

Crooked Words

A starburst light in a dark sky with a dark silhouette of grass at the bottom.

A Collection of Queer, Transgender
and Womanist Writings

K. A. Cook

CROOKED WORDS

A COLLECTION OF QUEER, TRANSGENDER
AND WOMANIST WRITINGS

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Imprint

Crooked Words: A Collection of Queer, Transgender and Womanist Writings
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Published in Melbourne, Australia.

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Layout and design: K. A. Cook

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'Blue Paint, Chocolate and Other Similes' © 2011 by the author. Originally published at <http://theskimblishone.livejournal.com/>, February, 2011.

'Certain Eldritch Artefacts' © 2010 by the author. Originally published at <http://theskimblishone.livejournal.com/>, August, 2010.

'Elysium' © 2013 by the author. Originally published in *Up Close and Personal: PWE Anthology 2013*, November 2013.

'Old-Fashioned' © 2010 by the author. Originally published at <http://theskimblishone.livejournal.com/>, September, 2010.

'The Differently Animated and Queer Society' © 2011 by the author. Originally published at <http://theskimblishone.livejournal.com/>, February, 2011.

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All other works are previously unpublished and original to this collection.

Blurb

A YOUNG TRANSGENDER MAGICIAN TRAVELS the world on a quest for a mystical talking sword. A witch wonders why her would-be lovers can't date her the old-fashioned way. A cross-dressing man meets a suit-clad soul whose gender defies definition. A non-binary zombie wishes ze were the hero in science-fiction stories. A genderqueer manservant tries to save her mentally-ill lover with a deck of tarot cards. A boy looks at himself in the mirror and ponders the fear of telling his family that his name isn't Susan.

Crooked Words is an eclectic collection of short fiction in pursuit of the many different shades of what it means to live queer.

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Author's Note

CROOKED WORDS CAME ABOUT BECAUSE I had a collection of short pieces from my online writing days, a few assignment pieces with which I wanted to do something, and an ongoing frustration at the difficulty in finding non-binary/gender-non-conforming queer fiction. Specifically, the non-presence of free stories: an abundance of cis gay romantic or erotic short fiction is available for perusal at e-book retailers, and even cis lesbian erotic short fiction (albeit to a much lesser extent). Stories about transgender, genderqueer and non-binary characters, however? Queer stories whose main focus isn't sexual titillation (an arguably cis/heterocentric view of queerness), but the lived reality of being queer? If we now live in a world where authors can put their work out just for the purpose of getting stories into the hands of audiences without the constraints of publishers, markets and financial considerations, then shouldn't there be stories glorying in the freedom to challenge the gender binary? Shouldn't there be stories, many stories, making it clear that gender-neutral pronouns are a valid, vital tool in the storyteller's belt, that names and pronouns and expressions don't have to match, that we exist and deserve to be literary heroes?

Crooked Words is, in essence, the act of putting my words where my mouth is: making the stories I want to see in the world accessible to the world. I want to pick up a collection that's not just about binary masculinity; I want to pick up a collection that remembers queer identities are so much broader than two cisgender men (or women) having sex; I want to pick

up a collection that has a story, here and there, about a person whose life is like mine.

So. Have stories with characters who use binary pronouns and don't feel the need for their pronouns, names and genders to match. Have stories with characters that use gender-neutral pronouns like 'ze', 'ey' and 'ou'. Have stories that are just about binary transgender characters or queer cis women doing things other than fuck each other.

However. Not every story is explicitly queer, or is about characters who are specified as queer, or about characters who—in the space of the story or play—deal with issues that involve or reference their queerness. Some of the stories are about mental illness, abuse, family, chronic pain and relationships. Some of the stories are about these things *and* queerness. No lead character is *straight* (sorry, I couldn't help it), but sometimes when they're taking to their psychologist or their mother, or are on a quest to find a magical talking sword, their sexuality, sex or gender identity isn't relevant. Sometimes they're talking about their dreams or fears instead. Sometimes they are an abuse-surviving feminist more than they are a genderless queer—and sometimes they are a genderless queer more than they are an abuse-surviving feminist.

Finally, a caveat: I do tend to write the kinds of stories that are or were mine to tell (with the obvious truth that fiction is fiction: to tell a story honestly does not mean having to have that exact experience, but emotional authenticity means a belonging in that spectrum or family of experience) so *Crooked Words* is in no way a collection encompassing all the ways in which a soul can live, feel and be queer. I hope the people who have the right to tell the many, many missing stories will someday fill the gaps.

K. A. Cook, Melbourne, 2013.

Content Warnings

THIS MAY BE A SURPRISE given the content of this collection, but I have triggers. I have a long list of things I cannot bear to come across in my reading—either because they’re often a mishandled/ignorant/oppressive approach to a sensitive and personal issue (mental illness, disability, queerness, gender, abuse, rape culture, consent, family), because I am not in a state of mind to handle the aforementioned issues even when depicted well, or because they are a more personal flashback/trauma trigger. (The numerous instances of Angel touching Buffy’s face in the early seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* make them unwatchable for me—a case of a personal trigger where the portrayal isn’t (arguably) problematic but nevertheless causes me distress.) This said, I don’t pull punches in my writing, and I write about all of the above—if I believe that mental illness sufferers are heroes, how can I not write about them and their experiences? How can I sanitise, erase and diminish my own existence by deciding that depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation are inappropriate elements of a fictional hero’s life? Isn’t that the very problem we minority creatives struggle against—this feeling that we’re not supposed to be?

I can’t write like this. I won’t. I’ve put too much effort into making myself write these stories and present them to a workshopping group or editorial panel, into making myself get past the fear that I am wrong and strange and broken and my stories shouldn’t exist, into making myself believe that I have no reason to silence myself out of fear of what other people may think. I am who I am. I won’t hide it. I won’t apologise for it.

But I also know what it is to be taken aback by the inclusion of content one may not be in the right frame of mind for, through no fault of one's own, now or ever.

So. I have compiled a list of content warnings so that readers can make educated choices about what they do and don't read—educated choices about their own safety and health. I will warn for things like sexual assault references, self-harm and mental illness depictions, cisgender and binary lead characters (transgender/non-binary folk should know when they're being forced to read about yet another fucking cis person and be able to choose accordingly) and abuse and/or family dysfunction—in short, anything that might be triggering, regardless of the story's focus or 'point' in handling the material. I will *never* warn for things like invented or archaic gender-neutral pronoun use, queerness and queer sexuality (the online culture of *warning* for queer fiction is utterly abhorrent) or characters who have mental illness. I also won't warn for consensual sexual references or swearing.

If you're one of the fortunate ones who can read freely and prefer the surprise, skip ahead to the stories. If you're not, please find each story's warnings below:

Certain Eldritch Artefacts: Ageism, gender essentialism, depictions of anxiety and social anxiety. Binary lead character.

The Art of Letting Go: Family dysfunction, emotional abuse, homophobia. Cisgender lead characters.

Blue Paint, Chocolate and Other Similes: Misgendering.

Elysium: Physical and emotional abuse, family dysfunction, internalised ableism and misogyny, depictions of depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide. Cisgender lead characters.

Misstery Man: Misgendering, transphobia, binary/gender essentialism, physical/emotional abuse/bullying, coming out, depictions of triggers and anxiety.

Absent a Consonant: Coming out, depictions of anxiety, gender dysphoria and fear of transphobia. Binary lead character.

Everything in a Name: Misgendering/naming, homophobia, coming out, emotional abuse.

The Differently Animated and Queer Society: Ableism, homophobia, transphobia, depictions of social anxiety and privilege/oppression (via zombies).

Old-Fashioned: Depictions of stalking (a *Twilight* deconstruction). Cisgender lead characters.

Playing the Death Card: Reference to past sexual assault. Depictions of depression, momentary suicidal ideation and chronic pain.

Certain Eldritch Artefacts

DARIUS SCRAMBLED FOR THE EDGE of the table, clutching at the tablecloth in an effort to stay upright. His hip brushed against something that clattered to the ground, and for a moment he thought he was going to scream from pure frustration. Not again, surely? It had to be possible that he could make it for more than about ten strides through the souk without creating another disaster? But no: a small clay pot teetered on the edge and hit the ground with an even louder clash, followed by the pinging bounce of several smaller items. Darius cringed, stood—and then found himself crashing into the looming chest of a man at least twice his height and counting.

“Oh, I—”

“Get off!” The man’s fist slammed into Darius’s ear with enough force that he again fetched up against the table, sending more items clattering to the ground. “Can’t a man shop in peace?”

“I’m really, really—”

“Gah!” The man shoved Darius aside and vanished into the crowd—leaving Darius to stand in the midst of the debris, confronted by a wailing stall vendor. Whoever knocked him into the table in the first place had long-since vanished into the crowd, of course.

“Ah. Sorry. I’m...”

“You! Boy!” The vendor leaned over the table and waved a knobbly stick through the air. “You watch where you’re going! I work a hard day’s living to sell those, and you think I’m going to let some fancy schoolboy just go

ahead and damage my wares?” He reached out with the stick, swung it at Darius’s head. “Do you?”

Darius ducked the first swing; the second landed with a heavy thwack on his shoulder, and he staggered down to one knee. “Ah ... no, sir. Of course, sir. I didn’t mean—”

The end of the stick connected with his abused ear, the pain sharp enough to make the souk seem to spin; Darius swore and fell in a dizzy, ungraceful heap onto a pair of leather shoes and the lace trim of someone’s petticoats, now half-stunned by the new, intense throbbing at the side of his head. The owner of the shoes shrieked, and Darius rolled under the trestle table just before the boot landed in his ribs. Under the table, at least, there was no one close enough to punch or kick. He lay still, panted, raised one hand halfway to his ear before deciding that no, he didn’t want to know.

“You! You lousy cur! You pick those up, you hear!”

Darius swallowed, far too aware that someone who wasn’t hiding would have already crawled out from under the table. He’d been through sandstorms and blizzards, he told himself. He’d travelled halfway around the world. He’d survived brigands and marriage proposals and terrible food. What were the dangers of traversing a mere market in comparison? Nothing, of course. So why couldn’t he make himself roll out from under the table and face nothing more dangerous than a crowd?

“If anything’s broken, you’ll pay for it, you will!” The vendor’s voice rose to a grating screech. “Guards! Guards! There’s a—”

“I’m picking them up!” Darius crept halfway out, headed for a gap between shoes and scooped up everything that didn’t look like rubbish in the aproned hem of his shirt—mostly brown, wizened little things that looked like dried-out monkey faces. He shuddered, only too able to imagine a set of trays covered with tiny faces, set out in the sun in the way sultanas and dates were dried with a midden of miserable, bleached-white monkey skulls sitting in a pit beside. What possible use would anyone have with monkey faces? “I’ll pay you, sir, I promise.”

“I’m a hardworking salesman with a husband and children to support, and you come here, with your smarmy smile and your foreign coin, and expect to just waltz right in and commit property damage without any consequences at all?” The vendor thumped the stick against the table in time with each word. “No. I will not take it!”

Darius thought the vendor had covered the consequences part quite well, actually, but now probably wasn’t the time for a philosophical discussion on the meaning of ‘consequences’. He grimaced, flicked something that wasn’t mud off his fingers, waved off the flies droning around and made a last pass across the ground. If he’d missed something—well, it’d just have stay missed, so he stood up and handed the monkey-faces to the proprietor, along with a suitable coin. “I’m so sorry,” he said again, and he blew the dirt off the closest monkey-thing. “I really am. Someone pushed me, you see...”

“Get on with you!” The vendor whirled the stick around again. “Lazy schoolboys!”

Darius didn’t even bother to try smiling this time; he just ducked and ran, stepping on several sets of toes and stuttering several apologies as he did so. Someone else cuffed him across the other ear, hard enough to send him tumbling into the side of a small hand-cart; an opportunistic hand grabbed at his belt, fumbling for the wallet he didn’t wear. It took him several moments to find a free, relatively safe corner by a cabbage seller, where he could huddle against the wall and watch the souk bustle past.

Why, why did this last attempt to fulfil his quest have to be the most difficult?

He drew in a deep, gasping breath, trying not to shake as he straightened his clothes and brushed the tips of his fingers against his swollen right ear. It felt five times as big as usual, which he knew from experience meant it didn’t look anywhere near that swollen, but just touching the outer edge increased the throbbing to a breath-taking jolt of pain, and he still felt dizzy. Maybe he should see a doctor.

The Professors Roxleigh had warned him about merchants out to cheat him of every coin, soldiers who'd arrest anyone who looked like a thief, beggars with twisted limbs and Guild membership, and the pretty people up on the curtained balconies who decried their loneliness. Lady Plumeria and Amelia had warned him about the desert, the snow and the sea—and to be suspicious of peaceful-looking green pastures. Nobody had thought to warn him about the ordinary people who thought it all right to push, shove, cuff and hit anyone in their path. Why hadn't they? He'd take on dragons over people—at least dragons could be reasoned with and had an appreciation for educated verbosity!

Darius took a swig from his hip flask, drew in another fortifying breath and stepped out into the crowd—only to step on a woman's foot and dart into the path of a pack-leaden mule. “Oh, I ... sorry, sorry...”

Several people glared at him. Darius gave them his best apologetic smile and scurried away.

If, in future, Professor March or anyone else in the world wanted a sword, they could go and get it themselves. He, Darius, had had more than enough of questing—in fact, he was calling the whole thing quits. If he didn't find the sword here, he was going home regardless, and if that meant spending the rest of his life trying to avoid dating the nice young ladies and gentlemen his father thought appropriate, so be it. Love wasn't worth this. Why had he ever thought that finding the right sword would make any real difference, anyway?

All told, Darius's grand quest was a grand failure. It didn't even cement his magical genius by requiring him to fire out creative alliterative verses on the spot: Darius hadn't used his magic at all. He just asked about legendary talking swords, and, in the main, people, ogres and dragons seemed willing enough to help him—perhaps because Darius could make a good cup of tea and didn't mind proofreading family histories. The real problem was that most of those fabled swords were either fakes, dearly beloved of their owners, or, worst of all, utterly authentic—but so damn irritating they

were chained and buried in the deepest dungeons in a vain attempt for everyone in the village to escape their ceaseless chatter.

Darius had become quite good at the art of the midnight runner, for every queen, lord, shopkeeper, ogre and farmer wanted nothing more than to bequeath their most noisy of heirlooms to someone else's care. On the upside, he'd soon learnt that swords which sang bawdy folk songs without stopping provided enough noise that even he could escape undetected.

This last sword, after a year of travel, was a rumour at best: a pair of drunk mercenaries he'd met on the Khaloun border suggested that an arms merchant in Rajad had acquired a lot containing eldritch weaponry, and one item might have been a talking sword, come to think of it—or was it a whetstone? They'd scratched their heads a bit and decided that there was a talking something in Rajad, and it might be worth his while. Darius didn't have much faith in finding anything that wouldn't drive him to cutting off his own ears, but it was worth a final look. Rajad hosted the largest marketplace in the world: where else, if he could not find what he wanted?

If not—well, he'd go home and hide from the gentlefolk callers.

It took Darius half an hour of knocking cauldrons, books, apples guaranteed to grant the knowledge of the universe, preserved rats, dried dates and supposedly enchanted rings (with the ensuing screaming, swearing, cuffing, hitting, punching and apologies) to make his way towards the corner of the souk reserved for sword smiths and arms merchants. Darius swallowed the last of his spit-roasted possum (at least his mother would be pleased to note that he'd now eat a boiled boot if he got hungry enough) and headed towards the closest stall, something easier said than done when he had to get around a man trying to herd five longhorn cattle through the alleyway. “Good morning. My name is Darius and I—”

The seller—a broad, slab-shouldered woman—looked him up and down and burst out laughing. “You? You'd take your own head off if I sold you a sword.”

“Yes,” Darius said, rolling his eyes. It stopped being funny once he'd heard the sentiment expressed in ten different languages. Yes, he did not

look much like a swordsman—in fact, he looked very much like a scrawny twelve-year-old boy. As a magician, however, swords weren't required; as a magician, looking like a non-threatening twelve-year-old boy was by far the preferable approach. Smiling, tripping and apologising didn't get him dragged into dark corners and his throat slit. "I know. I don't suppose you could tell me where Safi's stall is?"

She gave him a long, doubting glance.

"I'm buying a present for a friend." Darius stood up straighter and tried his best to look capable.

She gave a shrug and the kind of sigh that suggested this was ill-advised but so not her problem. "Three streets down, fifteenth stall on the left after you turn right."

"Thank you." He meant to stalk off with some pretence at dignity—but ran face-first into a low-lying wooden beam and fell flat onto the ground. The vendor shrieked with laughter; Darius groaned, poked at his nose, and pushed himself upright. "I ... uh, I meant to do that."

"You go and tell yourself that, dear," she called out between snorts. "Have a nice day!"

Darius gulped, blushed and walked away from the stall as fast as he could manage.

A faded red awning marked Safi's stall, which otherwise didn't look any different from any other stall, displaying a collection of weapons from several countries that fell in the range from beautiful to hard-used. Two-handed swords brought in from the west by traders or left behind by mercenaries lay on the front table; a few dusty rapiers rested in a painted barrel; a multitude of curved-bladed shamshir hung on hooks at the back of the stall. Select pieces rested on swatches of velvet—Safi even had a few zweihänders and cinquedeas with nonsense alliterations scored into the blade.

Darius eyed them off and snorted. Not a one of those alliterations made any sense. They certainly weren't going to make a common sword any more or less magical. He might not be able to walk through a marketplace

without making an idiot of himself, and he might look like a boy, but he'd been top of his year at school. If that wasn't good for identifying rubbish being passed off as magic, he didn't know what was.

"Good morning," he said as he approached the turning figure at the back of the stall. "I'm Darius and I—"

Safi was at least three times as tall as Darius and five times as broad, his dark hair falling in raggedy curls about his face. He looked as though he could break Darius's skull with a single punch, and just the way Safi peered down at him made him feel a little nervous. "Go back home to your mother," Safi said, shaking his head. "You're far too young to need a sword, boy."

Darius sighed. "I'm not a boy," he said, and he wiped his sweating hands on his trousers before reaching inside his shirt for the piece of crumpled paper more dear to him than anything else in the world: his diploma. "I am a fully-qualified magician from Greenstone's College of Magickery, on an errand of grave importance. I have heard that you have in your possession certain eldritch artefacts in which I may have a professional interest."

"I have what?" Safi frowned, peering at the diploma. Whether or not he could read didn't matter: a large, red, official-looking wax seal adorned the page.

"Certain eldritch artefacts that—"

"I'm not going to sell you anything if you don't start speaking in small words—and don't you roll your eyes at me, boy, or I'll slap you into next week."

Darius had the rather uncomfortable feeling that Safi could hit him well before he could alliterate a ward spell, so he nodded and tried his best to straighten his face. "Magic swords."

Safi glanced over towards the display; his face broke out into something close to a blush. "I see. I suppose you're after something ... well, real, then?"

"Yes." Darius attempted a modest smile. "I'm—if you should have one—most interested in a loquacious ... I mean, a talking sword."

Safi stared at him and broke into loud, raucous snorts.

Why, why did everyone laugh at him when he said that? Sure, the chances of finding a talking sword that wasn't obnoxious or cherished weren't high. Finding a talking sword—if taste weren't an issue—wasn't hard at all, and Darius had already passed one by on the way to Safi's stall, one that shouted not-so-helpful fashion advice at everyone that walked past. Finding that rare item, a talking sword that didn't drive its owner to despair, was a much harder quest.

It was, however, the only kind of sword Professor March didn't have displayed on his bedroom wall, the one thing that might make him look at Darius for just a moment and see something other than an awkward, green magician.

"A talking sword isn't going to make you fight better, boy," Safi said, once he could get a word out between bursts of laughter. "How about a nice little dagger you can wear at your belt?"

Darius knotted his hands into fists and counted down from ten before speaking. "This is an errand of grave importance," he said, trying not to snarl; he flipped his diploma back and forth to brush away the flies droning around his face. "I am a magician in need of a certain magical artefact. Can you help me or not?"

Safi paused, stared and then sighed. "I've been saving it for someone special, of course." He bent down for something tucked under the front display. "Here. If you want it badly enough. It's real, I assure you."

Too real, Darius thought in horror. The zweihänder (for a moment Darius just wondered how he was going to get the damn thing home, since even Safi appeared to have trouble holding it: if the chape of the scabbard touched the ground, the pommel rested at a level with Darius's chin) was ... well, hideous. He cringed, unable to look away from the gaudy hilt and guard fashioned like a serpent's head and coiled tail, or the fist-sized red glass 'gemstone' clasped between the serpent's teeth to form the pommel. The scabbard was covered with paste stones, golden tassels and too many glittering trimmings to count. Darius couldn't imagine anyone with a sufficient ability for embarrassment ever looking at the sword, never

mind wielding it—the only thing not embarrassing about the sword, in fact, was the battered leather belt wrapped around the scabbard, and even then someone had tried to pretty it up with a few tassels.

There was no way he could bring that thing back to Greenstone and expect any kind of reaction save March throwing the wretched thing at Darius's head.

“See?” Safi drew the blade far enough that Darius could see the ricasso, etched with nonsense alliterations in Khaloun and Eastern Orthodox. How did ‘Sword’s Strength Sings of Sweet Summer Sopranos Sighing in the Sultry Sands’, in two languages no less, mean anything at all useful? “It’s the genuine article. I got it from a little old man who found it a cave with other wizardly things, but—well, I think some magicians have trouble seeing past the outside to the beauty within.”

“Really?” Darius drew in a deep breath. “Ah ... no. No. I’m pretty sure if I return with that, my master will kill me.” If Darius managed to make it back to Greenstone with that thing in tow without first dying of shame; he didn’t like his chances.

“You sure? I’m willing to offer a very discounted price. I’m happy to see it go to a good home with magical-type folk who’d treat it right. That’s always important to me.” Safi held out the sword for closer inspection. “I know people think I’m some common sword seller, but matching up warriors and their weapons is a sacred calling, you know. I think you both could have a lovely relationship.”

Darius took a slow step backward. He was going to go home and join the monastery. He was going to spend his days gardening and transcribing sacred texts and giving sermons and never having lustful thoughts about Professor March or anyone else. “That’s really nice of you, really, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to—”

A loud, strident, metallic-sounding voice interrupted him. “You are going to give me to some random stranger off the street? A boy you do not even know? Are you trying to get rid of me?”

Darius jumped and sent a matched pair of throwing knives clattering to the ground.

Safi didn't even blink. "Why the hell not? You're annoying and bloody ugly. A boy like this is the only one too stupid to know how off balance you are. Do you think I'm made of money? Do you think I have the stall space for you to just lie around all day and not be sold?"

Darius swallowed. "I do know that, actually."

The sword raised its voice. "So you are just going to give me away to the most pathetic person who comes in asking for a pathetic sword and expect me not to be insulted by that?"

"Yes! Yes, I am!"

"I'm not that pathetic. I'm a real magician."

"I deserve better than that!"

On the positive side, Darius supposed, it talked without the distracting, annoying glow so many magical swords possessed, and, overlooking the insult to his person, it sounded direct and sensible. March liked those sorts of qualities in his students, friends, lovers and flying monkeys. The sheer ugliness of the sword could be overlooked—albeit with some difficulty—if it happened to be everything else Darius wanted. March might not even mind how terrible the sword looked if it happened to be a decent conversationalist.

"How about I go and nail you in a box? Or how about you go with the pathetic magician boy and stop complaining, or I'll drop you in the bloody ocean!"

The sword gave a low, grumpy mutter. "Fine. Boy. Who are you and what do you want from me?"

Darius stared at it and shook his head. Even with all the experience he'd had—and the first thing he was going to do in his monastery was write a book about magical swords around the world—talking to an object that rested, inanimate, in Safi's hands never ceased to feel strange. No movement, no expression, nothing that made the sword appear any

different to any other less-magical sword, aside from the fact that looking at it made Darius's eyes hurt.

"I'm Darius." He folded his arms behind his back as if he were giving a class presentation. "I'm a fully-qualified magician from Greenstone's College of Magickery with a specialisation in arcane and eldritch artefacts, and I'm looking for a talking sword for my mentor, the Professor March, who is a notable and world-famous sword collector."

"Is it not 'whom' is?"

"It's 'who'," he said, feeling comfortable for the first time in weeks. The Professors Roxleigh made any student who ever got it wrong in an essay clean up after divination class, and one time scrubbing liver and entrails out from under his fingernails had been enough for Darius to make sure he never made that mistake again. "'Who' is in the subjective case—that is, the subject of a sentence, which usually precedes the verb. 'Whom' is in the objective case, which means—"

"Interesting." The sword lowered its voice. "Are you saying, however, that I am to be hanged on a gentleman's wall somewhere and ignored?"

Darius gaped for a moment before he remembered that the sword, a thousand-odd miles away from Greenstone, would have no way of knowing what went on in the halls of the College. "Oh, no," he said, shaking his head. "You'll be displayed in his bedroom, which means that you'll be able to watch, or sense, every time an assassin comes in to kill him, every night he spends with a bodyguard, every time he sends his shoes off to the wrong place, every time someone tries to burn the place down, every time students try and sneak into his room and unwire his swords, and every time the Professors Roxleigh come and drag him out of bed—it's worth watching." He gulped and wondered if that sounded—well, just a little bit like he'd been paying too much attention to the goings-on in March's bedroom? "If he really likes you, he'll probably wear you. And ... it's 'hung', actually. People are hanged; pictures and swords are hung. It's an important distinction if you're trying to create an alliteration to put things away ... or hang someone, I guess."

The sword let the silence hang for a moment.

“I take it you learnt these things at your College?”

“You can’t create functional spells without correct grammar,” Darius said, shrugging.

Safi rolled his eyes and made a few impatient scoffing noises.

“Indeed. So, then. What sort of bodyguards does this Professor March employ?”

“Really?”

“I want to know what it is I am in for.” The sword sounded just a little bit prissy. “Or who it is I am in for.”

There was a double entendre there, but Darius didn’t really want to think about that one too much. “Whom’. Um ... well ... they’re gorgeous ones, really.” He tried his best to say it without any particular weight, but some amount of envy must have crept in because Safi gave him a surprise smile, one far too sympathetic for Darius’s comfort. “Gorgeous, adorable men. So I’m sure watching, or sensing, or however it is that you’re aware, and if there’s a correct verb and gerund please tell me ... anyway, it won’t be a trial to you, unless you prefer women. But then there’s the Professors Roxleigh, so...”

Swords didn’t have a preference, did they? It wasn’t generalising too much to think that an oversized zweihänder was more likely to appreciate men than, say, a rapier? Or would a zweihänder adorned with gemstones rather watch women? Or people who were neither? Or maybe they didn’t care who was involved, or didn’t care to the extent that human affairs were nothing but exercises in boredom, because they were *swords*?

The sword said nothing to indicate interest, just a bland, bored-sounding question: “And I will travel with you to this College?”

“Yes.”

The sword’s silence lingered long enough that Darius broke out in a nervous sweat and rubbed his palms against his trousers.

“Oh, very well. But in that case, you cannot give this blade to this young man. Not that someone will want to steal it, mind; I just doubt

that he can carry it. Unwrap me and give him that ... no, perhaps that ... hmmm. Let me think on the matter.”

Darius felt a little grateful that he wasn't the only one staring in confusion: Safi blinked as if he didn't have the faintest idea what to do next.

“Just unwrap me,” the sword said finally. “That will do nicely.”

“Unwrap you?” Safi continued to blink. His arms began to shake from the effort of holding the sword upright. “I don't...”

“Do you specialise in being moronic? Good grief. Do you really, truly think that a talking sword would look like this wretched thing? I am the belt, numbskull!”

Darius stared at the belt, which looked as inanimate as the sword. It could have been true for all he knew: it wasn't as though enchanted objects had some kind of ‘Here Lies an Enchanted Object’ signifier, which would have made his life so much the easier. A belt would certainly be easier to carry home, however. He wouldn't have to worry about someone mistaking him for someone capable with a weapon. He could even just go and wrap the belt around some pretty-looking elfish sword from the marketplace back home, and who would know the difference?

After a moment's thought, he rather liked the idea. It wasn't what he'd been looking for, but the belt seemed a good sight more personable than those screaming swords embedded into blocks of stone, and wasn't that what counted?

“You.” Safi held the zweihänder out at arm's length as though the belt were about to loosen itself and bite his head off. “A talking belt? What kind of good is that?”

“Unwrap me,” the belt said with just a touch of petulance. “I would like to go with the boy.”

“Magician.”

Safi blinked again—Darius wondered if he had something in his eye—and then sighed. “Are you sure you don't want the sword?”

“Very.”

The belt had even more enthusiasm on the matter: “Yes!”

“Fine.” Safi unwound the belt and dropped the sword onto the display bench. “It’ll be easier to sell the damn thing without you yabbering, anyway.”

The belt, when Safi placed it in Darius’s diploma-free hand, was a plain, common thing smelling of leather polish, sweat and horse. The buckle was smooth and just a little tarnished. Nothing about it suggested sentience or magic.

“You can take those tassels off, boy.”

“I have a name.” Darius wedged the diploma under one arm and pulled at the closest tassel, dropped it onto the bench. “It’s Darius.”

“Yes. Boy.”

Safi gave a throaty little chuckle that made Darius quite suspicious of his supposed generosity. Just what had this belt done while in Safi’s care?

“Now, you said that your master is a well-known sword collector? I have some examples—non-magical, of course—of exquisite work and such historical significance that any collector would be proud to display them, and, as you’re doing me a favour, I’d be quite glad to offer you a discount.” Safi winked. Darius glanced up and down the alley and wondered why there were no opportune cows or crowds ready to save him. “Anything to put a smile on your lover’s face, hey? I have a lovely rapier that was once wielded by the queen of—”

“No.” The belt’s voice sounded loudly enough that Darius jumped and almost fell over. “He doesn’t need a sword. You, boy. Wrap me around your waist. We will leave. Farewell, sword seller.”

Darius tucked the diploma back under his shirt and wound the belt. It was far too big for him, and he wondered if the zweihänder had been intended for a giant, the belt a giant’s baldric. “Goodbye. And—thanks. I think.”

“Should you ever need a blade, you know where to find me. Tell your friends! Tell your enemies! Tell everyone of my unending generosity!”

The belt didn't need to tell him to get out as fast as he could; Darius waved, smiled, and then turned and almost ran out of the stall. Safi called out something after him, but the jostling crowd drowned out the words. Darius sighed and headed south toward his rented room, barely making it twenty steps before running headlong into a flock of squawking ducks a young girl herded the other way.

"Oh! Sorry!" He darted to one side and landed on a duck's foot; he screeched when the duck bit him on the calf and clung on. "Get it off me!"

The girl just screamed back, her fingers balled into fists. "Stop stepping on my ducks, then!"

Something pecked at his fingers. He swore, pulled the duck away from his leg, and scrambled to the far side of the street, earning a few more hard pecks and a long stream of curses from the duck herder as the flock passed him by. The closest stallholder glanced at him and broke into laughter. Darius closed his eyes, counted to ten, opened them again, crouched down and rolled up his trousers. Blood smeared his calf.

"You are not very good at this, are you, boy?"

What to say to that? Darius stood up and headed back down the street, turning his head about in search for more dangerous livestock. Not answering wasn't better than answering, but at least he didn't have to worry about the belt giving him smug smiles. Words alone were easier to ignore.

"Did you hear me?"

Darius stepped past a jutting-out table laden with jars of eyeballs and didn't knock anything over. "If you're just the belt, why didn't you say so sooner and get taken off that sword?"

"Can you imagine what it is to be a sword belt? You spend your time being worn by horrible, sweaty men and women who wield horrible, sweaty swords and spend their days riding and fighting." The belt let out a deep sigh. "Not a one of them were capable of good conversation. The stall was peaceful."

A holiday, then? He supposed that made sense, but why would the belt end its peaceful interlude for Darius—or March? “Why are you leaving now?”

It said nothing for a moment, and spoke just when Darius thought it wasn’t going to tell him: “You might be capable of interesting conversation.”

Him? Darius bit back the urge to burst out laughing. “I was the most boring person in my year,” he said. “The only thing notable I did was ... well, not be notable.”

“You can tell me when to use ‘whom’.” The belt paused. Darius managed to spend the next few moments traversing the crowd without being cuffed more than twice. He’d have to note that in the book. “So, what are you going to do about becoming a bodyguard?”

Darius froze in mid-step only to place his foot down on a suddenly-appearing cat that screeched and bit; Darius flailed, also screeching, at the creature clinging onto his thigh before falling to his knees—knocking several glass jars of fingernail clippings off a stand as he went. One jar shattered, scattering fingernails over the sandaled feet of everyone in the vicinity, which started yet another chorus of shouts, curses and pleas from the vendor and anyone who ended up with a fingernail clipping between their toes. The cat vanished then, of course, leaving the crowd to stare down at him and his clawed, blood-spotted trousers.

Why, why couldn’t he just walk through a market without making a disaster of it?

He sighed and babbled out a few apologies and got down on his knees, trying not to think too hard about the fact that he was scraping up someone’s fingernail clippings. At least, unlike the divination classroom, there was nothing squishy, but if he let himself think about the fact that he had no idea where those clippings came from or how long they’d been in the jar—no, he wasn’t going there. He wasn’t. He was just going to pick up as many of the clippings as he could manage and get the hell out of the market. He’d go give the damn belt to March and then go hide in the monastery. Write his book. Suggest that ducks and cats were corporal

representations of evil. Live a quiet and unassuming life in the presence of no more than ten other people.

“I would think it would be much easier,” the belt said, its voice only almost drowned out in the din. “You do not really want to give the Professor a sword. You want him to notice you. You said he notices bodyguards. Therefore, become a bodyguard.”

“I...”

“And don’t think you won’t be paying for that jar, boy! You can’t just come along as you please and break a hard-working woman’s stock!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Folk like you always don’t mean it, but are you ever careful? No!”

Darius stared down at the mess of fingernails scattered in every crevice, impossible to ever scrape up while people walked through the market—and then shuddered and groped around in his boot for a spare coin instead. There was politeness, and then there was scooping up fingernail clippings. That shouting vendor wasn’t even the Professors Roxleigh, two beautiful women who spent their days torturing students and their nights torturing each other. How could this compare to their long-perfected art of misery-making?

“Hurry it up! You’re blocking customers!”

He stood up and slammed the coin in the woman’s hand. “There.”

She glared at him from underneath a witchy-looking broad-brimmed hat. The cat sat perched on one shoulder and stared down at Darius with an equally smug, imperious glare. “That’s all you have to say? When you damaged my property?”

“Yes!” Darius threw his hands up in the air, tired of it all. “That’s—no, how about not putting jars on the edges of tables? Didn’t your mother or father or parent ever teach you that? Don’t put stuff on the edges of tables in busy walkways! And tie up your blasted cat!” He turned around and glared at the crowd. “And stop pushing! Stop shoving! Give people space!”

The crowd fell silent for one wonderful, amazing moment. Darius brushed the fingernails off his clothes and turned around to stride off into

the souk. There. That would show them. He'd now walk through the crowd like the kind of person who didn't get shoved and jostled and called 'boy'. He'd be a man, a magician, the kind of person feared by the masses. People would, for the first time in his life, respect him—at least just enough that he could make it to his rented room without earning another bruise.

He made it five steps before someone shoved him in the back and he fell headlong into a basket of grapes.

"Especially if you want to get in his bed, as I understand it," the belt said. "Have you ever considered the fact that your search for a sword is nothing more than an extended metaphor?"

Darius pulled himself up and spat out a grape skin. A saucepan sailed over his head and he scrambled for cover behind a passing donkey cart. "That's gross."

"The grapes or the metaphor?"

"Both."

"I gather that the thing you are truly hunting..."

Darius put his hands in his ears and hummed for several moments before he risked lowering them again.

"Are you listening? Boy? Good. Turn left at the next street, and then head north until you get out of the souk. I will take you to a fencing school, one renowned throughout the Empire. Even just learning the basics here will attract the Professor's attention, I think. You could offer to pay your way through by doing whatever magic the sword master needs doing, although if I were you, I would offer to sleep with him. You could use the experience."

He drew in a deep breath and said, through gritted teeth, "I am not ... I have had ... I don't need..."

"Yes, of course," the belt said, lightly. "I think it is interesting that you respond to my commentary with regards your virginity first. Humans are such odd little creatures. In any case, turn left just up there. Give me a year. You will be..." It paused again, as if considering; it made an odd, high-pitched whistling noise as it did so, sounding rather like an annoying

tea-kettle. “Well, a little more capable than you are now. At least you have a brain. That gives you more prospects than most.”

“I’m not going to be a swordsman. You’re a gift. And I can’t use a sword!”

The belt gave a rather life-like snort. “Really? If you believe that you cannot do things like make your mentor fall in love with you, why are you a thousand miles from home scouring the marketplace for a talking sword—and not just any talking sword, but that rarest of rare things, an *interesting* talking sword?”

Darius hesitated right at the corner. The left-hand turn led to a quieter-seeming corner of the souk, the lane winding between fruit and vegetable sellers. “I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “I got drunk one night and it seemed like a good idea.”

“You got drunk? You actually got drunk?”

“Yes, I got drunk!” Darius stepped sideways to let a cart go past. “What do you think I am?”

“I am not going to answer that. Well. If you, boy, think that I am going to spend my time wondering across the country holding up a boy’s trousers, you are mistaken. If you think that I am merely going to be handed over to hold up someone else’s trousers, you are also mistaken. I am an artefact of great historical significance, to be used with a sword by someone who has the skills, knowledge and intelligence worthy of my company. So, I ask: does your professor ever use any of the swords in his collection?”

“I didn’t know that magical sword belts gave bloody speeches.”

“It is a hobby of mine,” the belt said with a rather breathy sigh. “Answer the question.”

Darius sighed, afraid that this revelation was going to do nothing but ruin the entire thing. “Well ... they hang on the wall. They look pretty.”

“No.”

“They’re symbolic?”

“No.”

He threw out his hands in frustration. “We’re magicians! We alliterate! We don’t—fight, or poke things with metal.”

The belt sighed again. “Then there is nothing for it. We go to the school and you begin your quest to become a swordsman worthy of me. Turn left.”

“I don’t want—”

“Yes, you do. You want to walk through the crowd and not have someone touch you. You want to be a man; you do not want to be a gangly boy laughed at by everyone you see. You do not want a sword; you want to be seen. You want to be somewhere else, away from home—you want to be, in point of fact, someone else altogether, or you would not have left on a fool’s errand to find something you know does not exist. Magic has not brought you what you want, or you would not be out here trying to find it.”

Darius swallowed, struck by the horrible realisation that he had no way at all of countering that particular speech. “I...”

“You want to be the man who went on an epic adventure and found the impossible and returned, glorious and triumphant. But all you did was talk to people and get knocked over and eat spit-roasted rat.”

“Possum.”

“I assure you that there are no possums in Rajad.”

Darius stood very still and concentrated on not vomiting. “I ... I was going to go home and go to the monastery,” he said, after a moment.

“Hide away because you failed, you mean?”

He sighed. Why did the damn thing have to be so right all the time? “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Okay—yes. I was going to go home and hide. Happy?”

“So do something different,” the belt said. “Turn left.”

Darius glanced down the alleyway. “You’re not going to let me give you to March, are you?”

“When I have before me a project?” The belt’s voice rose in pitch, as if excited. “Of course not. Now turn, Darius. Turn left!”

Darius sighed and, quite sure that he was going to live to regret it, stepped out into the laneway. Perhaps he could blame whatever happened next on the fact that he had a throbbing head-wound and was incapable of making a sound decision right now. How else could he explain the fact that he didn't really want to go home? That the idea of becoming the kind of man who could navigate marketplaces and defend himself, the kind of man that wasn't disregarded as a boy, the kind of man that someone might notice, was something he wanted more than magic? He was a magician, he shouldn't want—but he did.

“Good boy,” the belt said, almost whistling the words. “Now we start on the road towards getting you a penis.”

Darius just flailed in shock, almost on the verge of putting his hands over his ears once more, but then he squared his shoulders. “I don't need a penis to be a man.”

“Exactly.” The belt broke out into a fit of babbling, incomprehensible, metallic laughter. “You just may learn yet, boy!”

He had no idea, but he had the sneaking suspicion that the belt would ensure he figured it out anyway.

Darius sighed, shrugged, and trudged down the laneway.

The Art of Letting Go

[Note: since the artifice of the play is that the kitchen setting is in fact the stage it's performed on, directions refer to the stage setting as opposed to the kitchen setting.]

A row of kitchen-type tables stretches across the stage, cutting it in two. There is enough space between two of the tables for a person to walk through, but this is blocked by a tall chair. Dotted across and around both halves of the stage are dining tables and kitchen stools. Odd kitchen assortments like cups, plates, kettles and muffin trays are placed on the tables; brooms and buckets, shopping baskets, and a plastic tub piled with dishes on a cupboard are scattered around the space. They're all slightly out of style, inexpensive, and well used. Flowers are arranged in vases around the room; here and there drawings (ranging from childish to artistic) hang on the walls. A stool is placed, on the left-hand side of the stage, in front of the centre table, as if in front of a kitchen bench.

MARIA (mother, sales assistant in her mid-50s, wearing an out-of-style apron bearing her work name-badge over a similar shirt and slacks, and sensible shoes) stands to the right of stage, wiping down the tables and chairs with a cloth. As DIANA (daughter, sales assistant, early 20s, wearing in-style casual jeans and shoes with a shoe-store-logo polo shirt, carrying a large over-stuffed sausage bag with a shirt-sleeve poking out

from the top) enters from the door placed at stage left and lets it slam behind her, Maria pours two cups of tea and places two muffins on plates.

Maria: Hi, hon. How was your day?

Diana: [looks around at the stage, and then up at Maria] I, ah, well. Mum. I guess I lost my job.

Maria: You guess you lost your job? What did you do, Diana?

[Diana drops her bag to one side of the stage and sits on the kitchen bench stool.]

Diana: I didn't do anything. I mean that, well, I actually lost it.

Maria: [hands Diana a cup] How did you actually lose your job, then? Is it because you've been turning down overtime? I said you shouldn't be doing that—I don't know why you want your Fridays free. You're not doing anything but go out with your friends, anyway.

Diana: No. Mum, I told you—David's cool with me not working Fridays. It's just that centre management jacked up the rent again, so he's closing the shop. Since I was only casual ... well, first to go and all that.

[Maria picks at her muffin as if buying for time to think. Only after she's taken a sip of tea does she speak.]

Maria: I told you, Diana. You should have tried for the full-time job.

Diana: Why? What would've that done? David's closing the store. Everyone's leaving. Anna says we could get jobs at the chicken shop, but I don't know. The hours suck and ... well, food.

[Diana reaches over for the second muffin.]

Maria: No, I meant that receptionist job. You know, the good one. You should have gone for that.

Diana: You know I don't like that sort of thing. Phone calls.

Maria: You wouldn't be in this situation now, though, would you?

Diana: No. I guess.

Maria: Well, you can now go and look for a better job. You were far too good for that place. It didn't matter how hard you worked—you were never going to get ahead there. Now you can go somewhere decent.

[Maria picks up the muffin plate and places it, crumbs and all, into the sink. She then picks up her cloth and polishes any item in her reach.]

Diana: It wasn't bad. David's been really good to me. And the staff discount!

Maria: You never went full-time, though. You should have. You're far better than that Anna girl.

[Diana makes a non-committal grunting noise.]

Maria: You go and polish up your resume, put some effort into a real career. Such a shame about that receptionist job, though. That would have been fantastic for you.

Diana: Mum. I don't like receptionist work. I don't like phones!

[Diana takes a bite from her muffin. Crumbs splatter over the table-top.]

Maria: I'm just trying to help. There's no need to get all shirty at me.

Diana: Sorry.

[Maria wipes at the crumbs.]

Maria: Are you going to give me a hand instead of sitting there like a princess?

[Diana gets up and heads toward the closest chair. She carries it toward the table.]

Maria: In any case, won't doing that kind of work help you get over it? I'd think that'd be a good thing. Look at me! I couldn't even use a computer three years ago, and now I can send emails and find things on Yahoo. I'm almost as good as all those young things they bring in, and it all it takes is a little bit of effort.

Diana: [mutters] But you still haven't figured out capslock.

Maria: What was that?

Diana: Just saying that I don't like that kind of office work.

[Maria puts down her cloth and brings the closest chair over to the tables.]

Maria: Well, what can you do, then? You're wasting your skills, working in a shop. You can use a computer!

Diana: So can everyone else, Mum.

Maria: You're still far too talented to be working in some shop. I didn't raise my girl for that.

[Maria stacks the chair somewhere on top of the row of tables. Neither woman looks or behaves as though this is out of the ordinary. Diana follows with her own chair.]

Diana: You work in a shop, Mum.

Maria: But that's me. What else was I supposed to do, after I was left— anyway, you don't want to end up like me, do you? You have your whole life ahead of you, so shouldn't you be aspiring for something better?

[Both women go and fetch another chair.]

Diana: I don't know.

Maria: [stacking her chair on the table] What about going back to school? I think you could be a good teacher. Or what about a librarian?

Diana: Me? In a library? Get serious, Mum.

Maria: I am. Mrs Johnson said that her daughter's studying something at school to become a librarian, and you're good at computers. If she can do it, you could.

Diana: No. I don't want to be a librarian. Mum, can we not do this now?

Maria: What's wrong with right now? You're not working, are you?

Diana: [places her chair on the table] I ... Mum, I just got fired—like, half an hour ago. Can't we do this later? I have to call Suze, and tell her I can't go out on Saturday, and ring Josie about Friday, and...

[Maria picks up her cloth and starts scrubbing at one of the chair legs.]

Maria: When are you going to talk about it, then? Tomorrow? Next week? Next year? Never?

Diana: [turns away to grab another chair] What the hell's that supposed to mean?

Maria: You really mean you don't know?

Diana: Do I look like a mind reader?

Maria: You've spent the last three years at a shoe store. As a casual. You don't even want to work Fridays. You don't want to work full time. What do you think that means?

[Maria pauses, staring at Diana. Diana doesn't have an answer.]

Maria: I don't understand. You were so good at school. Why are you doing this?

[Diana adds another chair to the stack on the table before speaking.]

Diana: Mum, I ... it's not like that. It's not. I—

Maria: [interrupts] You're going to be too old for anyone to hire you. You need to settle down, get a qualification, decide on a career, stick to it. You

don't want to end up like ... well, like those girls at the chicken shop, do you? Too old to work anywhere else?

[Maria turns to grab a chair of her own.]

Diana: I'm twenty-two. How is this old?

Maria: It is if you go back to school. You'll be behind everyone else your age. Employers won't like it. You don't know how hard it can be to get a job when you're older. I ... some of the ladies at the club told me about it. They ask questions. They pass you over for young girls straight out of school. I don't want that for you.

[Maria stacks chair.]

Diana: Mum. I'm not old. I don't know what planet you're on, but I'm not old. Josie says that people don't even really grow up until they're twenty-six. At least.

Maria: Josie?

Diana: Some woman I know. Anyway. Can we not do this? Mum, I just lost my job and this isn't helping.

Maria: [stalking off toward another chair] I'm trying to be here for you, Diana. That's all I'm trying to be—here for you, if you'll let me. Of course, I can't help it if you don't see it that way, if you think your poor old Mum can't help you, or isn't good enough, or—

Diana: Mum ... that's not what I meant. I know you're trying to help. It's just...

[Diana stops and sits down on a chair in the middle of her side of the stage, looking out to the audience.]

Diana: I just mean ... stuff like this. The harping. The receptionist job. You just go on and on about it, like I'm some kid that's too stupid to get it. Like I can't do things for myself.

Maria: I think you're putting words in my mouth, girl. When have I ever said that you can't do things?

Diana: [stands up, picks up chair she was sitting on and carries it to the tables] I ... I, no. No, you've haven't. I just ... you go on and on.

Maria: [sits down on a chair, looks out to the audience] Did you ever stop to think that I might 'go on and on' because you don't do anything, Diana?

Diana: [adds her chair to the pile] But why do I need to do anything? Mum, I don't get it!

Maria: You're a bright, intelligent girl who could be doing things that are so much better than shoes, so why the hell aren't you? Why are you mooching around, taking Fridays off, going nowhere and getting yourself fired?

Diana: I didn't get myself fired. And David was good to me—I really liked it there. He always gave me the best shifts he could.

[Maria stops and stares across at Diana.]

Maria: That's what got you fired. Can't you see that? It was a nothing job. You don't have a career, you don't have your own place—

Diana: [interrupts] You know that I'm saving up. You said I could live here while I saved.

Maria: [puts her chair on the pile with a hard thumping noise] Don't interrupt me, Diana. Haven't I taught you better than that?

Diana: Yes.

Maria: Yes, I have.

[Maria pauses, waiting for an answer. Diana says nothing.]

Maria: Well? For what, then? What are you saving for, Diana?

[Diana still says nothing.]

Maria: Well, what?

Diana: I've been thinking that I'm okay at art.

Maria: Your sketches? That's what you want to do?

Diana: Yeah. People think I'm good.

Maria: That's your hobby, hon. We all need hobbies, but that's all they are—hobbies, like my flowers. Say, did you see my newest vase?

[Maria smiles and gestures towards one of the flower arrangements.]

Diana: It's great, Mum. They always are.

Maria: But it's not going to bring in the money now, is it?

Diana: Things are different these days, Mum. It could! You could do a course, and make a website. [Diana talks faster, with enthusiasm.] You know all the girls down at the netball club—you could advertise there, do all the club dos and weddings. You know your flowers are better than those trashy arrangements Claire had at hers! I bet you could find wholesale flower sellers online, and—

Maria: [interrupts] How's that going to help you right now?

Diana: I just thought...

Maria: You need to be focusing on a career right now, something that pays the bills—like the receptionist job. That stuff, if it happens, is for later.

Diana: Mum! I don't want to be a receptionist!

[Diana crosses the stage to grab one of the outermost chairs, glancing at the overstuffed bag as she passes it by. Maria stops in her wall-building to rub her cleaning cloth over the tables.]

Maria: Well, what are you going to do then?

[Diana stops, sits down in her chair and stares out towards the audience again.]

Diana: I ... I only got fired five hours ago. I haven't told Suze yet. I haven't thought about any of it yet.

Maria: That's your problem. You never think about these sorts of things.

[Diana pauses.]

Diana: You do.

Maria: Excuse me?

Diana: [to audience] You think of everything, don't you? You've got your plans, just like I'm a child. I don't want it. I don't need it.

Maria: When are you ever going to start acting like an adult, then? You've been fired and you can't even manage it.

[Diana stands.]

Diana: Look—Mum. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't do things the way you do, think about them that way, but—

Maria: [interrupts] You're going to have to. You have to start growing up. What if I'm not able to put a roof over your head? What if I can't pay all the bills? What if something happens to me? What then, Diana? What are you going to do then, if you don't start acting like an adult?

Diana: I don't need you to, Mum.

Maria: What?

Diana: [grabs hold of her chair and carries it to the tables] You don't have to hold my hand. Put a roof over my head. I can do things on my own. I can look after myself.

Maria: What, then? What have you ever done that's looking after yourself? Anna got you your job, didn't she?

Diana: Yes, she did, but—

Maria: [interrupts]What else, then?

[Diana pauses, looking nervous, and then speaks.]

Diana: I started seeing Josie.

Maria: Josie? Who is this Josie? [pauses] You're not ... not seeing a woman, are you? Because you do know that I'll always love you, Diana? Whoever you happen to ... uh, be with?

Diana: No! Well, I don't know. I never really thought about that sort of thing. Maybe. But no. Josie's my psychologist.

[Diana places her chair on the table and heads across the stage after another chair.]

Maria: Your what?

Diana: Psychologist.

Maria: You're seeing a psychologist.

Diana: On Fridays.

Maria: You've gone and started seeing a psychologist. Why? You're not crazy! You need to grow up, but you're not ... crazy.

[Diana sits down on her chair and faces the audience.]

Diana: Everyone's a little bit crazy, Mum. Anyway. Stuff I'm doing? I'm also working on a portfolio for university. Drawings and graphic design stuff.

[Maria drops the cleaning cloth. She ignores it and heads toward another chair.]

Diana: [continues] Mum?

Maria: You're what?

Diana: I'm putting together an art portfolio for when applications open next month.

[Maria says nothing. She wanders around the stage, picking up items and replacing them, straightening vases. She opens her mouth and, for a moment, looks as if she's about to speak before closing her mouth again.]

Diana: I would've liked to work longer, have more time to save up money for accommodation next year, but...

Maria: You're going to university? For art?

[Maria collects and stacks a chair on the table, and then goes in search of another.]

Diana: Applying, anyway. I'm hoping to get into somewhere in the city. I don't want it to be just a hobby, Mum. I just don't want to be like ... well, to be like...

Maria: Like what?

Diana: [to the audience] You.

Maria: Excuse me?

Diana: It's different for you, Mum. I get that. You had to get whatever job you could to look after me, I guess. You didn't have the chance, back then. But things are different now. Have you never wondered what it'd be like, to go off and do something you love?

Maria: You have no idea what I've done to look after you.

Diana: I—

Maria: I don't understand. Why couldn't you tell me this ... any of this? Psychologists and portfolios? What else are you keeping secret from me?

Diana: I'm really dating Anna and David's going to marry us on the last day of work?

[Maria just gapes at Diana.]

Diana: Just joking, Mum. Besides. It's not even legal, yet.

Maria: You think it's funny, playing around with me at a time like this?

Diana: No, I... Sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you.

Maria: You didn't mean to hurt me? You have, Diana. You have. I'm your mother, I'm always there for you, I've told you time and time again that I'll listen to anything you have to say, and now you've gone and kept all these secrets from me. For how long? Why? I'm your mother! Whatever you can say to this Josie, you can say to me!

Diana: I can't really talk to you about things. I think—

Maria: [interrupts] What do you mean you can't talk to me about things? I'm right here.

Diana: Stop interrupting me, Mum!

[Maria, startled, drops the chair she's carrying.]

Diana: [continues] Mum, I just want you to listen to me, and—you don't, you don't listen. You just go on and on about other things, and I don't like ... it's scary, sometimes, and ... I just can't. It's all so awkward. Josie doesn't do that. It's her job, but I can talk to her. It's different.

[Maria picks up the chair and adds it to the pile on the table.]

Maria: Are you saying that you're not happy with the way things are around here? With how I am?

[Diana glances towards the audience, and then the bag at the side of the stage.]

Diana: I don't mean it that way. Just—it's all so hard, all the arguing and the pushing.

Maria: What's keeping you here, then, if it's all too hard for you? You damn well know where the door is.

Diana: Mum...

Maria: [sitting on chair, facing the audience] I don't understand. Don't you want to have a good job? Don't you want to be happy? Secure? Why can't you just grow up and start being responsible? Isn't this what this Josie should be teaching you—how to be an adult?

Diana: [to the audience] Things are different now, Mum. I don't want to be like you and just wonder. Why can't you understand that?

Maria: How am I not understanding? I work to keep a roof over your head! Why don't you start trying to understand how hard it is for me to do that?

Diana: I do, and I appreciate it, but...

[Maria stands up and turns to face Diana.]

Maria: There's always a 'but', isn't there? I told you, Diana. If you can't tolerate it here, if I'm not understanding enough for you, then there's the door, right over there.

[Maria picks up her last chair and adds it to the pile on the tables. Diana stands up and picks up her own chair. She carries it to the centre-front of the stage and places it down, well away from the wall of tables and chairs now built up between the two women.]

Diana: Okay.

Maria: What?

Diana: Okay.

Maria: What does that mean?

Diana: Okay. I'll go crash at Suze's.

[Diana walks across the stage to her bag and slings it over one shoulder. Maria crosses over to the tables, peering between the chairs at Diana.]

Maria: You're leaving?

Diana: Yes.

Maria: You can't just walk out on me like this. Not like—

Diana: [walks towards the door, but stops halfway to look back at Maria]
You just told me to leave, Mum. So I'm leaving.

Maria: You don't have a job. You can't stay at Suze's forever. What are you going to do?

Diana: I don't know. I guess I'll have to be an adult and figure it out for myself.

Maria: You can't just leave things like this—

Diana: [interrupts] Mum, I'm sorry, but I have to. I can't do this anymore, and if you're not going to listen, then I can't be here anymore. Can you listen to me?

Maria: I am listening. What do you think I've been doing all this time? Ignoring you?

[Diana says nothing and opens the door. Maria pulls out the chair placed on the ground between the two tables and steps through the table-chair wall onto Diana's side of the stage, staring at Diana's bag.]

Maria: Wait. You brought that bag in with you, Diana? You brought a packed bag?

[Diana turns to face Maria.]

Diana: It's not like you haven't told me to leave before.

Maria: You came in planning to leave?

Diana: I wanted to see if we could talk it out, first. If things could be different. I wanted to give it a shot, but Josie said—

Maria: [interrupts] I don't see you doing much listening to me. What does this Josie have to say about that, Diana?

Diana: Goodbye, Mum.

[Diana steps through the door and shuts it behind her.]

Maria: [darts across Diana's half of the stage and opens the door] Diana! Wait!

[Diana doesn't come back. Maria stands in the open doorway for a moment, and then turns and shuts the door behind her. She stands and surveys the table for a moment, and then picks up her cleaning cloth and starts cleaning the kitchen.]

Maria: [to self] Hi, Mum. How was your day, then? Oh, Diana—not so good, actually. They said they have to cut back my hours even more. They say they want people who can use Excel, but really, I think, they just want the customers to see younger people. I guess we'll just have to muddle along, won't we? I'm sure we'll be okay.

[pause]

Maria: If it comes to it ... and I'm sure it won't, but just in case. You'd put in a good word with Anna for me at the chicken shop, wouldn't you?

Blue Paint, Chocolate and Other Similes

BEN THOUGHT HE'D STOPPED BREATHING for a second when the guy at the bar finally turned his way, his lips and eyes creasing into a too-broad, melt-your-heart sort of a smile. He sat there, transfixed, as the guy raised his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss in the direction of Ben's table. Grinning back wasn't a particularly suave thing to do—maybe someone else, someone far more experienced in the art of picking up hot men, someone who didn't feel self-conscious over their appearance, would know how to respond—but the man winked, and Ben fought the urge to pump his fist up and down. Yes. He still had it.

Take that, Dad, he thought. The sexiest guy in the room, suited up—it didn't matter whether or not he'd suited up for the bar or just came from work, as the black pinstripe suit fit him like a second skin—and eyeing him. If that didn't prove Ben wasn't desirable as he was, what did?

The sudden flailing of Lisa's hands right before Ben's face made him jerk and almost knock over the bowl of peanuts.

“God, Lisa,” he said, and he pushed his beer away from the edge of the table but made sure to keep his head raised, just to ensure the guy wasn't some kind of unholy apparition who'd disappear the moment Ben glanced away. “Can't you see I'm busy?”

“Do you see her?” Lisa pointed at the bar with a shaky hand. “Oh my god, do you think she'll come over?” She frowned and ran a hand down her chest, tugged at her blouse and necklace. “I've got a chance, right?”

Ben and Lisa's friendship revolved around a mutual low-level anxiety and shoring the other up at any presentable opportunity, so Ben nodded out of habit—and then realised just whom Lisa pointed at. It took a moment for Ben to scrape his jaw off the too-worn pub carpet; he picked up scattered peanuts and arranged them in a neat pile to one side of his coaster while he pulled himself together. “Uh ... what?” He tore his eyes away from his dream man for just long enough to check Lisa's glass, but she'd only knocked back a couple of lagers, nowhere near alcoholic enough to cause delusions on that kind of scale. He wasn't a woman, whatever Lisa thought of women in well-tailored suits (Ben did agree on that point), and he hadn't been staring at Lisa—had he? “That's not a woman.”

Lisa tore her eyes away just long enough to raise both brows at Ben's direction. “What the fuck yourself?” She swiped a hand through her hair and then broke out into a broad smile. “She's looking at me again. She'll come over, right?”

She? Ben stared at the guy again, now examining his suit for more than just an appreciation of well-fitting fabric. Lisa had never so much as dreamed of getting it on with a dude, and Ben could have sworn that she had better gaydar than him—not that this was a situation where gaydar mattered, come to think of it. There wasn't much of a social rule about gender bar the assumption that anyone could at any time tell anyone else's gender without difficulty, but that guy, that adorable smile above a loosened-collar dress shirt hiding way too much of his chest and shoulders? No way was he looking at some—what, a crossdressing woman? Butch lesbian? No, not in that pinstripe suit.

“No way is that a chick,” Ben said—and gulped, right as his dream man stretched both legs, grabbed the jacket hanging over the back of his chair, and strolled over towards them. “Lisa, is that a chick?”

“She's just packing,” Lisa said, doing a last minute check of her clothes before grabbing her glass and leaning back in her chair. “Glittery eyeshadow? Totally not a dude.”

“Could be a trans man,” he said, not sure how he felt about women who packed, however hypocritical it might have been. It occurred to him that in case Lisa was wrong about being the recipient of the guy’s sexy stares, he should probably make sure he also hadn’t dripped beer down his front; a surreptitious check proved that his clothes were where they were supposed to be and unsoiled.

“Could be anyone,” she said, not unreasonably. “How about you ask?”

Ben bit back a disgusted grunt. Lisa was right about the eye shadow, now that he (she?) strolled closer, every move of her feet and hands in perfect rhythm to the music. Blue and purple eye shadow, sparkly like glittery nail polish or My Little Ponies, framed each eye and detracted nothing from that glossed-up smile.

She grinned harder, running the tip of her tongue over her lips as she approached the table. “Got room for a g-gatecrasher?”

The girl didn’t wait for an answer as she draped her jacket over one of the two vacant chairs, which was good as the most Ben could offer was a grin and a nod. The rest of him was caught up in her. She smelled of sandalwood and vanilla, enough to be noticeable but not so strong it sent him running for the windows. Her voice gave nothing away. Somewhere between husky and rough, hoarse rather than deep, meant for whispering oh-so-fucking-bad things in bed—it gave him no clues as to who she was, but it made him shiver.

He wasn’t crushing on a girl, was he? A girl so masculine in all the hot, suave, well-suited ways that meant Ben was just as turned on?

What if he was?

“Here.” Lisa patted the chair beside her—and, to her credit, only blinked when the girl grabbed the chair closest to Ben, sitting sideways so that she could prop her feet on the rails of Ben’s chair. Her black leather boots—featuring polished silver buckles and dangling chains like something displayed in the windows of a counter-culture fashion shop, all the more incongruous when worn with a pinstriped suit—brushed against his shoes. “Uh ... hi. I’m Lisa.”

“Chris,” she said, and she leant forwards and plucked Ben’s glass from the table, grinned right before taking a sip. Ben blinked in shock, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight of her running her tongue over her lips and placing the glass back down on its coaster. “You see, I have this problem. T-thought I’d buy you a drink, but I had no idea what you drank.” Chris raised both eyes, and there was nothing particularly feminine in the way she (he?) stared right at Ben, far more like a sassy drag queen than a packing girl— maybe just a drag queen slumming it for the nine-to-five, with not enough time to change between leaving work and hitting the bar?

The name meant nothing; it could have been short for anything.

“So...” Chris’s stare lingered for a few seconds too long before Ben realised what he wanted. Lisa rolled her eyes and poked Ben in the knee before he found the ability to speak.

“Ben. It’s Ben.”

“So. B-ben. Can I buy you a drink, if you tell me what it is I just drank, because I still don’t know?” He leaned over, close enough for his breath to tickle Ben’s ear. His lips quirked upwards in that adorable unselfconscious grin, and Ben couldn’t look away. “It would have been so sexy if I could have figured it out from taste alone, but—well.” He shrugged, still grinning. “Now you know my gravest personality flaw, so ... so that gives you the chance to run, right?”

The noise that came out of Ben’s mouth sounded as much like a giggle than it did a snort or snicker, but Chris didn’t falter.

“I thought we could go and take our drinks outside,” he said, “and walk along the beach, learn more about each other than the fact we both enjoy a good suit?” His free hand found Ben’s knee, rested lightly enough to hint at a squeeze but with the safety of plausible deniability if Ben flinched or pulled away. He didn’t. “You have the most gorgeous eyes. Remind me of a glob of blue paint.”

He didn’t mean to laugh, but the snort escaped Ben’s lips anyway, helped along by that purple-blue wink. “Paint?”

“I could have said Smarties or shaving gel.” Chris knocked back the rest of Ben’s glass and set it down on the table, tapping his fingers—long, slender, decorated with pale pink nail polish and different coloured smiley-faces on each nail—against the lacquered surface. “Or those blue enviro bags.”

Lisa rolled her eyes as if unimpressed by the novelty, but Ben couldn’t stop laughing at the absurdity of such a statement. In the past he’d had guys, buzzed on a few glasses of their favourite poison, tell him all sorts of sincere-sounding compliments that got all the more elaborate the closer they got to drunk. Ben thought he was all right, for what he was; someone telling him just how sexy his eyes or arse were, however, tended to set him on edge. It was a pretty good sign someone was going to try and talk him into going back to his place and getting laid, and Ben was getting tired of being the guy that got picked up at bars and crept out the next morning, destined to have all future messages blocked and ignored by someone who just wasn’t in it for a relationship. This, though. Ben didn’t know if Chris meant it or was just being a smart-arse, but it didn’t matter either way.

Ben grinned and tilted his head just enough to catch Chris’s gaze. “I thought more like mouthwash, myself. Ocean blue is so passé, yeah?”

Chris stared back, his lips lush and pouty as if they were just begging to be kissed. Ben had never seen lips like that on a man, but he found himself itching to run his fingertips over Chris’s chin, wondering if he’d find the betraying rasp of stubble. What would it mean if he didn’t?

“C’mon, man. These days, you rock up to a hot guy or girl, mention something about how their eyes are like the ocean and their hair’s the colour of a pasture in drought, and they all start to back away slowly for some reason.” Chris quirked one eyebrow and Ben choked out another giggle-sounding sound—but this time he was too amused to care.

Lisa sighed and rolled her eyes, possibly on the brink of muttering something about embarrassing men under her breath, and began staring out towards the bar on the hunt for a new daydream. Ben thought he

should say something to include her, as was the job of a best friend, but he couldn't look away from Chris's face.

"I have been in that situation, yes."

"Then you understand. The old metaphors don't seem to do it in this cutthroat dating world." Chris hesitated, still tapping away with his fingers. "I think your hair looks like a, a Mars Bar."

A Mars Bar? Ben hadn't thought of that when the hairdresser talked him into the golden brown highlights, but he smiled and leaned in closer to Chris. "Damn, and here I was trying to look like a Flake." He angled his head, now so close to Chris's eyes that he could almost see his own reflection. Brownish-green, nothing spectacular—since when were eyes ever what fiction made them out to be, anyway?—save for the sheer gumption that let Chris walk into a bar with them framed by pop-singer-esque glitter, the shadow trailing down one cheek in a vibrant smear of colour. "I don't suppose you've got any suggestions for getting away from the Mars Bar look?"

Why was Ben flirting back? He didn't even know what Chris was ... except for being gorgeous and crazy in all the right ways, except for being the person everyone in the bar stared at, except for being just about everything Ben had ever wanted in anybody on first glance. If that sass and smile came hand in hand with those fingernails and a voice that defied Ben's ability to put a label to it, was it really a drawback when it was something Ben only assumed he didn't want? Did it matter what lay underneath the suit?

He expected other people to accept him; shouldn't that acceptance go both ways?

"Last time I tried to dye someone's hair, they only turned green for a month," Chris said, beaming. "You want to live on the wild side, Ben?"

Chris's hair looked like a Picnic bar, uneven and spiky, just waiting for someone to run his hands through and smooth it out. Too long for a guy? Maybe. Too short for a girl? Possibly. These days, who could tell? Hadn't Ben seen all manner of hair lengths and styles on all sorts of people?

He couldn't look away from Chris's eyes, but this time Ben was lost for words. He knew Chris wasn't talking about hair.

He took a deep breath, raised one hand and cupped it around Chris's chin; Chris sat still and let him, only clasping a hand in a tighter squeeze around Ben's knee. The skin on Chris's face was soft and smooth, which meant nothing at all, really. Chris might shave more than once a day. Ben had no way of telling, and the only way of finding out meant unforgivable rudeness—something that went far beyond asking someone what their gender was, but implied that it was of far less importance than their body. Shouldn't Ben know better than that? Given it involved a suit-clad soul wearing smiley-face nailpolish, what chance was there that Chris's answer would be simple? There might not even be an answer at all. If Chris didn't look male or female, chances were that Chris damn well didn't want to, and how did that not take courage—the kind of balls so few people, man and woman and person alike, ever had? How many times did Chris get harassed on the street for daring to dress in a way that didn't follow the rules? “Was this your own hair?”

A relieved smile flooded Chris's face. “Guilty. I had ... I had to go out and buy a green fake moustache to match!”

Ben swallowed back guilt of his own. What kind of anxiety did Chris hide underneath a projection of suave confidence and a killer suit? How many times had ze been rejected as soon as someone got close enough to realise hir presentation was a confusing, glorious mix of tells?

“I think you'd look better in purple,” Ben said, grinning. “It'd totally match your eyes.”

Chris shook hir head and increased the pressure of hir hand just enough that there were no longer any excuses. “Thought I'd look too much like a Violet Crumble bar.”

“Violet Crumble bars taste good,” Ben said, raising one eyebrow, smiling just enough to leave the words as bent as all hell. “Matter of fact, I could probably go for one, now that you mention it. I don't suppose you know where I could buy one?”

Chris leaned forwards just a little, close enough to kiss if Ben tilted his chin. Ben reached out and wrapped one hand over the top of Chris's wrist, just breathing in the vanilla scent before slowly moving inwards for the kiss, wondering what those soft lips were going to feel like. Instead, he started in surprise as Chris reached down, took Ben's other hand, and raised it to his lips like an old-fashioned gentleman. Ben didn't know whether to punch him and pull him into a proper kiss ... or swoon, maybe, as Chris ran the tip of his tongue along the back of Ben's hand, just light enough to tease. It wasn't what he expected or wanted, but it was pretty damn fine, not when Chris shot him another smirking smile as he lowered Ben's hand onto the surface of the table and covered it with his palm.

It seemed absurd, in any case, to expect Chris to do something that was in any way expected.

Lisa coughed, loudly. "Get a room, both of you." She reached for her glass and shot Ben a faux-angry glare. "I can't check out the hot chicks at the bar while you two are blocking my view and being all romantic."

"Could do," Ben said, and translated this into best-friend 'I don't care if you abandon me while we're out together' speak. He wiggled his fingers just enough to make Chris grin and nudge Ben in the shin with one boot-clad foot. "Are we cramping your style?"

"You're disgusting," Lisa said; she rolled her eyes at them both. "Go for that walk. There's probably a café on the beach selling hot chocolate. Go be all smoochy with your metaphors." She stood up and brushed down her skirt, and then grabbed her satchel. "Right. There's a gorgeous woman at the end of the bar who's been sitting on her own for the last ten minutes. I'm going in."

"Good luck," Ben said, and he slapped her on the shoulder as she went past. He knew that whatever happened, they'd meet up for coffee sometime on the weekend, and Lisa would ask him everything about Chris, and he'd ask her about whomever she did or didn't meet. They'd always be there for each other, whatever else happened. "And thanks."

Lisa snorted and headed to the bar, leaving Ben to sit there and hold Chris's hand.

"This is going to be awkward," he said, "and I don't know how to ask, but..."

Chris raised his eyebrows and said nothing.

No: he should have expected that Chris would be okay enough with the awkwardness to not want to step in and help a guy out. Ben sighed. "What do I call you?"

"That's all you have to ask." Chris shrugged, the words just mild enough to be reproachful—but then he broke into another broad, melting grin. "They. They. Any other questions?"

The challenge in Chris's voice—the explicit dare to ask any further questions about their body—made Ben wonder just how many people had failed at this final test. "Beach. How about it?" Peace and privacy, hot chocolate, the ocean, a gorgeous companion—and the assurance that Chris would make the evening anything but traditional or cliché? Whatever happened even half an hour from now, it would sure as hell be interesting—and maybe this time, with this person, Ben wouldn't be taking the morning walk of shame. "Besides, you owe me a proper kiss, asshole."

Chris sat still for a moment, as if considering, and then stood, grabbing their coat from the back of the other chair. "Well. I do know this fish and chip shop famous for deep-fried Mars Bars."

Ben grinned, stood, and straightened the lace-trimmed hem of his red silk blouse before he slipped one arm through Chris's and headed towards the door.

Elysium

EVEN WITH THE DOOR CLOSED, Eve can't escape the smell—some nauseating combination of industrial-strength disinfectant, vegetables cooked down to a soft mush and the nose-prickling medicinal reek of sealed bandages and antiseptic lotion. Is it bottled up, she wonders as she runs her fingernails back and forth across the hard plastic surface of her uncomfortable green chair. Does someone in a factory somewhere slap an 'Eau du Hospitale' label on a bottle and ship it out to every hospital around the country so that patients know what to expect on admission—just like a McDonald's?

She can't sit still; her heart pounds in her chest, frantic, desperate.

Eve laughs, folds her hands on her lap, unfolds them again. The chemical odour does more than give her a headache: it seems to strip colour and light from everything it touches. This room, with its sad greyish-pink walls, grey-brown carpet, flesh-coloured frames around faded prints—had it been colourful, once? Maybe the prints on the walls featured sunflowers and poppies instead of—she leans forward, frowning, unable to decide what those pink-purple blurs had once been.

Impressionism, she thinks, hides a lot of sins.

The door creaks open, brings with it a gust of antiseptic sharp enough to burn her nostrils. Wheels rattle outside and she can hear a trolley or a wheelchair banging over the linoleum floor, human voices low and loud. Deep inside the glass and concrete prison, surrounded by layers of plaster and steel, she can only hear the trees whisper inside her dreams—a whisper that grows fainter with every passing day. The creak of bough

and the clean eucalyptus scent follows her into wakefulness, however, the summons playing over and over again in her mind: *Eve, Eve, Eve...*

“Eve. I’m so sorry for making you wait.” The door clicks shut behind her and Linda crosses over to the desk, drops a set of keys and a pile of folders on the bare surface of her desk. She smiles her white-woman white-bread smile as if she’s glad to see Eve, her face light and relaxed—she’s the best pretender Eve’s ever known. Even Dr Johannes’s smile slips at the corners, but Linda never looks anything but happy to sit down and talk. “I won’t bore you with the tale of what happened with the neighbour’s cat...”

Eve shrugs, stares down at her hands to hide from Linda’s warm brown eyes. The cuff of her shirt sleeve has crept up her arm, revealing the start of the pale red cuts, jagged and uneven; she grabs the cuff and yanks it down, and then wonders why she bothers. She can invent a lie—everyone knows she’s clumsy, she always breaks things because she’s too lazy to be careful—but it won’t matter.

“Eve?”

She looks up and meets Linda’s eyes. Linda perches on the edge of her desk, a pen and notepad in her hands. Her black skirt suit, her bobbed hair, her make-up are all as boring as her office, which makes everything easier. Dressed in green jeans and a purple shirt and sporting wiry blue hair that’s just starting to grow out, Eve feels like a bruise, an assault on pale skin, something that doesn’t belong. It’s easier to ignore Linda when she knows she’s never going to fit into Linda’s ordered, professional world—easier to say good-bye.

“I understand,” Linda says in her soft, quiet voice, leaning forwards as if she’s willing to listen, “that you want to go home.”

Home. She supposes it’s as good a word as any—is it Eve’s fault that everyone else thinks of ordinary human things, of houses and roofs and families, when they say that word? How is she lying if she chooses not to correct them? “Yes,” she says, and she folds her arms across her chest. “I’m on my meds. I’m going to take them—I said I would. I’ll go to the psych. The outpatient program. I won’t do anything...” She pauses, hunts for the

right word to frame the act of glass piercing skin—the kind of word that makes her sound ordinary and sane. “Stupid.”

She expects Linda to nod and agree with her, but she frowns, lips pursed, writing something on the notepad. Eve tenses, but Linda just looks sad, and she holds her silence a little too long for the expression to herald anger. Eve lets out a long breath, tucks her shaking hands further under her armpits—and then frowns. Why isn’t Linda angry? Why isn’t she beginning the usual stream of loud concern and louder criticism Mum and Dad wield in all similar situations? Eve said the wrong thing, so why isn’t Linda telling her that?

She supposes it has something to do with the cutting, with meds and diagnostic words like *mental illness* and *clinical depression*. People are supposed to treat the crazy with leather gloves.

“Depression isn’t stupid.” Linda shakes her head. “You were depressed and miserable and trying to express that, none of which is stupid.” She sighs and stares at Eve until Eve nods. Okay. Don’t use the word ‘stupid’ around Linda—not that it matters. But she can do that; she can avoid saying the word until this last torturous session is over. It’s not so very much to ask. “Do you mean to go back to your parents?”

She nods and stares at her hands and not Linda’s eyes, afraid the lie is too visible in her face.

“I’m concerned about that. I don’t think you should go back.”

Eve jerks her head up in surprise. “What—*run away*?” The words sound too defiant and she shakes again, afraid that she’s betrayed herself in one moment of shock. People like Linda, after all, spend their days putting together the puzzle of someone’s soul, patching together the bleeding and broken. Eve meant to tell Linda, during their first session, of her fucked-up desire to turn her body into art—how she couldn’t resist the lure of her own brown skin, how beautiful the spill of blood looked once she’d parted her skin with the glass shard. The words came out strange and twisted, though, because she told the tale of the glass slipping from her fingers and the sound it made when it shattered across the carpet. She talked about

Dad's booming shout and the way she cried, always the cry-baby, while he pinned her against the wall and bellowed: *stop being so fucking careless, do you think I'm made of money, I'm tired of fixing all your fucking mistakes, what are you crying for, do you want me to really give you something to cry about?* She spoke of the way Mum frowned once Dad stormed out of the room and told her that he wouldn't have yelled if she just stopped crying, and how that made her cry harder. She found herself sitting there and saying, in a strange, twisted, distant voice, that she wanted to kill herself, although she didn't know until that moment death was what she meant by making the shallow cuts on her wrists and forearms with the largest piece of the broken glass.

Linda gave her more words, the kinds of words that sound like the shrinks on TV, the ones that convince teenagers to hate their parents: *trauma, emotional abuse, self-harm.*

"Yes! Run away!" Linda puts her notebook down on her desk and leans forwards so far Eve can't help but wonder why she's not falling. "Why should you go back? You don't deserve how they treat you. Why should you put up with it?"

Eve shakes her head, her throat constricting. "It's my fault. I'm a cry-baby." Tears well in her eyes, proving her point, so she shakes her head and says the first thing that comes to mind to keep from crying: "I won't do anything, I promise. I'm better now."

Linda lets out a long sigh. "I'd rather you stay here than go back to your family—okay. What's going to be different now, if you go back? What keeps you from hurting yourself again?"

No. She can't keep Eve here, can she? Not when Dr Johannes already agreed that she's stable enough to return home, as long as she takes her meds and joins the outpatient program? Not when she's packed her bag and called Jessie to come and pick her up? She can't stay, she can't—not in these white walls where nothing smells real, where the living flowers wilt and die and only the plastic flowers endure and thrive. How can she

answer the trees if she can't even feel the touch of the wind? How can she escape when glass and concrete separate her from the sun?

"I'll take my meds." She stares at her lap, tries to command her hands and voice to steadiness. "I won't ... I won't be what I was." Dr Johannes seems to think her meds will make a difference, if she tries hard with therapy. Eve doesn't know how any meds can be so magical, but it doesn't matter—she doesn't need meds. She needs the trees.

Linda stares at her and just lets the silence hang, so Eve rushes to explain, to sound like someone who means to do all the things required to stop being crazy. "I won't cry, then. I'll talk to people, and laugh, and things will be better. It's my fault ... because I'm in my room all the time. A freak. But I'll get better." She jerks her chin and meets Linda's eyes. "I'm not crying *here*."

Linda shakes her head. "Do you think that might be because nobody's abusing you here?"

No, no, why is she muddling this all up? No. Eve doesn't need to be here, in this pretend temple honouring lifelessness and sterility: she needs to go home, where she can sleep with her quilt outside on warm summer nights, wriggle her toes in the soft earth of the vegetable garden, laugh at the chattering parrots, press an ear to the trunks of the tall river redgums down by the creek.

She needs to leave before all she can hear are the noises made by people.

"Eve?"

She bites down on her lower lip to try and keep from crying. "I just want to go home!"

Linda nods, gives her a warm, patient sort of smile. Eve stares at her, digs the toe of her shoe into the carpet. Why isn't she yelling? Why is she smiling when Eve's being so stubborn? "I know you don't want to stay here." She waves a hand at the wall and the faded print. "It's a bit grim, I know. But you deserve better than to go back to a place where they're going to hurt you again—you deserve so much better than those people."

She shrugs, still smiling. “Can you stay with a friend? A relative? Can you live on campus?”

Friends? Relatives? She wants to laugh. She’s the cry-baby eighteen-year-old who likes gardening and talking to trees and painting pictures with the blood from her arms; friends are a scarce commodity. She doesn’t have enough money to pay anyone board—how do crazy people get and hold jobs when she can’t even manage the first semester of university?—and none of her relatives are going to want to live with a girl that can’t wash a single lot of dishes without breaking something and crying over it. “I don’t...”

“There are services that can help you. I can put you in touch with a social worker.” Linda leans forward further and then loses balance, snatching at the edges of the desk; it doesn’t slow her strange, passionate words. “You don’t have to go back there, Eve. You don’t. You can get out. You can start a whole new life away from those toxic people.”

She looks so sincere that Eve opens her mouth, wants to reassure Linda that she has no such intention—that the glass and her arms and telling Linda that she did want to kill herself had shown her that much. If she’s such a fuck-up that she wants to turn her arms into bloody art, if she can’t manage school and work and behaving like a normal person that doesn’t cry over stupid things, what’s the point of pretending otherwise? No, she won’t go back ... but she stops, closes her lips, swallows until she’s buried the impulse to speak. If she tells Linda her plan, Linda will tell Dr Johannes, and then no-one will let her leave—she’ll stay here, trapped behind these plain walls, until the trees stop calling.

“I only mean to go back for a little while,” she says. Looking down at the floor or her hands seems too obvious, but isn’t looking at Linda’s eyes also just as obvious? Eve settles for Linda’s lips, but the words still feel fake—how can Linda not know she’s lying? “Until I’ve saved money. I’m going to get Jessie help me find a place to stay. She knows ... about all this. Me. She’ll help.”

Linda sighs and nods, her shoulders sagging, her lips soft and downcast. “Good. If you need my help, I’m here.”

Eve stares at her, her heart pounding in sudden hope. “I can leave?”

Linda pushes a lock of hair away from her face. She looks tired, too tired for such a short conversation. “I’m not a doctor. I can’t keep you here.”

Relief makes her feel faint, dizzy, but also guilty. Eve looks away, at her hands, her feet, the walls, not sure where to look, what to say. “Thank you for helping me,” she says finally, the words sounding strange and awkward in her dry mouth.

“You’re welcome, Eve. If you need help, anything at all—please ring. Please.”

It shouldn’t be that easy, but somehow, it is. Get the last of her paperwork, get her prescriptions, have a final word with Dr Johannes, reassure her and the nurses that Jessie is coming to pick Eve up, head downstairs to the foyer doors. The medicinal reek in the hallway is just an annoyance now: she can almost hear the wind beneath the clatter of wheels and beeping machines and human voices. She can see the sky through windows. Eve turns her head, afraid that Linda has seen through her lie, has followed her, will drag her back to the ward, but no-one stops her as the glass doors slide open and she steps onto the footpath, surrounded by asphalt and car exhaust and the roar of traffic on the road ahead.

It’s enough, though, that Eve can feel the wind brushing against her cheeks, cool and salty; she twirls around in circles, skips forwards, is giddy with the rush of air. Yes. With the sun warm on her hands and face, the hospital only a shadow at her back, she can imagine the rest. The lavender bushes at the back door release their soft, woody scent into the air. The boughs of the old peach tree drop their autumn leaves, surrounding the trunk with a corona of orange and brown. Rainbow lorikeets squawk and flutter in the tall stringybarks in the bush beyond the back fence, a darting riot of bright colour. Underneath the clamour she can hear the soft whisper of the wind through the leaves: *Eve, Eve, Eve.*

She stops to pull off her socks and boots, toss them aside, wriggle her toes through the rough, prickly grass before the fence. There she pauses, her heart pounding in her chest, for she thought she heard someone shout—but this time the trees scream louder, their voices thrumming through her blood. *Eve! Eve! Eve!*

She turns and scrambles up the fence, the wooden boards warm and rough under her fingers and toes. She doesn't look back as she jumps off the top rail and into space.

In the far-off distance, she hears the screech of tyres on asphalt and the crash of shattering glass.

Eve lands and stops, shakes, waits ... but the parrots chatter and the breeze, tangy with eucalyptus instead of car exhaust, teases her hair away from her face. *Yes. Yes!* She smiles, laughs, screams until the lorikeets take startled flight—and then skips through the underbrush in search of the trees calling her name, singing in time to the wind.

Misstery Man

“MISSTERY MAN RESCUED THREE KIDS from a burning car in City North last night.” Hannah breezed into the office in a choking cloud of floral scent, a broad smile plastered across her made-up face. She sat down beside Darcy with a shrug at eir limp-wristed wave and placed the newspaper tucked under her arm on the desk. “The story’s all over the papers again. Yet another heroic triumph by our so-mysterious superhero.”

Darcy couldn’t help coughing. Someone needed to tell Hannah to lay off the perfume—worse, someone needed to tell her to lay off the conversation. How many times was ey going to have to sit there and listen to eir workmates go over the same tired discussion?

Ey sighed and looked anyway: ey could just make out the blurred catsuit-clad figure in the photo on the newspaper’s front page. Chances were that this latest story contained the same old spiel cluttering the media these days—maybe two lines, tops, about Misstery Man’s latest deeds, but whole paragraphs containing guesses and debates about Misstery Man’s identity.

Tim and Hannah were no exception.

“Oh, really?” Tim leant back in his chair, his eyebrows raised. He always had various news websites open in his browser, while he had plastered his cubicle with posters and pages torn from old-school comics and newspaper articles. Darcy used to wonder if he’d spent his childhood daydreaming of becoming a superhero.

The fascination seemed rather less charming after months of listening to him talk.

Office conversations hadn't been so bad, back in the days when superheroes had been new and everyone had been gossiping about the mystery. Who wouldn't fall in love with the idea of a hero stepping out of the shadows and taking down a knife-wielding attacker? Who wouldn't sleep just that little bit sounder at night when there was someone watching over the city? Science had brought the comics to life, and who wouldn't delight in the idea?

"Did they have anything to say, Hanners ... y'know, about who it is?" Tim added no particular weight to the word *it*, nothing at all that should provoke or inspire a memory, yet Darcy couldn't help shivering. The words leapt into eir mind as if ey were right back there in the school ground, as if eir tormentors' hands were still pressed against eir skin. *You're an it, then*, Adam Richfield had sneered, surrounded by his cronies; he'd laughed as they pushed em against the shed at the back of the football oval, groping at those body parts they considered evidence to the contrary. Each word had been a biting, venomous cut, and hurt it did—enough that, years later, Darcy could shake from the memory alone, could recall the words as if they'd been videotaped somewhere in eir brain. *Come on, everyone, have a look at the it!*

Darcy had hoped that sort of thing would stay at school, once ey had escaped to the real world of offices and politics and adults—but teenagers and adults weren't so different. Weight or no weight, ey still had to listen to the words used in much the same way.

Hannah shook her head and lobbed the newspaper into the basket at the other end of her desk. The sudden clatter was reminder enough of where ey was for Darcy to sit up and try to shake away the memory.

I'm at work. I'm in my chair. I haven't been in school for three years. Ey let out a long, slow breath, and then another. Focused breathing wasn't the miracle cure eir psychologist claimed, but it helped. Sometimes. *I'm safe.*

The paper had landed front-page up, and even though ey didn't mean to look as ey glanced back at eir monitor, ey could see the nondescript chin and nose of the city's saviour poking between the sides of black mesh. The picture felt a mockery: this superhero, Misstery Man, had the very thing Darcy wanted and was too scared to get or ask for.

All it took was being a superhero wearing a concealing costume.

"That guy in the Daily thinks it's a man." Tim propped his feet against the desk. His dress trousers rode up to reveal socks red enough to match his close-cropped hair. "Too tall and buff to be a woman."

Workplace gossip had been so much easier for Darcy to tolerate when everyone spoke of a hero and not of a mystery. They all knew of the Grey Ghost, who wrote editorials about her own deeds for the newspaper, and of John Jeffries, who'd lowered his mask and revealed his powers under his own name. Misstery Man, in contrast, was nothing more than a name and the ability to slip through space and perform miracles ... and that wasn't enough. In this new, post-superhero world, saving lives had become commonplace, even inconsequential. When rescues were made, criminals were caught, and people stepped onto the streets without fear in a peaceful city, what was left to talk about over the coffee machine? Life? Death? Gender?

"Bull." Hannah tossed her over-perfumed hair. She was everything a conventional woman should be: kitten heels, hourglass figure and womanly scent. Sure, Hannah hated fashion magazines and collected Matchbox cars, but while she wore correct feminine office attire and spoke with a woman's voice, enough pieces of the puzzle fit together for her gender to be accepted and unassailable. "It's a woman. You ever see those woman bodybuilders? They're huge."

Darcy turned back to eir computer, stared at eir morning emails in an attempt to distract emself from the memories, eir shaking hands—and the bitter, soul-twisting anger.

Misstery Man said nothing on the subject, a phantom ghosting the pages of newspapers and televisions around the city. Why couldn't ey send

that one letter to a newspaper and make a request for correct—gender-neutral—pronouns? Didn't Mistry Man realise what a difference that would make to everyone who wasn't lucky enough to be a superhero? That Darcy could then say eir gender wasn't the gender written down in eir passport, and ey would also prefer to be referred to by the correct pronouns, protected by the existence of a genderqueer superhero who'd earned the city's trust?

"I don't understand it, anyway." Tim waved his hands towards the mesh paper basket. Tim looked so confident, sitting there in shirt and tie, with short-cut hair, dress shoes, and broad shoulders. Everything about him made sense. "It's strange. Why would it do that ... keep such a thing hidden, you know?" He tipped his head toward his wall of images, the comic-book superheroes of old. "None of the others do. Not the Ghost, or the Raven Rider, or..."

No one would ever accuse him of keeping his gender a secret. He had, for a man, the socially-accepted pieces and the socially-accepted inclination for self-expression, so how could being otherwise make sense to him, anyway?

Darcy tried to keep staring at eir computer, but the screen seemed to blur and fragment right before eir eyes. That word again, the one that made em less than human: the word was used for objects, things that couldn't say their own name and sat on a shelf gathering dust, not people!

Hannah raised her eyebrows. "Because it wants everyone talking about it, obviously?"

Ey had heard those words, too, back when ey'd been idealistic enough to give being emself an honest shot—before public gropings, before superheroes. *You're just making it up for attention*, Mum had said, shaking her head as though Darcy's very existence made her tired. She didn't, or couldn't, see eir pain. *You just want to be different. Why can't you just be what you're supposed to be?*

A quick glance around the office showed listeners and coffee drinkers and a few people hard at work, all oblivious to the horror in that one unflinching word.

No-one stood up and said this was wrong. No superhero swept in to prevent the kind of crime that was made up of dehumanising words or the violence that came from those words but didn't make it to the pages of the newspaper. There were no Misstery Man or Grey Ghost to save Darcy from the Adam Richfields of the world. Nobody here, never mind a superhero, even knew that Darcy's real self existed, and how many others in the world would there be, hiding in plain sight just like em?

Nothing would change. Ey would sit at eir desk, trying to hide eir anxiety and the flashbacks provoked by a casual word, while Tim and Hannah and everyone else would use words in ignorance, oblivious. Darcy, meanwhile, would never be any closer to feeling as though ey could be emself. What could change?

The answer felt as loud as though ey had spoken it aloud. If ey didn't want to sit here every morning and listen to that word used over and over, then couldn't ey just say so?

Last time ... no, this wouldn't be like last time.

"Please don't say that." Darcy's voice wavered like that of a nervous child as ey turned to face Tim and Hannah. "It's for objects. Not people."

Tim dropped his feet and turned to give Darcy a startled glance. "You actually joining us?"

"Um ... yeah." Ey let out another slow breath and pressed on. "But please—you don't call people 'it' ... unless they want you to. But just because you don't know ... you don't call em 'it'."

Tim raised both eyebrows, held his hands up and out as if to fend off a furious charge. "Whoa, Darcy!" He smirked enough for Hannah to attempt an amused giggle. "And what else are we supposed to use, then? What did you say?"

“He or she, perhaps. Or ... some genderqueer or non-binary people prefer invented pronouns.” Darcy paused, hoped to sound as if ey were just plucking the word out at random. “Like ‘ey’.”

Everyone in eavesdropping distance seemed to stir, glancing around at each other or focusing a little too hard on their computer screens. A few smiled, or raised an eyebrow, followed Tim’s lead to bright-faced amusement. Darcy clenched eir sweating hand around eir mouse, wiped the other against eir right pants leg.

“And how do you know that?” Hannah flipped her hair back over her shoulder.

The simple, matter-of fact question took Darcy by surprise: ey gulped, froze, floundered. There were lies about relatives and friends, of course, flickering through Darcy’s mind in an instant: tempting, possible, but somehow void of any personal emphasis that might make them listen, stop, and feel awkward enough to attempt another conversation topic. Wasn’t that why ey was speaking?

After all, what could they do when Darcy spoke? They couldn’t touch, grope, or pin em to the wall. Teachers might turn a blind eye in school, but now ey could complain to eir boss or the police. Yet eir fingers rattled as though ey were about to step blindfolded over the edge of a cliff.

“I’m ... I’m non-binary,” Darcy said—now ey was rushing towards the ground, falling too fast to throw out eir hands. Where was Mistry Man—weren’t they supposed to come and save em? “I’m not a woman or a man. I ... I prefer gender-neutral pronouns. Ey and eir. Please. You don’t call us ‘it’.”

Tim gave a long, slow whistle, one piercing enough to draw the attention of anybody who had somehow *not* been watching the discussion. Others stared, their eyes fixed on Darcy like a flock of crows startled from their roadside carrion by something in the distance, pondering if they should take to air—or resume stripping the flesh from the corpse before them.

Everyone had long stopped the pretence of being caught up in work. Hannah had yet to even turn on her computer: she just sat in her chair, her chin resting on her arms, looking Darcy up and down. “You look like ... you dress like ... well.”

Did she think Darcy didn’t realise? Did she think Darcy didn’t know every minute of every working day that ey didn’t look like whom ey was?

“I’m safer this way.” Ey hunched eir shoulders, wished ey could fold in on emself, hide—no, ey wished that Misstery Man had had never created a mystery to discuss, had never given Darcy cause to try and speak. Misstery Man wasn’t a non-binary, genderqueer superhero making a point by not disclosing their gender. That was just Darcy’s fantasy. Misstery Man was just some cisgender man or woman keeping their identity a secret, and didn’t care that city referred to them as *it* because they knew it wasn’t true. That word had never been used as a weapon against Misstery Man, so why would it hurt?

The silence lingered as if nobody quite knew what to say for all that questions burned in each and every eye cast Darcy’s way; the words spilled out of Darcy’s mouth in a desperate attempt to fill it. “Some people don’t always understand. They think I’m lying or joking or making things up, or I’m wrong. It’s easier to pretend.” Ey swallowed, but there was no escaping the predatory crow-eyes. “Please. Don’t use ‘it’.”

Tim spoke first. He leaned forward in his chair, his lips creeping into the kind of pretty, too-confident smile that reminded Darcy far too much of Adam Richfield and his ilk. “We weren’t talking about you. Just Misstery Man.”

Was agreeing to use another word too hard? Was it easier to dive from the top of a building or to leap into a burning car?

“What do you mean, anyway?” Hannah shook her head, seemed to take Tim’s question as an opportunity to voice her own questions. “Look at you! Are you transsexual? Because that makes more sense. Why didn’t you say anything, anyway? Don’t you trust us?”

Don't you trust us? Darcy just shook eir head, not sure how to explain this—how can ey, when it was obvious that these people knew nothing of it what it meant to live in fear of others?

They didn't seem to want an answer as much as they wanted to ask questions, however, for Tim broke in before Darcy could even begin to answer: “Do you really mean we should use ... made up words, to refer to you? How are supposed to remember that?”

Darcy glanced back towards eir computer, wished there were some kind of magical cure for anxiety. What good was anything when ey still had to stay here and listen to all this? The questions weren't extreme, true, but how did ey answer someone who placed em in a wrongly-labelled box? How did ey answer somebody whose very ignorance felt like a slap across eir face?

“Yes,” ey whispered. “Please try and remember.”

From Tim's stare, ey might as well have been speaking Swedish—and the stare, if not the questions, decided em. Enough. Darcy stood up, tried to will eir knees and lower legs to some kind of stillness. Maybe ey would figure out how to come back and explain what ey meant, what ey was ... and accept that the office was going to find em confronting. But right now ey would escape from the stares, just for a moment, until Darcy felt a little less like ey were going to burst into tears. “Excuse me, I need to go ... um, to the toilet.”

Tim blinked. “How do you know which one?”

The ridiculousness of this—the obvious fact that neither he nor anybody else had stopped to think about what it felt like to not even have the correct toilet to use—made it easier for Darcy to ignore him. They just tucked eir hands up underneath eir elbows to try and hide their shaking and walked away from eir desk. Would they now question eir right to go anywhere—even if there were nowhere else for em to go?

The room fell silent behind eir back; Darcy walked to the bathrooms with quick, frantic steps, not caring that ey must look as though ey were running.

At least right now ey could, unquestioned, lock emself in a stall and try to calm eir breathing, wipe the sweat away from eir palms, collect emself enough for the ordeal that would be returning to eir desk. It wasn't just coming out once, of course, but having to explain over and over, and never quite belonging or fitting in as a consequence: this was just the beginning of the horror. Eir co-workers would ask questions and tell em what they thought about eir answers, and ey would have to endure them all somehow ... and wonder if eir words would be worth everything that came afterwards.

Why the hell did the world venerate Misstery Man as a hero? A figure with overblown superpowers who thought that saving a few children from a car wreck meant saving the world? How did that make any kind of difference—how was that the kind of heroism that meant anything?

No: the difference, perhaps, lay in the folded piece of paper found resting on Darcy's keyboard after ey found the courage to drag eir shaking legs back out into the office—and pretend that eir co-workers weren't staring at em while they attempted to work, weren't just waiting for the next coffee break to launch a new barrage of questions.

Someone had written with hands that shook as badly as eir own, leaving ink smudged across the sheet and blurring the words.

Thank you for making me think someone might listen if I say who I am.

Ey just stared down at a sheet that turned ever more blurry with unshed tears.

It took em a moment to figure out what to do, how to handle that precious sheet of paper: Darcy scooted back into eir chair, making sure that the room saw em fold the note and tuck it inside eir pants pocket. With any luck, the right person would see, the right person would find em at lunch, and then neither of them would have to be alone. Ey smiled and turned to eir computer, flicked through er emails: with any luck, ey might have enough time to answer a few before ey had to deal with a whole new life of being open and out—questions, notes and all.

In any case ... Darcy drew in a last steeling breath and leant towards Hannah's desk. If ey'd risked everything, what did this last question matter? "Hey, Hanners," ey whispered. "Would you mind if, tomorrow, you ... you wore a little less perfume?"

Absent a Consonant

YOU STARE AT THE MIRROR and mouth the word, trying it on for fit. Your reflection's hands shake, and even though you know that someone—Mum, Dad, your sister—entering the bedroom will only see you move your lips, you can't suppress the fear that you'll be caught in the act. That there will be words, tears, those awkward family conversations held around the dinner table. Perhaps confusion, but perhaps the kind of horror stories that pave the internet, with children estranged from families who refuse to understand. How are you to know which reaction you'll get?

You're not sure which is worse: the irrational terror that someone will look at you and know, before you know how to put the words together and risk them for yourself; or the rational dread that someone will look at you, and never know at all.

Why would they see an anxious young man mouthing that forbidden word, when all they ever see is a girl called Susan?

You mouth the word again, wonder if you dare speak it and make it real. If you speak, you can't pretend the realisation has never happened, can't go on being this shadow of a person beating against the windows of your outer skin. Your reflection stares back at you, twisted-faced and wavering, because the word does not match the pink singlet top and the floral-print belt, or the small, hairless-seeming face with too-full lips. It doesn't match your chest or flat groin, or even your peach-and-vanilla bedroom.

The word doesn't match anything you are or possess, but feels more right, more real, than the word others use. It touches the self buried deep

underneath a mask of every desperate attempt to be what the world thinks you are, but that mask only leaves you scratching and rubbing, chafed by your own unreal skin. That change in word, the erasure of a single consonant, makes all the difference. You don't look right yet, but you could, and it isn't so hard to imagine your reflection shifting and changing to that of a man. One day, when you are brave, when you've said the words to all the gatekeepers between you and transition, your outer and inner faces will match.

You can't start that journey, however, until you've said the first words to yourself.

You swallow, and then stare at the mirror, watch your lips move to frame those heavy, terrifying, wondrous words.

"He," you whisper, and then again, in a small, cautious voice: "I'm *he*. I'm a ... I'm a man."

The words are such a small thing to make what you know real, but now said, you can't take them back. There it is, that feeling you've had of not being quite right in your skin, the kind of feeling that is supposed to be improbable and at the very least abnormal, and you've gone and spoken it aloud. How can you take those words back, despite the fear of what might happen from here on in, when they are true?

You try it again, and this time the words come without awkwardness or hesitation.

"I'm a man."

Now it seems easy to say, as if all those hours of angst, grief, doubt and fear were for nothing, pointless. You've said them aloud, and now what? What has changed? Your expression still stares back at you with a girl's face. You'll still walk into the kitchen and be Susan. What does the truth inside matter if nobody can see it?

You wonder: what does the world see in you? Why are you perceived, without question, as feminine? Your body in the mirror isn't curvy, but long, lean muscle and bone, boy-like. Your aunt used to joke that you look like a pencil, not a girl. Your face lacks hair, but so does your father's after a

shave, and nobody questions his masculinity, so where is the difference? Is it just the clothes, the long hair? Your voice? Your breasts? It won't be hard to change those things, or at least some of them, even now. You reach up underneath the tank top, your eyes fixed on the mirror, and undo the back clip of your bra, letting the bunched-up cloth and wire sag to the floor. Your breasts sag also, flatter underneath the pink tank, but not flat enough.

You just look like a girl who strolled down to the kitchen first-thing for breakfast, too sleepy to bother with getting dressed.

It's not that the curves are wrong. It's that the curves are right for someone else. The dissonance has crept up on you over time, from feeling uncomfortable in low-necked tops that give you cleavage (for no logical, rational reason you can specify beyond a sense of disconcerting wrongness) to staring at yourself in the shower and wondering why your chest looks so much more appealing when you push your breasts higher up and across. It is supposed to be flat. You are supposed to be able to take off your top and just walk around shirtless in summer like the other boys, but you have those swollen curves of flesh—drawing the eye, screaming your gender. You sigh and pull off the tank, discard it by the fallen bra, cup your breasts in each hand and push them up as high as you can.

In the mirror, with your hands hiding the lower swell, they look closer to right. Not quite like those sculpted and bronzed models in magazines, but close enough to look and feel like some other ordinary man. Pressed flat and out so that there is no hint of cleavage, your breasts no longer define your chest: you're just left with the beautiful flatness of your sternum and the nervous rise and fall of your rib cage.

For a moment you wonder what you'd look like if you bundle up your hair so that it appears shorter, but you can't bring yourself to move your hands away from your chest and destroy the illusion in the mirror—or perhaps not an illusion, but a possibility, or even a promise. There has to be, you think, something that can hold them there like that. You know that there are others on the internet, that you're far from the only one who ever looked in the mirror and knew that you'd been given the wrong gender or

sex at birth; if you look, you might find an answer, something so that you can walk out of here as yourself. It's not hiding, just being more yourself—like cutting your hair, and buying new clothes, and anything else you can learn so that strangers on the street don't call you 'girl' or 'dear'.

You don't move your hands. You don't want to see your chest become rounded once more; you don't want to become a woman again, not now you've said that right-sounding word and caught a glimpse of the person you're supposed to be. You just stand there and stare at the self your mind's eye imposes over the traitorous reflection.

“Susan?”

Mum's voice and the soft knock that follows might as well have been the crack of a glass falling from the desk and smashing onto the floor, given how you react. You jerk in shock, your hands falling away as you scramble across the floor for the bra and top, panting in terror. The bra clip is too hard to manage with your shaking fingers, so you kick it under the bed, pray that no-one will notice—even though your chest seems to loom large before you, soft and fleshy, obvious, wrong. The pink singlet hides nothing.

You don't know what to say and, in your panic, can't make your dry tongue form any useful words even if you did.

Can you try and say the words to someone else, and trust that no matter what you say, no matter what you look like, no matter who you are, you will still be loved?

Or will those horror stories, the ones that turn into the kinds of nightmares that haunt you past waking, come to life—and leave you learning the cruel, hard lesson that gender, appearance and words matter to some people, so much so that there is no chance of love and acceptance?

You stand there, your hands over your head, and gasp for breath, because you don't know, and is there anything in the world harder than not knowing whether or not the people you love will hurt you?

“Susan?”

You don't have to say anything right now, you tell yourself. You can practice a script and do it later. You can put a plan together: drop hints, get a sense of how certain people might react, tell safe people first. It's not being chicken to reach for a blouse and pull it over your singlet, to decide to attempt this another day, to delay the bravery for a time. It's sensible. You can do this, you know you can muddle your way into coming out and everything that follows, but only once you've figured out the next step of speaking the words to someone else.

The decision calms you, so you swallow and find your voice. "Coming!"

This, you tell yourself as you open the door and manage a wavering smile at your confused-looking mother, is a pretence, but it's only temporary. You *will* find a way to step out from the safety of your false skin, to be brave enough to be yourself. You *will*, one day, be seen as the man you are.

At least today you said the words and saw a glimpse of the self you will one day be, and what journey doesn't begin with a first step out onto the road?

Everything in a Name

"H-HEY." CHRIS DRAWS IN A deep, steeling breath and plonks himself down on the couch beside Melissa. Their knees tremble and they can't seem to find a comfortable way to rest their feet—tucked up under their legs? Held loose, free to swing back and forth and draw attention to Chris's unease? They sigh and cross them before remembering that women typically cross their legs; they shift until they rest with their knees slightly splayed. Not too far: they don't want to be *that* guy, the man whose balls somehow need to take up both seats on the train. They just don't want to look like a woman, and doesn't that mean not feeling the need to cross their legs like a good schoolgirl?

Melissa only nods, her eyes glued to the dinky TV on the far wall, and while Chris supposes it's a relief that Melissa isn't noticing Chris's inability to sit still, the ease is short-lived: why isn't Melissa noticing? Shouldn't their roommate know Chris well enough to turn her head and notice that something is up?

She doesn't; she just stares at the TV as though there's nothing more important than reality show drama, curled up on the far end of the fraying green couch in her oldest pyjamas and a pair of fluffy bunny slippers. Chris looks down at their ironed dress shirt, waistcoat and best jeans, and then pretends to stare at the largest hole in the seat cushions while trying not to beat himself up for what, in hindsight, is nothing more than a terrible case of *obviousness*. Perhaps all that stuff about dressing for success is just

bullshit: what kind of confidence can looking good lend to a situation when they are way overdressed for the occasion?

Of course, it's not like Melissa has noticed either way. Hell, if Melissa were any good at noticing, Chris wouldn't be sitting there in an ironed shirt and trying to summon up the courage to ask their housemate one simple-sounding question. She'd have noticed Chris's best attempts to not grimace every time Melissa says their name. She'd have noticed that Chris never uses their full name in any capacity other than receiving mail and paying bills.

No, they have to ask.

“Uh. Melissa. C-can we—”

Melissa makes an annoyed grunting sound and plucks at her flanno pyjama leg—yellow ducklings on a soft blue background. Ducklings aren't as much 'in' as they are 'all that's left when nobody does the laundry', but Chris thinks them cute. “Commercial break, Christine?”

Chris swallows and nods. “Right. Sure. Sure. Sorry. I didn't think—”

“Hold it, will you?”

Hold it, when every moment that passes is another moment to think about it, another moment for the anxious mutter of their brain to grow louder, another reason to bow to the avoidance and not act? Chris nods, picks at their fingernails, hisses a slow gust of air out between their teeth. Their psychologist seems to think this might help, that a whole heap of absurd things might help—an audio track of clicking noises, tapping hands and recalling memories, meditation, paying attention to the sound of popping bubbles while they do the dishes. Logic has it that everything else they've been trying for years didn't help, so why not all these strange and bizarre solutions?

They're not the simple, easy, magic-wand answer they wish for; not even their meds accomplish this. The transition is one of slow degrees, one frightening step after another: a new jacket, a shirt from the boys' section of the store, a haircut. They're only made slightly easier by the application of a professional who can reassure them and point out when

their thoughts are illogical, by meds that help them sleep a little more and chew their fingernails a little less.

The program continues to run; Melissa sits absorbed by the box, pays Chris not the least bit of attention. Chris sighs and lets out another hissing breath, turns their head to survey the lounge in search of a distraction from their fingernails and the urge to run through their rehearsed conversation yet again—to survey a room furnished with all the care of two students who have no money but do have a landlord who bans hooks and blue-tack on the walls in order to preserve the beige paint. They don't even have a painting Chris can pretend to be engrossed in, just the brown drapes over the window and the yellow-brown carpet, Chris's purple-painted bookshelf beside Melissa's slanting brown DVD rack. Chris grits their teeth and tries not to jiggle their knees too much, but they can't sit still. Perhaps they should get up and get a book? Get out their latest in a long line of unfinished cross-stitch attempts?

They're just about to stand when the show cuts to the ad break and Melissa finally turns her head. Her eyebrows creep to her hairline as if seeing Chris for the first time, her green eyes wide and startled. "Woah. You going someplace, Christine? Is that waistcoat new?"

"Yeah." They shouldn't answer, should get straight to the point. "Do ... do you like it?"

Melissa reaches up to tug a lock of brown hair free from her messy, stubby ponytail. "You look like a butch dyke going to a wedding. Like Ellen. Why do all lesbians look like Ellen?"

Why will Chris never learn that they can never anticipate the kinds of comments that knock them breathless? "Uh. I don't ... I mean..."

"Oh ... *oh*." Melissa gulps and raises a hand to her mouth. "I didn't mean you're a lesbian. Unless you are. Are you? Is this why you're dressing so strangely?"

How the hell do they answer that? The one time Chris tried to explain pansexuality to their co-workers, all thanks to an innocent conversation beginning with science fiction and ending with Captain Jack Harkness,

they'd been forced to answer questions about inanimate objects, bestiality and non-human life forms. No, they do not want to fuck a tree or any non-sapient creature, and why do people ever think they would?

Do people, at heart, believe all the conservative Right bullshit about marriage equality opening the door to wedding pets and kitchen appliances? Do people think queer folk, pan folk, that perverse, that wrong, that the thought must cross their minds long enough to ask the question?

"Ah," Chris says, or something even less coherent, not at all sure they want to have this conversation here, now. Just talking about their name is going to be hard enough. "I don't—"

"You *are*, aren't you, Christine?" Melissa spins around on the couch to face Chris. "It makes so much sense—your hair, your clothes. I thought it was weird, but if you're a dyke—or is it 'lesbian'? Anyway, it makes sense." She runs her eyes up and down Chris's body and breaks into a frown. "Although, you know, right, that you don't actually have to go all Ellen to be gay? You can be Portia. You can still wear make-up and dresses. I don't know why it's a thing, but you don't have to do it, okay? You can be gay and be you—the person you are. I'm sure the lesbians will love you anyway."

Try as they might, Chris can't think of a single thing they've ever done that would explain or justify Melissa's absurd speech. They nod, too stunned to say a single word, and raise a hand to brush over their spiked-up, clipper-cut hair. The hair cut is the best thing they've ever done: ever since they've watched those drab brown locks fall to the floor, they've felt as though they spent their whole life as this inner, secret short-haired person bursting to get out. Moulding paste, hair straighteners and hair dye have opened up entire new worlds to a person who spent their life just tying their hair in a ponytail and letting it hang—finally, they have colour and texture and style! They can leave the house never looking the same way twice! They can look in the mirror and see this strange, amazing, vivacious-looking person who dared, *dared* spiked hair and a waistcoat, and as narcissistic as it may be, Chris can't tear their eyes away from the mirror, from shop windows, from anything that lets them see their new

self. It's been a wonder, a revelation ... but Melissa thinks they transformed themselves just to look like *Ellen*? Because of some ridiculous cishet notion that all queer women must look alike?

Was she lying that night when Chris came back from the hairdresser, just about floating on air, and Melissa squealed and said they looked fantastic?

"I'm not..." They stop for a desperate gulp of air, try to calm their breathing and their tongue. "I'm not lesbian."

Melissa stares at Chris for one awful moment before raising her hand to cover her face. "Oh my ... I ... you don't look that much like Ellen. I was just being an idiot. Ignore me. Your hair ... it's really good. I told you that, didn't I?"

The floor, of course, won't open up and swallow them whole no matter how much Chris wishes for the world to oblige them.

Now what? Now try and tell her that Chris isn't lesbian, but they are queer? Lie and tell Melissa that they're bi, even though that presumes the existence of two distinct genders that Chris doesn't any way think allows for or celebrates their existence—or encompasses the kinds of people Chris finds attractive? Tell Melissa the thing they've only told their psychologist and sit back and watch as this awkward evening becomes all the more horrific—because it is obvious, beyond obvious, that Melissa does not understand? She might think she does, she must believe she's being supportive, but she has no idea, none at all, what it feels to sit here and listen to her make mockery of the most empowering choice Chris has ever made.

They didn't want to look like Ellen; they just wanted to look like *Chris*.

"Christine? I didn't offend you, did I? Because I didn't mean anything by it. It's just—you know. You see it all the time, every dyke with an Ellen haircut. It's kind of ridiculous. But yours is different, so different. Yours is good." Melissa reaches across to the coffee table and scrambles for the remote; without turning around, she points it at the TV. The screen goes dead, leaving the pair in the horrible blank silence of the too-small lounge

room. Nothing on the walls to look at, no distractions. Nothing but the pleading desperation in Melissa's awkward, stiff smile.

"It's okay." The words spill out of Chris's lips, force-of-habit, before they realise it isn't. In fact, it is anything but okay: why the hell did Melissa have to go and make it so fucking awkward? How is Chris supposed to have a simple, reasonable conversation on the thing that really matters—Chris's fucking name—when Melissa can't even look at Chris's clothes without leaping to absurd and offensive conclusions? "I mean, you—" They stop, not out of a realisation but out of a desperate floundering to find something, anything, to finish off the sentence: *you made a mistake? You meant well? You didn't hurt me? You just made the best thing I ever did seem like some attempt to be fashionable? You blithely assumed that queer women are robots who want to look alike?*

About the only thing they can say, and mean it, are three simple words: *you fucked up.*

Melissa's face sags in relief despite Chris's lack of an answer; she sighs and leans back against the armrest. "It really does look good, Christine. I was thinking about getting my hair like that myself, except I think my face is too round to pull it off."

They know Shakespeare didn't intend Gertrude's line to be so interpreted, and yet Chris can't help but think the modern use appropriate: how does the lady *not* protest too much?

What the hell are they supposed to say to such an obvious lie?

"So." Melissa doesn't wait for a response; she just looks down at her lap, leans across to the coffee table, scoops up the remote in her right hand. "Was there anything else, Christine?"

It occurs to Chris that no, she wouldn't wait for a response—she wouldn't even notice a lack of response, because when does Chris ever say anything, outside of therapy? When did they ever say anything before this quest to get better, stop hiding, be who they really are? And yet—what is there to say? Does it even matter? Melissa will go and say something

ridiculous and stupid, but what the hell can Chris do about that? How is there any way to make this conversation not horrific?

The realisation doesn't diminish the anxiety or the stutter.

It does make them speak.

They rehearsed it in the mirror before they risked the lounge, one long, pleading, explanatory speech: *I don't feel comfortable when you call me Christine. Everybody else calls me Chris, and I'd appreciate it if you'd call me Chris as well—I feel like it suits the person I am, and as I'd eventually like to change my name, I figure I should start here with my friends. Please just try to call me Chris, okay? I know you'll make mistakes—we all do—but could you please just try?*

Of course, the words never make it out as intended to Chris's lips: the sentences fall apart, words are lost and forgotten in the quest to get the letters to sound as they should, points and goals vanish amidst the anxiety of speaking at all. They hate the fact that they can never speak like they wanted, never make the words come out right, never explain in a way that makes sense—that makes the listener understand.

This time it doesn't matter.

“M-my name. I'm Chris.”

Melissa just blinks. “You told me you preferred Christine.” She shakes her head, scrunches up her eyes. “I hate that we don't call people by their birth names just because we're too lazy to say the whole word. Why? Did your boss go on about it again? You don't have to change your name for his sake! You've been Christine for years.”

For a moment they're just speechless—they just stare, gape, blink. When did Chris say that? Did Chris ever say that? Why would Melissa think that?

It takes a moment for the comment to settle in Chris's head, for the realisation to occur—that this is the same thing, the same damn thing, as the comments on the haircut and their clothes. No, it makes no more sense than the rest of it does, but there it is: what good is this conversation ever going to be?

It doesn't matter that they've both been friends since high-school—no, that's why it matters, because Melissa sees Chris as the quiet, mousy girl tagging along behind her more vivacious friend, and she has no idea about the changes going on inside Chris's head. Oh, Melissa knows about the psychologist and the meds, knows about Chris's diagnoses, but she doesn't understand the most important thing about either: they're not supposed to make Chris a slightly-less neurotic version of their old self. Rather, a psychologist is supposed to help them become the person they were supposed to be—the person who buys waistcoats and hair gel and uses the rainbow-coloured eye-shadow stashed in their desk.

A person Melissa can't comprehend without packing them into the small, shallow boxes that are her only way of making sense of the world—a person she might not even be able to see.

"Well, I'm ... I'm going to change it," they say. The words fall from their lips in a blurring rush. "I'll change it. And until then, I want you to call me Chris anyway."

"Okay." Melissa strings the word out into one long, tri-syllabic drawl. "Is something wrong with you, Christine? You're acting really weird. You've been acting weird ever since—well." She stops and looks down at the remote in her hands, and while Chris's heart pounds in their chest, it strikes them as amusing that the one thing that stops Melissa, the one thing that activates the check in her brain, is the fact she shouldn't be commenting on Chris's mental health. She can remember that, but she can't remember to use Chris's preferred name *five seconds* after being told?

"It's Chris." This time they don't hesitate—this time they're too appalled to be anything but direct.

Melissa's lips twist into a scowl. "I'm not perfect, you know. I'm going to make mistakes. *Chris*."

The words don't differ from the speech Chris rehearsed, yet, coming from Melissa's lips, they sound ugly and cruel. It's not that she made the mistake, Chris realises, because it's easy to make the mistake, easy to slip over the words one has spent years using. It's that her first instinct isn't to

apologise—just justify. When told she is wrong, when asked to use other words, when making a mistake, shouldn't it just be a matter of apologising? Why this defensiveness?

Could it be, Chris wonders, that they were anxious for a reason that has nothing to do with serotonin and noradrenaline, nothing to do with the chemicals in their brain?

“I know that.” Chris wraps their arms around their shoulders. “I just w-wanted you to call me by the name I like.”

“Fine.” Melissa sighs and tosses her head back against the couch. “Is there anything else? I've missed half my show.”

Chris shakes their head, so Melissa points the remote at the TV. The image clicks on, the sound of the presenter providing commentary about an on-screen romance almost unbearably loud: Melissa's thumb presses away at the volume buttons until they can almost see the speakers throbbing. Chris almost asks her to turn it down, but stops: do they really want to sit here on the couch and pretend that everything is okay? Isn't that what the old Chris has done—isn't that, in point of fact, the kind of thing that tells Melissa it's right and okay to say the things she has?

Instead, they stand and walk to the lounge room door. Melissa doesn't so much as turn her head from the TV as Chris closes the lounge door behind them; this time it barely registers as an annoyance. The lounge room door, a heavy, crooked, creaking thing, doesn't drown out the noise, so Chris closes their own bedroom door until the presenter is nothing but an incomprehensible mutter on the edge of their hearing—just like Melissa.

They sigh and, for a moment, stand against the door, look out across the too-small, cluttered room. A single bed with a sinking mattress and a broken-legged desk propped up with a year-old edition of the *Yellow Pages*; a too-small bookshelf and the wicker laundry hamper overflowing with blouses and bras and dresses; the cupboard with the broken door and the suit they found at the op shop hanging off the front of it because there was no space anywhere else. It all seems as ill-fitting as the dresses in

the laundry hamper, and Chris finds themselves wondering why it is they're living there in the first place. Perhaps it's time to find somewhere else to live, somewhere bigger? They could get a better bed. Get rid of the clothes they're never going to wear again. Get the kind of housemate who doesn't make a conversation about names and clothes so difficult—the kind of housemate who doesn't expect anything of or about Chris save rent and a certain amount of cleanliness.

Is there any reason, besides fear, they shouldn't?

It's a decision, and yet it still feels empty. They could, perhaps should, pull out their netbook and start searching property listings. Logical, yes, but it still feels like they're the kind of person who runs away to hide in their room until this mess blows over. Isn't that also the sort of thing Melissa expects from the shy and mousy Chris?

They don't want to curl up on their bed with their netbook—they can do that any time. No, what do they want right this moment? Chris sighs and tips their head down to look at their shirt and waistcoat, and breaks into a little, twisted smile. Shallow as it might be, they want to be somewhere they don't have to hide anything, somewhere people have an appropriate appreciation for a killer waistcoat, somewhere people don't see Ellen—just Chris, a queer, pansexual, colourful Chris who looks fucking *fabulous*. Even if, or especially if, it corresponds to nobody else's definition of fabulous.

Shaking hands make opening the desk drawer difficult; they make tiny make-up brushes and the application of bright-coloured pigment—green and pink and silver—even more difficult. They take many careful breaths, erase many skewed lines and bright-coloured smears. By the end, however, someone strange stares back at them from the mirror.

No, Chris doesn't know this person, this person who slides the suit jacket off the coat hanger and tosses it over one shoulder, this person who snatches up their wallet and keys and steps out of the bedroom with their face a glorious riot of unnatural colour. They don't know the person who

opens the lounge room door and pokes their head in: “I’m g-going out. I’ve got my phone and keys. Don’t . . . don’t wait up.”

Melissa sits hunched before the TV, a remote in one hand and a phone in the other, her thumbs tapping at both. “Whatever. Don’t make too much—Christine?” She jerks her head up and stares. “Where the hell are you going like that?”

Chris shrugs. “Ah—gay bar.”

Melissa’s jaw drops. “*Chris?*”

They could explain. They could have another awkward conversation that will get them exactly nowhere.

Chris waves, turns and heads to the front door; they don’t trouble themselves to keep the door from slamming after them.

No, they don’t know this person who walks out to the car with cropped hair, Barbie-pink eye-shadow and a suit jacket, but they just might enjoy the process of getting to know them.

The Differently Animated and Queer Society

THE PUB WAS RATHER OUT of the way, jammed up between a dinky supermarket and an abandoned house just behind the red light district. It wasn't too surprising, given how hard it had apparently been for the chairfolk of the Differently Animated and Queer Society to find a venue that had gender-neutral facilities as well as a willingness to serve the undead, and Pat couldn't help a slight frown as ze got out of hir car. It wasn't likely that someone was going to try and mug a zombie, but even so, the neighbourhood didn't seem all that prosperous. There weren't even too many cars around, just one down the other end of the street and a rusty bike chained to a light post.

Maybe ze shouldn't have waited until ze'd be the last to arrive. What if everyone had come, decided that nobody was coming, and gone home already? What if ze was the only one to come at all?

Pat had almost backed out of the idea altogether. Joining DAAQS was a great way to meet new, like-minded folk in theory (it was hard enough finding undead folk to meet, never mind queer undead folk, never mind queer undead folk who were accepting and didn't spend thirty seconds staring at Pat's crotch before saying hello), and ze's psychologist had been quite insistent on Pat's attendance, but finding the courage to get out of the house and go outside was another thing again. The city wasn't always a kind place for the undead; Pat spent too much time standing in the dole queue at Centrelink listening to folk mutter about hir under their breath when they weren't pointing and staring. DAAQS should be better, but how did ze know that for sure?

This will be fine, Pat told himself, in what felt like a ridiculous attempt to bolster his courage. If he had summoned up the courage for his last job interview—and Pat thought he would have gotten it despite being undead if he felt remotely inclined to try and pass, something that annoyed his job seeker support officer no end—then he could summon up the courage to do this. This should be easier than a job interview!

Pat took a breath, choked as he realised for the umpteenth time that breath was no longer necessary, and pushed open the front doors.

Inside, the pub seemed quite cheery, despite the worn red carpet and yellowing photos on the walls. ‘Walk Like an Egyptian’ played on the stereo, and three ghouls clustered around the pool table to make bets on a match between a vampire and a mummy. Dull reddish lights made the room comfortable for the photosensitive amongst them without being too dark for everyone else, and Pat almost smiled when he saw two zombies slurping brains from a sundae glass at the bar. The tables and chairs scattered down the sides of the room—leaving a dancing floor of scratched parquet in the middle—were old-fashioned and a little dinged-up, but the place had a laid-back, homey feel, rather like Pat’s grandparents’ house.

Well, before his grandfather refused his zombie grandchild entry.

“Hello! Welcome to the inaugural meeting of the Society!” Pat jerked as a mummy, wearing a pink satin party dress over his bandages and a jaunty blue fez, walked up and grabbed his hand. “You’re Pat, right? Pleased to meet you, Pat. I’m so glad you came!” The mummy pumped Pat’s arm up and down a few times before letting go. “There’s a table over there, go grab a name-tag and come join us at the bar ... they tell me the Cranium Crush is just delightful.” The mummy patted Pat on the shoulder. “I’m Louisa, and it’s *she*, please. I mean, my name is longer and complicated and Egyptian, but I’ve always wanted to be a Louisa, and nobody can pronounce my name anyway, so why not? Such a pretty name, don’t you think?”

Pat managed some kind of agreement and headed for the table by the door, set up with coloured sharpies—the big, thick kind—and oversized

clip-on tags. The size of the pens and the tags made it easy not to shake too much as ze scribbled hir name in green on the closest tag. Ze'd spent hours in post-death occupational therapy, and Pat was rather proud of the fact that ze could write almost as well now as ze had when living—but glad that someone had thought to provide appropriately-sized sharpies.

Ze clipped the tag on hir shirt pocket, swallowed and headed over towards the bar.

Louisa, now twirling around on a bar stool, waved hir over to a seat. She grinned broadly enough to show her non-existent teeth; Pat could only marvel at her confidence. “Bartender, get Pat a Cranium Crush! And put one of those cute skull umbrellas in. They're really good here about the ambience, aren't they, Moon?” She slapped a zombie sipping from a glass on the shoulder, the motion followed by a dull thudding noise; the zombie turned and nodded, only looking slightly put out that Louisa had smacked hir arm off at the shoulder joint and onto the bar. “Moon, meet Pat. So tell me, Pat, how long have you been part of the DA community?”

Pat pulled out a chair on Louisa's other side and sat down at the bar. An array of bottles filled the shelves behind the bench, many of them filled with blackish, clear or crimson liquids, the labels turned outwards. “Six months.”

The bartender, a sallow-looking vampire in a miniskirt and waistcoat, placed a cocktail glass on the counter before Pat.

“Gracious, you're looking remarkably well adjusted for a new starter! Don't you agree, Moon? Coming out on hir own and everything? It took me fifty years to get up the courage to escape my pyramid ... of course, the fact that everyone would have been a little concerned about the re-emergence of a past Pharaoh had something to do with it, and it wasn't like my son wasn't doing a decent job of it all...”

Moon nodded and twisted hir arm up through the sleeve of hir shirt. Pat watched, a little embarrassed to see hir do something as intimate as reassemble hirself, but impressed by the fact that Moon didn't even bat an eyelid, as if this were nothing more awkward than scratching hir nose—

when was Pat ever going to get that kind of confidence? Moon seemed to notice, for ze raised hir eyebrows and shot a glance Pat's way as ze straightened out the sleeve of hir blazer.

Pat gulped—but Moon didn't scowl, and Pat couldn't tear hir eyes away even in a pretence at shame, for ze had never seen a more beautiful zombie. Moon's skin held a perfect grey-blue sheen, the sutures holding hir right cheek together lovely and thick; Pat could just imagine their fibrous, textured feel under hir fingertips. Moon only wore jeans, a T-shirt, and a blazer, all in black and navy to highlight hir complexion and the blue streaks ze'd dyed through hir hair, braided and tied off with a collection of skull-shaped beads. Did ze not care about all the looks ze would inevitably get when out on the street?

Sorry, Pat mouthed, but ze wasn't, not really.

Moon turned hir head, rolled hir eyes at Louisa and grinned. Hir teeth were sharp and pointed, just perfect for breaking open skulls and sucking out brains—not that any zombie did, these days, but why shouldn't Pat find it attractive that Moon could?—framed by delicate cyan lips. “Hey, Louisa, did Martin just score over there?” Moon gestured towards the pool players and broke into an even broader as Louisa leapt to her feet and ran over to the table, slapping the closest ghoul on the shoulder as she poked her head into the fray.

“Sorry.” Moon gave a shrug, but ze didn't stop smiling. “She's really enthusiastic, so...”

She was easily distracted as well; Louisa started flirting with two of the pool-betting ghouls at once. Pat gave an easier grin and reached for hir Crush. “She seems to have done a good job at organising this whole thing,” ze said by way of trying to sound conversational. The crowd wasn't large, but in a way that was nicer; it made everything smaller and companionable. The music wasn't so loud that ze didn't have to scream into Moon's ear just to speak, Pat didn't have to deal with the anxiety of speaking to many folk at once, and the Crush was almost as good as fresh, ripped-right-from-

the-skull-cavity brains. Pat made a mental note to ask the bartender what kind of preservatives she used and took another sip.

“One of the vampires told me that she bullied the owner of this place into letting us come for an evening,” Moon said. “We’re lucky.”

When ze was sitting right beside a stunning zombie, free of stares or muttered comments, sipping the best drink ze’d ever had in hir post-mortal existence? Yes.

“Uh. Do you come here often?”

“It’s the inaugural meeting,” Moon said; ze raised both eyebrows and took another sip from hir glass.

Of course. Pat cringed and wondered what ze could have said to make the situation worse. Ze had the most gorgeous zombie ze had ever seen sitting right beside hir, and yet ze couldn’t say anything but the most banal of comments? Pat took another sip as well—no, it wasn’t just fresh brains, as the bartender had added something that was starting to make hir lips tingle—and wondered just how stalkerish ze would sound if ze commented on Moon’s beautiful sutures. “What are you here for, then? I mean ... I mean I got told by my psychologist to go out and live again, so...” Pat grimaced. “I don’t think she’s used to DA folk. Breathing privilege and all that ... should’ve checked that at the door, right?”

Moon took a gulp of hir cocktail and then set it on the bar; bubbles of brain fluid snorted through hir nose and onto hir chin and lips.

“But she was right, even if she could use better words. So, you know ... angsted for a few days, spent ten minutes hovering outside worrying ... but it’s nice in here. Not weird at—” Pat stopped just before it occurred to hir that ze was as good as calling Moon weird. “Uh, I meant the pub. You know, not weird for being right by the red light district. But that’s not bad either, I mean... And this—this is delicious.” Ze picked up the cocktail and took a big swig just to shut himself up. “What’s in it?”

“I think some kind of formaldehyde blend. And peppermint schnapps.” Moon reached up and wiped the blood from hir nose with a serviette. “I’m saying that to my family next time I see them—the breathing privilege

thing. They just keep *on* about it: get outside, get some sunshine, get off the computer, why don't you volunteer, why don't you do this or that, life's only what you make of it..."

"Ouch." Pat grimaced in sympathy.

"I know." Moon grinned. "I work from home as a web designer, just to make it more frustrating."

Pat hadn't thought about working from home—hir social worker was set against it, and, really, ze wanted to get to know someone who wasn't hir post-death support team—but on reflection, it seemed like an increasingly brilliant idea. Nobody would ever know what ze looked like; nobody would ever judge hir on dietary requirements and how many breaths ze didn't make per minute. If ze had the skills to be able to create something and sell it without leaving the house—and could join a group like this to get out every so often—it might be the perfect solution to pose to hir job network advisor. Perhaps ze could go and do a course... "Do you like it?"

"Most of the time. I've just got to remember to use arrangements and colours that work better with breather eyesight. It'd be nicer to get out and talk to folk, if..."

"You can find folk to talk to," Pat said, and Moon nodded. Ze twirled hir umbrella in hir fingers, and it occurred to Pat that maybe ze wasn't the only one who found this whole social interaction thing complicated. Still. They were both sitting here, the music was good, and there was no chance of anyone staring at them oddly or asking them to leave. For the first time in months, Pat felt almost okay—ze wasn't alone here, they both understood exactly what it felt like to be in a world that wasn't comfortable around them and didn't want to understand, and maybe they both needed to be able to talk to someone. Maybe Moon also wanted to have a conversation that didn't involve processing trauma or post-death social adjustment. "Okay, then. Ah ... Star Wars or Star Trek?"

Moon raised both eyebrows. "Are you assuming that because I build websites that I'm a geek?"

Pat shrugged and tried not to look away in hir awkwardness. “Everyone’s seen one or the other, right?”

Moon grinned, then. “I’m just pull—” Ze stopped and shook hir head. “I was going to say that I was just pulling your leg—I find myself catching those sorts of phrases all the time.” Ze sighed and glanced down at hir previously-unattached arm for a moment before raising hir eyes back to Pat’s face. “Do you? And Trek.”

“All the time.” Pat took another small sip from hir glass. “Me too. Kirk or Picard?”

Moon, thank heavens, didn’t comment on the fact that Pat’s conversational skills started and ended at something close to a questionnaire. “Kirk.”

What? Pat sat up on hir stool, disappointed. “No. No way is Kirk better than Picard. Kirk just screwed around, but Picard had the whole Borg thing going on...”

“Kirk’s hotter,” Moon said, and ze folded hir arms as if that signalled the end of the argument. “Beat that.”

“Patrick Stewart’s—” On second thought, it might be wise to avoid any awkward discussions about the origin of Pat’s name, so ze stopped before ze could say ‘accent’. “Uh. Never mind. You win. The TARDIS or the DeLorean?”

“I can’t believe you’re even asking this,” Moon said; ze shook hir head. “The TARDIS. Do you find it weird now, watching science fiction, and the way the writers treat anything that’s not human?”

The question surprised Pat only because of its obviousness. “I can’t really watch it anymore,” ze said, struck by the sudden realisation that ze didn’t really know what else to talk about—well, aside from physical therapy, psychology and politics, but who wanted to speak about that on a night out? The realisation, however, left hir rather miserable. As a breather, science fiction had always been something ze could talk about with someone else (even if only to find out that they didn’t like it), but these days, post-death, it didn’t make sense. Almost nothing out there

bothered to acknowledge hir existence, in fact, so what did ze bring up as a conversation starter, anyway? Sport, played by breather men? Food, which they didn't eat? Clothes, which were an exercise in dysphoria and frustration, because society liked to pretend that hir body didn't exist? How long it took to re-learn to write with a child-sized sharpie? How Pat had given hir Lego collection away because ze could no longer manage the tiny pieces? "I want to like it, still. I tried after I got out and I ended up throwing mugs at the TV. Even these days ... there's still almost nothing out there with DA folk. Well." Ze paused to make sure the bartender wasn't in earshot. "Unless they're vampires."

Moon rolled hir eyes, and Pat wondered if ze'd felt the same frustration. Why did breathers consider vampires so hot and sexy? Pat couldn't see much difference aside from fangs and a little less scarring ... but it was nearly okay to be a vampire, these days. "Wouldn't you just do anything for one TV show?" Pat asked, leaning forwards across Louisa's empty chair. "Some dramedy about a bunch of zombies and a ghoul in a coffee shop, trying to get jobs, find a partner, survive the Centrelink queues and how supermarkets hide the brains and blood in a corner away from the breathers so that you can never find them ... and no vampires. Just mummies and ghouls."

Moon jerked hir head in such a quick nod Pat was almost afraid hir head would end up bouncing onto the bar. "I know, right? Especially the vampire bit." Ze shot an apologetic glance towards the bartender, now making her way down their end of the bar. "Sorry, Harriet, but it's true. And then you go up to someone and ask, and they look at you down their noses like you're not worthy to share the same air—never mind that we don't ... oh, I mean the supermarket stuff. When I first—well, I always had to ask for the brains, and it was so embarrassing." Moon grinned back at Pat. "I'd love a zombie TV show."

"And zombie space explorers," Pat said, hir words now rapid with enthusiasm. "Why can't zombies or mummies travel through space and time? Why can't we be the good folk for once? We're always evil,

or thoughtless, or just falling apart. You'd think we'd be more advanced than this. We all know about the differently animated now, so why can't zombies be the heroes?"

Moon gave hir a curious look as ze shifted hir weight on hir stool. "So, what do you do, or did, Pat?"

"Did." Pat shrugged. "Sales assistant in a bookstore. And ... well. Trek and Doctor Who fanfiction at night, not that there was any payment involved, obviously." Pat couldn't help a grin as Moon nodded and slapped hir hands against hir knees. It was kind of obvious. Bookselling hadn't been the perfect job—it wasn't just chatting to people about books, and the job involved a lot of private side-eyeing at the things people considered good reading without the usual disasters of a retail job—but the staff discount and the surreptitious reading of new releases helped make up for the rest. "It was getting hard anyway: the manager kept coming down on me for how I dressed—you know, retail."

Nice slacks and a well-ironed shirt clearly didn't matter if customers stared at hir oddly, if they felt the need to ask someone else to help them, if how Pat dressed now didn't match the clothes ze'd worn for hir interview. If death—months in rehab and therapy and trying to put hir existence back into some kind of order—had ended Pat's career path, it'd already been on the road to the end before ze'd gotten chewed on in the park one sunny Sunday arvo.

"That's disgusting." Moon scowled hard enough to tug at hir sutures; the gesture would have made a living Pat all tingly in hir chest. The undead Pat couldn't tear hir eyes away.

"Then I got chomped, anyway," ze said, and Pat tried to sound careless, like it didn't matter: in the end, it really didn't. What did it compare to all the glances ze's endured since? "I don't really know what to do, now. Maybe a course in something."

"Write," Moon said, and ze spun around on hir chair to reach across and take Pat by the hands. Hir skin felt rough and cool against Pat's own. "Write about all this. A TV show or—no, write a webseries, and then

you could get actual DA actors in it. Queer folk, right? Tell Louisa, and she'd pimp it out to every DA folk in the country—she'd know if there are organisations that help DA artists. I could make you a website. It'd be awesome. Then we could all read and watch things we like.”

Pat stared at hir in return, startled. Ze'd never really thought about that as a serious option—but ze'd spent hours cursing and throwing crockery at the TV, newspaper, book, or anything else that either pretended ze didn't exist, or treated the DA folk as though they were evil or freakish. Pat didn't think that anyone outside this room would ever read it, and it certainly wouldn't pay hir any money, so it wouldn't solve the job situation, but ... ze grinned, wondering if it might be more satisfying than zombie-centric Doctor Who fanfiction. It'd certainly be worth it even if Moon was the only one that ever read something ze wrote...

“Hey!” Louisa bounded over and wrapped one arm around Pat's neck, the other around Moon's; Pat just managed not to spill the remains of hir Cranium Crush over the bar. “How are you two going? Are you going to get up and dance, or sit there all day? Remember: nobody cares if body parts go flying, just as long as you're having fun! Hey, Tammy.” She waved at a ghoul in a blue silk evening gown hovering at her elbow. “Don't you totally think these folk are adorable together?”

“Oh yeah,” Tammy said, waving the pool cue in hir hand. “C'mon, Lou, I want to dance to this.”

Louisa grabbed Tammy by the waist, whirled hir about in circles, and vanished almost as abruptly as she'd arrived. Pat hesitated for a moment, and then reached up and shoved hir shoulder back into place. Moon broke into a small, wicked, almost admiring little grin, and didn't look away as Pat adjusted hir shirtsleeve and checked that hir fingers still worked. Pat smiled back, and then blurted out the first thing to pop into hir head in an effort to evade the sudden awkwardness: “I'm not sure, but ... did we just get set up?”

Ze'd never even so much as mentioned that ze was single during hir phone conversation with Louisa, and yet...

Moon shrugged, but hir eyes lit up a little too brightly to match her dismissive words. “Probably. Do you mind?”

Mind?

Pat shook hir head, a little amazed that Louisa had somehow known. Ze’d have to thank her, if ze could do so without having Louisa breathe down hir neck and knock off hir limbs in the process. “So.” Pat paused, not at all sure how to ask with anything close to Louisa’s casualness, but ze had to find out—and here, surely, it would be okay that ze hasn’t assumed? “When I see my psychologist, and tell her that I met this awesome zombie I want to see again, how would you like me to refer to you as?”

A beautiful, handsome grin bloomed across Moon’s face. “I like ‘ou’.”

“And when I see my psychologist, and tell her about this gorgeous and handsome and clever zombie, and that ou offered to make me a website and made me think about a new career, how would you like me to refer to you as?”

Moon hesitated before raising one eyebrow and angling ou head in Pat’s direction. “Ou...?”

Pat swallowed and tried hard not to smile—or tremble. “And when I see my psychologist, and tell her that I want to ask ou out on a romantic, midnight dinner down at the local graveyard this Thursday, and I’ll bring my laptop so ou can read my fanfiction—or whenever suits ou because I’m that unemployed and lacking in a social existence—how would you like me to refer to you as?”

“You’re an idiot,” Moon said, but ou shook ou head and laughed—and leant closer to wrap one arm around Pat’s shoulders. “Thursday’s good with me. And how do I refer to you on my blog, Pat?”

Pat grinned with sheer, brilliant relief and leaned into Moon’s chest, so close that ze could brush hir head against Moon’s. “Anything. As long as you know it’s not real.”

It didn’t matter what they called hir—man, woman, person, human. It didn’t matter, just as long as one damn person understood they were only words used as a shorthand, and never meant the real thing. And, as Moon

reached up to run the tips of ou fingers over the thick dark stitches holding Pat's neck together, suggesting just what they might do in the graveyard as a soft whisper in hir ear, ze felt pretty sure that ou did.

Old-Fashioned

WHEN AMELIA HEARD THE SECOND rustle, she reached down beside her bed and grabbed her favourite witchy-looking staff, raising it up to her chest with as little sound as possible. Anyone who didn't sleep within reach of some kind of weapon—a broomstick, a knife, a furious cat—was an idiot, and Amelia liked to think that while she might be an indifferent witch, she wasn't wholly idiotic. Who knew, these days, just who would take it upon themselves to invade someone's private space?

“Young idiots,” she whispered to herself as she sat up and raised the staff so that she could swing out with the knobbly end. She didn't make so much as a rustle; the intruder, however, seemed to find every creaky stair and floorboard between the hallway and the bedroom door. Amelia knew it wasn't the cat: no cat was stupid enough to rustle and risk being mistaken for an intruder. She had no mice or spiders inside her house; even the local moths knew better than to find shelter within her walls. Anyone with legitimate business would have knocked on her front door and bellowed for the midwife.

No, it could only mean one thing.

The lovelorn.

Midnight stalking had become all the rage amongst the lovesick, the impressionable, the young and the downright stupid—a fashion worse than constricting corsetry and wide-legged breeches. Worse than last summer, when everyone went about quoting romantic poetry in lieu of just asking someone to the town hall dance. Now love was all about

climbing through second-storey windows and watching their loved one sleep; roses were passé. Romance was about being new and innovative and showing to the world just how far one would go for their beloved—even if it meant proclaiming their star-crossed romance from a mouldy jail cell the following morning. Bruises and protective mothers and even magic seemed no deterrent.

Amelia heard a faint cough, as if muffled by a hand. In daylight, she knew nothing more about fighting than the next person, but in the dark—and in a room cleared of most things breakable, because Amelia knew her aim was atrocious—her lack of training didn't matter. She waited a moment longer, listening for the distinctive grinding creak of the floorboard just before her bed—and then she swung the staff as hard as she could until she heard a loud and satisfying crack.

Someone shrieked. Amelia swung again, this time hitting a glancing blow. She heard a series of thumps, a something clattering to the floor, and then vicious swearing and a snuffle followed by several soft sobs.

“Curse it, I just had to get another weeper,” she said under her breath as she placed the staff on the bed and leant over the bedside table to fumble at the lamp with her right hand. “Do none of you ever think how much all this is costing me in kerosene and matches?”

It took a moment for the lamp to catch and light the room. Amelia sat back in bed and stared down at her intruder.

A young woman sat huddled on the floor with one hand wrapped around her elbow. She was gorgeous, Amelia had to admit: round and curvy, with a mane of curly chestnut hair tumbling down her back and falling in her eyes. Big, beautiful green eyes, paired with the kind of pouty lips Amelia enjoyed pressed against her own when the kissing happened to be mutually agreed upon. She was gorgeous, but she'd forgotten to wear a few useful things like shoes, underwear and clothing, and Amelia couldn't help a deep, frustrated sigh. Perhaps something was wrong with her. Anyone else would be thrilled to discover a naked person of the correct

gender creeping into their room, especially if the intruder seemed to have every last intent of getting under the covers and beginning a seduction.

Who wouldn't want someone willing and ready to tumble you without even so much as a get-to-know-you?

Everyone did it nowadays. Lovers skipped the whole tradition of meeting, dating, getting to know each other over a meal or two, the nervous small-talk where two people tried to figure out where the other stood with regards common interests and how soon they could talk of bedding without being offensive. No, everyone in the village sighed over the love and romance of a mysterious stalker. How else could someone prove their love for another, if they weren't willing to take the risk of creeping into their would-be-lover's house after dark?

Amelia stared down at the woman. She fluttered her damp eyelashes as if in some desperate attempt to look alluring—but she just looked like a stranger with an eyelash stuck in her eye. A pretty stranger, but a stranger. How was Amelia to know what she thought about anything important, like equal voting rights for gnomes?

“Well?” she said. “Do you? Don't you think it's pretty inconsiderate?”

The woman blinked and said nothing.

Curse it, just how were they all getting in? Amelia had fastened the windows and bolted the front door before going to bed, checking every lock twice; she'd made sure that nobody could open the catches from the outside after the last debacle, and she'd have heard a window breaking—if anyone wanted to annoy a witch by breaking her windows. Perhaps the intruder had decided to risk the nesting basilisk in the cellar and entered by the cellar door? Just what had the world come to when not even a basilisk could keep out lovelorn intruders?

She frowned and decided that tomorrow she would walk around the house in circles with her cat and a basket of bones and herbs, and chant something that sounded mysterious and spell-like—anything to scare the woman or anyone else from trying again. Everyone knew that magic was

more powerful, dark and serious when a cat was involved, after all. If that didn't give the villagers the right idea, nothing would.

"If you're not going to refund me for my matches," Amelia said, "get up, stop crying and go home. Try asking someone else out the proper way. Mentioning your name, too, might help."

The woman peered up at Amelia, now trying a wobbly sort of smile. "You're the most beautiful woman I ever saw, and I—"

"And you're a stranger invading my house." Amelia folded her arms and tried not to stare at the woman's breasts. She was worth staring at, if only this meeting had involved Amelia's knowing the woman's name, occupation, address and favourite colour, and Amelia's having issued something resembling an invitation. The last thing the woman needed, however, was encouragement. "Now get out before I throw my cat at you."

Amelia heard a clattering noise that sounded like a cat streaking for shelter under her bed, but at least the woman looked somewhat concerned as she struggled to her feet with her fingers still cupping her elbow. She didn't look red or blotchy despite the tears streaming down her face, but Amelia couldn't have said that she didn't look pathetic, either. Pathetic wouldn't have made it past the basilisk. "But ... I did all this for you."

Amelia rolled her eyes, grabbed her staff and stared at the girl in her best attempt to look suitably witch-like, despite her floral-print nightgown. "If you do not get out of my house in two minutes I will turn you and your family into toads. *Dead* toads. They'll have to bury you in a shoebox."

No, she wasn't a good witch and was an even worse magician: she'd earned her diploma only because the Professors Roxleigh couldn't stand the thought of yet another year trying to locate the non-existent magical bone in Amelia's body. The village didn't question her post because she was good at pretending to be magical and she'd studied medicine abroad. The latter made her seem just as magical as if she did know how to summon zombies and enchant crops—and a good sight more useful.

"But..."

Amelia drew in a deep breath. "One, two, three, four, five..."

The woman yelped, perhaps finally seeming to realise that Amelia wasn't the least bit interested in being seduced by an intruder, and scurried for the door.

“Please tell everyone that if they wish to romance me, they can send a request in writing,” Amelia yelled as she put the staff back in its place beside her bed. “With references!”

The main door, with its ominous-but-useful-for-scaring-people creak, slammed shut, followed by the crunch of the woman's footsteps as she ran down the gravel path towards the village.

Amelia waited until the noise faded before following her down, grumbling as she locked the doors, checked the windows and laid down lines of pepper and dried basil leaves across the front and cellar doors in the hope that the villagers would think them some kind of magical protection. Tomorrow she'd have to do something about the cellar. Some kind of suitably dangerous-looking creature that liked the dark and didn't make too much noise would do nicely, although Amelia had never imagined that the basilisk wouldn't be threatening enough.

Something had to be done; no more having her sleep interrupted by the desperate whims of people thinking themselves in love!

“Good heavens,” she said when she returned to her bedroom. It took her a moment to blow out the lamp, lie back down and get comfortable under the covers. Her cat made a soft purring noise as it ventured back out from under her bed. “Do they think that because they're pretty, I'm not going to care if they invade my house? Do they think that because they're naked, I'm going to tear my clothes off and ravish them?”

The cat said nothing; it just jumped up on her feet and clawed her through her quilt.

“I know, I know.” Amelia sighed and rolled over with one ear always trained to listen for the tell-tale creak of floorboards. “I'm just too old-fashioned.”

Playing the Death Card

Note: ‘Playing the Death Card’ is a Stillwater Files short story that takes place at some point after *Asylum*; it does contain minor spoilers. For those willing to read on anyway, Oscar Stillwater is a queer, female-assigned, bigender psychiatrist living as a man in a world where queerness isn’t just a ‘mental illness’—it’s a crime.

SHE ENTERS THE STUDY JUST as Oscar settles down in her favourite armchair and props her heels up against the edge of the coffee table—a staid, rather plain-looking woman in a light lawn dress, her dark, wiry hair tucked under a pinned scarf like Trade women, a silk pouch in her right hand. No pendants or crystal orbs or shawls hanging around her throat and arms, thank heavens, just neat blue cloth and a thoughtful-looking expression, although Oscar should know by now that Sydney has no patience for the extravagant charlatans that entertain the daughters and wives of the Council. If not for the pouch, Oscar could have imagined her a seamstress or perhaps even a governess, but the pouch, hanging on a string and flicking back and forth as she stops just inside the door, ruins that fond delusion.

“Oscar.” Sydney slips in behind the woman and closes the study door. She’s as smartly-dressed as ever, her shoes polished, not a button or hair out of place, but she smiles a little too broadly for someone pretending to be household staff. “I bring you Mistress Arrah Piper. Arrah—my spouse, Oscar Stillwater.”

“Milord.” Arrah bobs her head despite the informality of the introduction. “I am given to understand...” She stops and looks back at Sydney, who leans against the doorframe with a casualness not typically given to a man in the three-piece suit of a manservant. Oscar’s not sure if it’s Sydney’s behaviour, Oscar’s title or the subtle wealth of the room that unnerves her: Oscar doesn’t go out of her way to flaunt her money, but there’s no Trade woman alive who can’t work out the cost of the red cedar sideboard, or how many shillings Grandmamma paid to purchase the lace protecting the table from Oscar’s boots. “Ah ... well, some scepticism?”

Some scepticism? Oscar raises her eyebrows, taps her fingernails against the worn leather armrest. “You could say ... well, that I am here because sometimes we must indulge the people we love.”

Sydney gives a loud, rude snort and steps forwards, waving Arrah onwards. “Come, sit here. Oscar...” She frowns at Oscar’s left knee and the cane she left propped against the seat of the chair, and then shakes her head as if deciding that what Grandmamma thinks about the coffee table is none of her business—as it should be. “Be nice.”

She can argue that insult, but Arrah twists the red string back and forth in her hands, and really, the sooner this farce is over and done with, the sooner Arrah can go back to the Districts or wherever it is she comes from, and the sooner Oscar can return to her stack of medical journals—to science and logic and sanity. “Yes, Master Cliffhall,” she says, and she tries not to sound too sarcastic; she gestures at the love seat angled behind the coffee table. “Have a seat, Mistress Piper.”

“This is real, milord.” Arrah sits down on the very edge of the love seat; she threads her fingers together as she looks up at Oscar’s face with a rather earnest-mouse sort of expression. “The cards are our opportunity to talk with the universe—to receive enlightenment and inspiration. All we have to do is listen to what the cards tell us.”

Oh, *please*. Not only is that ridiculous—as if the universe is going to bother to speak to one Oscar Stillwater through a deck of printed cards—but also tiresome. In fact, Oscar’s not sure there’s anything substantially

different between Arrah's speech and those of the temple priests on Sundays, and isn't her life about proving those ignorant, archaic men wrong? "Did you know, Mistress Piper, that there's a group of Icali scientists who have put forth the proposal that religion is nothing more than—"

"*Oscar.*" Sydney sits down on the love seat beside Arrah, shooting Oscar a dark, furrowed-brow glare. "What did we agree to, again?" She holds the glare for a moment longer, and then turns a softer, gentler smile towards Arrah. "I'm sorry. She's a scientist and a psychiatrist, and, for all that I try, every so often she slips back into ignorance. It's taking quite a bit of effort to undo all that education."

Arrah gives a nervous, whisper-soft giggle.

Oscar glares back at Sydney, but Sydney turns her head as if Oscar isn't even in the room, ignoring Oscar as effectively as a parent ignoring a yelling child in a tantrum. Well. Someone is going to be sleeping alone for a few weeks—Patron's tits, Sydney knows just how Oscar feels about fortune tellers, so why does she insist on Oscar's playing along? Yes, there needs to be more compromise in their relationship, but Oscar doesn't make Sydney read medical journals, for fuck's sake!

"Perhaps we should finish with the small talk and get on with the reading," she mutters through gritted teeth. Half an hour. It can't take any longer than that, can it? Light a few candles, shuffle the deck, lay out a few cards in whatever mystical-seeming pattern Arrah finds appealing, and voila, one useless prediction. "How about I go first?"

Sydney does look at her then, her eyebrows raised. Oscar reaches up to adjust her spectacles and tries to look as though she hasn't just volunteered in order to escape from the parlour the moment Arrah is done with her reading.

Arrah, however, seems oblivious to all the staring, and nods. "Of course, milord." She glances around the room and then looks back at Oscar's face. "I ... I think perhaps the room is cleansed enough."

The urge to comment that the cook probably has basil and oregano in the kitchen and would this do for a cleansing ritual has Oscar pressing her

teeth into her lip. Nice. She did promise, for all it's obvious to everyone but Sydney that this is a colossal waste of time. She sighs and lets out a long, slow breath, while Arrah leans forward, opens the drawstring pouch and emerges with a spread of black silk that she smooths across the table, all the while looking at Oscar's feet. Politeness dictates that she remove them, but it's her parlour, and besides, what's the worth of being a fucking cripple if she can't rest her boots on the coffee table every now and then?

The cards follow the silk from the pouch, a colourful printed deck small enough to fit in Arrah's palms. She slides them back and forth, shuffles them together well past the point where Oscar would have declared the job done, her eyes closed all the while as if she's focusing some part of her soul on the printed and lacquered slips of cardboard. Oscar's just about to speak when Arrah opens her eyes, shuffles the deck one last time, and scoots around the table to hold the deck out to Oscar. "Would you shuffle them please, milord?"

"Didn't you shuffle them enough?" she asks, but she sighs and picks up the deck. The Tower looms up at her, the lightning striking its twisted top creepy for all that it's only ink on paper. She grimaces and shuffles the card away, deliberately not looking at the cards as she slides them together. Arrah doesn't answer—Sydney just gives Oscar another warning glare—and Oscar shuffles them once more before handing them back. "There. Now, remember: if you pull any fake so-called soul-reading tricks on me, I'm going to know about it. My life is about knowing when patients lie to me."

"Oscar." Sydney grimaces. "You're acting like a bratty child. Stop it."

"It's—"

"*Stop.*"

Arrah scuffles back to the table, ignores them both as she takes a card from the top of the deck—and then stops, staring at the card, her lips making a small O-shape of shock. Oscar's stomach hurtles to her ankles, because she knows before Arrah's hand turns and the back of the card brushes against the silk what the card is, what it always is, what trick these

charlatans like to pull—and there it is, skull-and-bones grinning wickedly up at her.

Sydney grabs a pillow from the back of the loveseat and buries her mouth in it; the pillow does nothing to silence her loud, squawking laughter.

“I ... milord, it ... it doesn't... not literal...”

“I know I'm not fucking going to die!” Oscar waves her hands at the table, glaring down at Death. “Just ... just get on with it.”

Arrah swallows, nods, and draws another card, laying it across the first. It too is terribly familiar, and while Sydney's laughter becomes a shoulder-shaking near-convulsion, Arrah's face turns a sickly shade of grey as she looks down on the Five of Swords.

Oscar grits her teeth hard enough to make her jaw ache. “Hurry it up.”

Arrah nods again and lifts the third card ... and then puts it back down on the top of the deck, resting them on the table. “My ... milord, I ... perhaps we should reshuffle.”

Oscar slides her boots off the table, takes the time to prop her left heel against the ground—this isn't delay, just being careful—and leans forwards to pick up the deck. The Devil, followed by—as usual for her—the Moon, and then the Ten of Wands and the Ten of Swords. She doesn't bother with the rest; she just tosses the deck back on the table, not caring that the cards flutter and skid across the silk and onto the floor.

The Wheel of Fortune lands face-up and upside-down by her left foot.

Arrah slumps back against the loveseat, looks from the cards to Oscar and back again, shakes her head as if she can't believe what she's seeing.

Sydney has stopped laughing, but her lips curve upward into a smug, self-satisfied smile. “We keep telling you that you have to stop trying to do everything,” she says, leaning forwards and picking up the Ten of Wands.

“You *told* her.” The words explode from Oscar's lips, furious and petulant. “You fucking told her—”

Sydney throws the pillow at Oscar's head, forceful enough that Oscar barely raises her forearms in time to deflect it. "You shuffled the cards, Oscar! Did *you* see her draw from the bottom of the deck?"

No. No. This is a trick—the cards were rigged, they have to be. It is the only explanation. "Someone else told her, then." She shifts her left foot, despite the increased throbbing in her knee, just enough to turn the Wheel of Fortune face-down on the rug: she's had more than enough of that, thank you very much. "Every damn reader you've had here knows by now, and any one of them could have told her—"

Sydney snatches up another pillow and hurls it at Oscar's face. "Does she look like she knew, Oscar? Does she?"

This time the pillow smacks against Oscar's forehead, jamming her spectacles against the bridge of her nose, but the pain isn't as sharp as the question. Indeed, Arrah quivers like someone sitting down in Oscar's office for the first time, terrified of the frightening insane-declaring-and-making psychiatrist. She still stares at the cards, eyes wide, jaw open, and for all that Oscar would dearly love to believe Arrah knew about Oscar's previous spreads and rigged the cards to come out that way to mess with her head, every scientific, medical and psychological bone in her body screams that regardless of whether this is real or not, *Arrah* believes in what just happened.

"I didn't know, milord. I swear I didn't know..." She blinks, wraps her arms around her knees, raises her head to stare at Oscar. "Ah. Know what ... milord?"

Oscar scowls and can't bring herself to answer.

Sydney, however, does. "She always draws Death first. And no, she doesn't draw the same spread every time ... but most of the same cards. The Devil. Eight, Nine, Ten of Swords. The Wheel of Fortune."

The words hang heavy in the now too-silent room.

"It's not real." Oscar lifts her left foot up onto the coffee table and grunts as a spike of pain shoots down from her knee to her ankle. "Just

some attempt at mysticism because conventional patriarchal religion doesn't—"

"You know, for a psychiatrist, you're pretty damn good at ignoring reality." Sydney leans over and picks up a handful of cards, sorts through them and shuffles them together. "Seems to me the universe is trying damn hard to make a point while you're sitting back and declaring what is and isn't real because that's what suits you. What the hell kind of science is that?"

Oscar snorts. "Is this your point, then? With this?"

Sydney slides forwards and offers out the deck, the cards spread across her brown fingers. "Pick a card, love." She narrows her eyes. "You know that I wouldn't rig them, or is what we have that meaningless?"

No. For all that Sydney drives her to despair, for all that Sydney fails to understand any number of realities or why everything Oscar does just isn't rooted in some self-harming hate, she wouldn't do that. She'd tie Oscar to a lawn chair in the garden, yes, but she wouldn't rig the cards to make a point—not when she seems to believe that the universe is making her point for her. Oscar sighs, but she reaches forwards and runs her fingers over the deck, picks a card entirely at random. No tingling fingers, no feeling of rightness, nothing but paper and annoyance.

Death cackles up at her.

Oscar snarls and tosses the card on the table, not caring that she now *looks* like a toddling child having a tantrum. "It doesn't matter. It's not literal death ... change, right? Death of the mind or soul or something, they all say, so why does it matter?" Literal death, and the freedom from pain it brings, would be better, but that's the thought of someone lacking in the sanity she pretends to possess, the thoughts she doesn't dare utter, for no-one, not even her family, will understand.

Sydney places the rest of the cards on the table—gently, reverently. "Oscar. Last time I took you for a reading ... just before we left for Iscal. You drew the Death card. You then—do you remember, Oscar? You failed to get Athanase to help, you ended up hurting yourself out of depression,

and as soon as you came home, you fell down the stairs and broke your arm and your head!”

She rolls her eyes, tries to hide the sudden, hot, surprising tears. “And how, exactly, does one follow on from the other?”

“Three years ago.” Sydney learns further forwards, ignores Oscar’s question. “We went to the fortune teller at the fair, remember? You drew the Death card. A week later you got shot in the knee.”

“That was a freak accident! Do you know how hard it is to get shot in the fucking knee?”

On the other side of the table, ignored by both, Arrah gapes.

“In Levesque.” Sydney points at Oscar’s chest. “That end-of-term party put on by your housemates, where one of the history students fooled around with a deck of cards? Remember what happened after that? No, you probably don’t, because you were so sick with fever I thought you were going to die!”

That—what the hell does scarlet fever have anything to do with anything?

“And then there was the time we met Prefect Athanase’s personal clairvoyant—just before we met Sydney.” The soft, low voice startles Oscar right out of her pout; she turns her head to see Grandmamma standing in the doorway. Dressed for home in a plain black gown, her hands folded, her grey hair tied back in a simple, almost-severe bun, she looks cool and serene. “I don’t think I need to remind you what happened after that.”

No. Athanase happened. Oscar scowls and folds her hands together in a vain attempt to not think about Athanase and everything that followed. “And your point, everyone?”

“*Change.*” Sydney reaches down to the table and picks up Death. “Unless you want to stick your fingers in your ears and ignore the universe once more and see what it does next. Break another leg? Lose your sight? Become so ill you’re forced to spend the next year in bed because you’re too stupid to take a hint when it’s right in front of your nose?”

The room almost wavers. She feels dizzy. “You seriously expect that this conversation is going to—what? Make me how you think I’m supposed to be?”

Sydney shakes her head, scooping up as many cards as she can reach. “No. Oscar ... well, I don’t see how we’re going to get a psychiatrist to poke around in *your* head.” Her eyes linger, for a moment, on Oscar’s shirt and coat, her equally-masculine dress—because, of course, just which Southport psychiatrist is going to not declare both of them depraved? “But we’ve got the next best thing, and the universe seems to be screaming at you.” She shrugs and shuffles the cards again, and then hands them back to Arrah, who still sits with her jaw hanging open, her eyes wide. “So. Mistress Piper, can you please do a reading for my spouse? I assure you: the cards are correct.”

She can get up and walk away, for all that limping makes for an undignified exit. She can, save for Grandmamma still standing in the doorway: for all that Grandmamma looks like a nice, short old lady, Oscar doesn’t doubt that in any altercation for the door, Grandmamma will win. Easily—and not only due to the effects of Oscar’s knee and her laudanum use on her balance.

Arrah makes a small squeaking noise, but bends over and scoops up the Wheel of Fortune from the floor. “I ... ah, milord...”

Oscar isn’t even sure what Arrah is asking, but the real problem here is Sydney. She glares, but it’s only an expression, and while a nobleman’s face and voice and words might hold power in the outside world, here it’s as good as meaningless, and Sydney seems to know that, for she doesn’t even as much as flinch. “Why—fuck, why are you doing this?”

Indeed, she just rolls her eyes, sits back against the loveseat. “Because I love you, idiot, and I want you to stop hurting yourself. I’ll keep on doing this until I find something that gets through your thick head!”

She can yell and argue and explain and go over all the words they’ve said so many times before, waste her breath on a case that she can’t make, for Sydney is as stubborn about Oscar as Oscar is. She can start the same

old argument she won't win while Grandmamma stands in the doorway, for Oscar's lover and grandmother are firm allies in the matter of what they believe to be Oscar's health and how it should be handled. She can speak, scream to the wind, and it will be useless—it will be *insanity*, the kind of irrational insanity that comes from believing if one just says the same failed argument often enough and loud enough, the world will change despite a long and tired history of failure. There's no growth in that kind of thinking, no health, no reason, no point at all in trying to make the same case for the umpteenth time. How many times has she talked about this with patients? How many times has she—

Fuck. *Fuck.*

Damn it, she might have figured out that arguing with Sydney about her health and madness is insanity, but isn't arguing with the cards—the universe, according to Sydney and Arrah—just as irrational and insane?

“I hate you,” she says, and she scowls at Sydney—scowls, because she's afraid she's going to burst into tears in front of the fucking tarot reader.

Arrah looks back and forwards between the two of them and then begins to shuffle the cards.

“Ignore her, Mistress Piper.” Sydney breaks into a broad, satisfied, cat-like grin, her brown eyes sparkling. “She only says she hates me when she realises I'm right.” Her smile and her voice softens; her eyes linger on Oscar's face. “I forgive you, love. Now stop pouting and shuffle the deck.”

There's nothing she can say to that, either, but sit there, and scowl, and try not to cry, and take the wretched deck when Arrah hands it to her, slide the worn, warm cards through her fingers.

“I want you to explain what the cards mean as you lay them out, Mistress Piper,” Sydney says when Oscar hands the deck back to Arrah. “Just because Oscar decides it's pointless to argue and it's not scientific to deny the universe doesn't mean she's open to listening to the cards. She's not. We need to get her thinking.”

She has no response to that, either.

In fact, the only possible, worthwhile, sane response, the only response that isn't a repetition of everything that has never worked ... is to listen.

Arrah glances at Oscar and nods. Her face relaxes into a kind of pitying, grandmotherly calm. "Of course, sir." She straightens the silk and lifts a card from the top of the deck; her hand only slightly trembles as she lays it down on the table. "Ah. Your current situation. Death. Time ... time to cut the dead wood from the tree, however painful this might be, so you can flower and grow." She presses her lips together, but when Oscar says nothing, continues speaking. "I have the impression, milord, that you have perhaps spent many years ... not doing this?"

They all look at her expectantly: her grandmother from the doorway, her lover from the loveseat, and the tarot reader from the floor by the table. Quite possibly that can be another arrangement of cards, if one cares to look the scene symbolically—something very little different from the deck of cards in Arrah's hand.

Oscar sighs and slumps her shoulders forwards. "According to—" She stops and shakes her head, knowing damn well Sydney will have something to say to that. Wouldn't Oscar have something to say to that if this happened with a patient, after all? "Yes."

Grandmamma's slippers patter across the floorboards until she sits on the armrest of Oscar's chair, sliding one strong arm around Oscar's shoulders and tugging her close until Oscar's head falls against Grandmamma's chest. The contact shouldn't make her cry, given that she's never lacked for affection, but for some reason it does—hot, relentless, shoulder-shaking tears that seem all the more poignant, and loud, for Oscar's struggle to keep them silent. Sydney stands up and rounds the table to perch on the other armrest, and she just makes it worse when she leans over and wraps an arm around Oscar and Grandmamma, threading the three of them together in one warm, united tangle of family.

They hold her, running hands through her hair and down her back, until the tears ebb and Oscar can raise her head, rub her hand over her

face, all the while floating in the strange emptiness that follows a good cry—or a good embrace.

Arrah, thankfully, just reaches for the next card and lays it across the first. “Ten of Swords. Your responsibility to this situation. This card, milord, is regrouping and healing—the situation will be dire, but you need to take the opportunity to learn to care for yourself despite this.”

Nobody else speaks, but Oscar’s never heard such an exclamatory silence.

“I’ll ... I’ll...” She stops, swallows. “There may be ... is something to that.”

This time Sydney doesn’t snort or laugh; she just gives Oscar’s left shoulder a soft squeeze and holds her tight as Arrah turns over the card that represents Oscar’s past. The Devil, of course, all wicked horns and teeth. Bondage. Oppression. An inability to be who one is. She’s heard it all before from far more eloquent readers.

She sighs and nods.

This time, she tries to listen.

Acknowledgments

THE STORIES IN *CROOKED WORDS* were written over the space of four years, a period of the most upheavals in my life since—well, being born. There are many people who deserve sincere and everlasting gratitude for their love and kindness and support. A non-exhaustive list of the people who made this collection a reality include:

The many awesome teachers in the Professional Writing and Editing TAFE program at Victoria University for not only being kind and supportive in and out of class, but allowing me all manner of extra-curricular projects and opportunities. I would not have had the skills to create this book without you—in fact, I shudder to think at what this book may have been without your teachings. Particular thanks to Lucas McKenna, Julianne O'Brien, Susanna Bryceson, Tracey Rolfe and Michael Kitson for going above and beyond the call of duty.

The many awesome friends I've made in and out of class: the acceptance I've found at Victoria University amongst my wider classmates has been unexpected, relieving and wonderful. Special thanks go to Emanuel Cachia, Janet Singleton, Craig Henderson and Melody Soan for always providing helpful, considered, wise feedback and advice in workshops and out; and to Melanie Higgins for being a supportive ear. It's been an honour to work with you.

The many awesome friends and adoptive parents I've found and made since first taking that frightening step of posting a story on the internet, all of whom encouraged, nurtured, sheltered and supported an anxious,

broken soul in writing and life. You saved my life by being there for me at a time when I had no-one else. Kimberley Beattie, Emily C, I.D. Locke, Saskia, Frogs, Meep, Charis, Nae—with all my heart, thank you. These stories could not be if not for you.

And, for going so far beyond the call it astounds me: Hania, psychologist extraordinaire. You're amazing and wonderful and I'll never stop being grateful.

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