

AWAKENING

the lost woman

(book one of the lost woman trilogy)

august
XXIX

Anna Buckley

WARNING – This book contains explicit sexual content and language that may be offensive to some readers.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy this book as much as I loved writing and researching it.

My life has been spent working in design but now I have a new interest – story telling.

Home is Melbourne Australia. I love to cook, eat and drink wine with friends. I like to travel but am equally happy exploring the streets of inner city Melbourne, where the book is largely set.

I dedicate this book to my husband who lovingly encouraged and supported me while I wrote.

Thank you to Mary Lou for being an unfaltering listener, Karlene for being the first reader, and most importantly to Karyn, my editor and life long friend, whose wise words and vision kept me on track.

Lastly I must warn you this book may not suit those who find graphic descriptions of sex and strong language offensive. But for the rest of you, happy reading,

Anna Buckley

P.S.

to keep abreast of what I am doing, and for stories behind the books, visit my blog at annabuckley.com

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Part 1

The Funeral

Another tedious dinner. Tuning in and out of boring conversations, pretending to care.

Sitting beside me, his arm brushes my shoulder, the charge of an illicit touch. He talks to the stranger next to him, his voice, the sound of seduction. Beneath my dress he strokes my leg.

My body hungry.

'Follow me,' he whispers discretely.

A few moments, waiting, so as not to arouse suspicion.

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Into the corridor, opening doors, peering into empty rooms, thrilled with the chase, searching. My longing grows.

Where could he be? I am frantic.

An open window. I lean forward, he grabs me from behind, slipping his hand into my dress, roughly teasing out a breast, his knee forcing my legs apart. My back arches, lower, I spread my legs wider, needing to feel him deeper, to fuck me to oblivion.

Where am I?

I feel my damp warm sex, then reach across an empty bed. No ruffled sheet warmed by a lover's body, no smell of sweat, of lust.

I am in my bed, alone, starved of affection, craving to be touched, to be desired, desperate for intimacy.

What would it be like to be made love to, to love passionately back? Who would want me?

A dream that taunts, inappropriately, this morning. My mind and body so disconnected.

A rude awakening to the day.

My eyes focus. I'm in our bedroom. A large oppressive dark green room, acanthus leaf wallpaper, elaborate ceiling rose, laboured carved fireplace. A mantle adorned with ostentatious ornamentation. His things, layers of his family's history.

Windows covered in rich velvet drapes blocking out the light. Is it sunny this morning?

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Heavy furniture, an overstuffed chair, his pants neatly folded, still draped across the back. He liked things to be tidy, orderly.

A rococo gilt framed portrait of his ancestor. Her beady eyes and weak chinned ugliness scowling at me every morning.

'Fuck off and leave me alone, I've had enough,' I tell her.

Layer upon layer of stultifying decoration threatening to suffocate me. I never really belonged here. Why had I chosen to stay?

I drag myself out of bed, into the shower, aware of the need to wash away the heat of my arousal and begin this dreadful day.

The drab outfits hang in my dressing room.

What do I wear to my husband's funeral?

In front of me a range of uninspired garments, the type of shapeless clothing favoured by women of a certain age. A wardrobe of blandness, things to disappear in. Nothing to wear.

When do women begin to disappear? I had become one of those nobodies, careworn and numb. Of course it would be black. A straight skirt, a tailored shirt, opaque tights and low heeled pumps. I pull my longish, mousey brown hair into a low bun and spray the few stray wisps. No make-up, it would smudge, just a few eye drops to take away the red. Crying for what had been lost. The mirror, something usually avoided, reflects the face of someone I no longer recognise.

Why have I let this happen?

Who am I?

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I am thirty nine, not old enough to be dressing like this and not old enough to be a widow.

From my second storey window I could see the silver Mercedes bearing the name of the funeral parlour, pulling up to the portico. The flower beds brilliant with colour, the vast lawns mowed, the hedges clipped, ancient trees towering over this well kept garden, orderly, managed. He liked it this way.

'Kate, the car is here, are you ready?'

'Yes, mum,' replied my precious, quiet, eighteen year old daughter.

'Come on darling, let's go and face this together,' I said, hugging her.

The drive was a quick one through Melbourne's leafy eastern suburbs. Stately Victorian mansions and Federation villas lining the roads. Hedges and gates keeping the undesirables out.

Throughout these suburbs were the prestigious private schools their children attended. Where appropriate alliances could be made, occasionally letting the new money in when the inheritances were diminishing.

We drove slowly through the grand entrance, along a tree lined drive, past manicured lawns surrounding the imposing old bluestone buildings. We stopped in front of the cathedral like chapel at his school. The car park was full.

They were all there inside the church. His old mates, their fathers, the wives, his clients, shocked and numb that Paul Brown, was dead at forty. Fate had played the same trick on Paul's father, Charles, who had also

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suffered a heart attack just thirteen years ago. They must have wondered at the injustice of so much loss for one family.

We made the long march down the aisle. I could feel Kate recoiling from such a public procession and reached for her hand. Eventually we arrived at the front pew and sat down next to Paul's mother, Margot Brown.

Margot knew how to dress for such an occasion. A smart black Chanel suit, pearls, elegant heels, a discreet amount of make-up on her regal face. Her hair fashionably grey, stylishly back combed. Cruella, Lucretia, they were the secret names I had given her.

She looked over at me coldly and I imagined she must be thinking that soon we could end this charade. But for now, we must play the roles of the stoic, but contained widow and grieving mother.

The priest presided over a solemn ceremony. His friends eulogised about their boyhood antics. Talking more about themselves than Paul, unable to find interesting things to say about this dull, quiet, man. No reminiscing with final favourite anthems, just standard hymns and when the Lord was finally My Shepherd, it was over.

Kate and I walked into the grand reception room of our Victorian mansion where they had gathered for the wake. All was ready. I would be on show, judged.

The house was immaculate, perfectly prepared. The heavy antique furniture had been polished. Flowers from the garden had been appropriately arranged.

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The kitchen was ready with porcelain cups and saucers waiting to be filled by the women from Kate's school who had volunteered to help. Women whom I had met when I joined their committees, thinking I'd made a connection, when really I was just good at getting the hard work done.

'Chris, you're amazing, I don't know how you do it.'

I had spent most of yesterday cooking. Food was my sanctuary, what else was there to do?

Spread before me was a perfectly laid table groaning with plates of tiny sausage rolls, tartlets, dainty crustless sandwiches, small cakes. Finger food that was easily popped into the mouth, very neat, no mess, food they understood.

This is what I knew, working hard to be accepted, trying to be one of them, seeking their approval.

I headed into the crowd of people, ready to be subjected to their schadenfreude platitudes. A discrete squeeze, an insincere hug from the blonde bobbed women who knew their roles.

'Chris, we're so sorry.'

'You know we're here for you.'

'Please let us know if there is anything we can do to help.'

The 'we' referring to the non committal, collective group, not the 'I' of true care and affection. The men not knowing where to look, offering emotionless one word condolences. Words to a woman who wasn't one of them, none of them real friends.

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Numb to it all, I wished to escape, felt like running, screaming outside, to get away from this stifling pretence. If only they knew what was really going on inside my head.

The day dragged on, then, after a polite amount of time had passed, the rooms began to empty. I wanted them to go so Kate and I could have the place to ourselves, retreat into quietness.

But it was not to be, the doorbell was ringing.

Who could be here this late? I wished everybody would just piss off and leave us alone.

The door burst open, startling the stragglers.

'Cara mia, Christina, darling.'

With arms outstretched racing towards me, she was here, my beautiful friend Lola. The crying, the intensity of her hug, the outpouring of grief. At last someone who understood.

'I came on the first flight available. I couldn't stand knowing you were alone. Are you ok? Where's Katie?'

A whirlwind of words and emotion.

'Thank God you're here,' I whispered.

When Lola finally let go I could see she had been followed by her family. They too embraced me and for the first time in days I felt safe, protected, loved. They went straight to the kitchen.

I had farewelled most of the mourners. Only Paul's closest friends remained, his best mate and business partner, Justin Darcy, his wife

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Fiona and Justin's twin brother Adam. Justin and Fiona hovered obsequiously around Margot, the dowager. They knew it was their duty to remain, to wait till she was ready to be driven home. I longed for them to leave and wished they didn't feel a compunction to stay. Hopefully the arrival of the Italians would give them the excuse they needed to depart.

I was surprised to see Adam. He was rarely in Australia, spending most of his time overseas supervising his global empire. He had become a kind of Machiavellian hero amongst his old school friends. They envied him. For the seemingly endless supply of money and the rich man's toys it bought. For the beautiful women, parading on his arm, (and crudely fantasised about by these men in their sad wet dreams). But above all of this they admired him for his intuitive brilliance in business. I would overhear them talking about his latest acquisition. Of his ability to buy struggling companies, stripping their assets, selling them off and profiteering spectacularly. He had a fierce reputation. Mining companies, undervalued, purchased before the China boom, now worth billions. Even the G.F.C. had been kind to him, cheap property, cheap money, a massive buying spree in Europe and America had seen his wealth increase enormously. Cashed up and ready to invest in whatever the next boom would be, the money men watched his every move. People were in awe of his Midas touch. They were surprised he had achieved so much. His wealth far exceeded that of his father. Had he become his father? It took a certain kind of sociopath to be that good. It didn't surprise me at all.

Adam was ageing well. His tall, lean body exuded arrogance and power. His hair was peppered with grey, adding to his dark, brooding, good looks. He dressed immaculately, beautifully cut charcoal suit, dark

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shirt, tie, handmade shoes, black rimmed glasses framing his chiselled face. He seemed cold and distant, he hadn't changed.

Adam looked down at Christina acknowledging her loss with a melancholic shaking of the head, unable to find the appropriate words. He knew the circumstances of their meeting and why she looked drawn, tired, but it was more than that. He barely recognised her. He hadn't seen her since the wedding eighteen years ago.

He remembered the time he'd dropped by her place in Brunswick. At how aroused he had been by her beauty and sense of style, by her. Where was that feisty young woman now? She looked lost, a vacant shell. What was the real story? He wanted to stay, to talk to her, alone.

'I'm sorry for your loss. Paul was a good man. Please let me know if I can help in any way. Here's my number.'

I was surprised by what seemed to be a sincere gesture of condolence. I couldn't imagine what would provoke me to ever ask for his help. He was one of them and I couldn't wait for them all to be out of my life.

He took my hand and shook it, then unexpectedly embraced me, his firm body and strong arms holding me for what seemed a bit too long.

'I mean it, Christina, don't hesitate to call,' he whispered, then left.

Justin was looking more than his forty years. Stooped, overweight frame, thinning hair, with the pasty complexion of a man who spent too much time indoors, conjuring up his next deal. Fiona looked harsh, hardened.

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What would happen now that Paul was dead? With no son to take over, who would inherit the company? Would I be forced to do business with this ugly man and his scheming, undermining wife?

Adam had started the final exodus.

'Christina, I'm exhausted. Justin take me home,' Margot commanded and with that they were granted permission to depart.

I stood at the door being offered perfunctory kisses and then, thank God, they were gone. At last I could let my guard down, relax.

Desperate for a drink and a chance to talk to Lola, I returned to the kitchen. The mess had been cleared by the ladies. In its place a very different scene awaited. At the stove was Lola's papa, Massimo, stirring a pot of something that smelt delicious. Sitting around the broad marble bench, Gabriella, Lola's exquisitely beautiful mama, was snuggling Kate into her warm embrace. Raphael, her older brother, with an opened bottle of wine and a glass in his outstretched hand, offered me a drink.

'Thanks, you've got no idea how much I need this.'

They knew.

'Darling, I bet you've not eaten all day. Massimo has made a ragu. Here, eat,' said Gabriella, gesturing to her husband to hand out bowls filled with the food she knew I craved.

Not much was said. It felt so good just having this family around me. It was what I needed right now. The fridge was filled with the food they had lovingly prepared. They told me they would come over to check on us.

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And when they could see the food and wine was doing its job, they understood it was time to leave.

We said our goodbyes at the car and I walked alone back down the driveway.

I was about to shut the front door when Raphael came running back.

'Christina.'

'What Raphael?' I replied, tired but curious.

He held my shoulders, looked me in the eye then kissed me, deeply, sexually charged.

He whispered huskily in my ear, 'I will help you, set you free.'

And with that he disappeared.

The Realisation

I woke, my head cloudy, not so much with the events of the last few days, but trying to make sense of what Raphael had said. What had provoked this behaviour, so soon after the death of my husband?

Had Raphael Finestra propositioned me? He seemed to be inferring he would guide me, set me free. Had he seen through the charade? Or had I dreamt the whole scene? What was more perplexing was that Raphael had kissed me. He'd always seemed sexually ambiguous. Not gay, not straight, but filled with a lustiness that affected both men and

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women. He was ridiculously handsome, desired by many, yet strangely he'd chosen to kiss me.

Confused, I got up and walked towards the mirror. How could anyone behave that way, think that way about the woman whose reflection I saw? What's more, he was a man with whom I had only ever felt a brotherly connection, one I thought was reciprocated.

A steaming hot shower brought me back to reality. Raphael had exposed my fraudulence, the lie that my life had become. For the first time in eighteen years I was ready to confront the truth.

Eighteen years ago I had made a decision that I thought was right. Paul had loved me and I thought I could change, grow to love him. But it was not to be. In the end ours became a partnership where we seemed to care so little about each other, neither of us could be bothered leaving.

His death had released me.

I thought that managing the family home and pouring all my love upon our beautiful daughter, Kate, would be enough. Being the wife of Paul Brown had become a full time job. I was always being observed. They were all waiting, his mother, his friends, waiting for me to falter. So I played the role of 'good wife' to perfection, just to prove them wrong. I would not fail.

A quiet, subservient mouse who followed their rules strictly. This is who I'd become.

I had not always been this person.

Dress ups

I grew up on an isolated small farm near a town called Greenhope, in the dry mallee scrub of western Victoria. My dad, Edward Maxwell, inherited the farm from his father and had returned to the land after failing to make it in the city. My mum Mary, met Dad at a dance in Melbourne and was so charmed that she followed him back.

Dad worked hard to keep the farm going from one year to the next, drought and debt always hovering in the background. Men like my father were burdened by their obligation to keep the family farm, not wanting to be the son who lost the battle. No money, no ponies, no rolling green fields, no rural idyll.

It was a hard, monotonous life. Dad didn't seem to fit, he was tall, gentle, quite handsome and had delicate 'piano playing' hands.

My birth, twelve years after they married, ended the longing of a couple who desired a child more than anything they knew. I was much adored. The love that engulfed me came from two people who felt they had been given a precious gift.

They were much older and had little in common with the other parents of the town. They cherished each other's company and lived very privately in their own quiet little world.

As a child I had a happy life. My fondest memory was of playing dress ups. My mother had been a fifties beauty. With a somewhat misguided notion of what country life was, she brought to the farm a large trunk filled with the ball gowns from her past. I would dress up, Dad would put on records, play the piano and we would all dance and sing along to old musicals.

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'What do you want to be when you grow up, Christina?' they would ask.

'I want to go to the big city where I can make beautiful dresses for all the pretty ladies,' I replied.

For a brief moment we thought our luck had changed. A new road was to be built, bypassing Greenhope. The official said the road would pass right through the middle of our farm. The government would buy our land and my father could make a gracious exit from the life that had tied him down for so long.

A letter arrived.

They had made a 'mistake' they happily informed us. The road would pass in front of the house and we would be free to keep farming.

The road was noisy. They paid for metal shutters to cover the windows, to help block the unrelenting hum of traffic, the house became dark. We felt even more trapped.

I was curious about the city, fantasising about the land of Oz, where all that traffic was heading.

Nobody bothered to take the exit to Greenhope anymore. The next town, Smithfield, was only twenty miles away. The road went through its broad main street. That's where all the travellers stopped and the town thrived.

In Greenhope the shops closed, businesses failed and the people became more insular. No place for a dreamer like me.

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The road and its destination became even more tantalising.

The Student

I quite liked school when I first started, excited to explore a world beyond the farm. Greenhope Area School was in the middle of town and tried to meet the needs of all the kids in the surrounding districts. But this was a near impossible task. It was a small school with limited resources and a narrow range of subjects.

Lots of kids started, very few finished. The first exodus was at the end of year six when the wealthier families sent their kids to boarding school. This is when childhood friendships began to disintegrate, where we started to understand our status in life. At age fifteen another group would leave, the children of middle class families who had saved for the better education a private school could offer. At the same time the young apprentices and the sons of poorer farmers would begin their working lives and some girls began their unfortunate gamble with motherhood. By the end of year eleven, the 'nice' girls took up the much prized jobs in town, pharmacy assistant, doctor's receptionist, vet nurse. They were considered very suitable marriage material. Mothers of the town's good sons kept watch. By year twelve only a few kids remained. Girls who wanted to become teachers, clever boys who may join the armed services, become policemen or at a push enter university. And then there were people like me, the misfits, who no one really understood, let alone knew how to categorise. Where did I belong? I didn't play sport, didn't

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share their taste in music, dressed differently, was smart and longed to leave. I dreamed of the unbounded possibilities a life away from Greenhope might offer.

Every year new teachers would be sent to our school, an undesired country location. Time spent in Greenhope was considered penance. No one wanted to be posted here. To compensate, the teachers who came earned points and were rewarded by getting their choice of school when they returned to the city.

The yearly parade of new recruits was good for quiet speculation. Who would last, who would need to be transferred and who of the younger female primary school teachers might find a suitable husband? These educated women were valued. They were welcomed into the homes of the establishment families, the government wage came in handy during the lean years.

Some of the younger teachers would give me tantalising glimpses of the outside world, their dress, their travel stories, the food they ate and the music they played. Few would mix, they kept to themselves, most would return to Melbourne on the weekends. Inevitably I would feel cheated by their condescension, their patronising attitudes and their eventual desertion. None of the interesting ones stayed.

Occasionally we would be sent young student teachers who naively thought they could change the world, or Greenhope at least.

During the middle of year eleven, Ryan, or Mr. Summerland arrived. He was twenty two years old and in his final year at teachers' college. I was sixteen. He had long blond curly hair, wore an earring and a leather band around his wrist. He liked to surf and loved photography. The girls

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fell in love with him and the boys called him 'gay'. That was the term they gave to any male who dared to be different.

Mr Summerland came up with the idea of a photography camp to the seaside town of Lorne, directly south on the Great Ocean Road. He knew not many of us got the chance to go to the beach. And that is how a few parents, teachers and a ragtag group of students found themselves, hundreds of miles from home, camping in the caravan park on the foreshore of this picturesque seaside town.

The students cared little about photography. The camp was the perfect opportunity to get away from the heat and dust, to hang out with their mates. Holiday romances blossomed amongst the horny teenagers. Teachers and parents went to the pub most nights. Only Mr Summerland and I seemed to be interested in photographing or drawing the beach.

He knew the area well. His family had been coming to their holiday house here for years. When he could not tempt the other kids away from the trampolines, the shops, the main street action, we went to his favourite surfing spot alone. The remaining adults happy to be left to sleep off their hangovers. School trips were very different back then.

The beach was magnificent, not a soul in sight, clear bright blue winter light, damp salty air, the roar of the sea, my senses alive. I took my sketch pad, drew shells, found smooth rocks polished by the sea and picked up small pieces of driftwood that caught my eye. Occasionally I glanced up as he surfed. After some time he came back and sat next to me, looking at the drawings, seeing through my eyes what I'd discovered on the beach.

'Why do you get into that freezing cold water? You hardly catch any waves, I don't get it.'

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He paused and looked out toward the ocean before he answered.

'I feel free when I'm out there. I like floating on my board, it gives me time to think. And when I do catch the perfect wave, I like the adrenalin rush. It makes me feel alive. It's quite addictive, you should try it.'

'Nah, I wouldn't like it. It's not my thing. I'd be hopeless. And anyway, we hardly ever get to the beach.'

'Fair enough. Well, what is it then that Christina Maxwell does to escape? What do you dream about? What makes you feel alive?'

I was too embarrassed to say. I had learnt not to talk about my ambitions beyond school. A conversation about such a fanciful idea would often result in unrelenting teasing. I had become conditioned to keep my mouth shut, only my parents supported my dream.

'Nothing really,' was my unconvincing reply.

'Bullshit! I don't believe you. You're not like the others. I've seen you spending your time in the art room, the library, armed with loads of books. What do you really do during that time?'

My heart skipped a beat. He'd said 'bullshit', he'd used a word not spoken between a teacher and a student. The informality felt strange and kind of exhilarating.

'Draw, sketch ideas. I want to go to Melbourne, to study clothes,' I clumsily babbled.

'Fashion design. How come?' he continued, smiling.

'Don't know, maybe it's a bit like what you said about surfing. I feel free when I design dresses, imagine a world where they might be worn.'

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'Not many of the girls at school even think about a life beyond the town. What makes you so different?'

'My mother, she was from Melbourne originally. She has a trunk full of amazing clothes. We used them as dress ups when I was a kid. I liked how it made me feel when I transformed myself with her beautiful gowns. I don't really fit in here.'

He didn't laugh or mock me, but just sat there with an understanding look on his face. I liked that I'd found someone to talk to. I trusted him.

The next day it rained. Predator and Full Metal Jacket were screening at the Lorne cinema. This was a real treat for the kids of Greenhope. Our town had no movie theatre, not even a video store, so the offer of an afternoon at the movies was eagerly anticipated. Mr Summerland sensed my lack of enthusiasm and volunteered to take me to the local gallery.

Unfortunately it was closed and would not reopen until the summer crowds returned in December.

'Doesn't matter. We could go to my place, I think you'll be interested.'

It was a house like nothing I'd ever seen before. Two huge glass, concrete and steel rectangular boxes set into the cliff, suspended high above the ocean. Inside the main wing a wall of glass gave uninterrupted views of the vast stormy sky and the raging ocean below. It was a space filled with light and life. Even the furniture was unfamiliar, designed to fit the uncluttered space, minimalist, functional. So modern, so strange, more like a gallery than a house.

'Wow!' was all I could say.

It was so unlike the old, dark cottage I shared with my parents.

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'It's pretty good, isn't it? My father's an architect. He built it in 1961 when he'd just graduated. His parents owned the land.'

I couldn't believe it was twenty six years old, nothing about it seemed old fashioned or dated.

It was truly majestic, sitting so defiantly in this wild landscape, letting in the light, the views, yet protecting us from the tempestuous weather outside.

'It's this house as much as the surf that keeps me coming back here,' he said proudly.

I could perfectly understand why.

The walls were adorned with photographs and art, all originals. I had no words to describe such luxury.

We spent a wonderful afternoon drawing, looking through art books, talking about the future. He told me about his favourite streets, galleries and restaurants in Melbourne. Painted pictures in my mind of what I could expect. The lure of the city became even more tantalising. Mr Summerland had made it real. I was glad he had come to our town to tell me what my future could be like, that it was just around the corner and all I had to do was wait.

The end of the year was looming. The careers teacher felt obliged to take us to Melbourne and reluctantly the students followed. Most couldn't see the point. Their lives had already been planned. They didn't like Melbourne and couldn't understand why anyone would want to live there. Cities were foreign hostile places.

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Mr Summerland's time at the school had finished. He would accompany us on the trip, but remain in Melbourne to finish his final exams. I dreaded the thought of what my final weeks at school would be like without him. Who would I talk to when he was gone? Who would understand?

We stayed in the gym of an inner city school, it was a swap. We felt like country hicks. The Melbourne kids were supposedly getting a taste of country life. I shuddered to think of the entertainment the locals would provide.

Mr Summerland took a group of us to Melbourne Uni. They made us wear our school uniform, I felt like a stupid kid, we all felt out of place.

The cafeteria was even more confounding, food I'd never eaten, people who looked different. He sensed our discomfort and ordered for us. People he knew came and chatted, he introduced us as his students and they dismissed us with casual disregard.

'Who was that woman with the piercings? Was she your girlfriend?' I asked, slightly wary of the cool woman who had just left us. I had become very possessive of our relationship.

'No, no, that's Zoe, we share a house,' and instantly my premature jealousy abated.

A day of visiting universities saw my fellow students restless with boredom, so the teachers decided a trip to the state sports centre the following day would be more entertaining. I groaned at the thought.

Mr Summerland volunteered to take a group to the National Gallery on Saint Kilda Road and once again I was the only participant. I could barely contain my enthusiasm.

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He introduced me to paintings I'd only seen in books and took me to galleries filled with modern masters. My first Picasso, Kandinsky, I almost cried at the madness of what I saw and loved.

'I can't believe you have this reaction. Most people just don't get this type of art. They find it too confronting. They fear things they don't understand. It's usually the McCubbins and the turn of the century chocolate box shit that gets people worked up,' he said conspiratorially.

I liked his irreverence.

We had walked through all the galleries, seen the exhibitions and had no plans for the afternoon.

'I've got an idea.'

'What?'

'Do you want to see my old college, it's just down the road.'

'Sure,' and I followed him to the campus just a few hundred metres away.

He had studied at the Victorian School of Art.

'So why did you become a teacher?'

'My parents. They thought I needed something safer, knew how hard it would be to make a living as a painter. I'm doing my diploma now, training to be a teacher. I'm doing it at Melbourne Uni and live just around the corner in Carlton.'

'So why aren't you doing it here?'

'They don't offer it, it's just for art.'

'You mean that's all they do here? Art for the sheer hell of it, no strings attached?'

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'Yeah, that's about it in a nutshell. Want to have a look around?'

He took me into the studios and I marvelled at such a place. Just as we were about to leave he bumped into one of his old lecturers, who asked if we'd like to join a drawing class. Without hesitation I nodded enthusiastically.

We positioned ourselves in front of two spare easels. I was wondering what the subject matter might be, when a tall man dressed in a robe walked into the room. The lecturer introduced the model and to my complete and utter horror the man let the robe drop. It was a life drawing class. I didn't know where to look. I had never seen a naked man before.

'You ok?' he said, sensing my extreme discomfort.

'Jesus Mr Summerland! What the hell am I supposed to do? Where do I start?'

'Ryan, call me Ryan, we're not in school now. Just watch what I do,' he said, smiling at my reaction.

I watched as Ryan started faintly sketching, mapping out a rough outline of the body, then slowly filling in the detail. I tried to follow suit, but couldn't concentrate. I kept being drawn to the model's penis, glancing then quickly looking away, embarrassed by my voyeurism. I decided to focus on the torso, the well defined muscles on the model's chest, but still my eyes wandered past his navel, to the dark curls of pubic hair, the soft penis dangling languidly from between his thighs.

I had lead such a sheltered life, no boyfriends, no clandestine sexual encounters, not even porn. The male body just wasn't something I had any experience of.

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After a twenty minute pose, the model left and we walked around looking at each other's drawings. Ryan talked to me about what worked and I came back to my easel feeling a little more confident.

The next model was a woman and this brought some relief to the anxiety I had experienced. Ryan started drawing and once again I was unsure of where to start.

He moved to my blank sheet of paper and sketched a line roughly marking out the angle of the woman's body as she lay stretched languorously on the mattress on the floor.

He took my hand and directed the charcoal I was holding.

'Look how the parts of the body are connected in relationship to that central line I've just drawn.'

He was right and suddenly what he was saying made sense. I flipped over the pages on the easel and drew with more confidence, thrilled with each new sketch, eagerly awaiting the next pose.

I was brought quickly back to reality when the lecturer thanked the model and asked us to finish up. I didn't want this day to end.

I rolled up the paper and wondered what on earth the rest of the kids from school would make of the drawings, of what I had just seen and felt.

It was well after five and I was starving. We walked back into the city. Ryan grabbed my hand as we negotiated the trams and the traffic on busy Bourke Street. He didn't let go until we reached the restaurant. Valentino looked far too posh for me. Men in suits and well dressed women, trophy wives, were seated in this elegant Italian restaurant. Again everyone looked so different, their clothing defining them. I wished I could've worn something more appropriate. Jeans seemed far too casual in this sophisticated place. At least they hadn't made us wear

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our uniform today and perhaps I could get away with not looking like the awkward school kid I knew I really was. Ryan ordered us a simple pasta dish and a glass of red wine. I felt so grown up. We chatted about the day and after a second glass of wine I confessed that I'd never seen a naked man before. He smiled and told me there always had to be a first time and he was sure it wouldn't be the last.

I imagined what it would be like to have a boyfriend. Someone more sophisticated than the stupid immature boys at school and fantasised about the possibilities of what might happen when I eventually moved to Melbourne.

After Valentino we sat at the bar of a fifties looking diner, Pietro's, and I sipped my first espresso, nothing like the instant coffee I was accustomed to. Then a little way up the street to a book store called The Artists Library, where I marvelled at the gorgeous art books.

It was getting late, we were supposed to meet the rest of the group back at the school library. Dinner at McDonalds had been planned. What a come down. I felt melancholic, knowing that our amazing day was coming to an end.

'Why the sad face?'

'Going back to them, to Greenhope. It's alright for you. You teachers think it's ok to fill our heads with all these possibilities, but you get to stay here in Melbourne. It fucks with my head. The thought of being stuck back there for another year makes me want to end it right away,' I pleaded somewhat melodramatically.

He understood.

'Let me make a call.'

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He walked up the road to the nearest phone booth, talking to a teacher perhaps, gesticulating, pleading my case? He returned smiling.

'No problems, told them I was taking you to a gallery, wouldn't finish till late. They said as long as I got you back before nine it would be ok.'

I clapped my hands with glee, thrilled that I wouldn't have to explain today to my fellow classmates, who by now would be eagerly awaiting their Big Macs.

'So what's the gallery?'

'Big new place near the university. A lecturer of mine is curating a new show of installation art. It opens tonight, thought you might be interested.'

'What's installation art?' I quizzed, completely unfamiliar with the term.

'Well, it's hard to describe. I guess you'd say it's not painting or sculpture, not art in the traditional sense. You'll understand when we get there.'

The high school where we were staying was near the university. I had spent the day in jeans and was pretty sure that a gallery opening required a change of dress. He waited outside as I changed.

'You look pretty,' he said.

I emerged, looking like Princess Diana, dressed more appropriately, or so I thought, for a gallery opening. I had made the dress myself, nothing like this could be bought in Greenhope.

'Actually, would you mind if we called past my place? I need to drop some of this stuff off,' he said, pointing to the roll of drawings he'd been carrying around all evening.

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My heart skipped a beat. He was taking me home. The tram on Swanston Street took us just past Melbourne university. We got off and walked the few streets till we reached his house. It was a two storey terrace, paint peeling, weeds in the garden, threadbare couch out the front. Inside it was just as run down. The rooms were filled with clutter, shabby furniture, posters on the walls. It smelt of dirty dishes and stale cigarette smoke. We went to the kitchen and he handed me a beer.

'Welcome to my share house,' he said rather apologetically.

We drank and slowly a procession of scruffy, radical and not so friendly tenants walked through. I felt like the uncool, overdressed country girl that I was. I didn't know what to say to them, and sensing my discomfort, Ryan took me to his room. It was quite spartan, a mattress on the floor, a desk, a wardrobe with a missing door and books stacked on the floor. Sanctuary.

He gestured to the bed, the only place to sit, loaded a pipe and put on some music.

'Here, want some?'

I took the device and copied what he was doing. I had never smoked weed before. He hit me on the back as I coughed away the burning, suffocating smoke.

'You ok?'

'Yeah, I'll be fine,' I said, barely audible, between gasps.

'You haven't smoked before?' he said, half questioning, half pleading.

'There's a lot of things I've never done before,' I replied, smiling as the drug quickly began to take effect.

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I don't know how long we sat there, silently, before there was a knock at the door.

It was Zoe, the girl from the cafeteria.

'Hey, what's up?'

'Just having a smoke before we go out. Want some?' said Ryan handing her the pipe.

'Thanks, where ya goin'?' she said, before inhaling deeply.

'Show at the uni gallery, wanna come?'

'Sure, what time?'

'About now,' he said, looking at his watch.

After a short walk we were back at the now familiar university campus and entering a big white gallery. The room was crowded with people, mostly wearing black, talking seriously amongst themselves, nodding knowingly at the art. I looked ridiculous in my preppy frock. My head was spinning from the effects of the drugs and I reached out and took Ryan's arm to steady myself.

'You ok?'

'Yeah, I'm fine, just a bit wobbly,' I said, inexplicably wanting to giggle, eyeing off the food being offered and thinking how hungry I'd become.

Zoe grinned.

We moved to the centre of the room where I got a closer look at what was being exhibited. I couldn't quite understand the meaning of the massive pile of coloured pencils randomly scattered like pick-up sticks on a white rubber mat. On the walls a video projection kept repeating a

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scene of a woman, naked, sitting then standing, up and down, up and down. Then in the centre of the room, a man, with a stuffed cat on his head, rode a bicycle around screaming out, 'THIS IS NOT ART'. The people clapped politely as he wheeled past.

They talked about the irony of the work.

Ryan was comfortable here. He understood their language and obviously thought I was now ok as he disengaged and walked towards the beautiful woman holding court in the centre of the room. He kissed her passionately. They were more than friends. I felt abandoned.

'What the fuck is this all about?' I mumbled, as I watched the incomprehensible circus unfold before me.

Never before in my entire life had I felt so out of place. I was bewildered, confused and suddenly very aware that this was not where I belonged. My schoolgirl fantasy had just been shattered. What kind of an idiot had I been? The drugs, the alcohol and the noisy, crowded room saw me run out the door like a frightened mouse, barely reaching the garden bed before I threw up.

'It's ok, don't cry, it's all been a bit too much,' said Zoe, rubbing my back, trying to comfort me.

I felt so embarrassed.

What a naive fool I was. Ryan Summerland was just my teacher, he already had a girlfriend. He took me to places to show me what was out there and all I could see now was they were not for me. I felt like a fraud, pretending all these years I was better than the people I grew up with, only to discover that the world I'd dreamt about was more foreign than I could comprehend. It didn't include simple country girls like me with no understanding of art or clothes or food or people.

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Zoe took me back to the school in her beaten up old car.

'This your first big trip to the city?'

'Pretty much.'

'Where are you from?'

'Greenhope.'

'Past Smithfield?'

'Yeah, you been there?'

'Driven past, lived further away near the border.'

'Wish I was back there now. I hate being here!' I mumbled petulantly.

'What do you want to do?'

'Don't really know. Thought I wanted to move to Melbourne.'

'Listen Christina, Melbourne is a really amazing place. It's still yours to find. You seem like a nice kid. Don't let what happened tonight fuck with your dreams.'

The Last Year

But it had. The kids I'd gone to Melbourne with started to bully me, tease me about the things I had chosen to do when we were in the city. They couldn't understand the attraction of the life I'd been given the briefest glimpse into. Of the trip to the big city, they remembered sport, stadiums, junk food and taking the piss out of all that was strange,

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foreign. Most of them were glad to return home to what they knew. I remembered something different.

When they started to call me the freak, I decided I'd had enough, didn't want to be different. My dreams of a life beyond Greenhope had been tainted. I was broken and decided it would be easier if I fitted in.

So the remainder of my time at high school was a blur of mindless conformity. I went to the football games, played the perfect debutante, got drunk on Saturday nights, gossiped with all the scary girls and shut up about the things that had always driven me.

My parents saw the changes, too. I rejected their oddities. Couldn't stand it when Dad tried to cheer me up with his old records. Didn't want Mum to remind me of the beautiful gowns in the dress up box.

What I did find was boys, whose graceless affections I tried to convince myself could be love. Or perhaps it was just that they had cars. I could escape with them to out of the way places where awkward gropings inevitably led to a clumsy excuse for sex. My virginity was lost somewhere along those back roads. In fact I didn't really know who could claim that prize because it was so ill defined. Sex was an obligation to the girls of my tribe. It was not magical. My amateur partners didn't know how to give me pleasure and quite frankly all I cared about was that they didn't come inside me. I wasn't stupid enough to desire the baby that made the lives of some girls complete.

And when the year was over my ambiguity continued. It had become too easy to do nothing.

'Why not just give it a try?' my mother begged, when we received word that I'd been accepted to study fashion design at the Melbourne Institute of Technology.

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She couldn't understand why I had changed. All she knew was that life was too short to live with regret.

Dreams Reawakened

It didn't take much. That first week at uni reignited my passion. We were shown videos of couture shows, documentaries about fashion icons. We got to touch and feel the clothes created by past students and were taken to the costume department of the Sate Theatre Company. For the first time in my life I got to be with people who unquestionably loved the same things as me. I was no longer different and said a silent thank you to my beautiful mother, who so wisely knew where I really belonged.

And as much as my parents loved me, would miss me terribly, they were happy I had escaped. Perhaps to find the life they had failed to discover. I felt ashamed of the terrible way I had treated them during that last year.

It scared me to think how close I'd come to a life of teen pregnancy, unfulfilled dreams and shattered hopes that so many of my peers quietly accepted.

In the city I felt alive. I could be me.

My parents had little money, so I quickly found a part time job with a clothing manufacturer.

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‘JD Dresses’ was situated in a large, old, red brick building in an inner northern suburb. Brunswick was a blue collar, new immigrant place with warehouses, factories and workers cottages. It was considered a bit rough and it would take a few more years before it would become a Brooklyn-like hipster hangout.

I started working in the design department. When I say design, it was more just reworking the same old skirts, pants and shirts. A slight change in cut, colour or pattern. Our market was middle aged women.

Sometimes I looked at the garments and wondered who wore these bland clothes? Had they given up on themselves, their looks? Had fashion become an irrelevance?

Ok, I couldn’t stand seeing mothers dressing like their teenage daughters, but had wondered why some women were content to disappear into this world of drab nothingness.

I wanted to dress people in clothes that worked, transformed them, made them feel great, confident.

Good design was not about fashion, it was about making things just right for the individual.

Most of my colleagues had been with the company for a long time. They were ‘job for life’, ‘work your way up’ type of people. All but one.

Lola Finestra was a vivacious young woman working in the marketing department. We clicked immediately.

Her father owned a large furniture store catering to the tastes of the Greek and Italian immigrants. He was well known for the TV ads he fronted.

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I couldn't understand why she was working here. She explained that although her father wanted her and her brother to take over the business, he wanted them both to get some real life experience first.

We shared our dreams with the idealism of youth. She wanted to take her family business in a new direction and I wanted to design the perfect dress.

We vowed to never settle for mediocrity. To always be there for each other.

We joked about how we would change the world and what wicked old women we would become.

Sydney Road Flat

I had been boarding with a woman who took in country students. We didn't 'click'. I hated the long commute to and from the dreary outer suburbs, so it was with some relief that I found the one room flat above an old shop front near JD. It was cheap, near work and just a short tram ride to uni.

The entrance was right on busy Sydney Road. The small plaque set into the decorative facade said 1880. After climbing the narrow staircase I opened the door onto one large room. An ornate plaster rose decorated the ten foot ceiling. Two tall, grand, windows, facing the street, lit the room. Against the back wall was a rudimentary kitchen with an old

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enamel gas stove and a sink cupboard. A small bathroom was tucked into the corner, barely hidden by a rickety old screen. Despite it being filthy with nicotine stained walls and pigeon shit piled below the windows, I could see what it could become. I couldn't wait to move in and make it mine.

I knew it would take a bit to make it liveable, but I wasn't afraid of hard work. The Easter break was coming up and the maintenance guy from JD said I could borrow any of his tools.

Dad would have none of it, he and Mum were coming. He loaded the ute with all he thought was needed and they turned up ready to help with the transformation.

'Bit of work to do here, love,' said Dad, master of the obvious.

By Sunday afternoon, dirty and exhausted, we were finally finished, it was beautiful.

The late afternoon sun shone through the windows illuminating the newly painted white space. After ripping up the filthy carpet, I had discovered pristine floorboards that only needed mopping and some polish. After removing years of grease, the stove was restored to its original pale green enamel. The sink gleamed from a thorough scouring and the white kitchen cupboard was relined with fresh paper. In the bathroom the toilet and claw foot bath just needed a scrub and again the same beautiful boards were exposed when I pulled up the peeling linoleum.

From gigantic, raw cotton painter's drop sheets, Mum had made curtains to cover the windows. Dad attached a rail to the ceiling and hung a second curtain to replace the bathroom screen. I could imagine

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pulling back these giant ten foot drapes, luxuriating in the decadence of taking a bath in this big sun filled white room.

We were all starving and I wanted them to try some of the food I'd discovered on this vibrant street.

Sydney Road was home to a vast array of middle eastern shops. The street was teeming with life. Burqua clad women buying exotic looking food, men sitting outside cafes smoking hookahs, families gathering to share delicious flatbreads at the Lebanese bakeries. Even grandfathers carried boxes of sweet pastries, gift wrapped to bring to the homes of friends.

What would my parents be feeling in this alien environment?

I took them into my favourite bakery and waited in the queue to buy the manoushe, Lebanese pizza.

'Tina, darling, lovely to see you. What can I get you today?'

'Hi Fatima, this is my mum and dad, Mary and Edward. They've never had manoushe before, could you put together a selection for them to try?'

'Welcome, you here to help fix up that old place across the road?' she enquired as she worked.

'Nice to meet you, Fatima. Yes, we've come down from the country, Greenhope,' Dad replied awkwardly.

'Your daughter, she works very hard, you must be proud? I always look after her when she comes in. Take a seat. I'll bring the pizza when they're ready.'

We sat down. They didn't know where to look, how to be in this strange, exotic place.

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'I think you will like this,' said Fatima, as plate after plate of the strange pastries arrived. Tentatively Dad took a bite, he smiled.

'Not bad,' he said and pleased at his approval, we hungrily wolfed down the delicious meal.

We all relaxed, the food having worked it's magic.

Mum and Dad needed to get back to the farm and so after long hugs, I said goodbye.

'Miss you darling, love you,' called Mum, waving out the window.

I returned to my beautiful flat, tumbled onto the mattress on the floor and slept soundly.

Over the next few weeks I added some furniture. The first piece was the most important, a large, old cutting table found in the junk pile at work. I sanded the timber top and varnished its wooden surface. This huge industrial dinosaur fitted perfectly in the room. It became the permanent home to my sewing machine. The frame underneath stored the bolts of cloth I'd collected, sturdy old faux crocodile suitcases held just about everything else. Hard rubbish scavenging provided more pieces of other people's discarded furniture. I wasn't a hoarder and took just enough. I didn't want to clutter my big elegant room.

Like my table, JD was also a dinosaur, still cutting, making and distributing its clothing from the Brunswick factory. I wondered how much longer they would survive? China's sleeping dragon was beginning to rouse.

Meeting Paul

My life for the next three years was pretty much work and study. Any spare time was spent designing and making my own creations. And when I gave myself the odd weekend off, I usually caught the train home to see Mum and Dad.

Like a lot of country students, I felt divided, one person, two places. A loyalty to my parents, to help them on the farm and a desire to create a new life in the city. Few friends in the city, few friends at home.

Sometimes this could be a very lonely life.

The design department realised many of their students, whilst almost gifted in their creativity, had absolutely no business skills. Towards the end of the final term, our lecturers paired us up with students from the Accounting faculty. The aim was to see if both groups could learn something from each other and come up with a business plan to suit the young designers.

Paul Brown was paired with me.

At first it was really uncomfortable. We were worlds apart. He found it incomprehensible that someone could imagine earning a living from something that in his eyes was a frivolous hobby. I couldn't understand how he could commit to a life working with columns of numbers, to such unmitigated tediousness and boredom.

We had almost nothing in common.

He was raised in the affluent suburb of Toorak. His family owned a small but trusted accountancy firm and had been rewarded handsomely

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for looking after the wealth of some of the city's richest citizens. Worlds away from my family's life of struggle. Paul attended an elite private boarding school and had a close network of friends around him. I went to a country high school where only a few of us completed year twelve and moved to a city full of strangers. He lived at home where everything was provided, including a generous allowance. I rented a room above an old shop and worked part time, giving me just enough money to survive.

There seemed to be one thing that we shared. We were both only children whose parents wanted the very best for their one precious child. This was our bond.

Funnily enough, I quite enjoyed our business project and learnt some fundamental principles that could one day help me set up my own fashion label. As for Paul, I think he just found me amusing with my eccentric clothes and opinions, an escape from his overbearing friends and regimented life.

When we weren't working on the project, we would often meet up with his mates at the uni bar, and although they were not my friends, it was good to get out and socialise. I had become a bit of a recluse.

Justin and Adam Darcy were twins. Justin was Paul's best friend. They had been at the same school and did everything together, including studying accounting. Unlike Paul, Justin was an untrustworthy schemer, who had the charm of a used car salesman. He seemed to have a bullying control over Paul and when he'd almost pushed the boundaries too far, redeemed himself with a 'just joking maaate!', followed by an overly demonstrative punch and bear hug.

Adam Darcy was studying architecture. He was tall, handsome, with dark hair and looked nothing like his unattractive brother. It was hard to believe they were twins.

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Adam was insufferably arrogant. So at odds with Paul's bland, but nice boy persona and Justin's thuggishness. His contemptuous self importance infuriated me.

Justin and Adam were always together. Adam was smarter than these people, often even contradicted their opinions. I wondered why he bothered to hang around them? Perhaps I just didn't understand that tribal mentality.

Their father, Graham Darcy, was the property developer responsible for tearing down much of the beautiful, gold rush era architecture of inner city Melbourne. He replaced it with ugly multi-storey office blocks, built cheaply and quickly, making him extremely rich.

Paul used to say that Adam was studying architecture just to piss Graham off. Graham thought architects were a nuisance, whose artsy fartsy intellectualism got in the way of a profitable job. He preferred the services of draftsmen and engineers who did what he wanted, efficiently, cheaply and without question.

Graham's was the kind of new money the old money welcomed, simply because there was so much of it. Graham enjoyed showing off his wealth. Marquee at the polo, mansion in Brighton, fast cars with personalised plates, holiday homes in exotic locations and an ego big enough to require a new wife every few years. He could always be seen with some bimbo on his arm in the social pages of the city's down market tabloid. These unions all eventually produced children, guaranteeing the mothers some financial security.

The lone female of Paul's tribe, Fiona Snelling, was a slim, fair haired woman who confidently wore the uniform of the upper class. Faded jeans, crisp white shirt with a pale cashmere cardigan, flat leather designer shoes and pearl earrings. Fiona was studying Arts, a course

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favoured by these women who were just killing time, waiting for their trust funds to mature and their carefully matched husbands to arrive.

Her family were western districts farmers whose property was the size of a small European nation. My farm life of hard work and struggle knew no comparison to Fiona's world of horses, grand houses, boarding school and overseas holidays.

Fiona was a nasty piece of work. Barely acknowledging me with a thin lipped smile, just tolerating the person she most certainly considered beneath her. She knew her place, allowing the boys to continue their boarding school antics like a sexy, dominant, house mother with a whip.

Like all good dynastic pairings, Fiona, the prized bitch, had chosen the top dog, Justin. When they married, she would get the money and he would get the status.

'Pauly, mate, you and the little lady gonna save the world by floating her frock company on the stock exchange?' said Justin.

Paul responded with a one fingered salute, smirk on his face.

I found these experiences quite intimidating, with their 'in' jokes and blokey camaraderie. A subtle kind of bullying that let me know I wasn't one of them.

I often wondered why I kept going back for more? Did I want to prove that I was just as good as them?

Maybe it was my own vanity, wanting to be able to tell the people back home that I had lots of friends in this fabulous new life. Perhaps it was simply that I envied what they had. I wanted them to like me, so that

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I could feel what it was like to be part of their close knit gang, to be included.

In truth, I really didn't know where I fitted. I think I just wanted to belong.

That said, I was no retiring wallflower and often challenged their 'born to rule' opinions.

Naively, I thought I could win them over with my clever banter and witty repartee and have them embrace me as their new chum. I wasn't going to let their smart assed, brattish behaviours defeat me.

On one particular night I sat down right next to Adam, determined to get him to speak to me, to break his haughty silence. I wanted to push his buttons, get a reaction. Or just maybe I was attracted to this controlled, elusive man?

I had become sick of them talking about themselves, of a life so clearly mapped out ahead of them, of a world that so obviously excluded me.

There was an election coming up and they thought the conservative government would win. They needed to be back in control. I couldn't stand their self righteousness and tried to join in, maybe ruffle their feathers a bit.

'So do you really think much will change with a new government? Do you think politicians have that much control? The things that affect change are subtle. Politicians react to a situation, they don't create the mood. Are you aware of the subversive power we designers have? We can affect the mood, the environment, the comfort of the people around us. Fuck the politicians, imagine how we could change the world if we designers were in control,' I said, tongue in cheek.

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He looked up, surprised I was sitting next to him and almost offended that I had spoken.

'Designers? Change the world? You can't be serious? Fashion is about frivolity, discarded from one year to the next. St Vinnie's is overflowing with that special dress, so special it's dumped as soon as some new bit of superfluous crap comes along,' he spat.

For a brief moment I was taken aback by his vicious retort, then I felt my blood boil and snapped back.

'Bullshit! When women began wearing miniskirts in the sixties, they were saying much more about their place, their sexuality, their freedom. It wasn't just about what they'd chosen to wear that day.'

'That's just one example. Are you seriously telling me every chick in a short skirt had a political agenda? I think they were just advertising for a husband or a fuck. No intention of changing the world. You're reading far too much into it,' he paused for a moment before continuing his attack.

'When a building is erected, it's there for all to see, to be commented on. It must be enduring, stand the test of time. I can't believe you're so naive to think that a dress has the same power as a building!' he said leaning closer, moving into my space, emphasising his contempt.

'Yeah, like the shitty high rises in Collingwood or the office blocks your father builds, the ones that feed your trust funds. Suicide towers, ugly enough to want to kill yourself, high enough to ensure death. Yeah, you're right, they do affect change. Not just for the poor bastards who live in them, but also for the innocent bystander who has to live with the blight on the landscape. No choice about that fucking building, good or not. No wonder you architects are so bloody arrogant, you need to be to

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protect yourselves from the shit flung at you by the people who feel pissed off at what you impose!' I snapped back.

Adam was surprised at her fiery attack, furious she had connected him with his father. No caring, sharing hippie bullshit from the girl Paul had been hanging around. She was typical of the 'alternative' crowd. Studying some useless subject and by the look of what she was wearing, designing shit that no one in their right mind would ever wear.

Who the fuck did she think she was?

'More beer anyone?' said Paul, trying to change the subject.

They were subtle in their taunting and, as usual, the night ended with them drunkenly reminiscing about school days. Talking about the things they did together on weekends, reaffirming their place in this exclusive little club. Pushing me further away.

I grabbed my beer, drank till the glass was empty and walked out.

That night I came to my senses. This would be the last time I would bother to go to the bar with them.

Paul and I were still working on our project together. Away from his friends, he was a really nice guy. I was aware he liked me, but he wasn't my type. Did I even know what 'my type' was? He seemed disappointed that I no longer went out with him to the bar after lectures, so I told him of my feelings toward his friends. How I thought they didn't like me intruding, how uncomfortable I felt around them.

He dismissed my insecurities and told me I had nothing to worry about.

'Give 'em time Chris, they'll come round.'

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I didn't have the heart to tell him I hoped I would never see any of them again.

It was getting close to exam time. I had an hour to kill between lectures and decided to head to the bar. Not because I needed a drink at 2 pm, but because the space was almost empty. Much quieter than the library full of students desperately cramming for exams. I sat in one of the booths that lined the edge of the room, took out my notebook and began to write. My peace was interrupted by the familiar sound of Justin Darcy's voice.

'Too early for a beer, ladies?' I heard him say.

I slouched into the seat, hoping they couldn't see me.

The 'ladies' were his usual entourage. I could hear Fiona and Adam. I knew Paul was away that day, he had an appointment with his father. I remembered being shocked that a son would have to book a time to catch up with his father.

Justin returned with the drinks.

'Here's to our last day of freedom before exams!'

They clinked glasses and a temporary silence ensued as they downed the beer.

'Where's Paul?' asked Fiona.

'Probably still sniffing around that little bitch, pretending to do some sort of assignment together,' sneered Justin.

'Thank fucking Christ he doesn't bring her to the bar anymore. Wanted to tell her to shut the fuck up after that rant she gave,' he added.

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'Gave you a fair serve, Adam. Who the fuck does she think she is?' said Fiona.

'Pauly should watch out. Bet she wouldn't mind getting a slice of that action. He'd better make sure he keeps his dick in check or there'll be trouble. Girls like her are just looking for an opportunity to freeload on nice guys like him. She'd be pregnant, with her hand out for cash in no time,' snorted Justin.

'Don't think I'd let her get away with it. If she screws with any of you boys I'd let her know just how misguided she was. She's not one of us and never will be. She'd regret it for the rest of her life. I'd make her pay,' snapped Fiona.

'Trouble is, Paul's so desperate I don't think he can see it. It's been ages since he's had a good fuck,' said Justin.

They all laughed. It was Adam who spoke next.

'I think you've got it all wrong. You don't give Paul enough credit. Just let him have some fun. He needs something to play with before his old man locks him into that tenth floor office.'

'Anyway, people like her despise people like us. They're just not self starters. They have some morally superior, left wing ideal that money is distasteful. She'll never make a living out of her bullshit dress thing. She'll probably pick up some job in the arts bureaucracy, sucking off the taxpayers tit, living with some cuckolded dickhead she meets at the community garden,' he said, finishing his rant.

I was seething. Fiona and Justin's comments were so predictable. What hurt most was what Adam had said. To be so easily dismissed, with contemptuous disregard for all that mattered to me. As if I was some

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completely disposable commodity, something for them to play with on their rise to the top. Adam Darcy was the most despicable of them all.

Christina finds the Italians

Finally it was over, my exams were done, portfolio submitted and now I just had to wait for my results. I wasn't really worried, my lecturers had quietly informed me that my designs were some of the best they had seen in a long while. In the meantime, with rent to find, bills to pay, I headed straight into full time work at JD. It would be great to see more of Lola.

Lola could not believe I had no celebrations planned to mark the end of my student days, so we agreed to meet at my flat after work. She would bring something to drink, maybe we would go out somewhere.

'God Christina, I love coming to your place. I envy you. I wish I had the freedom to live on my own, but it's not the Italian way! My father would have a fit if he knew what really went on when I came to stay!'

I smiled. She often told her parents she was staying with me. What she didn't tell them was that I wasn't even in Melbourne when she came to visit. I let her use my place when I was back home in Greenhope. I was her alibi when she dated the inappropriate men who would never meet with her father's approval. On those weekends spent back at home, I

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helped my parents, was the good daughter. And Lola spent some weekends at my flat being the very opposite.

She was carrying a bottle, so I grabbed two glasses while she popped the cork.

'Mmm, what's this?' I asked, after taking a sip of the sparkling wine.

'Prosecco, my favourite. Everybody thinks we Italians drink only that disgustingly sweet Spumante,' she replied, taking another sip.

'But this, I think, can be as good as any French champagne.'

'I don't know the first thing about wine. How did you learn?'

'Ah, at the family table. We've always had wine. Dad would give us small sips when we were little. As we got older we were allowed a bit more and Dad would describe the wine, telling us why it suited the food we were eating. You should come to our home this Sunday, meet my parents, experience one of our Sunday feasts.'

I hadn't planned on doing anything this weekend. I wasn't going home and now that the pressure of uni was over, I had a bit more free time.

'Love to, can I bring anything?'

'No, nothing, in fact I'm sure you'll be leaving with enough food to fill your fridge. My mother wonders how you survive on your own, no mama to cook for you.'

We talked for a while, ate some manoush and finished the bottle, too tired to go out.

'See you at twelve Sunday. I'll pick you up,' said Lola, as she headed out the door.

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It was a perfect late spring morning. What to wear? I looked in the mirror, young punk, spiky hair streaked with a garish purple. An image quite at odds with the elegant, sixties inspired dresses I was designing. This was not an appropriate look for a lunch with a traditional Italian family and it was not the look for a young woman wanting to be taken seriously by the fashion world. I ran to the pharmacy down the road and bought a bottle of hair dye, dark chocolate brown, my natural colour. Tamed, I would wear it up, a French twist.

I looked through the rack of dresses I had been working on, having recently been inspired by some of the outfits a young Jackie Kennedy had worn. I chose a little white linen shift, no sleeves, fitted, cut above the knee, a subtle black trim around the hem and sleeves. Teamed with a pair of espadrilles it would look very La Dolce Vita, perfect for an Italian lunch.

Beep! Beep! Lola was here, I ran down the stairs.

'Mamma mia! What the hell? Where is Christina?' she exclaimed, as she circled me on the pavement.

'You look amazing!'

We jumped in her car, a stylish aqua blue Carmen Ghia. She glanced at me with a big grin as we drove off. I smiled back, happy she approved of the transformation. Feeling very confident with my new self.

I had preconceived ideas about what I would see. I imagined a grand faux palazzo in one of Melbourne's newer outlying suburbs, but was surprised when we headed in the direction of Kew, a short drive out of the city, up Studley Park Road. We arrived at a large block hidden by a tall hedge. As we drove through the gate I was struck by what I saw in

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front of me. An understated elegant sixties modernist villa, white sandstone walls, massive glass windows. Set magnificently into a steep cliff, overlooking the Yarra River below. This was so not what I had expected.

We pulled up and were greeted by Lola's parents.

'Mama, Papa, this is Christina.'

'Buon giorno, Christina, I'm Massimo, welcome to our home.'

I recognised him from the ads, a big man, short grey hair, generous girth, warm smiling face, two kisses, one on each cheek.

'This is my wife, Gabriella.'

'Christina, lovely to finally meet you. Please, come in.'

I saw a small, exotic, gypsy like woman. Not at all what I expected. She was wearing a loose fitting, asymmetrical charcoal top over leggings, bare feet, a single strand of large orange beads her only adornment.

I couldn't help myself, 'I love what you're wearing.'

'Asa Saito, a young Japanese designer I saw in Sydney,' she took my hand and led me inside.

We entered a large, gallery like room, white walls hung with modern paintings. A lurid Howard Arkley picture of a clichéd suburban house stood out immediately. Lola had told me Gabriella owned a gallery on Gertrude Street. She must have been one of the first people to recognise the value of some of Australia's emerging modern painters. I looked at the walls and was amazed by her foresight. All these painters were now represented in Australia's top galleries.

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We walked through the glass doors to a stone terrace. Verdant gardens rolled down the river valley, gum trees framed the view. This sanctuary only ten minutes from the city.

We sat under a vine twisted pergola. A large wooden table was laid simply and stylishly with cutlery, big white plates, crisp linen napkins, water and wine glasses, set for five. Lola looked at me and the empty space.

'My brother,' she cocked an eyebrow and with a wry grin said, 'He's always late.'

Massimo offered me some olives, plump, salty morsels, slick with oil, and a glass of red wine.

'Some Aglianico, a wine native to my region, Basilicata, in Southern Italy.'

'I've never heard of Basilicata,' I replied politely.

'It was a very poor area. Carlo Levi wrote about it in his book, 'Christ Stopped at Eboli'. I left to escape the poverty.'

'We built this house using a white sandstone that reminded Massimo of the cave houses of his home town of Matera,' said Gabriella.

'True, my darling, but that is where the comparison ends. This,' he gestured expansively at the house, 'is the work of my beautiful wife. You know she studied architecture in Milano, before she ran away to Australia and seduced a brute like me,' he said proudly.

'Please, Massimo, enough, I never practised,' she responded coyly.

'The land was cheap when we bought it. Market gardens used to grow on the flats near the river, close to the city, planted long before trucks and refrigeration. The land became too small to cope with the

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demands of a growing, hungry city. No one thought it would be possible to tame the bush and build on the steep river slopes. And it goes without saying that no insurer would cover housing built on the floodplains. People thought we were mad building on these cliffs. Only my wife saw how beautiful a house in this setting could be. And now we have the last laugh. Everyone wants to live here. Those real estate agents in the High Street are always trying to convince me to sell up and subdivide the land. But I tell them, this land is for my grandchildren, there is enough room for all my family to live here.'

I could well imagine Massimo being king of his own little realm. I wondered what Lola thought?

We were interrupted.

'Ciao, ciao, Mama, Papa, Lola'

'Raphael, come sit down next to my friend, Christina.'

'Ah, Christina. At last we meet.'

Raphael reached for my hand, pulling me gently to my feet and kissed me twice, one cheek then the next.

'Is this your secret friend? Why haven't we met before?'

'Because I was keeping her away from you, my mischievous big brother!' she replied playfully.

Christina could see why. Raphael was gorgeous, dark olive skin, mystifyingly blue eyes and tousled light brown hair. He wore a loose white shirt, jeans hanging just so from his hips. This man could be trouble or.... fun?

'You work with my sister, what do you do?'

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'I'm in the design department.'

'And this dress, is it one of yours?'

'Yes, actually'

He stepped back, still holding my hand, slowly looking me up and down, 'Bellissima'

'Raphael, enough, sit down, we must eat!' said Gabriella, as they brought out platters of delicious antipasti.

Pickled artichoke, eggplant, red, green and yellow capsicum. Salad of arugula, mesclun and radicchio. Cured meats, salamis, porchetta and a rustic loaf of bread.

'This food is delicious,' I said, as more and more was handed to me.

'Thank you, Christina, I do most of it myself. I am still just a peasant at heart. It is my hobby, what I do to relax. I hope to do more when the children take over the business.'

'When do you think that might be?' I asked.

'Very soon. My son, Raphael goes to Italy next week to oversee the buying and production of a new range of contemporary furniture. Lola will follow as it nears completion. You see, Christina, my old customers are a dying breed. We have big plans to open a new emporio next to my wife's gallery on Gertrude street. The young people of today don't want that fussy old furniture and my children don't want to sell it,' he said wistfully.

We finished the day with fruit from his trees and like Lola said, I returned home, generously laden with gifts from their garden and pantry. I was slightly saddened knowing my friend would soon be leaving and that my connection to this day, this family, was only fleeting.

Help from a Friend

By the time I returned to work after Christmas, Lola had gone.

Not that I had spent much time with her anyway. My range of little La Dolce Vita dresses had been selling well to a number of small boutiques in Carlton and Fitzroy and this growing business was taking up all my spare time. My bosses at JD had allowed me to have them made at work and had charged very little. By late January this arrangement was no longer simply about the machinists making a few extra dresses at the end of the day. I knew I had to commit to larger orders and wondered how I would fund this development. Paul would know.

'Hi Paul, Christina here, how you going?'

'Chris, how the hell are you? Made your first million yet?' he responded enthusiastically.

'Ha ha, if only. Actually, I need some advice. Do you think we could get together?'

We had arranged to meet at the Hot Cat on Brunswick street. I was running a bit late and arrived to find Paul wearing a business suit, sitting at a table in this retro fifties cafe. Surrounded by black clad, bohemian types he looked uncomfortable.

'Chris Maxwell,' he stood, smiling.

'Paul, sorry I'm late. Have you ordered? Cappuccino from memory,' I asked.

'And the usual espresso for you, Christina?' asked the barista.

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'Thanks, Tony, that'd be great,' I replied.

That was the Chris he remembered.

He'd missed that confident enthusiasm. He loved how her presence had always thrown his mates. She didn't play their games, flaunted the rules, was free to be herself.

He noticed she had changed. Gone was the crazy hair and clothes, she looked different, older, more grown up. She was more beautiful.

She sat down next to him, his body responding immediately to the electricity created when their legs accidentally touched.

'So Paul, look at you in your suit. You look like a proper accountant,' she grinned.

Is this how she saw him? Did she have any idea of how she made him feel?

She spent the next few minutes telling him of her plans to expand her design business, but he found it hard to concentrate. He knew if he offered to help, he would at least get to see her again.

Time flew, he needed to get back to work. Being the boss's son didn't let him off the hook. He had more to prove, not only to his father, but also to his colleagues. He needed to show he would be a worthy heir.

As he walked back to the office, Paul wondered whether there was any real future in her plan, but he admired her guts at wanting to give it a go. Their lives were so different. She had the liberty to explore a whole new world without constraint. His life was mapped out before him. There was no risk, but also no freedom.

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He knew if he lent her the start-up money, she would have to continue to see him. It would be a kind of informal partnership and honestly she probably didn't need that much. They agreed to meet the following night at her place to work on a business plan. She lived in a dilapidated old room, in a part of town he would not normally have ventured into. She seemed to thrive on its edgy eclecticism. He didn't know if he could live this life of uncertainty, but he loved living vicariously through someone who did. He couldn't wait to spend more time with her.

Paul was great. I loved the way he took the emotion out of my schemes and was able to give me clear, considered advice. He made me realise I would need to have some money to take the next step. To commit and pay for bigger production runs, to become a real client of JDs. Also to have the stock more readily available to meet the ever increasing demand of the shops.

Paul said he would lend me the money, I thanked him for his generous offer and told him I'd like some time to think about it. I'd always been so independent and was slightly reluctant to mix our friendship with business.

We worked solidly every night for a week, papers spread out on the cutting bench, ordering manoush from Fatima.

'Well, Paul, I think we should call it a night. My brain is fried and anyway we need to look fresh tomorrow.'

'Oh yeah, I'd completely forgotten. Your mum and dad coming?'

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'They wouldn't miss it for anything, I'm the first to get a degree in our family. They're a bit nervous. They've never attended a graduation before. What about yours?'

'Yeah, they'll be there, but under sufferance. Dad doesn't understand why he has to sit through the whole long drawn out process. The Chancellor is a friend of his and I'm sure he thinks a private dinner would be more in order.'

We both said goodbye. Paul leant forward and clumsily kissed my head.

I slept soundly knowing a clearer picture of my future was beginning to form.

They were late, it was not like Mum and Dad, they always liked to have plenty of time up their sleeve. I'd expected them to be here at least an hour ago. The radio was on, there were reports of a collision, train crash. A creeping fear started to come over me. There was a knock at the door. It was the police, they had bad news. My parents were dead. The world I had known came crashing down around me. Lola was in Italy. I called Paul, I had no one else.

When someone you love dies, you join a club you don't want to be a member of. You observe everyone around you, walking the street, laughing with friends, going about their business, all so normal. But your life has been turned upside down. You feel anger at their indifference. You retreat under a shroud of sorrow.

I'd always prided myself in my ability to be independent. Now I had no choice. I felt angry at my abandonment. As if I'd never been someone's child. Lost without the two beautiful people I loved more than

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anyone in the world. Who would I call to share in good news? The kind of thing only a parent cared about. Who would care? The word orphan was such a simple word used to describe such a complex state of being. For the first time in my life I was deeply and truly alone. Nothing seemed to fill the black hole of despair.

Paul was a comfort. He came back home to help with the funeral, talked to the bank, the accountant, the lawyer. Sorted out all the stuff I didn't know how to handle and supported me when the bank put the farm up for sale. He did what he was good at. I said my final farewell to Greenhope.

He called frequently, suggested I get out of bed, said work would be good and generally was a dear friend and decent human being. Some days the grief and loneliness was all consuming. The future blurred, what was the point in eating, working, living?

Paul had worried he would lose his beautiful, bright, effervescent friend. He kept ringing, visiting, trying to coax her out of the suffocating grief.

It had been a month and it hit me. This was it, I was alone, they weren't coming back. It shook me. I had to do something. Paul had been calling often, but tonight when he rang and suggested we go out, just dinner, get out of the house, I said 'Yes'. It was a start.

Dinner

There is something magical about the process of transformation that we as women are allowed to make.

I decided to see this as a ritual toward healing.

First I flung open the curtains and windows and allowed the light and warm summer air to come flooding back into my apartment. I had neglected the space and cleaned it till it shone. I filled the bath, pulled back the drapes and submerged myself in the water.

I chose a little black dress, cut just above the knee, modest, except for the low back. A little make-up, some eye liner, mascara and dark red lips. My hair, now a long dark brown bob, dried and combed straight. Black, high heeled strappy sandals and the transformation was complete. A sense of control, the first step toward a new normality.

Adam was heading over to Brunswick to look at some property, a big old factory, ripe for redevelopment. He felt that this part of Melbourne was undervalued. His mate, Paul, had mentioned he was going to Sydney Road to meet up with a friend. Adam volunteered to drive him. They arrived and Paul knocked on the door. She opened it.

'Chris, do you remember my friend, Adam?' asked Paul, as they both entered the room.

'Adam, how are you?' she said coldly.

He barely recognised her. She was exquisite. He looked around the room, all white, simply but tastefully furnished. A Harcourt chaise, a Featherston Contour chair, a low slung Scandinavian sideboard, two

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Clement Meadmore stools. How did she know about this furniture? Where had that naive, wild girl gone? Who had she become? Who was this sophisticated woman standing before him?

As she turned to walk into the room, he saw the cut of the backless dress, the power of understatement, he felt his cock stir.

He wanted to stay, be with her, find out more, but knowing Paul had already made a claim, he politely refused the invitation to join them.

I was surprised to see Adam standing at my door. I should have known that reconnecting with Paul would inevitably mean bumping into some of his obnoxious friends. Strangely I was a little thrown by Adam's presence. He seemed different. Something about his whole demeanour had changed. He looked more sophisticated, much less standoffish. Maybe it was because he was not with his brother? I was almost disappointed when he said he would not be joining us. He seemed to have no interest in staying.

Paul had booked a restaurant on Lygon Street, a large, bustling, Italian eatery. It was the type favoured by busloads of tourists wanting the 'authentic' Italian experience. Checked tablecloths, Chianti bottles and modern day frescoes of old Italy adorned the walls. We were shown to our table by a heavily accented, handsome, Italian maitre d'. The clichés continued. Dean Martin was singing 'That's Amore' and Paul bought me a rose from the rather sad woman wandering past the tables. He was trying hard, but it was not the sophisticated Valentino on Bourke Street, where I had almost succumbed to a different type of charm just a few years ago.

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I felt overdressed, but was rewarded by the attention I received from the flirtatious Italian waiters.

The food, the noise, the people were just what I needed and despite my initial reservations, the night was fun. The wine helped.

We couldn't find a cab, so we stumbled across to Sydney Road and caught a tram.

We had both had too much to drink.

'Come on, Pauly, you can crash at my place. You'll never get a taxi from here,' I said drunkenly.

Paul took the sofa and mumbled 'goodnight'. During the night I was aware of him tossing and turning. The chaise was not a comfortable place to sleep. He was keeping me awake.

'Jesus Paul, why don't you just get in to my bed and go to sleep? I've got work tomorrow,' I called out to him.

He got into bed and tentatively tried to spoon me. The closeness was kind of comforting and I was not really surprised when, after some time, I felt his erection pressing against me. I had been turned on by the attention of the waiters and had shamelessly flirted with them all night. It left me with a lingering arousal. I had a sexual hunger that needed satisfying. He began to touch me, I didn't reject his advances. What could happen? This was the nineties. Surely two mature adults could handle a bit of casual, consensual sex? This was not an unfamiliar situation, he was not my first. We faced each other, fully aware of what was about to occur. We were both naked and, in the darkness, he moved on top of me, smothering me with his sloppy kisses. He entered me

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clumsily and started pumping, panting, grunting. And it was done. Another unsatisfying fuck. He rolled over and I pretended to sleep.

Thank God that was quick. The idea of him grinding away, trying to come, would have been more than my body, or mind could endure. I lay still, not wanting to wake him, not wanting to suggest we be more intimate. Eventually the alcohol did its job, Paul was snoring and I finally got to sleep.

The next morning I woke, head pounding. I got up to look for some aspirin, some cold water, anything to kill this pain. I sat at the bench and saw his note, 'Darling Chris, had to get to work, didn't want to wake you, best night, love Paul x.'

God, what had I done? It was coming back to me. I had let him stay, I had let him fuck me. It was wrong. I had sensed Paul wanted more than just friendship and I'd let my guard down. He was kind and gentle and it would hurt to tell him the truth, that I did not feel the same way about him, as he felt about me. Why did I let this happen? Had my grief made me vulnerable? I looked at the time, shit, work! I raced around to get dressed and ran out the door. I'd call him tonight.

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