her hairy. Then at high school a couple of slob in the class above me, sensing I was somehow different, singled me out for abuse. Name calling, dropping bags on my toes, things like that. Not much, but terrifying for someone desperate to blend in.

‘For years I faked interest in girls, booze, car racing, footy. I forced myself to laugh when some dickhead got smashed and chundered all over his mate’s carpet. I male-bonded like a pro. Went to all the parties, suffered the excruciating boredom of feeling up my latest girlfriend for hours in the back seat of a car. Anything to prove I was one of the lads. I understand terrorists’ urge to hurt those who’ve hurt them, when thinking about such an appalling waste of my youth!’

‘Grist to the mill... grist to the mill.’

Ignoring the fatuous platitude I ploughed on, by now thoroughly aroused. ‘The idiotic gang mentality of heterosexual males destroys the uniqueness at the core of every human, replacing it with dreadful conformity. You guys are prepared to sacrifice independence just to be part of the group. That makes you no better than pack animals! You’re like wild dogs, empty of individuality

because you're so bloody frightened of rejection by your peers. I look like the tough, sporty type, so was expected to love rugby—but team sports with all their macho madness leave me cold. In a team environment I feel like a lemon in a bowl of oranges.'

'A suitably fruity metaphor.'

I granted him a small, sad smile but he was again scrutinising his ostentatious watch.

'Time to go?' I asked hopefully.

'No, no! I've just bought this watch—well a chronometer actually, it's so accurate that...'

I let the fat fellow rave about his technological toy while planning my next move. If I couldn't get him to leave in the next five minutes then I'd forego the evening meal. When he finally shut up I leaned forward and gazed soulfully into his piggy little eyes. 'Fear of others led me to deny the existence of the strongest of my natural urges, and by the age of twenty-two I was a sexual cripple; masturbation my sole sexual release. When I attempted sexual relations with any other person, no matter how attractive I was impotent!'

My guest yawned largely and muttered, 'Not good.'

'Not good! Can't you see?' I screamed as if teetering on the edge of sanity. 'It needn't have been like that! Fear of harassment, violence, and worse from my fellow humans warped my development!'

My visitor was beginning to twitch. Sensing success I turned up the volume and howled, 'Because I've kept my problems to myself my benighted sister has probably told you I've waltzed easily through life. Stupid bitch. Her problems are the only ones that matter to her. The truth is I've hobbled along like a cripple! Like everyone else she doesn't even take my years with Jon seriously—to all you het bastards I'm still a bachelor!'

My listener snorted in disgust. 'You misunderstand your sister, she's a...'

'Crap! She's a self-centred cow. We had to flee the house at the beach because of a gang of child terrorists. Had to sell the farm... But that's not the worst. What really drives me crazy is the realisation that we each have only this one life—and mine's been stuffed up!'

'Everyone has regrets.'

'Perhaps,' I said, allowing a sly smile to linger on my lips as I reached for the sharp little knife we'd used for peeling the mango. 'But what really hurts is that I can't undo a single action or inaction from the past and I can't stop thinking about it—because when you're retired there's nothing else to think about, so I've decided someone has to pay.' I stood, ran my finger along the blade and gazed speculatively at his vast belly and sidled around the table towards him, leaving his escape route open.

Eyes wide in disbelief, he hauled himself upright, clutched his shirt to his bosom and fled.

The panicked spinning of the tyres of his ridiculous little sports car nearly had him slithering off the edge of the drive into the trees. He only just missed the gateposts. The fading roar of his exhaust was replaced by the sweet scent of mimosa, the mournful wail of a catbird and the shrill screech of a honey-eater. Across the valley the late afternoon sun was dusting the escarpment with gold. Beside the path, fairy wrens dragged down grass stems and pecked at seeds. Jon wandered down from wherever he'd been hiding.

'Has fat-guts gone then?'

'Suddenly remembered an appointment.'

'I heard shouting.'

'Mmm... he became somewhat excited. I don't think he'll be back.'

'Who was he?'

'A friend of my depressed sister. She probably told him to call in as a punishment.'

'Punishment? What for?'

'She thinks it's a sin for people to be happy, especially queers—they're supposed to be in eternal torment or something. Why do miserable people want to inflict their wretchedness on the few happy ones?'

'Pass.'

'Is that latest batch of home brew ready?'
'Just waiting to be tasted.'
'I'll get the glasses.'

A Misunderstanding.

At Art School, Marjory discovered she had the skills but not sufficient imagination, dedication or ego to be an artist, so she became a wife and mother. Twenty years later when all except her youngest had fled the coop, she set up a studio in her basement and gave classes to people who had always wanted to draw but never got around to it. Her 'Life' classes proved the most popular, but this evening the model hadn't arrived and the students watched with concern as Marjory's fragile self-confidence unravelled.

Her son, who sometimes joined the class, offered to telephone and sort out the problem. He sprinted upstairs, stood quietly at the top and counted to a hundred, then ran back down to inform his mother that the model had left town leaving no forwarding address.

'Oh my goodness! It's too late to find another! What on earth shall I do?'

'I'll model—but I choose my own poses.'

'You're too young! I need a professional!'

'Mum, I know what to do.'

With ill-concealed nervousness Marjory apologised to the class while Antony slipped behind the screen, stripped, checked that everything was as it should be, pulled his nervous penis back to normal size, stepped onto the podium and adopted a series of athletic three-minute poses that kept the would-be artists delighted and very busy.

Marjory gazed at her son in apprehensive awe. Bringing up three previous teenagers had taught her to interfere as little as possible in Antony's life, and she'd always assumed his lack of close friends, avoidance of groups and preference for solo pursuits like computing, karate, swimming and reading meant he was a bit of a nerd. But under the spotlight her son was transformed into a handsome young god with well-defined muscles; manhood jutting almost too proudly from its nest of pubic hair. She gazed nervously around. No one seemed perturbed; the busy scratching of pencils the only sound.

She felt dizzy and sat down. This morning Antony had been her baby. Tonight he was a man! When had it happened? A chunk of her life was missing! She'd been too busy to notice. The realisation was bleakly depressing.

For the twenty-minute poses Antony chose difficult positions, yet remained utterly still, exuding a confidence she'd never guessed he possessed. Close-cropped hair emphasised his fine head and smooth young neck. And such well shaped legs! In the two-minute breaks between poses he wandered naked among the easels and stools to look at drawings and charm the students with praise, questions and ingenuous smiles. Marjory's heart missed several beats. What must her students be thinking! Models should never mingle with students when naked!

Antony had been practising for two weeks; since intercepting the model's phone call saying she was moving interstate. He told himself he was doing it as a social experiment. People didn't question a nude man posing for an art class, but what if he wandered around naked between poses and during the break? If he could charm everyone into accepting him doing that, it would prove taboos against nudity were not inherent in human nature. There was also another, perhaps more truthful reason that he kept tucked away at the back of his brain in case anyone found out; the idea of being naked in a room full of dressed strangers was a turn-on and had so fuelled his nightly wanking sessions he was starting to worry about the loss of sleep.

Most artists' models are lazy, keep their legs together and avoid difficult positions. Antony did karate kicks, gymnastic exercises, handstands... complicated and powerful positions that often left him exposed and vulnerable. But he wasn't stupid. If the students guessed he was getting a thrill out of it they'd despise him. It was essential to appear naïvely innocent. Luckily, difficult poses require constant monitoring to avoid sagging; this, combined with the discomfort, ensured any arousal remained cerebral. Time passed quickly.

At tea break Antony jumped from the podium and began handing round biscuits and beverages with such friendly, guileless naiveté that everyone assumed he was unaware of the extraordinary

effect he was having. The atmosphere had never been so relaxed and informal. Gone were the usual strained politenesses. The students chatted easily like old friends, bubbling with enthusiasm. An air of suppressed excitement pervaded the studio and for a change everyone was impatient to resume drawing. Marjory couldn't decide if she was embarrassed, jealous or pleased. A unanimous vote booked him for the next five sessions, and his mother agreed to use him for her two other Life classes.

'You're braver than me,' his father grunted when told of his son's success.

Antony didn't consider himself brave; he'd been enjoying the most liberating experience of his life! And that made him wonder if anyone was really brave. Perhaps skydivers and mountain climbers were just like him—doing what they wanted.

Deirdre, his mother's divorced school friend, had recently joined an evening class in the vain hope of meeting someone who appreciated her. She wasn't talented and found it difficult to finish drawings in the time available. Would Antony pose privately?

It wasn't only the generous payment she offered that enticed him after school the following day to recline naked over an antique divan in Deirdre's Spanish-style duplex. As long as one is admired, being naked when other people are dressed is like a drug requiring regular 'fixes'. Unlike a narcotic, however, it does no one any harm and as long as the intention is never to shock or offend, frequently has a positive effect in liberating the viewer from religion-inspired fears.

Barefoot in a flimsy sun frock, Deirdre stood at her easel muttering. 'Oh! It's so difficult. Come and tell me what I'm doing wrong.'

Bored and pleased to stretch his muscles, Antony stood beside her. A smooth hand caressed his buttocks.

'Looks OK to me,' he muttered, moving away to hide his annoyance.

'Let's change the pose,' she said, taking his hand.

He pulled away but she held firm.

'You're tense,' she said with a coquettish smile. 'I'll give you a massage.'

Antony stared in astonishment at the woman. She was old! As old as his mother! There was no way he wanted her touching him. He spluttered incoherently but Deirdre just laughed.

'You young men are all the same, pretend you don't want it just to make us poor women plead.'

It wasn't her strength but her extra weight and Antony's reluctance to fight a female that did for him. Suddenly he was face down enduring an amateurish pummelling. It was unpleasant and the carpet wasn't particularly clean, so after several seconds he rolled over to tell the woman to lay off—he was going home. The words never made it into the air. Before he could clamber to his feet she'd straddled his knees, pressed him back onto the carpet and begun sucking on his penis. No one had ever touched him there before, let alone taken it into their mouth!

He stared in fascinated horror at Deirdre's head bobbing up and down, both astonished and appalled at his mounting erection! He wanted to scream and pound her head with his fists—but was terrified she'd bite it off, so watched in frozen disbelief as his tormentor lifted her head and grinned, saliva dribbling from slack, lipstick-smearred lips. The dreadful nightmare continued as she slid forward, rose onto her knees, reached behind, grasped his erection and lowered herself onto it, at the same time drawing her flimsy garment over her head and tossing it aside.

As if drugged he stared at a soft white belly, a patch of hair and long brown nipples on fat tits that bounced and swayed inches from his face. He thrust them away, repelled by the softness. She didn't notice; just kept riding him; grunting, moaning, muttering, 'Yes, yes, yes...'

Anger and revulsion anaesthetised all sensation. How dare she!

After an age, a series of ecstatic moans signalled his release. Deirdre rolled off and sprawled on her back. 'Ah! I needed that!'

Antony gazed down at his rapidly shrinking penis and realised he'd ejaculated but felt nothing. Silently he replaced his shorts and T-shirt.

'Fancy a coffee?' Deirdre asked brightly.

Antony shook his head, walked silently to the door and let himself out.

At home he stood in the shower scrubbing his genitals till they hurt. He felt unclean. Used. Why hadn't he stopped her? She'd treated him like a blow-up doll! What was wrong with him? Why hadn't he enjoyed it? Why hadn't he shoved her off and left? Why hadn't he ripped shit out of her before going home? He couldn't face her again. No one must ever find out! The shame! He couldn't model again. The bitch had ruined everything!

He muddled through the next day at school earning reprimands for inattention, but didn't care; he deserved punishment for being such a useless wimp. Pocketing a Stanley knife from the art class he hid himself in the toilets and made small cuts on his forearms. It hurt, but he wanted it to. Then he realised people would ask questions. There was nowhere he could cut himself because the following night, unless he could think of an excuse, he'd be naked in front of a drawing class. The thought made him feel sick.

Alone in his room self-hatred mushroomed, inhibiting sleep. In the morning he refused to get up.

His father came to investigate. 'You OK?'

Antony remained facing the wall.'

'Want to talk about it?'

Shame took a back seat to anger and tears. 'Deirdre raped me! You have to prosecute her!'

'What happened?'

If Antony left out any detail it was unintentional.

His father thought for a while, then said softly, 'I watched you the other evening. You looked mature and confident. I was proud of you. During the breaks you wandered around, completely at ease, and, astonishingly, everyone else was equally relaxed. That's quite an achievement!'

'But no reason for...'

'You visited Deirdre, accepted a massage, and got an erection. What was the woman to think?'

'But... I couldn't help it!'

'Yes... I remember... always stiff at the most inopportune moments. Enjoy it while it lasts.' His smile was perplexed. 'Didn't you enjoy any of it?'

'I hated all of it!'

'She's a good looking woman.'

'I felt sick when she touched me—and when I touched her.'

'Did you ask her to stop?'

'I couldn't. It was like I was frozen.'

'Did she hurt anything—apart from your aesthetic sensibilities and pride?'

'No, but that's not the point!'

'Remember a couple of years ago I took you to the Grand Prix and you endured a day of noise and fumes and racing cars going round and round and you swore it was the worst day of your life?'

'Yes.'

'I thought I was giving you a treat. Perhaps this was a similar misunderstanding.'

'She didn't give a stuff about me!'

'Most men would be jealous.'

'And probably the kids at school too! But I hated it!'

'Does she know?'

'Don't think so.'

'If you lay charges everyone will find out. Is that what you want?'

'No!'

'Then just file it under 'Lessons-Learned'.'

'What lesson? Stay away from randy old bitches?'

'No. Only be naked alone with people you would like to have sex with.'

'So I was stupid.'

'Innocent.'

‘And now I’m soiled goods.’ Antony dredged up a smile. ‘Thanks, Dad.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What for?’

‘Making me feel useful.’

To Antony’s relief, as soon as he stepped onto the podium that evening the exhilaration returned. During supper, instead of mingling with everyone he stood chatting to Stephen, a first-year Art School student he’d never dared to speak to during previous sessions because he seemed so self-confident and aloof. But the experience with Deirdre had changed Antony. Paradoxically, perhaps, he felt more sure of himself, less nervous about making friends. It turned out that Stephen had not dared talk to him for similar reasons. Their tête à tête had reached the stage of mutual compliments when Deirdre sidled up and handed Antony an envelope.

‘You forgot your fee,’ she said roguishly, patting him lightly on the bum.

Anger had been transformed into benign contempt. Unsmilingly, Antony took the envelope, nodded vaguely and deliberately turned his attention back to Stephen.

‘Your fee?’ asked Stephen with a friendly leer. ‘Don’t tell me you...’

‘Hardly! She’s an old bag. I just sat for her at home.’

‘That’s what I need, I was sick for a while and missed most of the life drawing classes at Uni.’

As if in a trance Antony heard himself saying, ‘I’d really love to see your stuff and...If you like... I could model for you.’

‘Just joking. Can’t afford it anyway.’

‘No charge—I’d really like to.’

‘You sure? It’d be really great.’

‘Sure I’m sure.’

‘When?’

‘After school tomorrow?’

The two young men shook hands, gazed into each other’s eyes to make certain neither had misunderstood, and smiled shyly.

Useless things

The jacaranda tree's miserly shade had moved on, leaving the three men behind. Sweat dripped from eyebrows and trickled down furrowed cheeks, necks and chests.

'Jeeze it's hot! My mouth's as dry as a nun's tit.'

'It seems that no one gives a stuff in this place, Charlie. I'll never get used to it. Why couldn't I have had a lethal heart attack instead of a fucking stroke?'

'We all feel like that, Mal. It's a trap. I always vowed they'd never get me into one of these places—but they did it while I was unconscious and now I'm in there's no way out—no one's allowed to die if there's a medical procedure that would bring them back from a peaceful death. Suffering's good for the soul, a religious nutter told me the other day. I told him I hoped he'd rot in a nursing home for twenty years screaming for release from pain and nausea.'

'Good one. What did he say?'

'Nothing. Just walked away. But it's odd that the women don't seem to mind this purgatory.'

'It's different for them, Charlie, they're used to being looked after, having things done to and for them. My wife nearly bankrupted me before we divorced with her massages, hair dresser, manicures—it seemed she wanted nothing more than to be fiddled with by another woman. You'd never find a bloke wanting that sort of treatment. And deep down most are religious as well so they're shit scared of dying and grateful to put it off.'

'If I had the keys to the medicine cupboard I'd be sleeping the beautiful sleep tomorrow.'

'Leaving me behind... Some mate you are.'

'Don't worry, I'd take you with me, Mal.'

At that moment a delivery van pulled in and parked at the main doors, belching diesel fumes. The men coughed and cursed impotently.

'Seriously, Charlie, is this normal procedure in this place to dump us out in the car park and forget us?'

'Relax, Mal, someone will be out soon. Come on, what's really bothering you? Someone pinched your chocolates?'

'Among other things, yes!'

'Bloody thieving bitches. They pinch everyone's.'

'It's not only that, it's...'

'In the shower?'

Malcolm blushed and looked away.

'Who was it?'

'I...I forget their names, there are so many of them and... and they change all the time.'

'This morning?'

'Yes.'

'Yeah, that'll be right.' Charlie wriggled into a less uncomfortable position. 'I overheard the girls sniggering about someone with a huge dick in the shower.'

'Ugly cow! She wagged it around and reckoned I should have it lopped off because it was useless to me now I couldn't get an erection. When I got mad she said I should get a sense of humour. I... I feel so impotent. So angry it feels as if my head's going to burst. But there's nothing I can do. We're at their mercy here. Sartre was right, Hell is other people—especially in a nursing home.'

John, whose mind had developed a tendency to wander, snapped out of his doze and whispered, 'Yesterday, one of them... You know, that red haired one, told Jeff, to lift a full bag of laundry. Much too heavy. When he couldn't she called him a useless poof.' John's right arm began to twitch. He stared at it for a couple of seconds as if unsure to whom it belonged before grabbing it with his left hand to prevent it slamming against the side of his wheelchair. By the time he'd returned it to his lap he was breathless.

Charlie placed his good hand on top of John's, staring belligerently at the still-twitching limb as though daring it to move. 'That's Gloria! She's gotta go! Jeff's the best nurse we've had in ages. He buys me smokes and gives the best rubdowns I've had in this place. Most of the tarts here couldn't give a tinker's cuss if we all broke out in bedsores.'

'Jeff...' John paused, marshalling his forces. 'Jeff took me...' his gaunt frame began to shake and it was several seconds before he could speak, '...to the shops... in his own time.' Muscle tension suddenly collapsed, the handsome face slumped, his head drooped forward and slack lips spilled saliva.

Charlie pulled John's head back against the headrest and wiped the chin with his bib. 'We bloody have to do something—Jeff's the only man left. No decent bloke will stay the way those bitches treat them.'

Mal shook his head. 'Surely they're not all bad.'

'Name one who isn't!'

'Sister Sue seems nice.'

'OK. But she's the only one.'

'Brenda,' John whispered. 'We'd never get out of this place if she didn't arrange trips.'

'OK, Brenda.'

By the time Marge came to collect them only five of the staff had failed to earn a reprieve of execution. As she backed towards the heavy door, dragging Malcolm's chair, Charlie called, 'You'll get fat, Mal unless you push yourself around. One arm's no excuse.'

Malcolm looked contrite. 'I try, Charlie, but I just go round in circles, and this thing,' he tapped his left leg, 'sticks out and bangs into everything.'

'If it shrivels any more it'll look like you're sitting there with a boner. Get 'em to hack it off like mine. Less weight to shove around.'

'Good old Charlie,' Marge laughed. 'The only man who's legless before he starts drinking.'

'I could drink you under the table, any time.'

'I'll take you up on that one day.'

'You can take me to bed if you like.'

John's laughter triggered a general strike of synapses and his stranded head lunged forward.

'Marge!' Charlie bellowed.

Calmly efficient, Marge rescued John, turned to Charlie, tightened his harness, chucked him under the chin, kissed him on the forehead and grinned, 'Who's in a bad mood, then?'

Charlie brushed irritably at the spot. 'Stupid cow,' he muttered. 'I'm not a fucking child!'

'No, you're a sweet little cherub.' She pinched his cheek roughly, pulled him and Mal inside, set John on track then wheeled Mal off to the dining room. Charlie followed slowly, a smouldering bundle of frustration.

Weak tea and a slice of dry chocolate cake did little to quell the rebellious spirit. 'I'll give you yours, John, when I've downed this tepid muck,' he growled, but Marge returned to hold cup and cake until John's errant nerves sent the signals; chew, swallow, open...

In the dead time before lunch, Malcolm practised moving his chair in a straight line, Charlie dragged irritably on half a dozen cigarettes in the smoking room, and Brenda took John to the Physiotherapist. On the way he tried to tell her about Malcolm, but his vocal chords had gone on strike. He'd learned not to waste precious energy fretting. When there's nothing you can do about something, you've no choice but to accept. His mind floated free.

An afternoon concert had been arranged and the lounge was filling with the murmur of perfumed and painted old women carefully dressed in their faded best, scrupulously choosing who was fit to sit next to. Nursing staff wheeled in those who couldn't walk or shuffle, and an awkward scattering of visitors hovered. The few men in evidence sagged in their chairs as though left over from the last show.

Charlie checked the blackboard. 'It's those bloody Singing Senior Sits again. I'm not going to watch a bunch of old tarts flashing their varicose veins.' He wheeled himself away.

Malcolm, whose eardrums had taken a bashing from the banjo the previous week, pushed himself around in circles in the corridor and John slumped nearby until a couple of nursing assistants tipped both men's chairs back at an alarming angle and raced each other through the corridors. By the time they skidded to halt in the courtyard, Malcolm was a trembling wreck and John was pop-eyed with shock. Charlie was puffing irritably on a cigarette.

'Look what you've done, you stupid bitch!'

John's urine bag had come adrift, the end of his catheter tube dragged along the floor leaving a wet trail.

'Shit,' she muttered, dragging John's shirt up and trousers down. She heaved a sigh of relief. 'You're in luck, Johnno, nearly pulled your plug. Another centimetre and your essential self would have drained away.' She laughed nervously, retrieved and re-hung the bag under the wheelchair, reconnected the tube and roughly adjusted his clothes while the other woman hosed the urine away.

John began to shake.

Malcolm breathed deeply to quell his nausea. It was the first time he'd seen a white plastic tube sticking out of someone's belly as though it was growing there.

'That's her!' he managed to blurt.

'Fucking Ishbel!' Charlie hissed.

Ishbel turned at the door. 'I hope you're not going to be a sooky girl, Johnno, and go crying to Matron.'

'Arghhh!' Charlie slumped forward, gasping as though in agony.

Ishbel hurried across and lifted his sunken head.

He slapped her hard across the face.

She leapt back, hand pressed against her cheek. 'How dare you!'

'How dare you waggle Malcolm's penis and tell him to have it cut off because it's useless?'

'It was a joke.'

'How many old women have you told to have their vaginas sewn up?'

'Don't be disgusting! That's a woman's...'

'Exactly! We put up with bits falling off, leaky bladders, shit in the pants, having to be washed and fed... because there's nothing we can do about it. We don't even feel sorry for ourselves. But we don't have to put up with being treated like half-witted kids! We're men!'

'All men are babies.'

'We think, feel, have opinions, and try to retain our self-respect—but how the hell can we do that when you make decisions for us.'

'We do not!'

'Yesterday you said only fools watched that crap, and changed my television channel to something you liked. I couldn't change it back because you left the remote on top of the set. And someone's always changing John's radio to pop music, knowing he hates it but can't do anything about it. And the staff pinch our chocolates.'

'We do not!'

'You do! And we should never be the butt of jokes!'

'You joke about yourselves.'

'Laughing at our disabilities makes life bearable. Being laughed at, makes it intolerable.'

'Ah, you...'

We hate it when you get impatient and push our chairs for us. We hate having our chairs tilted back so you can go faster!'

'We're overworked and busy.'

'Going somewhere slowly fills in our day. I may have only one good arm and stumps for legs, but I hate having everything done for me. By treating us like dolls you destroy the only thing we have left, our dignity.'

'Ha! Dignity with a shitty bum.'

Ishbel held Charlie's glare for a short second, then looked away. She didn't dare feel compassion. All this old flesh; vacant minds in decaying bodies; the pervasive smell of urine, shit, and vomit; the sad, terminal hopelessness of it all would swamp her unless she held pity at bay. She coped by telling herself they'd always been like this. To admit they'd once been like her—young, vital and full of hope, would be to accept that they were also her future—too awful to contemplate. The hard line of her lips softened, and she muttered a faint, 'Sorry.'

It was half an hour before the rattle of palm fronds and the chattering of caged budgies freed their spirits.

'Why do women like to bust guys' balls?' John wondered.

'Because they're bitches,' Charlie snapped.

'It's probably our own fault,' sighed Malcolm. 'We don't want women to think we're soft, so we pretend nothing hurts. We lift and carry even if we get a hernia. We fake we're tough and insensitive, and unfortunately, they believe it.' He turned to Charlie. 'How many times have you cried?'

'Hundreds. I'm a sentimental bloke.'

'How many women have seen you cry?'

'None!' Charlie was indignant. 'They'd tell everyone I was queer.'

'What was your job?' Malcolm asked.

'Green keeper; Sanctuary Men's bowling Club. Lots of members, especially retired blokes, reckoned it was a real sanctuary—their wives were used to having the house to themselves and when their husbands retired they made it clear they wanted it to stay that way. A man can only spend so much time in his shed without going batty so they'd come every day to have a couple of roll-ups, do a bit of cleaning, maintenance, sit around and talk...' As Charlie's smoke-hoarsened voice faded, Mal jolted to attention, worried he'd fallen asleep and was expected to say something.

'Good one,' he murmured, hoping it didn't sound stupid.

'But the women's club took them to court, and now it's mixed.' Charlie sighed. 'No longer a sanctuary. A lot of the guys left when I did. Now they make home brew and drink alone in their sheds. Did you know that in Australia most suicides are by elderly men? They're not sick, just sick of their life.' he dragged on his cigarette before flicking it angrily away.

'Same at school,' said Malcolm.

'What school?'

'I used to teach at St Eustace Boys Grammar. Only male teachers till equal opportunity and females arrived to make us more civilised; bring a bit of gentleness. Huh! The women wouldn't take after-school sport, so took over drama, art, and music. So the men who liked working with kids in those areas missed out. The boys then started seeing those options as girls' stuff, didn't like it and numbers dropped.' Malcolm frowned, remembering. 'If a kid didn't turn up to a woman's detention she'd send him to a male teacher who'd belt the living daylight out of him to impress her. It changed the place all right. It became... nasty. The staffroom divided into two camps...' Malcolm stared at his useless leg, lost for words. 'I used to think I'd be sorry to retire, but...'

Charlie slung his arm around Mal's shoulders and gave him a peck on the cheek. Mal turned his head and their lips brushed softly.

'I'm so glad you came, Mal. I was going nuts on my own.'

Mal smiled shyly. 'If anyone had told me I'd fall in love with an eighty-four year-old legless curmudgeon, I'd have thought they were insane... but it's happened and despite all the crap I'm happier now than I've been for years.'

'Me too, you gorgeous old hunk. But we don't want to shock John.'

'No worries. He guessed. Told me yesterday. Thinks it's great.'

Charlie sighed contentedly and in a voice lacking its customary venom remarked as if to himself, 'What bugs me is there's nowhere for a bloke to just be a bloke—women are everywhere!'

They pondered the meaning of this.

John, who had been diplomatically pretending to be asleep broke the silence. 'I once asked my wife why women feel threatened by men-only spaces. She got mad. Thought I was looking for an argument.'

'There's no rational answer, that's why. But I reckon we've solved your problem, Mal.'

'What problem?'

'Your not so useless bit of flesh. Poor old bugger, your memory's going.'

'It's allowed to, I'm eighty-two and ready for a nap... but how the hell do we get back inside?'

Charlie wheeled himself towards the fire alarm.

I arrived a week early

Twenty years of failure had not diminished my grandparents' hopes of biblical fruitfulness, evidenced by the rosary-wrapped box on top of the fridge containing a photo of the Pope, a prayer, and a plastic bag containing a syringe, several tiny needles and a dozen vials of a substance guaranteed to produce an iron hard erection. On her fifty-fourth birthday, grandmother dropped the hot-water kettle's electricity lead into the gravy, and licked it. False teeth smashed against one wall, body against the other. Grandfather carried her to bed, checked for breakage, then crawled under the blankets to massage warmth into trembling limbs. Grandmother responded with unaccustomed passion and after an arduous nine months and a difficult birth, Esther was born.

The wilful child grew into a vexatious young teenager, unappreciative of parental efforts to transform her into a hard-working consolation and support for their old age. Esther hated the isolation, loneliness, farm work, everything. The only other child in the district was Antony, a handsome young lad a year older than her, who lived a couple of kilometres down the track.

On his fifteenth birthday Antony decided his viciously drink-sodden, layabout parents had nothing further to offer him, so went to work at a uranium mine hundreds of kilometres away to the north. He worked hard, saved every penny, shunned women, avoided alcohol, and in two years was relatively wealthy and depressingly unpopular. One afternoon some workmates stripped him, shoved an unripe banana up his backside, and threw him into the warm water of a sediment pool—not the large dam regularly checked for contamination, but a small, very deep hole concealed inside a shed plastered with signs warning: Danger! Radiation!

Skin already beginning to tingle, he hosed himself down, crept back to his hut, filled a rucksack with essentials and took off.

Jag, a stringy, lean featured, curly-haired seventeen year-old prison escapee, found Antony deliriously clawing at his clothes. He slung the young man over his shoulder and carried him to a hideout beside a billabong, plonked him up to his nose in the muddy water, stripped, peeled off Antony's already disintegrating clothes and massaged calming mud into angry flesh. When his patient stopped moaning, Jag poured cans of muddy water down his throat until he gagged, then dragged him onto the bank and held him upside down by the heels until he'd stopped vomiting dark, sticky muck, then lowered his burden gently onto his back. Scarcely breathing, Antony stared vacantly at the sky and an ache filled Jag's chest as he gazed on the handsome, hairless youth with skin that reflected the sunlight like burnished bronze.

By the end of the second day Antony declared he'd never felt better, reckoned didn't give a stuff about his hair loss and new metallic sheen, and wondered how he could ever repay his tall, dark, lithe and handsome saviour

'You look like Cellini's Perseus,' Jag laughed.

'Who's he?'

'Only the most perfect bronze male sculpture ever made.'

Antony smiled to himself, ridiculously pleased with the compliment.

The young men wandered, living on fish, sheep, berries, roots, blossoming friendship and the fruits of love. After a week they arrived at a ramshackle dozen wooden houses scattered along a dusty track—Jag's hometown. The police had been sniffing around so his parents packed them off to a large block of tribal land about six hundred kilometres north in the absolute middle of nowhere. Unfortunately, a misguided sense of duty made Antony decide to visit his parents first in case they were worried, so Jag drew him a detailed map of where he was headed and easily extracted a promise that his lover would join him as soon as he'd checked up on his parents.

Back on the farm Esther had grown ever more rebellious. Her parents blamed the pre-conceptual electric shock, global warming, positive ions, negative ions, and the world's godlessness. Their unhappy daughter's brilliant escape plan was to get pregnant and force the man

to marry her. Late one afternoon while driving the milk-cow back along the track, she tripped over Antony, bleeding and unconscious. His parents' welcome had been curses for not bringing them money, followed by a beer-bottle smashed on his head. He had staggered nearly two kilometres before concussion downed him.

Esther tied a rope to his feet and the cow dragged him into the darkening shearing shed where she heaved him onto his back on the sorting table, undressed him, lashed his wrists and ankles to the table-legs and gagged him with an old rag before going inside to make the evening meal. It was dark when she returned with candles, disinfectant, food, water, and the plastic bag from the rosary-wrapped box on top of the fridge. She cleaned the wound, fed and watered the frightened youth and, as she slipped out of her clothes, marvelled at how strangely beautiful Antony had become. He looked like the semi naked Jesus on the little bronze crucifix above her parents' bed that made her feel sexy.

Antony watched in horror as Mad Esther, stinking of cow and wild of hair, filled a syringe from a vial, then grabbed his penis in filthy, work-callused hands, tugged it taut, stabbed it with a needle and pressed the plunger home. After the first wasp-like sting there was no pain and, to his astonishment, a monumental erection rose to the challenge. Esther climbed onto the table, kneeled astride him for a second as if uncertain, felt behind, grabbed his erection, positioned herself, took a deep breath and sank quickly onto it.

Her eyes popped and with a shriek of pain she sprang back up. Years of guilty fingering in front of the sexy crucifix was no preparation for an invasion of such magnitude. Antony thought his penis had shattered. Gingerly, she lowered herself again and was soon pounding away emitting deep growls of gratification each time an orgasm electrified her sense-starved frame. Antony's first and only ejaculation gave no pleasure and passed unnoticed by his ecstatic rapist.

After an eternity Esther tired and climbed off, loosened her paramour's ties slightly, threw a horse-blanket over him, rifled through his pockets, extracted Jag's carefully-drawn map, and went to bed.

During a long and uncomfortable night Antony managed to rub his bindings against the metal edge of the table until they frayed. In the morning his absence surprised Esther, who was anticipating pre-breakfast sex, but didn't dilute her happiness. Antony would be forced to marry her. Escape was nigh.

So much for planning. My grandparents considered her pregnancy a sign from God that she was too sinful to leave the farm and disgrace their name. As for forcing Antony to marry her, no one from that drink-sodden family would ever become part of their family!

I arrived a week early. Esther was massaging her constipation on the outside dunny when a resounding fart and gut wrenching contraction propelled me into the world. She whipped a hand between her legs, grabbed hold of a foot, hauled the slimy bundle into the light, took one look, and screamed. Before she could separate herself from the tangle of baby, umbilical cord and placenta, and drop the lot down the hole, her father arrived, dragged her from the dunny, tossed her onto her back and with the expertise of fifty years' lambing cut the cord, tied the knot and sat back in astonishment, deaf to his daughter's continuing screams.

I suppose it must have been a bit of a shock to give birth to a three and a half kilogram, wild eyed kid whose knowing grin revealed a full set of teeth. And if that wasn't enough of a surprise, I sported a thick head of hair, five-day growth of beard, pubic hair and fully functioning genitals. In a photograph taken of me standing in front of a wall an hour after birth, if it wasn't for the ruler beside me you'd swear I was a well muscled eighteen year-old, not a forty-centimetre tall manikin. How Esther thought she was simply doing a shit, remains a mystery.

I have no memory of the womb, but everything since then is crystal clear. Esther kept shouting that I was a monster. I tried to calm her, but every time I spoke she yelled louder. Breast-feeding was impossible because of my teeth, but I didn't crave milk, I was ravenous for meat and vegetables. After two days of wailing, gnashing of teeth and praying to their god for forgiveness and guidance, my grandparents collapsed from exhaustion. Esther grabbed her chance, broke open

the fireproof box containing their life-savings, filled the tank of the ute, packed her clothes and all the food from the freezer, plonked me on the passenger seat and drove for three days.

I ate continuously, talked to keep my mother awake, and dozed off whenever it seemed safe. By the time we arrived at the coast I'd convinced Esther I wasn't the devil, but only prevented her from dumping me in a church doorway by agreeing to keep my mouth shut and gurgle like a baby for hours while a horrendously expensive depilatory expert permanently removed all my body hair using a laser. It took all my self-restraint not to piss on him when he wittered on about the problems of bringing up a physically and mentally challenged child; sugaring the pill by insisting that god loved me, even if the rest of the world would find it all but impossible to love such a strange little creature. I should have shoved his laser up his nose when we left.

After writing her parents that we were going south to Sydney, she swapped the old truck for an even older car and headed north. In Cairns we rented a caravan on a vacant lot near a beach and Esther hit the bottle by day and told me her life story, such as it was, at night. Constant eating meant I was gaining half a kilo a day, and when the food ran out I was as big as a five-year-old, weighed fourteen kilos, and shopped at the local store. Fortunately, a naked little kid going shopping for his mummy in a tropical beach suburb was considered cute, although my manly physique drew a few odd looks.

The money soon dried up and with it Esther's binge. She had no skills so starvation loomed. One afternoon at the beach I twisted an ankle and was carried back to the caravan by a beery-breathed tourist. Within minutes he and Esther were screwing. When he left he gave her fifty dollars. 'Money for fun,' she reckoned, and with my expert assistance as a cute little pimp, we soon built up a substantial clientele.

At seven weeks I weighed twenty-three kilos and had changed shops three times because such rapid growth made people suspicious. When a woman snarled that it was disgusting for a ten year old to run around naked, I bought a pair of shorts from the Op-shop. Esther had started accepting drugs instead of money, and mood-swings from ecstasy to fury complicated life. I ate more than ever, grew even faster and morosely wandered the beach. One evening, a lanky, hook-nosed fisherman snagged the seat of his shorts. When I laughed he swung round, fixed me with light blue eyes, ran long fingers through his straight black hair and barked, 'Don't just do something, stand there!'

I giggled and untangled him.

He shook my hand, grinned and said, 'I owe you one. What's your name?'

'Esther calls me Nuisance. I hate her!'

He raised his eyebrows at my vehemence. There was something in his eyes that attracted me. I'd not seen it before so didn't realise what it was, but later understood it was intelligence, so I blurted, 'I like you!'

He laughed. 'You're certainly frank, so I'll call you Clovis—he was King of the Franks. I'm Paco.'

Every afternoon I waited for him and we fished and talked. Didn't catch many fish, but the talk was excellent. One evening he said carefully, 'You've grown a lot in two weeks, Clovis. How old are you?'

'Nine,' I replied, not adding, weeks. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-eight.' Paco frowned before continuing seriously, 'Friends should trust each other, so I'll tell you about me. I'm a doctor in the Genetically Modified In Vitro Fertilisation program at a private clinic. That means I fiddle around with the genes of human eggs and sperm according to the parents' instructions, before fertilising the eggs and later implanting the healthiest zygotes.'

His slack-jawed surprise when I nodded my understanding and asked to see his mobile laboratory made me laugh aloud. He drove us there, took samples of my saliva and hair, analysed them, weighed me, gave me a medical once-over, pronounced me far too healthy, and again asked my age.

For the first time in my life I cried. I don't know why, I wasn't sad, probably stressed. Anyway, I told Paco everything. He hugged me till I stopped crying, said my genes were odd, but reckoned a

thirty-five kilogram, precociously intelligent, ten-week-old kid deserved privacy and a decent home, so I moved in with him.

While he was at work I educated myself from the Internet. I say educated, but it felt more like remembering than learning. The really useful stuff came from talking with Paco. At twenty weeks my endless eating suddenly stopped, I weighed seventy-two kilos and looked, felt and acted like a healthy, 190 cm tall eighteen-year-old. To celebrate we went clubbing in Cairns. Back home we made love for the first time, and for the first time in my life I felt secure and happy.

I hadn't seen Esther since going to live with Paco. At his insistence we drove to the caravan. The stinking, crazed woman lying in her own filth on the floor thought I was a client and came on to me, before asking for a fix. Sickened, Paco went out for fresh air. I filled a syringe with everything I could find, gave it to her and watched her shaking fingers attempt to locate a vein. Impatient to be gone, I pushed the needle into the vein and pressed the plunger. She was dead in seconds. I took nothing except the map, because it was the one thing she had cherished. On the back was written; Don't get lost. XXX Jag. Esther had scrawled beneath, 'Hubby's place?'

When I told Paco what I'd done, he nodded and said I'd done her and the planet a service. 'Are you sad?' he asked.

I shook my head. 'Relieved.'

He nodded thoughtfully, 'That's sensible.'

After poring over the map he thought for a bit, then looked up with a grin. 'Before the government gives in to the fundamentalists and shuts down the GMIVF program, I've got to visit several couples in the bush whose eggs are ready for implanting. I reckon this place is not too far distant from where I'm going. Fancy a trip to the outback?'

The unmarked mobile laboratory looked like a giant camper-van so drew little attention. On our way west we detoured past my birthplace. It looked as though nothing had been done in the previous five months. Inside we discovered why. Grandmother was a husk on the bed, shot through the head. A skeleton picked clean by ants swayed on its rope in the shearing shed.

Like their god, we too abandoned them.

As the last satisfied clients waved goodbye from their isolated homestead, Paco roared with laughter. 'In nine months, eleven outback children will be born with blue eyes, blond hair, straight noses, perfect teeth, generous mouths, athletic bodies and the chance of superior intelligence. Do you reckon they'll love their parents?'

'They'll think they're adopted.'

As we followed the map across flat, treeless, windswept plains the laboratory's solar cells kept eighteen back-up human ova and sperm samples preserved in special flasks. After three days the stony wasteland ended abruptly at the edge of a ridge. Below us, under a searing blue sky painted with storybook clouds, kilometres of tree-sprinkled golden grassland stretched to a distant range of amethyst hills. We juddered down a dry riverbed and drew up beneath a stand of enormous eucalypts under a bluff, beside a lake. A flock of pink parrots fluttered through opulent air, and the silence was palpable.

Within seconds of our descent from the van, two naked men, lean as skinned rabbits appeared as if from the air. One was dark brown with a wispy beard and thick mop of hair, the other was slightly taller, metallic bronze, dreamy and hairless.

I proffered the map and said nervously, 'I'm Esther's child.'

It was only sixteen months since conception, yet my father and I looked the same age. He frowned. Paco explained, and we faced each other silently. Calm enveloped me; strangeness dissipated; I relaxed; Antony kissed my forehead; and that was right.

'I had no idea such a place still existed,' said Paco in awe.

'One of the last untouched spots on the continent. Probably preserved for rich bastards when they've fucked up the rest of the country,' Jag muttered angrily.

'I want to stay here,' Paco said softly.

'It's a hard life.'

‘It’s what I need.’ Paco looked at me and I nodded. Where he went, I went.

‘Suits me,’ I grinned, delighted at the way things were developing.

Providing life’s necessities using tools and weapons powered only by one’s own energy, is hard, time-consuming, and deeply fulfilling. The sole reminder of civilisation was the Laboratory guarding its cargo of potential life. Actual life was everywhere and we were part of it. Around the fire at night and during the hottest part of the day we talked. One night Jag assumed a serious expression and asked, ‘What’s the meaning of life?’ We hooted with laughter. Couldn’t stop. Sides ached as we rolled around hysterically trying to outdo each other. ‘Pacifying God!’ screamed Paco, tears streaming. ‘Making money.’ Antony spluttered. ‘Passport to heaven!’ I shouted. ‘Self denial,’ laughed Jag. We leaped into the water to cool off, but catching someone’s eye was enough to reignite the shouting. ‘Good and evil!’ ‘Malevolent nature!’ ‘Faith!’ ‘Reincarnation!’ ‘Heaven!’ ‘Eternal soul!’ ‘Magic!’ ‘Saints and angels!’ ‘Satan!’

‘It’s not really funny,’ Paco gasped. ‘Most people believe in all that mumbo-jumbo.’

‘And they have their reward—a fucked up world.’

‘Yeah, the fundies have a lot to answer for.’

‘It’s not only them—anyone who believes that supernatural things can exist in a natural world is bonkers.’

‘I read on the internet that Gods and devils are the bugbears by which cunning men govern fools,’ Jag said soberly.

‘Living here,’ Paco mused, ‘has taught me that nature is indifferent to us, neither benevolent nor malicious. Our purpose is simply to live. After death we feed other life—in that sense I guess we’re eternal. We can know nothing but through our five senses, so worshiping things not able to be sensed is nonsense. The only question to ask ourselves is: How should I live?’

‘Simply,’ stated Antony.

‘Doing as little harm as possible.’

‘Contentedly,’ was my contribution.

‘And not in fear,’ added Jag sourly.

We nodded agreement.

Paco broke the silence. ‘I want semen samples from everyone.’

‘You’re sex-mad.’

‘This time in a test-tube.’

He refused to elaborate, so we provided samples and three days later he reported.

‘Clovis’ and Antony’s sperm cells are fifty times normal size. I want to replace an egg nucleus with one from Antony’s sperm, and fertilise it with Clovis’ sperm.’

‘That’s incest,’ Jag observed. ‘What about inbreeding?’

‘With good stock it’s called line breeding,’ Paco grinned.

As soon as it was stable the zygote was inserted into the receptive womb of one of the four sows Jag’s parents had insisted he take with him in case wild game proved elusive. A week later she aborted.

‘Pigs usually have large litters,’ Jag said thoughtfully. ‘Perhaps her body thought one piglet wasn’t worth the trouble?’

Paco fertilised and implanted ten more of the precious eggs. After four months, a sow’s normal gestation period, she aborted ten partially developed foetuses. Risking all, we tried again with the last seven eggs. Muscle-relaxant injections prevented automatic birth contractions at four months, and nineteen weeks later, seven, two-kilogram, twenty-centimetre-long, perfectly-formed young men slipped into the world.

Four hairless, metallic-skinned youths immediately began eating their way out of the placenta; three hairy ones had to be helped a little. All immediately demanded food. Physically, they were perfectly normal except for one thing, the hairless, metallic boys had a vulva between the base of the penis and the anus.

Paco was ecstatic. ‘We have a new species! Homo hermaphrodites!’

We called them numans; Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta. The other three we named Edgar, Fernando and Greg. Tests revealed the numans had three chromosomes instead of two. YXY. Paco figured it must have been the two Y's that caused a doubling up of sexual organs.

Like ducklings and crocodiles, the boys could immediately forage for themselves. Ancient species-survival instincts, along with mobility, thought, and speech, were available from birth, and at one stroke the problems of bad parenting were eliminated. No one could play mind-games with these young creatures. It seemed a tragedy that beings so perfectly adapted to a natural life should arrive when nature had all but disappeared. They played like all young animals, chasing, teasing, having fun. On a hunt, the tiny young men followed closely, alert for a signal to scatter and conceal in case of predators. On long hikes they would sit astride our shoulders.

Feeding seven ravenous young people was touch and go for a while, but timely rains and unexpected bird migrations saved us. At six months the children were mature and venturing far afield, living more economically than we knew how, and getting to know every part of the territory. Healthy, active men are extremely efficient organisms, and with no dependent wives and children the food they required was quickly obtained. Hours were spent lying silently in the grass. When I asked what they were thinking, Beta tried to explain. 'It's a bit like those Mozart symphonies Paco told us about—a lot of different sounds making up a perfect whole. Sensations from all our senses; sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, combine and recombine in our heads like a complex orchestra. Nature is so unpredictable that I could sit forever in one spot and never experience the same symphony twice.' He grinned mischievously, 'Sometimes it's like a continuous orgasm.'

The boys were mostly incurious about the outside world, but one evening Gamma asked, 'What's this civilisation you've escaped?'

'Restrictions and compensations so humans can live in cities.'

'What restrictions?'

'Building regulations; proscribed behaviours; rules about where you may do things and where not; permits to do almost everything; dependence on strangers for life's basic necessities; accepting the pollution of earth, water and air; constant noise; sacrificing half your earnings to the rulers...'

'Stop! I'm mad already.'

'Without the rules the system would collapse.'

'What happens if you buck the system?'

'It punishes you.'

'How?'

'Prisons, fines.'

Paco described Chicago, where he had completed his degree; Jag talked about prisons and teeming Asian cities he'd seen on television; I told them about coastal development destroying fishing, and clear-felling of land for farms; and Antony described mining, industry, and warfare. A shocked silence ensued.

'How can they bear it?'

'Clever propaganda convinces most people they're living the good life. For the rest, drugs such as alcohol, together with non-stop television entertainment numb their minds.'

'But why huddle together in the first place?'

'The only living things humans need to fear are other humans. Mothers and children are vulnerable for at least ten years after birth, so families had to gather for support in villages. When brigands terrorised them, many moved to cities that grew large and powerful, eventually controlling the surrounding countryside and, by fighting endless wars, created countries ruled either by dictators using fear of pain; by witchdoctors using fear of the supernatural; or by leaders using the carrot of more and more possessions. Today there are so many humans that there isn't room on the planet for everyone to have a piece of land. The only way to cope is to jam them ever tighter into cities while stripping the land and mass-producing a narrow range of foods.'

'That's why we're here,' said Antony violently. 'Here we live naturally, like other animals, taking no more than we need, respecting—not fearing nature, and I am happier, more contented

and... and....' Jag draped his arm round Antony's shoulders and stroked his neck until he grew calm.

'You boys, like Clovis, have never been children.' Paco continued. 'While they're growing up, human kids are fed all sorts of garbage to warp their minds into an appropriate shape, thus preventing any useful change in the human condition. You have learned everything from nature.'

It was true and I was slightly jealous. My first weeks of fear had crushed the indomitable independence and pleasure in living that they enjoyed. They suffered no jealousy, prudery, false modesty, boredom, or any of the other side effects of civilisation.

After two wet seasons the numans menstruated. They'd been sexually active since the age of twelve weeks, but only with each other to the chagrin of Edgar, Fernando and Greg, so it wasn't surprising when all four conceived. Gestation took forty weeks, there was little visible enlargement of the abdomen, and parturition was painless and uncomplicated.

'True to type,' whispered Paco. 'We definitely have a new species. Aristotle's Complete Man.'

For ten wonderful years we wandered through the many 'rooms' of our paradise, and the numan population increased to sixteen. Though large, our land could not sustain more than twenty-three. We were a peaceful bunch, especially the numans, who were as verbal, intuitive, and propitiatory, as they were physical, inventive, and logical. I don't recall anyone losing their temper, starting a fight, being jealous, or indulging in the negative behaviour that so frequently complicates human relationships. I'm sure everyone was as contented as I, living a simple, clean, rewarding life with people I loved and trusted.

I guess we were lucky it took so long for someone to inspect the satellite photographs. One morning when the numans were hunting in the hills, three helicopters circled, landed, and disgorged a dozen armed soldiers, loudly commanded by a plump, moustached young officer. Transfixed like possums in headlights, we froze while booted, machine-gun wielding soldiers encircled us.

'Show us your papers!'

While Paco was collecting his, Antony's and Jag's driver's licences from the laboratory, two camouflage-painted panel-vans arrived in clouds of dust and fumes. Four soldiers got out, saluted, and one was given the three documents. He disappeared into the front van.

'What's with the metallic, hairless look?' Moustache sneered.

Antony explained.

'Like shit. You're a fucking mutant.' He turned on Edgar, Fernando, Greg and me and snapped, 'Where are your papers?'

'Lost.'

'You're illegals.'

'Illegal whats?'

'Immigrants, smart arse.'

A head poked out of the back of the van. 'These three are wanted criminals, Sir!'

Moustache nodded and Paco, Jag, and Antony were locked in the back of the second van. We were starting to panic. 'What's going to happen to us?' Edgar asked.

'You'll go back to where you came from. Australia's awash with foreigners taking our jobs, carrying on their feuds and barbaric customs. Look at you lot, naked as Abos. You're as bad as friggin' GM Mutants!' He cleared his throat noisily. 'Right, where'd you come from, and how long have you been here?'

Edgar, Fernando and Greg suddenly raced towards the bluff, deaf to shouted commands to stop. Machine-guns chattered until three red pulpy heaps twitched on the grass.

'Bloody savages.' Moustache stomped over and stared irritably at the mess. I gazed across the shimmering land. A kangaroo stood frozen between trees a hundred metres away, distant hills wavered in currents of hot air, and I howled. Like a dingo I howled, then vomited.

Moustache slammed a fist into the side of my head and snarled, 'Where are the mutants?'

'What mutants?' Fear kept me upright.

‘Satellite photos are so sharp you can compare dick sizes. Sixteen hairless, metallic-skinned, GM Mutants like that bloke in the van, normally hang around with you lot. Where are they?’

‘They haven’t done any harm.’

Spittle collected on fleshy lips, eyes popped and hysteria threatened. ‘Those evil, inhuman creations of godless fools conceived in sin, are everywhere organising themselves, converting the weak, plotting against civilisation, and subverting God’s plans. It’s them or us! My job is to make sure it’s us, and you can watch!’ He shoved me towards the front van. Inside was an array of electronic gadgetry and several TV monitors. The helicopter hammered into the air and the monitors came to life, but I couldn’t work out what I was looking at.

‘Nose-camera,’ grunted Moustache, and suddenly I realised we were flying across our valley and already approaching the hills. The camera zoomed in on my children and grandchildren clambering up the rocks. As the helicopter hovered, branches and soil were hurled against the frightened men, but in the van all was silent. Moustache spoke into a microphone. ‘You have two minutes to surrender. Climb down now!’ The numans looked from one to the other in confusion. I grabbed the microphone and shouted, ‘This is Clovis! Don’t surrender!’

Moustache slammed me to the floor, retrieved the microphone and shouted, ‘Fifteen seconds!’

Gamma shook his fist and followed the others up the cliff-face. Helicopter engine-noise shattered the quiet of the van: ‘Sergeant Parkin, Sir. Awaiting instructions.’

‘Fire,’ said Moustache flatly.

The cliff face erupted into a fireball. I was still screaming when they shoved me into the prison van, where Antony, Paco and Jag lay dead in a pool of blood. They had torn a jagged scrap of metal lining from the wall and ripped open their veins. I was dragged back to Moustache who was shouting into a telephone, ‘... suicide cult, Sir, ...self defence.....Resisting arrest... only possible course. ...’ He replaced the phone, turned to the nearest soldier and barked, ‘Secure this one to the van.’

Three limp bodies were dumped on top of the others while Moustache bullied me for answers. Tear-blind at my loss; throat and tongue swollen, I could scarcely breathe, let alone speak. Verballed and punched, I was grateful for the pain. The helicopter returned and sixteen corpses, burnt beyond recognition were added to the six already in the pit some soldiers had been digging. Petrol was poured over them, set alight and when the flames died down, covered in soil. I was lashed into a straightjacket in the prison van, still stinking of death, and we drove all night.

At sunrise we arrived at military headquarters where I was given a pair of shorts and questioned by an elderly man in civilian clothes; but I couldn’t speak. I mimed typing and after a lot of whispering to someone outside, he asked if I could use a computer. I looked dumb. When he talked about the Internet I acted even dumber, then shrugged as if I didn’t care and lay down on the floor. After a long, muttered conference about security and the urgent need for a report, they sat me in front of a computer with an armed guard. I typed this to set the record straight. Our family was in tune with nature, loving life. Civilisation is the suicide cult! Over-breeding and poisoning one’s own nest is a recipe for extinction.

This has taken so long my guard’s attention has wandered. I’ve posted it on every social networking site I could find. Now I’ll fill my mouth with spit, disconnect the power plug to the monitor, and shove it in my mouth. Lucky Esther told me about Grandmother.

Poisoned Chalice

If my brother and his wife named their son after me in the hope of future gain, they miscalculated. After two hours of my flabby nephew's know-it-all, complacent certainties I was left wondering why, having enjoyed years of freedom from family tensions, I had finally accepted the annual Christmas invitation. I stopped listening to his vacuous twaddle, merely grunting when it seemed appropriate.

'Don't go away,' he instructed. 'I've something else to show you.'

The instruction was unnecessary; somehow I'd lost the will to escape.

'I'll bet you've never won anything like this!' he gloated on his return, holding up a glittering trophy. 'My name's already been engraved, see? But the first winner's name's been rubbed off!' With exaggerated care he passed me the shallow gilded bowl flanked by a pair of elegant lions.

I placed it on the small table beside my chair, where it appeared to float on its slender golden stem above a lustrous hardwood pedestal. Picking it up again I turned the exquisite object and there it was: '1982'... followed by a dusting of fine scratches.

'Richard!' his mother screeched for the umpteenth time that morning. 'Come and finish your piano practice!'

'Don't drop it!' the fat boy snapped as he waddled back into the house.

As I gazed at my reflection in the polished surface it all came flooding back. Loud sneers of derision from the boys' side of the Assembly Hall at the music teacher's announcement of two new trophies to be awarded to the best boy and girl singers. Register for the competition before Friday.

I had waited until after school to register so no one would know. At lunchtime on the day of judgement we gathered in the Music Room. Mr. Laurie introduced the elderly woman adjudicator and welcomed our scant audience, all girls, before sitting at the piano and calling up the contestants, girls first. Judging by the applause they all sang well.

My first opponent looked about ten and wobbled 'Bless this House' in a breathy treble, then pompous Harry David boomed 'The Cornish Floral Dance' before I earned a smattering of applause with what I hoped was a spirited rendition of 'Westering Home.' By the time the judge announced that Florence Jenkyns and I were the winners I was cursing my stupidity. The whole thing had been embarrassingly amateur and I slunk away, sick with apprehension. Imagine the guys discovered I'd entered this poofter competition! I'd never hear the end of it. Luckily, only rugby and athletics results were ever announced at assembly.

The year passed and I'd forgotten about it until Heather whispered in Chemistry that my name was on the Prize-Giving notice board. Panicked, I grabbed a bottle of correcting fluid, excused myself from class and deleted 'Singing Cup...Richard Stone.'

We lived in a logging settlement north of the river. The High School was in town so we had a twenty-minute ferry ride there and back. The middle of the launch was reserved for workers, girls sat under the awning in the stern, and boys crowded at the bow; soaked in spray, chilled by the wind, and sunburnt. When it got too rough to be allowed outside we crammed into a stuffy little cabin in the bowels between the engine-room and the toilets. Boys were tough, and girls... there was only one thing girls were useful for, and it wasn't talking to. But you had to have a girlfriend to prove you weren't a poofter, and to wander around the shops with on late-shopping nights. I probably wasn't the only one who wouldn't have minded sitting with them and talking about something other than footy, cars and booze, but survival instincts screamed 'Conform!'

On the morning of Prize-Giving I pretended I was sick and convinced Mum, who knew the school secretary, to telephone and ask her to remove the cup from the table and my name from the list. Next day I waited till all the kids had gone before collecting the cup from the front office and catching the late boat home. Mum thought it was beautiful and wanted it on the bookshelf beside my gymnastics trophy, but Dad, after a grudging admission that it was 'a bit of all right,' gave me an odd look and mumbled so Mum wouldn't hear, 'You won't want to be telling anyone else about this, I reckon.' When I whispered I was going to lock it in my cupboard, he nodded approval. My

brother wasn't old enough for High School and, haunted by the risk of his blabbing, I never told him I'd won it.

In Year Eleven I secured a big part in the school play. The boys reckoned that was cool, so when Mr. Laurie cornered me in the playground I was vulnerable.

'How's the voice, Richard?'

'I'm not entering the competition again!'

'What a pity. How about an opera?'

I looked blank.

'If you'll sing the leading role, the last half of the School Concert this year will be a condensed version of Mozart's 'Magic Flute'.

Mozart was famous, so an opera by him had to be OK, not an amateur wank like the competition. But I was learning caution. 'Who's the leading lady?' There was no way I was going on stage with dumpy, hot-eyed Florence.

'Charmian Ingram.'

I wouldn't be disgraced. 'You're on!'

It was much more difficult than I'd expected but remains one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. Even the local rag did a bit of a gush. However, there's always a down side. The following morning Graham Lignis yelled from the deck as I approached along the jetty, 'I thought you were a man, Stone! How the fuck could you let yourself be talked into poncing round on stage in that poofster gear and singing! Jeeze you looked a fuckin' wanker.'

I pretended I didn't hear, but as soon as I got on board he shoved me in the chest and yelled as loud as he could, 'Don't bloody sit near me, prima donna!' Everyone sniggered.

After a great deal of thought I've reached the conclusion that discouraging physical solutions to young men's problems is stupid, because physical and verbal violence are merely different sides of the same coin. Idealists who ignore human nature and forbid the use of force for self-protection are sending troops to battle with unloaded guns. Persecutors lack compassion, so their victims, if they hope to survive, must immediately decide on the best defence—words, actions, or both—and then let loose! It doesn't matter whether they win or not as long as the retaliation is coolly deliberate; not a girlish hysterical outburst! Salvaged pride will prevent psychological damage, and victimisation will probably cease. The absolutely worst thing for any young man to do when bullied is suffer in silence.

Lignis, a rangy, freckle-spattered red-head, could look you straight in the eye from a face gashed by a permanently chapped and thick-lipped sneer, and say the most pernicious things. Nothing you could say in return would touch him. I should have immediately launched a violent, physical offensive with the clear intention of maiming, followed by a verbal attack. Instead, as lumps of ice displaced my guts, I gave a pathetically unconvincing performance of not caring.

I know lots of blokes suffer worse things, but this was my first experience of the True-Aussie-Male clobbering-machine, and I didn't cope too well. Funny looks and whispers circulated whenever I came on board and a space much larger than necessary was left around me, no matter how packed the boat. If I spoke, someone would shout in mincing tones, 'Hush everyone, prima donna wants to sing!' A couple of younger kids acted all girlish and queenly in front of me once, as though they were copying me. They weren't, because I've never acted like that. I started taking the late ferry home to avoid at least one trip with them.

Heather was sympathetic, but told me the other guys reckoned I must be a queer to have done it, and everyone hates queers. 'I told them you weren't,' she said, 'but everyone's afraid of Graham Lignis. Don't let him get to you.'

I tried not to, but eventually told Mum.

'Ignore them,' she advised. 'They'll soon find someone else to pick on.'

It took two very long weeks.

A few months later, while I was hanging around town waiting for the late ferry, Florence appeared with an older version of herself.

‘Mum wants to talk to you,’ she pouted, having forgiven neither me nor the world for denying her the lead in ‘The Magic Flute’. Her mother appeared equally disgruntled. ‘Your voice shows promise, Richard,’ she declaimed in a contralto pitched to the back row of the gallery. ‘However, you must have lessons and I will give them to you.’

‘No way! Singing’s for sissies and I can’t afford lessons.’

‘What complete and utter nonsense!’ She was genuinely shocked. ‘Surely you are not swayed by such philistinism?’

I looked blank.

‘And I was not intending to charge you!’

I shook my head.

‘No one will know.’

I gazed into the distance.

‘Richard Stone!’ she boomed. ‘It would be criminal not to train your voice! What do you say?’

I said as little as possible, and escaped. Next day at school I asked Mr. Laurie what he thought.

‘Grab the chance of free tuition from a recognised teacher.’

A week later, nibbled by maggots of doubt, I presented myself at the Jenkyns’ rambling wooden guesthouse. Florence led me to an enormous, uncarpeted and sparsely furnished sitting-room, which, according to her mother already seated at the piano, provided perfect acoustics. Florence sang, I sang, we sang, and the afternoon passed too quickly. As she tidied away the music and lowered the piano lid, Mrs. Jenkyns trumpeted grandly, ‘Your voice is beautiful, Richard. It matches Florence’s perfectly! You will easily win the duet at the Eisteddfod.’

Duet? Eisteddfod? An artery threatened to burst in my neck. The free lessons were bait to get me to sing with Florence in public! Imagine it leaked out! If anyone discovered I was still singing it would be bad enough, but singing with Fat Florence? That’d be the end of my life!

Crossed fingers didn’t help. Florence had spread the word and on the boat the reaction was vicious. Terror and fury lent my denials the aura of truth, and I convinced the blokes that the stupid bitch was off her rocker. From their point of view it was pretty unlikely; I already had a good-looking girlfriend and only a blind, half-witted spaz would be seen dead with Florence. It had been a close call though and I didn’t sleep easily for a week. At school I cornered Florence, cancelled the lessons and ripped shit out of her. She looked so pathetic I almost felt sorry.

End of year exams were looming, the blokes had forgiven my treasonous behaviour and I was beginning to enjoy life again when, on the morning I had to take the cup back someone grabbed my schoolbag and tossed it around. When I lost my temper he emptied it on to the deck. Lignis swooped, grabbed the cup and bellowed out the inscription, ‘The Robert Francis Memorial Cup for singing... Richard Stone!’

Dead silence... then Dennis said incredulously, ‘I’d rather be dead than win a thing like that.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘Me too,’

‘What are ya?’

‘What a frigging girl!’

Sneers and jeers till Lignis shouted, ‘Whadaya say fellas? Is Stone a queer or is she a fucking poofter?’

From every throat, ‘A queer!’

As though it had been rehearsed, everyone grabbed their bags and filed up the stairs, leaving me alone in the stinking little cabin. I couldn’t make myself get off the ferry, just sat there in shock for the return trip, slunk home as soon as we docked, and spent the day in bed. For the next three weeks I sat in the adults’ section, but even there bags were accidentally dropped on my toes, elbows crashed into my ribs, and whenever Lignis thought he could raise a laugh he’d point to me and act limp-wristed. I hid at intervals in the Library in case someone shouted poof, queer or prima donna. I caught the late boat home, and shut down all systems. At night I lay awake in cold sweats. I took days off school and refused to go to the shops.

Although I wanted to brazen it out, something inside had crumpled. When Heather came round I wouldn't see her. Mum kept asking what was wrong, but I was too... I don't know, too sick to talk about it. I felt ashamed, guilty, unmanly. Both parents were relieved when I scrapped plans to do year-twelve. Dad, who always reckoned I was costing him too much, organised a job for me down in Brisbane and as soon as exams were over I quit school and took off, not even returning for Christmas....

'Were you asleep?' Fatboy had returned without my noticing.

'No, thinking.'

'Do you like my cup?'

'It's beautiful.'

'Did you see the scratched out name?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Who was it? I worked it out; you were at school then!'

'Yes.'

'Well? What did he do?'

'Who?'

'The first winner!' The scent of malicious gossip had him salivating. 'He must have really disgraced himself!'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

'What do you mean?'

'You think gossiping about other people's problems will make you seem better.'

He cringed as though I'd hit him. 'No, you've got me wrong, I...'

'Forget it. You're not alone. The whole world's like that.'

He glared and retrieved the cup. 'Mum says you're a queer.'

'Does she?'

'Are you?'

'Why? Do you fancy me?'

'Yuk! Not likely!'

'Believe me, the feeling's mutual. You're fat, ugly, conceited and disagreeable.'

He reeled back as if I'd hit him. 'Mum's right! You're a nasty, bad-tempered old queer. I wish you hadn't come.'

'So do I. As for your mother, she's a slut who thinks any man who refuses her advances is gay. How my brother puts up with you both beats me. Do me a favour and piss off.'

On the verge of tears he stormed out leaving me to my memories. I'd forgotten how soothing it was to stretch out in the hot, humid womb of a tropical afternoon. Childishly pleased with my cheap victory I relaxed for the first time since arriving. As a young man I used to wonder why older men were so often grumpy. As a middle-aged man I understand. Youths are herded through the marshalling yards of conformity and don't realise until it's too late that they're headed for the gates of the abattoir. When warned to make the most of things they mumble impatiently, 'Yeah, yeah,' and carry on as though there's time to do everything. But there isn't, and when it's too late to do anything except continue along the path laid down in heedless youth, all that remains is the sour remembrance of squandered opportunities.

Of course most men have some regrets and wonder what would have happened if... Unfortunately, we have only the one life and every choice we make eliminates an infinity of other choices, so we mustn't pick at old scabs; that way lies madness. I know now that I over-reacted to the name-calling. Everything would probably have been forgotten over the holidays, but a chilling, nameless dread of my peers left no room for rational decisions. Mum knew I was suffering, but all she could say was, 'I'm sure you know best, dear.'

I still don't know what's best, but I'm certainly not going to tell my self-satisfied nephew I sandpapered my own name off that beautiful cup.

A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body

Three local businesses were competing to get the new French electrical goods franchise, so after bending the agent's ear on Thursday afternoon Francis invited him home for dinner, figuring it could only help the fellow make the right decision. Mum was annoyed at having such short notice to prepare a gourmet meal, but after shaking hands with the charming young god who introduced himself as Loic, she was all smiles. We were expecting someone middle-aged, not a slim, perfectly proportioned twenty-four year-old with olive complexion, heavy five-o'clock shadow, black eyes, close-cropped black hair, wearing an elegant cream linen suit.

It was hot and Mum always needs peace to cook, so she suggested we went for a swim. Loic was keen but had no togs. Francis explained that the pool was private and we always skinny dipped, so if he didn't mind... He didn't and within a minute there was a heap of clothes on the patio and we were padding bare arsed down the sandy path through the trees to a stream that flows through a deep pool at the bottom of our property. There are loads of birds, the forest is fairly dense and Loic kept raving about how perfect it was. The sight of the pool excited him so much he danced onto a rock like a mythological faun shouting he was in Arcadia with the gods. He grabbed Francis and me and we danced in a circle, holding hands and laughing like crazies. It would have been embarrassing if an Australian had done it, but with his French accent and cute face, not to mention his body, it was poetic and beautiful.

Loic looked even better naked than dressed; lean but attractively muscled with short black hairs on his chest and legs. He's well tanned, all over so he was obviously used to skinny-dipping, and his hair looks like a shiny black skullcap when it's wet. Francis is thirty-four but looks younger than Loic. No wrinkles or frowns and apart from dead straight blond hair that hangs over his eyes, he's hairless; hardly has to shave, has no armpit hair to speak of and smooth strong legs. We share the bathroom between our bedrooms so I see him in the shower every day. All it takes is a couple of strokes with a safety razor over his chin, under each armpit, and half dozen strokes over his pubes to render his body so smooth and sleek you'd think he was prepubescent—if you didn't look into his pale blue eyes that seem to know your secrets.

People often make the mistake of thinking Francis is a pushover, but he's a savage at heart and takes no crap from anyone. We jog together now and again and take self-defence classes—the sort that teaches you to maim your attacker leaving no one able or willing to seek revenge. A couple of months ago some louts called him baby face and shoved him aside as we were walking back to the car from the gym. He politely suggested they show some respect. They told him to make them. So he did—smashed their kneecaps with the steel-capped shoes he had specially made to look like casual loafers, knuckled them in the side of the head as they went down, then stomped on their fingers and asked if they wanted more.

It's odd. I'm the tall tough guy with broad shoulders, narrow waist and a mean look—Mum says I'm the classic male type—but my instinct is to placate, or run away if that doesn't work. In this instance I was useless; just stood there watching while Francis put them out of commission.

I guess I should mention that Francis is my father. He married young and was eighteen when I was born. I've never called him Dad or Daddy; he's always been Francis. When he enrolled me at school he was so sick of people saying he looked far too young to have a kid that he told them he was my brother. Since then everyone, teachers and friends, continue to think he is. As a five year-old I assumed that brother and father were the same thing.

My difficult birth gave Mum a nervous breakdown. The day she brought me home she handed me to Francis and moved into the guest flat at the front of the house so she could shut herself away, prepare her own meals, and wouldn't have to share the bathroom. Francis looked after me and the house for a couple of years as well as run his business. Mum's sole contribution to my survival was to express milk into a bottle so Francis could feed me. I slept in his bed till I was two, so he didn't have to get up to feed me, change nappies or calm my crying. I grew into a neurotic little prick and although my bedroom was only a few metres from his and the doors were kept open, nightmares

had me spending more nights in Francis's bed than my own until I went to high school.

He never made me feel I was a nuisance or complained that he'd fed me, changed my nappies, toilet trained, entertained, looked after me, picked me up when I crashed, took me to school, explained sex, taught me to shave, cleaned up my diarrhoea and vomit and taught me to clean under my foreskin. I was so scared of losing him I became a goody two shoes, always ready to help out, do my chores, be on time... seeking approval I suppose; but mainly because I loved him. I was shy; insanely shy, didn't talk much, avoided all adults except for Manu, Francis's accountant and best friend who spends most of his spare time at our place and goes on all our outings with us. It's always been a toss up, who I prefer—Francis or Manu. Luckily I don't have to choose.

Manu's a bit reserved, like me, but Francis is the opposite—I got so used to him wanking every night that I slept through it and assumed it was natural; that all men did it and so would I. A correct assumption and from the age of eleven I often joined in. It probably sounds kinky, but isn't. We're mates and share everything.

I used to worry that our family was abnormal, but from what I hear about other families we're no weirder than most. All the kids in my class are convinced they're normal and everyone who's different is either queer or loopy. It seems other families argue and fight most of the time. The kids hate or despise their parents and siblings. Freddy screws his sister. Andrew's father brings his mates home and forces his wife to sleep with them. Marty's sister is on the game and works from home. Lizzie's mother is usually drunk by lunchtime and has no idea who her daughter's father is. Albert, who's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, misses school a lot because of 'accidents'. Broken bones, scars, bruises. Abused by his father according to rumours. Only two kids are living with both parents, all the rest have either single parents or they're divorced and living with someone else. All the guys reckon they have regular sex and the girls seem to do nothing but gossip, giggle and bitch at each other.

What beats me is that despite their weird personal lives they're violently intolerant of others. Four of the guys in my class reckon they go gay bashing on weekends. And they're all racist, making life hell for the half dozen Aborigine kids. If Francis was in my situation he'd confront them with their prejudices and get himself beaten up—after doing them as much damage as possible; whereas up till now I've pretended I like them, have had girlfriends I don't want, don't seem to try too hard in class, pretend I'm as tough as I look and do whatever it takes so they leave me alone. But I always feel I'm walking on a tightrope—one false step and I'm dead.

At least there are no arguments in our house. Mum eventually got her act together, sort of, and makes the evening meal that we usually eat together, then Francis and I clean up and she goes back to her flat. She's like a polite neighbour who comes in and cooks and cleans the place occasionally, but takes no interest in us. She has a good job in an office and a best friend, Judith, who visits regularly. Sometimes Mum goes to stay with her for a few days. Life's always been predictable and boring but safe, and I worry about ending up in a dead end job, alone, because I'm too introverted to make friends. At least I was until Loic arrived.

From the start I felt completely at ease with Loic, perhaps because he was a foreigner and we always imagine they can't see through us like our compatriots. I taught him to do honey pots off the rock and we mucked around in the pool till we felt chilly, then lay on a large smooth rock that caught the afternoon sun. Francis had to go back up to the house as he was expecting a phone call and there's no mobile coverage at our place. Loic and I chattered away like old mates for a bit then he leaned over to look at the gold chain round my neck.

His fingers brushed my chest and he told me I was handsome and had a great body. That surprised me because I've always compared myself to Francis and thought my slightly hairy chest and legs, and having to shave every day, made me coarse like Mum's brother. I should have said I wasn't as handsome as him or something, but being praised by people I like makes me tongue-tied. I don't know if it was his touch or the compliments, but my cock began to spring to attention so I quickly dived into the water before he saw it and thought I was queer.

Dinner was a success, Mum's an excellent cook, probably because she thinks she isn't, and

afterwards instead of returning to her flat she joined us for coffee on the verandah.

Loic congratulated Mum, praised the house and grounds, and reckoned it was the best afternoon he'd had in a long time.

Francis asked him if he'd decided who was going to get the franchise.

Loic stretched back dreamily. 'Tomorrow I've a video conference with head office and then I'll review the applications. Tomorrow evening at the earliest, I'd say.' He yawned attractively. 'You know, this area's so interesting I'd love to stay the weekend and explore—if I could find a guide.' He turned to me with a grin. 'If you're not busy, Asa, how about spending the weekend with me and you can show me the sights? I'll let you do the driving.'

Before I could shout, 'Yes! Anything if I can drive your Porsche Sports!' Mum asked what he meant when he said I would spend the weekend with him.

Unfazed, Loic said, 'There are so many things to see and do, Sarah, I thought it'd be most efficient for me to pick Asa up after school tomorrow, we'll have a meal, take in a show, then sleep at my motel so on Saturday we can set off very early to get in as much sightseeing as possible. On Sunday we'll do the same and visit what we missed, then on Monday morning I'll drop him at school in plenty of time for his first class.' He smiled sweetly.

'If you pick him up from school he will be in his school uniform.'

'We're the same size and I've plenty of clothes, so he can borrow mine.'

'Even pyjamas?'

'I don't wear them.'

'Neither do I,' I said with a laugh. 'I knew we had something in common.'

Silence. Then...

'Where are you staying?' Mum's voice was disarmingly soft.

'Honeymoon Chalets.'

'My brother and his wife stayed there last year,' Mum observed sweetly. 'The chalets are all identical, I think; a bed sitting room with cooking facilities and a bathroom?'

That's right.'

'And one double bed.'

'That's right.' Loic looked at his watch. 'Heavens, look at the time. My beauty sleep awaits.' He leaped to his feet, shook Francis's hand, kissed Mum's cheek, grabbed my hand and squeezed it with a grin, walked briskly to the front door, then turned and said, still grinning cheekily, 'I realise my proposition may at first seem presumptuous, but think about it, discuss it with Asa, and ring me when you've decided.'

Francis walked him out to his car while Mum and I stood like dummies listening to the Porsche power off up the drive.

'Cheeky monkey!' Francis fumed when he returned.

'But very handsome,' Mum said with a laugh. 'Asa thinks so, don't you?' She gave me one of her irritatingly knowing looks. 'You couldn't take your eyes off him.'

'He's OK. I just like the way he speaks—that cute accent.'

'Handsome is as handsome does.' Francis muttered. 'He knows I desperately need the franchise and the competition is rat-shit, but despite our hospitality and your magnificent dinner he refused to commit himself. Wouldn't even answer when I walked out to the car with him just now. Just laughed and said I should get Asa to seriously consider his offer. He's either a pleasant nutcase or very nasty!'

'He's not nasty, he's a smart young man,' Mum said softly. 'Twenty-four year-olds don't get to be international representative for a large company unless they're very sharp.'

'Well, he sure gave me the run-around. Why's he stalling?'

Mum laughed. 'None so blind as those who do not wish to see! He obviously fancies Asa and wants to spend the weekend with him—that's his condition for signing.'

'You're joking.' He turned to me. 'Is Sarah right?'

My heart was thundering. Suddenly I realised why he'd touched me down at the pool; he was

checking my availability! He must have seen my hard-on. The thought of spending the weekend with him set my pulses pounding, but there was no way I'd tell Mum and Francis that. They'd think I was gay! But surely I wasn't? I had a girlfriend. At least I had until she dumped me. To avoid their suspicions I shrugged and said I thought Loic was a great guy and Mum had completely misunderstood him—he just wanted to be friendly.

'Trust me, Asa. He may want to explore the depths of your mind, but he also desires to immerse himself in your body.'

Fortunately, loose shorts hid my erection and I hoped my face hid the fact that I wasn't put off by the idea.

'Well, he can whistle in the wind! Francis snapped. 'There's no way my son is going to prostitute himself for me!'

'It's not like that, Francis!' I said more calmly than I felt. 'He doesn't...'

'What's the franchise worth to the company?' Mum interrupted.

'We might fold without it.'

'Then it's far too important to lose. However, it's entirely up to Asa to decide whether or not he wants to act as a guide/companion/sex object for Loic. Personally, I can't see there's any harm in it.'

'What? The creep obviously wants to get into your son's pants. And you say there's no harm!'

'What harm could that slim young man do to our much tougher and equally manly sixteen year-old son?'

'What all healthy young gays do—kissing, petting, jerking and sucking each other off, fucking...'

'I asked what harm, dear, not what actions.'

'Are you mad, woman? Asa shouldn't have to have sex with someone just so they'll sign a contract!'

'If sex was all he wanted he'd have quietly asked Asa back to his hotel for an hour or so after school tomorrow.' She turned to me. 'Did Loic make any advances to you down at the pool?'

I could honestly say 'No', at the same time wondering why I felt a little disappointed that I hadn't encouraged him.

'You see, Francis? Loic has behaved in an exemplary manner. He asked us, the parents, if he could have Asa's company all weekend. And anyway, no one can have sex for an entire three nights and two days. They'll go swimming, sightseeing, to a restaurant, the movies... And from what I can remember, if Loic's anything like you the sex won't take more than a few minutes. I think it would be very good for Asa.'

'Good for him? Woman you're round the bend!'

Mum turned to me coolly. 'Asa, you've got a girlfriend, haven't you?'

'Yes,' I lied. Sandra had dumped me after the last party.

'And you've kissed her, let her fondle your genitals, wanted her to perform fellatio? Hoped she'd let you have intercourse with her?'

My head nearly exploded. Mothers should not talk about these things with their sons! 'Mum!' I howled. 'You can't ask me these things! Ever heard of privacy?'

'Rubbish. This is the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth. Everyone talks about such natural things. Well, have you?'

I had kissed Sandra for what seemed like interminable hours in the back of Arthur's car after the last party. Then, without invitation, she'd played with my cock and tried to suck me off, but it was pointless as I couldn't get an erection so I told her to stop slobbering over me. That pissed her off no end. I certainly hadn't hoped to fuck her! But I could hardly tell Mum that, so I pretended to be annoyed she'd asked.

'I've always thought,' my mother continued calmly, taking my silence for agreement, 'that men would be more considerate of their girlfriends if they knew exactly what it is they are asking them to do. Surely, if a man wants a young lady to kiss him, he should know what it's like to kiss raspy stubble and wake up with a rash around his lips. Then in future he might be more gentle.'

I grunted something indeterminate, wondering where the mad woman was heading.

‘Have you ever played with another man’s penis and had it in your mouth?’ she asked in the same way other people ask if you collect stamps.

‘No!’ I almost shouted.

‘Exactly! So you’ve no idea of the feelings and sensations girls undergo when they are asked to do it.’

‘I never thought of it like that,’ Francis mumbled thoughtfully.

‘Of course not!’ Mum snapped. ‘You’re a man.’ She redirected her attention to me and asked with all the finesse of a prosecuting lawyer, ‘Tell me the truth, Asa, have you ever had an erect penis inserted into your anus?’

‘Mum! Stop it! Francis! Tell her to stop. She’s insane!’

But Francis was nodding sagely. ‘Actually, I’m beginning to think your mother’s right. Men can be a bit thoughtless sometimes and it wouldn’t hurt them to experience what they expect their girlfriends and wives to do to and for them for their pleasure.’

‘Francis! I’m not gay!’

‘No one said you were!’ my mother almost growled. ‘And no one here would give a flying fuck if you were. But where’s your sense of adventure? You disappoint me.’

‘I disappoint you? You’re the one who...’

She dismissed me with an irritated wave of the hand. ‘I read the other day that anal intercourse is now the preferred method of avoiding unwanted pregnancy among teenagers. Girls are willing to suffer that to satisfy their boyfriends because then they remain virgins. But it can be somewhat traumatic the first time, so I think it’s only fair that you should experience sodomy yourself before inflicting it on your girlfriend.’

‘I’m not bloody going to inflict anything on Sandra or any other girl! We’ve split up!’ I shouted.

‘Good, when you introduced her to me I thought she was a common little trollop.’ Mum’s self-satisfied smile made me want to hit her.

‘I never liked her either,’ Francis chimed in.

I was beginning to smell a plot.

‘You may not have had much sexual experience with girls, Asa,’ Mum continued severely, ‘but surely you had sexual experiences with other boys when puberty arrived?’ She turned to Francis. ‘According to the books, all kids experiment. I suppose you did, Francis, despite the odds.’

Francis grinned and nodded. ‘Despite the odds indeed. A couple of us used to jerk off in the sand dunes.’

‘Well, I’ve never had the pleasure!’ I snapped, unwilling to admit I was jealous because there was no one at school I’d want to do it with, although I fantasised regularly over my Maths teacher. And even if there was I wouldn’t dare suggest it; they’d tell everyone I was queer.

Mum sighed. ‘Oh, Asa, what has made you so insecure? Why are you so worried we’ll think you’re gay? Don’t you realise there’s no such thing? Humans are merely sexual animals and there are as many ways to achieve sexual satisfaction as there are people. Stop pigeonholing yourself and others and liberate your body as well as your intellect! I may not be a great mother, but I know you’re sexually interested in Loic, as you should be—he’s a most attractive young man and obviously attracted to you, so what’s the problem?’

‘I’ve got nothing against him, and he is attractive, it’s just that...’

‘So why not be a devil for once in your life—take a risk; enjoy yourself instead of always doing the usual boring same old thing.’ She sighed in resignation. ‘But it is your life and it would be reprehensible of me to try to force you to act like a young man instead of a middle-aged puritan.’

‘I totally agree,’ Francis said with a grin. ‘The worst thing for Asa to do would be to act against his nature.’ He turned to me. ‘Well done for sticking to your principles, even if they do make you seem like a boring old fart.’

‘Yes,’ Mum said softly. ‘I apologise for arguing so forcefully. You must believe there’s no way either of us would want you to spend the weekend with Loic just so he will sign the franchise agreement—we were merely arguing hypothetically, so let’s forget about it.’

‘OK!’ I snarled. ‘You win. I’ll be Loic’s guide for the weekend! Satisfied?’

'No, no!' Francis said firmly. 'Whatever you do you must want to do for yourself, because you value new experiences. The last thing we want is for you to do anything you don't honestly want to because you think we want you to. Isn't that right Sarah?'

'Absolutely. I'd never forgive myself if that were the case. Just because I advanced strong arguments in favour of young men escaping their pathetic comfort zone to learn about how the other half experience things, doesn't mean I want to force you to do it. Let's change the subject.'

My brain refused to unravel the logic, if there was any, in what they were saying. 'No!' I sighed. 'I really want to do it. I agree it will be good experience.'

Francis put on his patient-and-understanding-of-my-stupidity face. 'Or we can leave a decision till the morning so you can sleep on it.'

That did it. 'No!' I shouted. 'It's my choice and my responsibility, nothing to do with the fact that we'll be bankrupt if he doesn't sign the contract. Ring him now and tell him!'

'Sure?'

'Yes!' I yelled.

I was prevented from pouring a bucket of water over Mum's self-satisfied smile by the sound of a car powering down the drive.

'That sounded like Loic.'

We went out, the car door slammed and Loic bounded onto the front porch.

'Lucky you're still up,' he laughed. 'I was just getting into bed when I realised I may have given the wrong impression regarding the contract and Asa spending the weekend with me. So to make sure there's no misunderstanding I decided to get this thing signed tonight.' He held out a yellow envelope. 'I was just being pedantic; the competition is not up to your standard and I didn't have to sleep on the decision.'

'You beaut!' Francis said, dragging Loic inside.

When all was settled Loic refused a drink, said he was tired, and we walked him to his car.

Francis dug me in the ribs. 'Go on!' he whispered. 'Tell him.'

'School finishes at half past three, Loic, I'll be waiting at the front gates at a quarter to four. Is it OK if I tell the guys you're my cousin?'

Loic's grin nearly split his face. 'Excellent, and you can drive; that should impress them.'

'I'm off to bed,' Mum said brusquely as if we'd done something to annoy her. I never get used to her mood changes; one moment she's chatty and clever, the next cool and dismissive. I used to think I'd done something wrong, but Francis says there's a mental 'switch' in her head that flips on and off and she has no idea it happens. It's all to do with her upbringing. It still hurts though.

After my shower I went in to Francis's room. It was a hot night so he was lying on his back on top, hands behind his head. In the dim light he looked so smooth and young I had to remind myself he was my father. I sat on the end of his bed. 'I'm nervous.'

'Changed your mind?'

'No way! I'm looking forward to it, but scared I'll make a fool of myself in bed.'

Francis patted the bed beside him. It had been a couple of years since I'd got into bed with him and it was an unexpected relief to return to a place where I felt comfortable and safe. As if I was still a kid I snuggled against him with my arm across his chest.

'Just do what comes naturally.'

'But suppose doing 'things' with Loic feels as disgusting as it did with Sandra? I've read that heterosexual guys who're approached by gays experience uncontrollable urges to exterminate them.'

'That's their excuse for gay bashing and murder. It's never been true, although some judges believed them. You're not like that.'

'You mean I'm not heterosexual?'

'I mean you're not going to become a psychopath. But Sarah and I think you're probably mainly gay.'

'Why?'

‘Because you’re ambivalent about sex and girls. Heterosexual young men have no doubts, they just do unquestioningly what society projects as usual behaviour.’

‘Yeah, I’ve been thinking I’m probably a bit gay, but what do gays do?’

‘Whatever they enjoy, and not what they don’t. There are no rules. If Loic proposes something you don’t fancy, just say no thanks and do what you like. Easy.’

‘I don’t suppose you’d show me?’ I was half serious—imagining he’d take it for a joke.

‘You want to be careful making suggestions like that, I might succumb to a pathological urge to strangle you.’

‘No, no, I was just...’

‘And Manu would be jealous.’

That shook me? What was he on about? Surely not? ‘Manu? Manu your best friend?’

‘The same.’

‘He’s your lover?’

‘Exclusive for the last fifteen years.’

‘But... how? When? Does Mum know? Why haven’t you ever told me?’

‘Your mother has her own lover—Judith.’

‘Judith? The woman who comes and stays with her... the one she visits?’

‘The same.’

‘You mean Mum’s a lesbian?’

‘Yes.’

‘So that’s why she’s a bit down on men... but how did...?’

‘Emanuel, Manu’s real name, Sarah, Judith and I had the misfortune to be born into Exclusive Brethren families and were not allowed to socialise with people outside the sect. Not allowed much of anything in fact, except make money for the church. As the only fundamentalist religious kids at high school, and because we knew each other from church, we did everything and went everywhere together. It was a very convenient way of hiding the fact that Manu and I were an item and so were your mother and Judith.’

We were not good Brethren kids, kept breaking the rules, especially the ones prohibiting everything to do with sex, and had enjoyed several foursomes before deciding where our true interests lay. You were the result of one such day of lust and laughter. Abortion was, of course, out of the question so pressure from our parents forced the guilty pair to marry. Not knowing who the father was, Manu and I tossed a coin and I won.

‘After the birth we had a meeting, all four of us accepted responsibility for you and that’s how your luxurious lifestyle has been financed. We also rejected entirely the crap pumped into our heads by the church and vowed no child of ours would ever be subjected to the brainwashing and cruelty of religion. Therefore, in secrecy and with the minimum of planning we all moved north.’

‘Your maternal grandparents risked eternal damnation, found us and tried to force us home and back into the church. We threatened to tell everyone we were queer, so they repudiated us and the church declared us to be irredeemable sinners and forbade every member to have any contact with us whatever. Suited us perfectly. If we never see them again it will be too soon.’

I was too shocked to speak. This meant I had four parents, two of whom had kept out of the way to maintain a sense of normality for me. The magnitude of their sacrifice nearly unmanned me and I burst into tears.

‘Hey, it’s not that bad is it? We all love you; even Judith. She sometimes seems cold and unfeeling, but she isn’t. She was very badly abused by her god-fearing parents and still finds it almost impossible to show the real affection she feels for us all.’

‘So... you and Mum gave up living with Manu and Judith, for me?’

‘We see each other every day and on the nights when you think I’m at the gymnasium. As it turned out we needed the time to adjust our brains to accept the hands we’ve been dealt. You, with your upbringing, found it difficult to accept you might be gay, so you can imagine what it’s been like for us who were threatened with eternal damnation and torture in hell for even thinking about it. It’s not possible to totally erase the shit that priests and parents put into your head as a kid. Manu

and I haven't suffered by not living together; it's been a perfect camouflage. None of us, Judith, Manu, Sarah or I would have been emotionally strong enough until now to take on the world and live our loves openly. We'd probably have split up. You've been an excellent excuse for us to put off commitment until we were ready—so we owe you.' He grinned and kissed me on the forehead as he used to when I was a kid.

'It explains why I've an olive skin, a wrestler's body and a heavy beard, while you're slim, pale, blond and hairless. That's why you never wanted me to call you Dad, isn't it?'

'Partially.'

'So we're not related?'

'Only by love.'

'And Manu's my father? No wonder I love him as much as you.' I was surprised at how little the news affected me. I guess subconsciously I'd known things were not as they seemed. 'So, what happens now?' I asked, worried I was about to be discarded now I was no longer essential. Parents forget how irrational their kids can be.

'Very soon, Manu will be moving in here with us—we'll take over your mother's rooms to give us some privacy, and Sarah is going to live permanently with Judith. The farce is over at last. And next week all four of us will have dinner together and answer all your questions. OK?'

'Like what happens to me?'

'That's not changing. You stay here in your old room as always until you're sick of us. Like me, Manu hopes you'll stay forever, but we accept that one day you'll find a lover to share your life and set up on your own. However, it won't be with Loic.'

I couldn't help laughing. 'I know that, Francis, I'm not in love with the guy, just curious, and flattered that he's interested in me.'

'Ha! It's him who should be flattered.'

While we'd been talking I'd unconsciously been stroking Francis's chest and noticed his nipples had erected into tiny hard points. One thing I'd learned is that adults never hesitate to tell kids to stop if they don't like what they're doing, so as Francis hadn't told me to stop he obviously didn't mind and I wondered how far he'd let me go. As we continued talking softly I let my hand wander further south till I felt the bristles of his pubes, then on impulse I leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. It was incredibly exciting for me but he didn't stop talking, even though I'd stopped listening. Buoyed by my daring I slid my hand under his balls and fondled them, then wrapped it round his erection, lightly sliding it up and down as I do to myself when masturbating. He gave a light sigh, stopped talking and closed his eyes. I kissed his lips again then licked lightly at his nipples and ran a line of kisses down his belly before licking his knob and taking his erection into my mouth.

It was my first real-time sexual experience with a man and much more exciting than the hundreds of fantasies inspired by all those porn flicks that had fuelled five years of wanking. I looked up into a pair of amused eyes.

'So, how was it?' he asked. 'Disgusting?'

'The opposite! Thanks for letting me experiment.'

'The pleasure was all mine, but it's a one off. I've no desire to destroy our relationship by letting sex rear it's beautiful head.'

'How would it do that?'

'If you want casual sex, find a healthy, attractive stranger so you don't feel obliged to do it again if you don't want to. With friends, one is always keener than the other and if one says he doesn't feel like doing it any more the other feels insulted, and everything deteriorates from there. Loving relationships are the place for serious sex.'

'Yeah, I can see the logic. You know, I can't believe how sexy it feels with a man!'

'So it isn't like that with your girlfriend?'

'I hate it with Sandra. And she's no longer my girlfriend, she dumped me.'

'Why?'

'Probably because when she did to me what I've been doing to you, my cock shrank so far into

its foreskin it almost disappeared and I told her to stop slobbering over me.'

'Not a diplomatic turn of phrase. And kissing? 'Perhaps you should have gone down on her?'

'Ugh! Francis! Stop it! The idea makes me want to puke! It felt obscene enough touching her tits and cunt with my fingers. With my mouth? Yuk big time! But with you it felt absolutely right, normal... as if this is what I was meant to do.'

'Excellent. OK, off you go to bed for a wank and a good sleep so you'll be fit and ready for whatever Loic has planned.'

The weekend with Loic was brilliant. He let me drive everywhere, we visited loads of places I didn't even know existed, picnicked on a beach, swam in a river, climbed a mountain, went to a show, to a restaurant and had fun. My fears about sex were groundless; he's a 'vanilla' guy—at least that's what he calls it. Only likes touching, kissing and mutual wanking. Nothing gross or dirty or crude. I reckon I'm the same. We parted the best of friends. He's off back to France in a couple of months and didn't give me his address so I'll never see him again... but I don't really want to. As Mum says, only fools try to live the same experience twice.

Two days later Manu moved in and Mum moved out. Excellent. I love my mother, but both she and Judith seem so unimaginative, lacking in humour—so unlike men in every way that in their presence I was never totally at ease. Now, Manu and Francis are so happy together and the three of us talk about anything and everything and do things together or alone without argument, without having to explain or justify ourselves. Women are so curious and nosy. At last I feel totally at home, at peace with the world and contented—well, I would have been contented if I had a lover. Loic made me realise what I was missing and what all the other guys were getting because they wanted girls.

Being with Loic was like the switching on of a generator in my guts. Suddenly I knew who and what I was, and felt a huge burst of self-confidence that fuelled my determination to get a lover. Wanking's fun, but sharing sex with someone you like and admire is a million times better. I still didn't know any one my own age at school or elsewhere that I wanted to leap into bed with, but my lust for my Maths teacher was undiminished so I set out to seduce him.

Mr. Andros is tall, about one metre ninety, lean, energetic, a strong jaw, dark eyes and lips that always seem to smile. His voice is low and sexy; his fingers long and slim. All the girls have the hots for him, but he drifts through the school as if pupils don't exist outside the classroom. I've walked towards him in the street when we were the only two people on the footpath, and he passed by without the slightest acknowledgement.

It was Wednesday before he agreed to help with my Maths after school. I didn't need it but imagined we'd be sitting side by side at his desk, rubbing thighs and that would be the start of a glorious romance. Unfortunately, he stood at the blackboard and I had to sit at a desk in the middle of the classroom with the corridor door wide open and pretend to be grateful. The following lunchtime I joined him in the playground when he was on duty and chatted in an effort to discover his interests. It turned out to be no effort at all. With almost no prompting he gave me the benefit of his ideas for a perfect world.

'A healthy mind in a healthy body,' he declaimed as if he'd invented the phrase, 'is the first requirement for a sane society. It is every human's duty to keep his body as physically and mentally fit as possible.'

Having established the need for fitness he then denounced competitive sport because activities should be indulged in for their intrinsic pleasure and worth as a means for developing skills and fitness, not for gaining worthless prestige and fame. Jogging, he declared when I invited him to join me sometime, is a waste of energy that could be spent on useful activities such as gardening. Team sports foster dangerous pack mentality in young men. Social dancing with girls led to promiscuous sexuality. TV is not only the source of foolish propaganda against good moral values, but is also anti-intellectual as it requires no imaginative effort from the brain-dead voyeurs who spend too much of their precious lives staring at it. Actors spend their lives pretending to be what they aren't and became less than human. Music should be listened to and never used as background noise,

because that devalues it. Gambling is a retreat from reality and thus destroys sanity. Parties are pointless because no one can have a worthwhile conversation with more than one person at a time. Alcohol destroys not only brain cells but also self-control and relationships. We should eat to live, not live to eat. Fiction is better than non-fiction because the author creates ideal situations in which to teach valuable lessons in life, whereas non-fiction presents itself as truth when it is nothing but carefully selected facts and wishful thinking that support the writer's ego.

Naturally, I was awed by this philosophic deluge from such a relatively young man; he was only twenty-two and this was his first year of teaching, which he liked, but was saddened by the impertinence, laziness and lack of moral fibre of most students. Equally naturally, being in lust I dismissed any of my ideas that conflicted with his and made further plans for his seduction.

After school on Friday I jammed my school uniform in my locker and changed into a pair of low-slung running shorts. Not the sort with the crotch hanging halfway to the knees that makes the wearer look deformed, but the latest style in which the top is severely cut down so there's only about fifteen centimetres from crotch to drawstring. They're made of thin, soft material; not baggy, just loose enough to slip on and off easily. Even pulled up the maximum there's always a sexy bum cleavage. It was a hot afternoon so I stuffed my tank top with my Speedos in the army surplus knapsack I use as a schoolbag. On my feet a pair of leather thong sandals almost the same colour as my skin. They're so soft and light it feels and looks as if I've got bare feet. I work out a lot on the horizontal and parallel bars every day so my chest and the so-called 'Greek muscle' that goes from over the hips down to the crotch are well developed. I look best naked, but very low-slung shorts are fine because they draw attention to my good points. Yes, I'm a bit vain, but blame Loic and my mirror—both told me I look irresistible.

Careful planning ensured I 'accidentally' ran into Mr. Andros in the street near his lodgings as he was returning home from school. I gave him a huge grin, I have excellent teeth, and he seemed pleased to see me, but nervously suggested I didn't let my shorts slip any lower because passers by were turning to stare.

'Do they look shocked?' I asked.

'No, no! Not at all... but...'

'Are you shocked?'

'No, no... it's just... I can see your... and the shape of your...' He coughed to hide his embarrassment. 'You're not wearing underpants!' he blurted.

'Of course not. I'm a free spirit.'

'Ah! A free spirit. Most of us have to work hard to attain that state.'

At that moment a shirtless young man on a skateboard zipped between us, so close we could feel the wind of his passage.

'Yo Asa! Hi Mr. Andros!' he shouted.

I just had time to note a slim brown body, short curly hair and perfectly formed legs before he hit the kerb and ended on his back. I raced forward and pulled him to his feet, holding onto his elbow with one hand and placing the other on his shoulder in case he needed support. He didn't, but he also didn't shrug me off; just looked into my eyes, grinned and thanked me.

'You stupid boy, Zeccinelli! Mr. Andros fumed. 'You might have hit us.'

'But I didn't, I crashed instead,' he said unapologetically. With a practised flick of his toe he set his skateboard upright, winked at me and, waving cheekily, disappeared along the pavement.

'Who was that?' I asked.

'Mario Zeccinelli,' Mr. Andros said tersely. 'He's as annoying in class as on the street.'

'What class?' I demanded, amazed I hadn't met this cute, sexy guy seeing we went to the same school. I also wondered how he knew my name, and felt proud that he did.

'Year eleven, top stream,' Mr. Andros replied shortly. 'Too smart for his boots, that one. He'll end up badly I predict. Skating round the city half naked.'

'No more naked than me,' I said with what I hoped was a winning smile.

'Compared to you, he's overdressed,' he said with a tight smile, 'he left something to the imagination. The fact that you are not impertinent, however, redeems you.'

‘Thank you, Sir,’ I smiled, delighted at my redemption.

‘But why do you expose yourself like this in public?’ he asked with a frown.

‘Because it exemplifies the Ancient Greek ideal.’

‘Greek ideal?’

‘They did sport naked to show their healthy bodies. But how can I show the world I’ve a healthy mind as well?’

‘I don’t know, you tell me,’ he said irritably.

‘That I dare to walk around like this indicates I’m blessed with a nonconformist mind, which I reckon equates to a healthy one. Don’t you agree?’

‘Mens sana in corpore sano.’ He barked a short laugh and looked at me critically for the first time. ‘You’ve a very fine body, Asa; a firm abdomen, fine skin—and a sharp mind; it’s just...’

‘Don’t worry,’ I laughed, ‘my shorts are well anchored, see?’ I gave them a tug downwards, pretending not to notice they slipped another centimetre. I’m not only a bit vain, but also a bit of an exhibitionist if I think the audience will appreciate it.

His eyes popped a little but an all too human desire to prove he was also liberated and nonconformist prevented him from telling me to pull them back up. Instead, he looked around nervously then led me quickly across the street to the park and a shaded seat where he said he often sat and read. Away from the gaze of strangers he relaxed and once more held forth on the virtuous life and the necessity of balancing mind and body. My attention wandered to the shouts of kids at the swimming pool at the far end of the park.

‘Do you like swimming?’ I asked when he paused for breath,

He professed to adore it so I told him the public pool would be reserved for adults in half an hour, so we could go then. He agreed and we set off to get his togs. On the way he said it was silly for me to keep calling him Mr. Andros, his name was Melvyn. I suppressed a grin. Things were progressing very nicely on the seduction front, although I was no longer quite so desperate having decided to get to know sexy, skateboarding Mario on Monday at school.

Mrs. Spurdle, Melvyn’s ancient, wrinkled and diminutive landlady, was brewing herself a pot of tea in the kitchen. She gazed in cheeky appreciation at my crotch and chest and asked hopefully if we wanted tea and if I was staying to dinner. Melvyn seemed irritated and snapped, ‘No thanks! Of course he isn’t!’ and went to change his clothes.

Mrs. Spurdle tilted her head like a curious parrot. ‘If you jump up and down will your shorts fall down?’

‘I don’t know... shall I do it and see?’

‘Yes, please.’ Her smile was wicked.

I have to admit I’m a sucker for admiration and I also like giving nice people pleasure, so as the old girl was saucy and perky and I liked her, I kicked off my sandals, secretly loosened the drawstring and jumped. They slithered to the floor. ‘Goodness,’ I said as if surprised. ‘It’s lucky I did that in front of a sensible person—imagine this had happened on the street—I’d be run in.’ To give her a decent look, I stepped out of them and pretended to check the waistband to see if the drawstring had given way.

‘You’d be mobbed by every woman nearby,’ she laughed. ‘Oh, Asa. You’re such a breath of fresh air! Everyone I meet seems to be so stuffy and straitlaced; ready to criticise anyone who has fun and doesn’t take life seriously. You’ve made my day. I haven’t seen one of those since Mr. Spurdle fell off the roof and broke his neck thirty years ago. Thank you so much. You deserve a biscuit.’ She handed me a plate of home made shortbread and a cup of tea.

We sipped and munched and then she said thoughtfully, ‘I never imagined Melvyn would find a lively friend like you. In fact,’ she said with a sniff of disdain, ‘I was beginning to wonder if there was something wrong with him. He spends so much time in his room on his own, never goes out, seems to have no friends. Not even a girlfriend so I was beginning to suspect...’ She let the sentence hang in the air.

‘What?’ I asked feigning innocence.

‘Nothing, dear. Anyway, you’re so obviously a real man I was clearly wrong.’

By the time Melvyn returned wearing baggy beige shorts that did not look as if they were slipping off, and a grey T-shirt, my shorts were back on and I was laughing at one of Mrs. Spurdle’s irreverent tales about her eccentric husband.

‘You seemed to hit it off with old Ma Spurdle,’ he said waspishly on the way to the pool. ‘Did she talk about me?’

‘She’s pleased you brought a friend home,’ I replied diplomatically.

‘Yes,’ he said reflectively. ‘I believe we are friends. We seem to have much in common.’

I wondered how he’d worked that out; so far he hadn’t asked me anything about myself. Perhaps he was psychic.

After the dreadful baggy beige shorts, Melvyn looked superb in his Speedos. Slim, tanned, perfectly proportioned, a light dusting of hairs on chest and legs, obviously fit and healthy with a reassuring bulge at the crotch. My lust was reignited. We swam a few lengths. I dived from the low board, he climbed the tower and with no discernible hesitation walked to the edge and leapt—something I was too chicken to do. I always imagine I’ll turn over in the air and break my back on landing. Watching his lean and graceful form hurtling through space triggered an erection and when we dragged ourselves onto the warm tiles at the side of the pool to relax I didn’t bother to conceal it. Melvyn glanced down, then across the pool to where several young women in thongs and tiny tit-holders were laughing too loud and casting come-hither glances in our direction.

‘I see you are susceptible to lust, Asa,’ he said seriously. ‘I believe we can only achieve spiritual harmony if we learn to control and mould our minds in the same way as we do our bodies, do you agree?’

‘Of course,’ I replied, a little irritated by his patronising tone. ‘Those women aren’t the reason for my hard on—they do nothing for me. No females do.’ This was a first for me, practically admitting I was gay, and my heart hammered furiously from fear that he’d curse me for a pervert.

But he didn’t seem to have heard. Instead, he placed a long-fingered hand on my thigh and said placatingly, ‘I apologise, Asa. I’d forgotten what it was like to be sixteen. I now recall the raging hormones that kept me in a constant state of arousal in my teens. I guess I was slightly shocked that you don’t bother to conceal it, but on reflection I realise your attitude to such a natural phenomenon is very healthy and does you great credit. It further indicates a strong spirit and healthy mind. I wonder if we are soul-mates.’

I’ve never considered myself spiritual, and have always doubted the existence of souls, but being praised for having an erection certainly didn’t make it go down! Nor did the pleasant sensation of his hand on my thigh. I was obviously expected to say something, but what? On an impulse I placed my hand on top of his and, looking into his deep brown eyes said sincerely, ‘Melvyn, you are very handsome and have a beautiful spirit.’

Without even a hint of embarrassment at the outrageous compliment he nodded seriously. ‘I try my best,’ he said. ‘But we all need assistance from outside ourselves to reach our full potential and attain true beauty of spirit.’

Imagining I was to be his assistant in developing his full potential, I smiled in the delicious afternoon warmth and leaned back on my elbows to better display the evidence of my strong spirit and healthy mind. Melvyn remained sitting, his hand still resting on my thigh as we gazed with benign condescension at all the unhealthy bodies containing unhealthy minds. A grossly fat man waddling past was the trigger for Melvyn to leap abruptly to his feet and announce that we should celebrate the meeting of true minds with an ice-cream. Pulling our shorts over our togs we set off for an ice-cream parlour. Between licks Melvyn suggested that we couldn’t rely on accidental meetings after school; we should make an appointment to get to know each other better. Breathlessly, I agreed.

‘Tomorrow afternoon, perhaps? Mrs. Spurdle plays Bridge on Saturdays until five o’clock, so we’ll have the place to ourselves.’

‘Excellent!’ I said. ‘What time?’

‘One o’clock?’

Manu and Francis congratulated me on my progress to date, but held their tongues when I told them about Melvyn's ideas and our spiritual bond.

'If everything turns out as you hope, then you must invite him here for dinner,' Manu said.

'Indeed,' Francis laughed, 'I can't wait to meet this soulful paragon of spiritual virtue.'

Such was my lust that not even their sly digs could diminish my excitement and on the dot of one, having shaved, showered and deodorised with care, I knocked at Melvyn's door. He was dressed in grey slacks and a white shirt, which made me feel a tad underdressed in shorts and tank top. He led me into a large, dim, peaceful lounge with open French windows that gave onto a garden shaded by giant Moreton Bay figs. Unsure what to do, I stood and gazed at the tranquil scene. He stood behind me, placing his hands on my bare shoulders.

We stood thus for several seconds allowing our spirits to mingle, I suppose, but my impatience took over. Clearly, he was too shy to make the first move, so I turned, took him in my arms and crushed my lips against his.

Instantly I was thrust back, tripped over a low table and ended on the floor.

'What are you doing?' he shouted. 'What madness has entered your brain?'

I struggled to my feet. 'I thought that's what you wanted.'

'What?'

'I thought you were gay and wanted to have sex with me?'

'Are you totally insane? We agreed to assist each other to purify our spirits through communion with a higher sphere! To ensure the health and purity of our minds!'

'I'm sorry,' I stuttered, retreating before his outraged fury. 'But what was I to think when you put your hand on my thigh at the pool and told me I was handsome and we were soul-mates?'

'You're nothing but a whore,' he whispered venomously, 'to impute such disgusting intentions from my innocent words and touch.'

Unprepared for such irrationality I could think of no defence, so fled.

Both Manu and Francis managed to contain their laughter. With twitching lips they assured me they thought I'd behaved exceedingly well in the circumstances. Francis said he'd have thumped the twerp, and Manu agreed.

At school the following Monday I spied Mario sitting alone on the ground under a tree. I went over and plonked myself down beside him.

'Giddy, Mario.'

He turned and grinned. 'Asa! Great to see you. Sorry about the other day.'

'I'm not,' I replied. 'You rescued me from that bore, Andros.'

'Don't tell me you think I'm more interesting than him!'

'More interesting, more handsome, sexier...' I looked away and paused in panic. What the fuck had I just said? Any second now he'd be shouting 'Asa's a queer' across the playground. The silence grew and I dared to look at him.

He giggled and smiled in exactly the right way, so I asked if he'd like to go to the flicks with me. He would, and now he spends most weekends at our place. I must say it's very pleasant and relaxing to have a lover one's own age.
