

C.C. Saint-Clair

Benchmarks

(Désir et Déchirure)

Though the quality of certain moments has inspired this book, the characters are created out of the imagination of the author.

Certain real locations are mentioned but any resemblance to actual events or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Benchmarks by C.C Saint-Clair
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About The Author

QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA – Lesbian romance has a new voice. That voice is that of C.C. Saint-Clair. She belongs to a rare breed of contemporary lesbian writers who achieve much more than mere titillation in their fiction. Her writing is solid, sensuous and evocative. It deserves the tag already attributed to it of 'the thinking woman's lesbian romance'.

With her debut novel, ***North And Left From Here***, published by www.1stbooks.com, C.C. Saint-Clair launched a series of trademark romantic and sensual plots thus bringing a different voice, life and vulnerability to lesbian-themed literature.

Born of French parents in Casablanca, Saint-Clair is a native speaker though she completed her formal education in the United States, at the University of Texas, majoring in English Literature.

She now lives in Australia with her long-term partner, free to pursue her interests in literature, cinematography, computer imagery, and collecting rustic antics.

Her third novel, ***Silent Goodbyes***, is set in Australia, in the city of Brisbane, and on board a yacht sailing the Whitsunday Islands in The Great Barrier Reef.

Visit **C.C.**'s website for extracts and choice author cuts:
<http://www.ccsaint-clair.com>

By The Same Author

North And Left From Here

Silent Goodbyes

Risking-me

Jagged Dreams

Far From Maddy

Acknowledgement

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Prologue

Oh, to lose myself inside the tender turmoil of your chestnut-brown eyes, to melt with the deliciously painful constriction of my inner core.

You gave me green; the colour and its essence. You made them yours. "*Verde, que te quiero verde.*" Federico Garcia Lorca himself must have dreamed about you. Your green coat, walking away from me left me alone to wait on this cold little park bench of another green. A green, yet another, comes towards me from behind the solid, green, cast iron kiosk.

It is not yours, though it resembles it. Yours, I can now almost see, hanging limply on the brass coat rack hidden deeply behind one of these grey, impenetrable Parisian facades. It is the arrival of this green, your green, that keeps me waiting, in the parc Monceau, on this little bench of another green.

It is far too early still for the fortified walls of your office chambers to release you. I know mine is an unreasoned impatience though the little ducks of the frozen pond are already looking for their night's shelter; some search amongst the partially immersed ornamental rocks, others amongst the green mossy folds of the Muses' marble robes.

A *sotto voce* sing song: '*Viens, viens, c'est une prière, viens, viens ...*'

Electric green, thunderbolt through my heart. That green! You have returned. My heart flutters at the sight of your coat. Green. Across the street, one impatient foot already on the black tar, you wait. You smile at me who had not yet dared to actually wait for you. The desire for you uncoils itself like the sleeping child that stirs and stretches. Freeze-frame. The green hem of your coat brushes against the scaly bottle green of my little park bench. You are here, right in front of me, silent, and unaware of the shy smile in your chestnut eyes. The passers-by, muted by the cold and their own rush towards warmth and home, glide past, silent shadows in tones of grey and brown. The branches glazed by the incoming evening frost bend their icy tips to eavesdrop on the *jeux interdits* we whisper without word or movement.

Part 1

(Désir)

Baie des Anges

Even the sea reflects my unease. Her crinkled skin folds and unfolds itself in frightening coils of deep emerald. With all her might she hits against the dark rocks that stand in between the violence of her assaults and the beach. Each wave shatters itself against the unyielding surface, surrendering its water in an upward release, multiple offerings to the deceptively empty blue sky, multiple gestures of penance.

The wind sweeps the sand with erratic strokes that leave it surprisingly smooth under the million mist-like plumes of sand spray that run and dance a mad dance on its flattened back. Invisible grains of silica whip the legs, graze the skin, search for my eyes, even behind the protective screen of my glasses. They crack between my teeth.

Further ahead, diminutive dunes try to give themselves a shape but the wind, master of their destiny, slashes and whips and blows their efforts away. Forever in a state of perpetual search for our definite mould, I, like them, bow my head as the capricious wrath of the wind-god plays havoc on the beachfront.

I would like to know that I irk him, that maddening wind. Like a child intent on leaving gummy footsteps on the glistening kitchen tiles on which his mother has just rearranged the patterns left by her mop, I, too, take pleasure at the sight of my prints as they trail behind me. Streaks of translucent clouds emerge from behind the Alpes Maritimes range, beautiful, even from afar in its cloak of glistening ermine, shiny snow cover under the frail winter sun.

I breathe in the sea wind. I trap it inside my lungs to purify them. I am airing myself from the inside, all the while knowing it will take more than this force nine Mistral wind, the great tormentor of the Mediterranean Sea, to dislodge the knot of anxiety that has curled itself inside me.

Will I ever hear from you?

Paris, 10 January

Alex,

Last night, *ta première lettre*. It was all alone in my mailbox. I can't keep from answering. But only this once, if you don't wish to get involved in a correspondence.

I felt you pull away, I understand why; I should do the same but I can't. How could you move away, just before you left, from our whirlwind of conflicting emotions?

Your bouquet of tulips has exploded in its own fireworks similar to the one I've experienced during the last ten days.

I hope you won't find me either over the top or too forward, but I'll be honest and say that our incomplete physical contacts have left me totally unsatisfied and my imagination is, well, all over the place. You, you don't write about things like that and yet you leave me in a strange state of sexual limbo. I don't know if I should be ... euphoric or melancholy. The thing is that even my neighbourhood feels different now.

You're ready for a new chunk of life in France, in Nice. Maybe I'm already a ghost in your memory. I imagine you, still walking by my side with those long strides of yours, used as you are to less busy sidewalks and open space, face to the sky. From what you say, too, the people of your town in Australia don't walk their dogs much through downtown streets. I imagine that not being wary of what one might step on would be liberating to anyone's stride. I remember how you looked up at the eighteenth century facades and their slate roofs as they line the avenue to the place I only know now as our parc Monceau.

They're very beautiful, but I had stopped seeing these facades a great many years ago. Had I ever seen them the way you did?

Alex, if you still wish for us to stop writing know that, at the very least, I won't forget any one of our moments. I was ecstatic, energised, electrified during those unexpected ten days. You thought I was adorable; I adored you. Never forget any of this. At least, hold on to it a little longer. Will this letter disappoint you? I've learned yours by heart. I learn you a lot faster than I ever did English, and with so much more pleasure!

As it is, I had heard a few little things about you, as told by some who had known you, in different times, in different places. Sometimes Sophie, my Sophie, would show me a letter she'd just received. When she brought Elisabeth into our little group of friends, quite a few years ago now, it was clear that Eli still held fond memories of you and her in Spain. But of course, she could still give a mean rendition of how you'd dropped her for a younger one. I guess she was young and vulnerable at the time. Nineteen was she? *Si jeune*. Either that or we're getting old. Well, I am getting old. No, I can say that better; I was getting old until I came across you. Now, as I said, I'm energised.

Anyway, during that first evening with you I discovered another Alex, first-hand: an Alex whom I haven't yet been able to absorb at leisure. And might never.

My past, such as it is, my roots and my experiences, have always been my *soutien*, my sustenance, my level-headedness. They gave me inner strength when faced with chaos. So I hope that, as in the months ahead, too, they'll come to my rescue. Anyway, the point is that this incomplete feeling in regard to the short time spent with you, already part of my past, only makes me long for more. I kiss you.

Alex, *je t'embrasse* with infinite tenderness.

N'oublies pas trop tôt.

Adrienne

In a flutter of wings, white with light; stick-red claws guiding their landing, seagulls fly in to pick at the crumbs abandoned on bleached roof tiles of the beach bungalow below. The air vibrates, tormented by their graceful, frenetic wings. Facing the sea of the much photographed and filmed Baie des Anges, in Nice, I now see it already alight with the sparkles that will later scatter upwards towards the night sky. I find you on this, the first page of a very thick notebook, wanting to share this moment of beauty with you, my pen as channeler.

Ever since Sophie, and you, Adrienne, accompanied me to the airport for the last leg of my homecoming journey and my eyes lost sight of you around the bend of that dreadful satellite corridor, you have remained by my side.

Ironically, as the plane inched towards my almost forgotten relatives, already on their way to welcome me, one of the two major reasons for the twenty thousand-kilometre journey, reunion with them no longer filled my heart and mind. The mixture of apprehension and joy that had been with me since I had made up my mind to break from my life in Australia was no longer focused on them, during that one hour flight from Paris to Nice.

I was already full of you, my heart constricted by dread and guilt at the thought of you. You, the lover and partner of my long-time friend, Sophie, a friend with whom, good year, bad year, I had maintained a friendship, though mostly through the peaks and troughs of an enduring, intercontinental correspondence. Yes, you, Adrienne, the love of her life I had read about on numerous occasions during the past ten years! You, still unknown to me until a few days ago.

"Let me introduce you to Adrienne. *Addy, pour les copines!*" With these innocuous little words, Sophie brought you into my life in a way none of us could have foreseen.

She was so happy to finally have us acquainted with each other, to introduce me to the woman who had made her happy and secure for the past decade. She had not changed much; she still carried on in that larrikin way of hers and had not lost any of her strongly accented Parisian intonation. I knew she could still keep her audience of friends spellbound when she sang Piaf. And as Piaf, she was still as thin as the tiny resilient birds that carry the same name. I had been happy to read in her letters that she had finally found a comfortable niche within a trusting relationship, she, to whom life had not often been kind. Not until it had brought the two of you together.

With a twinge of guilt as I hugged her, I remembered that more recently I had stopped reading her letters thoroughly. I was happy enough, by quickly skimming her lines, to know she was well. What I had retained was that she was happy with you, a woman of sound character called Adrienne, a lawyer specialising in international law, and that Sophie, herself, enjoyed a relative harmony within her own professional framework.

I would merely glance at the pictures of the two of you she would send at the end of each of your summer holidays. I had not consciously focused on any of your traits and would have found it impossible to recognise you, had you not been by Sophie's side.

And so we met. You, a Parisian *femme d'affaires*; the cut and style of your clothes gave that away at first glance. Friendly, warm; your eyes gave that away as we shook hands. I had no other thoughts except the wish to sit down and fight off the encroaching jetlag with a tumbler of whisky on the rocks and immerse myself in the syncopated start and stop conversations of friends excited to be reunited and eager to reconnect.

Elisabette, Eli as she now wants to be called, was there, too, with Isabelle, her new lover. In fact, the poor things had had to leave the warmth of their bed and each other at dawn to greet me at the Charles de Gaulle airport en provenance de Tokyo. And Eli had arranged to let me have her little flat all to myself for the length of my stay.

"I spend most of the week nights at Isa's anyway. She's got a movie channel. We just love watching films in bed, all cuddled up. So no big deal," she had written at the time my trip to Paris was still at the planning stages.

Women connecting, sharing memories and anecdotes, cocooned by the wood panels of the little alcove where Sophie had sat us, cocooned by the lace of drifting smoke and the din of Parisians socialising in the brasserie Chez Lipp.

Now that all possible grudges lay buried under the gossamer layer of time, Sophie, Eli and I were exhilarated by the proximity of each other. We were reunited like the survivors of a shipwreck: happy and relieved the count was right, that everyone had survived the passage of years with only minor emotional wounds, either already healed or well on their way.

You all pressed me for more details of events that I had penned, possibly absent-mindedly, in my letters to Sophie. Humdrum day-to-day stuff: a little on school life and its inherent 'modern' problems; usually very little on my private life except the occasional admission to loneliness, on a particularly low day. Sometimes a couple of pages would not have been enough, as I tried to be convincing, or rather was convinced that I had finally found love. So, now, months or years later, through the smoky gauze of Chez Lipp, cobwebs and memories were lifted on request, from the pages of my heart, and revived.

And then: "...to chase the monotonous grey of our little Parisian lives," as you put it, you asked about Australia. So I explained how, some three days earlier, I lay floating on my Lilo, liquefied by the thirty-three-degree post-New Year heat, comfortably living in the Western suburbs of Brisbane. So comfortable, in fact, that one day I had had the sudden urge to break that stifling comfort and had applied for an undetermined leave of absence from work to come back here, back to France. My aim at the time had been simple; I had had a sudden craving to rediscover the little but beautiful country that France is and, at the same time, discover the handful of relatives I had once known, on my father's side. Him included.

And the moment came when the ticket booked on QANTAS months earlier needed only the final good wishes of one last celebration with my good friends. I was toasted, hugged, farewelled and waved at, till only the deserted corridor tugged at my heels. The final boarding call had forced a hasty conclusion to the last minute advice and recommendations friends always seem to have for the one who strays away from the safety of the flock on the wings of a big white bird.

Paris, 18 January

Alex,

Te voilà. Well, here you are ... closer to me when I place an empty white sheet of paper in front of me and superimpose on it an image of you. A one-way conversation is better than nothing. A good friend of mine used to say: little pants fit little behinds. I have my own understanding of that line and yes, it fits the occasion.

Yesterday, your letter was waiting for me, amongst many in my mailbox. I spotted your handwriting as I flipped through the bundle. The truth is I was looking for it. I had been waiting for it, you see. Though I desperately wanted to tear it open while waiting for the lift, I couldn't. Sophie was right next to me. She had picked me up from work and was going to spend the night, as she normally does two or three times a week. Many years ago, you see, we agreed that neither one of us really felt absolutely compelled to a life under the same roof... with anyone. By then, I already had my apartment and she had hers. I loved mine and she loved hers and so we agreed that there was no need to sell or rent off either one of them. There was no real call for us to always be thrown together, all the time and forever. But we do spend at least half of the weeknights together, in one apartment or the other. And of course every minute of the weekends.

I always love having her pad around in my flat, but last night I resented her presence. That scared me. That had never happened before. The urge to tear that envelope open scared me. It was not reasonable. I didn't want to sneak it into the bathroom. I didn't want to read it in a hurry. My distress at knowing I wouldn't be able to read it, without betraying it, or you, or me, scared me too.

Imagine, if you can, the inexplicable exasperation in which I slapped our breakfast together the next morning. It was only once inside the over-crowded metro compartment that I reached inside my coat pocket. The inside one. Ah yes, you did like my green coat. How appropriate then, to have made it, as opposed to any of my other coats or jackets, the guardian of our secret.

Careful not to poke the old woman jammed against my arm, I tore the envelope with my teeth as discreetly as possible, one hand holding on to the overhead strap while the other extricated your folded letter, my heart lurching in rhythm with the carriage.

Mon dieu, the state I'm in today! Two grey eyes set on the rim of Sophie's large breakfast cup; she asked if you had remembered to leave us your father's phone number in Nice. I nodded that you had, trying hard to focus on the tiny trails of butter that were forming on either side of the blade, as I ran the knife across a piece of toasted baguette. When I did look up, I sensed a painful dawning behind her lowered eyelids. You had forgotten to give it to her, your friend, because your conscious or unconscious priority was that I should have it: I, who quite uncharacteristically, I'm sure she remembers the moment, had blurted out how beautiful you looked in her purple jacket; I, who by two a.m. the following morning, the time of her last phone call to my flat, had not yet returned from my dinner with you. That was on the night she had trusted me to entertain you while she was busy. That was the night that had turned into that 'horrible dawn'. Dawning desire already frustrated. Never able to be replayed. Never able to be played out better.

Alex, I'll never be able to hurt her. She notices my changes in mood though she doesn't prod me for information. Somehow, her silence changes into a burden, you know, *un poids*, what might otherwise only be an electrifying infatuation with someone that I simply can't have. You.

Sophie doesn't say anything anymore but after your plane had left, she joked, 'Is it because we've just seen our little Australian friend to her plane that you look that way?'

I should've asked, 'And what way is that?' I didn't because I knew. I should've managed a real smile. I should've peeled my eyes away from the rear bumper on the black Audi that seemed to be pulling us forward as we crawled back towards Paris, caught as we were in yet another traffic jam on the *Périphérique*. All I felt able to do was slide a side-glance in her direction and mumble something like maybe it was. But very quickly I added, 'It was fun having her here. We all enjoyed the change in routine. Now we'll get back to our normal work-a-day schedule, and it might seem a little tight ... for a while. A little like when we come back from holidays.' It's then that maybe I made another mistake. Though I smiled at her it was one of my everything-will-be-all-right smiles. What did I need to reassure her about?

You know her story, Alex, in the broad lines; you know I'm all she has. She's always been a loner since childhood, a lonely child with a great big burden to drag everywhere. As an adult she's never been able to forgive her mother for not having protected her at the time. The old woman died a couple of years ago and still Sophie could not bring herself to go to the funeral. And of course her brother would have been there too, though well into his sixties by then.

She cried but not when she heard the news. She only cried on the day of the funeral. She didn't go to work on that day. She didn't want me to stay with her either.

Tu vois, Alex, I'll never be able to tell her anything at all about us. What worries me the most is the need for total secrecy, the impossibility of being transparent. The fear that maybe, one day, I might betray the trust she's invested in me, that's really what my panic is about. Because I know that it's only with me, finally that she's learnt to trust. What scares me, too, is knowing that you come and you go. You're a footloose spirit. And that I'd live each day in constant fear of the first look of indifference I'd see in your eyes, one day. But that's another story.

Time, more time is all we needed but couldn't have. *Le temps, normalement, il y en a de trop*, but in our case we just didn't have enough of it. How can we test the difference between a new love and an *attirance*, an infatuation I think it's called, if all we can do is write secretly about it? The only thing I know for sure is that I'd never be able to build another relationship over Sophie's pain and sorrow. That's the only certainty I have to hold on to at the moment.

I have your letter right here, on my desk. I've memorised every word. I try to remember your tone, too, from what I remember of your voice, of your eyes, of your smile.

I kiss you *avec une tendresse infinie*.

Adrienne

The thick ledger-like notebook is cool under the palm of my hand, inseparable companion of the last few days. Waking hours, sleepwalking nights filled and challenged only by thoughts of you, by the ghost of our prematurely amputated love. You, Adrienne, vulnerable and raw on the eve of my departure as some moral scruple plummeted behind the frail chestnut veil of your eyes. You, from whom I have had to wean myself the second I found the other you, the 'you' I had not, until then, seen, not yet sensed. The 'you' not yet unveiled. And then, only seventy-two hours remained.

Seventy-two hours in which to try to deal with our awesome discovery; to let the tenderness of your face invade my heart, to allow the burst of euphoria to course through my belly. Squash it! Flatten it under its weight of guilt and lust! But how? Not a minute on our own to acknowledge and contain the wave of desire that washed over us with the violence of a flash-flood as it courses on a parched desert bed. Silent sparks of sexual arousal, painful in their intensity, crackled as my eyes locked with yours. And already then, at the second of our reckoning, our hearts began to shrink with guilty apprehension, strong in the knowledge of what could not be.

Back at Le Chicago bar in Paris. It had become our meeting place around 7.30 p.m., giving each of you time to leave work and fight your respective traffic jams. That allowed me to go back to Eli's little flat above Avenue de Turennes after I had scoured the streets of Paris for most of the day and enjoy a shower and a read before setting out for our evenings together.

But earlier on that particular day, a Sunday, the four of you had taken me on a day trip to Provins some eighty kilometres away, on the outskirts of the capital. Sophie had parked the car on a little esplanade and we were getting ready to begin our stroll. I remember fumbling with the buttons of the padded jacket she had lent me in anticipation of a crisper winter morning, once away from Paris. I remember its colour well: a deep shade of royal purple. My gloved fingers had become furry and clumsy with the buttons. Intent on my task as any pre-schooler learning to tie shoelaces, I heard your voice.

'Tu es belle dans cette couleur. That colour really suits you!'

I turned around, surprised to realise the compliment had been addressed to me. I smiled at you, quickly, shyly. Instinctively I knew that I could not maintain eye contact or should not linger by the car. Instead, on my own, I began the gentle climb to the heart of the village, while the four of you were still preparing to make the ascent.

I have rewound my memory to the only private dinner conversation we have ever had, back to the moment when you had explained, leaning toward me, your small cashmere clad breasts almost brushing the foamy whiteness of your dessert, "You know, Alex, when I saw you in Provins, looking so healthy, still golden from the Australian sun with that deep purple of the jacket as a backdrop, I felt my legs go under. How can I say? I lost my breath, just like that. Totally unexpected. Never saw it coming. And when you turned to face the old trail, I simply had to ask though to no one in particular, *'Où elle va, comme ça, in such a hurry?'*"

I had heard your question so I replied, without turning back to you, that I was getting a headstart, that I was going to breathe in the musky smell of the old stones. And off I strode, leaving you below with Sophie, Eli and Isa.

And now you added with a little girl lost expression, 'I just stood there, alone and *désorientée.*' You looked down, embarrassed by this impromptu confession. Yet you added a detail that constricted my throat: 'Then I realised Sophie was looking at me, vaguely puzzled, an odd kind of smile in her eyes. Now, I know I should've paid more attention to that smile of hers. *J'aurais dû faire plus attention.*'

Adrienne, I did not tell you then, or did I, that a short while later Eli had caught up with me?

'Well, well, my friend. I see you haven't lost your touch, she said, zipping her jacket all the way up to her pale chin. I looked at her quizzically. 'You've obviously made quite an impression down there.'

'What d' you mean?'

'Oh, c' mon! Don't tell me you haven't noticed. On Addy, of course!' She moved closer to me as if to peer into my eyes while mimicking you, *'Tu es belle dans cette couleur.* You heard her.

This colour suits you beautifully. That's what she said down there.' She skipped ahead, then turned around, stopping dead in her tracks. 'I've never heard Addy comment on what any of us might have been wearing. Ever.' Then, half-joking, half-serious, she had poked me in the middle of the chest, in warning. 'Alex, this one's not for you. Remember, she's Sophie's partner. They love each other. And they've been at it for a long time.'

'I know. It's lovely to see. But why are you being silly. I know, you're just jealous ...' I had replied jokingly, though amazed she could perceive something I had only just realised myself. Unsure if I needed to be wary of her perceptiveness I simply added, '... because purple is one colour that does nothing for your pale, English rose complexion and you know it. Purple and yellow.' Humour had often rescued me from tight corners. Eli grinned back at me. Without the confirmation she had sought, she shrugged a kind of truce and stopped to admire the tiny chapel, in silence, while waiting for the three of you to catch up with us.

Le Chicago Bar was in full swing: the air around us moved in smoky patterns but it was another well-chosen venue.

"What a day!" I said to Eli, as I sat back on the well-worn leather sofa.

"Damn right!" she smiled. "Must say, I've surprised myself during these last few days. Now, I know that when I lose my ranking at squash I can always reinvent myself and become a tour guide specialising in medieval villages for Australian tourists!" Eli playfully punched me in the arm.

"That's a thought. In the meantime, remind me not to forget your tip. Actually," I added as I got up, "the first round is on this 'Australian' visitor. Orders everyone. We'll get a head-start on Sophie."

When I came back from the bar, I came in on the tail-end of a conversation about Sophie.

"Well, not that long to go now that she's decided to retire. Next year, right? Good on her, really," Isa was talking to Eli. "Who wants to go on working, forever and ever, for a guy like that who needs constant propping up, huh?" We all turned to you for a reaction to the fact that Sophie had had to rush home, with only enough time for a quick shower and a change of clothes. But you remained silent, staring into the burgundy depth of your glass.

Earlier that afternoon, when the car phone had beeped on the way back from Provins, you all let out a synchronised groan and Sophie had looked at you with a silent warning to remain quiet. She picked up the receiver with one hand, keeping the other supple on the steering wheel.

I guessed you all knew who this obviously unwelcome caller might be. Eli moved her head in the direction of the phone, making her green eyes wider and round for emphasis, while her lips exaggerated the contour of her whispered words. 'It's him again ... her boss!' I looked blank and she added, 'He always does that. Calling Sophie at home, after hours, on weekends. It's like he can't decide anything without her.' Eyebrows cocked in surprise, I nodded that I had understood the gist of what she had said and Isa joined in *sotto voce*.

'According to Sophie ... he's bored with his home life so ... he fancies himself as a workaholic. But the thing is he's not competent enough ... to make any real decisions on his own. He's a *foutu* director, you know, a regional director. I mean ... really!' She shook her head in mock disbelief. Strands of blond hair fanned and twisted on either side of her face, 'So, when something needs doing but he can't handle it ... because he doesn't know how, he calls Sophie to the rescue. And she bails him out ... every time. Because she's nice.'

'That and the fact she feels sorry for him.' At this point, you had turned towards me where I sat squashed in the back seat, and added in a tone of low exasperation, 'It's been going on like that for the past five years. He doesn't seem to have learnt much during all that time, though.' You looked pointedly at her profile but, though I think her eyes had crinkled in what might have been a smile, if seen front on, she had remained intent on her conversation, and focused on the curves and bends of the black and white ribbons of the road ahead.

So, you had come on your own to Le Chicago Bar and Sophie, as agreed, would meet us at Le Prince Noir restaurant, a little later. You and I would later pinpoint this as both a fated and a fatal absence on her part.

In Provins we had inhaled the musty smell of mist rising over ancient moss-stained stones. We had stood still as the old bell tower called vespers, for miles around, as it had over the centuries. We had followed the uneven, steep cobbled streets, wide enough only for donkey and cart. We had strolled on the restored battlements of the fortified village, a storybook village forgotten by the passing of time, that I had dreamed about while basking under the lavender shade of a jacaranda tree, back in Australia.

The Chicago waiter, decked out in a suit that could have been Al Capone's favourite, brought my round of drinks to the table and over the din that filled the bar on this Sunday night, we resumed our friendly banter.

Eli stretched out her long legs. "I can't tell, anymore, if they feel taut or jelly-like. All I know is that they're lead-heavy from so much walking." She rubbed a calf muscle and grinned, "I won't have any problems falling asleep tonight." Then, she added screwing up her eyebrows, "You'd think that considering the numbers of squash games I put in every week, I'd be immune to leg tiredness!"

"It must have been the steep walk up to the rampart that did it, you know, when you caught up with me?" I could not resist another little jab.

"It's a different type of exercise, you know," I added, tousling her shiny, dark curls. She snuggled a little closer to me, all aggression of earlier seemingly evaporated, as I added, one arm folded around her shoulders, "That's all very well, but I know you will all be happy to return to your normal routine in a couple of days." I was acknowledging that none of you had had more than a couple of waking hours to yourselves since my arrival a week earlier. You had taken turns suggesting interesting and varied activities to keep me entertained after your work hours.

Leaving me to my own initiative during the day, the four of you had planned to accompany me on evening and sightseeing activities for each night I would spend in Paris. And while I lazed around each morning, before tackling the Louvre, or the Musée Rodin in search of the Danae the master had carved in the shape of Camille Claudel, the four of you got ready for work, stale smoke still trapped under your eyelids.

And so, later on this particular night we had left the smoky *ambiance* of Le Chicago and had made our way to the restaurant where Sophie was due to catch up with us. And so we were seated at yet another table, tucked away in a side room of Le Prince Noir.

"In about seventy-two hours, I'll already be back on the plane to Nice, on my way towards ... I'm not sure what."

A little sigh had escaped from my lips and for some reason I looked in your direction. I could have made eye contact with Isa or with Eli who were seated opposite me, across the white expanse of cloth, but no, I turned slightly to the left as I made myself more comfortable on the hard Bentwood seat. And I saw you! I sensed, more than saw, a twinge of pain cross your face and instinctively I knew that that look was somehow related to my imminent departure for Nice. And through the unfortunate phenomenon of osmosis I met you right there, on the edge of the beckoning void that swirled upward as it wrapped itself around our ankles, reaching for our bellies to better pull us into its clutches.

Momentarily disoriented, I was brought back to the conversation by the peripheral awareness of Eli. She looked away as she felt me about to pull away from you. I glanced back at you; your eyes trapped mine and held them tightly, for the space of a nano-second which stretched into infinity. If we had effectively arrested time, Eli, not affected by our time warp had caught up with us. Somehow, I had become aware of her silent encroachment and wrenched my eyes away from yours. In a mad attempt to protect you, I reached for my glass and tapped its rim against hers.

"To us and to yet another great day! *A nous et à Sophie! To us.*"

Sophie did join us shortly afterwards. She made her way around the table giving each one of us a hearty *bise* on one cheek before settling on the chair left vacant for her between Isa and you. I remember thinking then that the cold imprint left on her cheek by the winter wind blowing outside felt as cold against my lips as the knot of ice suddenly lodged under my solar plexus.

The only other thing I remember of that evening are my desperate efforts at avoiding Eli's prodding looks, as she peered at me through her thick eyelashes, every time she lowered her head. I sensed she was trying to lock me in a silent confirmation that she had, indeed, interpreted

correctly the essence of what she had caught in mid-air, just then, and earlier, with the purple jacket incident.

But the conversation resumed around the table. Isa told us about an article she had recently read in *Le Monde* newspaper about the rising number of rapes of young boys and how our Western laws and our societal attitude were both antiquated and blind in regards to these occurrences.

"Apparently," she said, loosely paraphrasing the article, "It's not just the well-being of men in jails and of young men living on the edge that is at stake here. What seems to be the latest concern for social welfare groups, here in Europe and in the States, is the rising incidence of boy rape. It seems that more and more little ones are raped either by a parent, by a trusted other for paedophilic sex, even by their male siblings. Boys from five to fifteen seem to have become a new 'at risk' group in regards to rape."

"Welcome to what's been a female reality for –"

"What's new, really?" said Eli cutting in on Sophie. "The world's been turning a blind eye to the on-going rape of women over the centuries," she added, looking sideways at me.

"I assumed that it's because rape, like menstruation, like birth, are undervalued or devalued like most other women-related issues."

"Okay! So, okay, the good news for females is that maybe, just maybe, now that the issue of little boy rape has hit the headlines our lawmakers and our hospital staff and our neighbours might start paying attention." You spoke looking carefully at Sophie first and then at Eli across the table from you.

"A new set of victims but the same old story," I replied, intent on the embossed pattern of the tablecloth. "You know, it's never really been much of a 'Stranger Danger' thing. That's the 'bumper sticker' leitmotif used in the Australia media," I explained. "It's probably the universal Anglo expression used to warn children away from strangers who might hurt them. I am sure you have the equivalent here. Like warning kids against getting in a car or being led away by someone they don't know, even if that person tells them, 'your mummy sent me' and so on."

"*Ah, c'est facile!*" Sophie snapped with the classic Gallic throw of hands. "Don't look too close to home; you might not like what's there! 'Beware the Males you Trust,' is what the bumper sticker should be about. They, the trusted males, they're still the aggressors of girls. Of women."

I saw the way you looked at her but she had already turned to Isa who was pursuing her point.

"Quite true. Any kind of violence. Not just physical," Isa added, "If it weren't for them..." suggesting that the world would be a better place if men, on the whole, had evolved differently. "Maybe that could work, too, as bumper sticker philosophy now that it's no longer cool to wish they should all be sent to the moon."

"Yeah, it's a sad world all right but all the same, I don't think these incidents involving either boys or young men need to be called rape."

Silence, then a pause. You all looked at me but it was you who eventually asked, "Well, what should they be called then?"

"Hey, call me territorial," I replied as light-heartedly as I could, "but I think the term 'rape' should be ... like saved for what it's always been referring to: the forced penetration of a female by a male."

"What does it matter who endures the 'forced penetration' as you say? A victim's a victim," Sophie said categorically, following the traditional line of thinking.

"Absolutely. I am not trying to belittle what is happening to boys or innocent men who have never dished out violence to anyone. But as far as I can see these sexual aggressions already have a name. Predating the writing of the Bible. These are called acts of sodomy. They can also be called anal rape. But not just rape."

"What you mean is that rape is a woman's ... *prerogative*." You smiled on the last word. Did you actually see my point or were you simply diplomatically playful?

"Something like that."

"*Mais enfin*, a rape is a rape, *non*? And it doesn't matter what it's done with either. A bottle, a broom or a finger ... anywhere." Sophie was not disposed to differentiate between one type of sexual violation and another. Yes, both were against the will of the penetree.

"Is it a matter of anatomy, then?" Isa suggested as she filled up our five glasses, one by one.

"For me, yes. Absolutely. That article you read, Isa, is about what is happening to males, younger and older, and it clearly has to do with the forced penetration of someone's anal ... anal ... duct. *L'anus*," I explained, gently trying to modalise and remain neutrally distant from the topic. "While rape is the forced penetration of someone's vaginal duct. *Le vagin*. Men, be they little or bigger or older, simply do not have 'vaginal ducts' or uteruses for anyone to penetrate."

"Okay, maybe. It's a matter of semantics," I threw, in conciliatory.

"Semantics and anatomy," I heard you confirm softly. I looked up as you accepted the basket of bread Sophie was passing you.

"But what does *viol* or rape really mean, etymologically speaking?" Eli asked us.

"Does it truly only refer to a vaginal penetration?" No one knew for sure. But we all thought we should look that up.

"Well, yeah, sure but besides that, I mean who knows what they call it in Russian or in Bambara? My point is, why should women, now, have to share this word with male victims, whatever word has been used for centuries and across the world to refer to that very specific victimisation of the female kind?"

"*C'est vrai. Depuis les hommes des cavernes ...* since cavemen clubbed women on the head to drag them back to their cave," Isa looked at you as she spoke, "since the billion maidens raped as war bounty from antiquity to now, even without mentioning what goes on—"

"In our civilised streets—"

"And in their homes and yeah, the act of rape has always been perpetrated by dominant males and inflicted on 'weaker' females."

"Or weakened females," I added dryly. "But anyway, what's wrong with sodomy as an alternative noun?"

My thoughts lingered around the issue well after we had moved on to other topics, caught on the thorn of rape as surely as by a line of barbed wire. I couldn't just move on as the rest of you did. Not with my own understanding of what the word 'rape' meant to me, perhaps even to most female rape victims, we who, despite our separate histories, were united by the common bond of survival.

Later that night, you and Sophie dropped me back to Eli's flat. I was thankful she was sleeping over at Isa's, glad to be alone with my thoughts. I stayed up by the window but not to rest my head against the cold pane as I had done the night before. Not to replay your smile, the chestnut warmth of your eyes. I did not try to imagine you asleep, Sophie's head on your shoulder. I did not imagine you at all. Instead I listened to the sounds of Paris at night and I tumbled back in time through a dim tunnel of swirling dark violence.

To be continued on December 18th ...