

"Your Honour, I would like to bring out exhibit 8, if it pleases the Court." The defence lawyer opened a plastic bag and dipped a pointer inside it. As he turned to face the jury I felt my eyes widen. A pair of blue and white striped, skimpy nickers were dangling from the tip of his pointer.

"Are these the panties you wore on the night of your date with the defendant?"

"It wasn't a date ... I'd never—"

"I'll ask you once again to limit your responses to answering the questions asked. Are these the panties you wore on the night in question?"

"Yes."

"You did say 'Yes', didn't you?"

"Yes, I said yes."

"Then, would you be kind enough to explain to the Court, in your own words of course, how it is that these very thin and pretty panties, considering the amount of resistance you claim you exerted to keep the defendant from making lov—"

"Your Honour! Objection! Really!"

"Sustained. Mr Bartley I must warn you against repeating this tactic."

"Considering the struggle you claim to have put up that night, please explain how it comes to be that these very thin, almost transparent, pair of panties are neither torn nor ripped."

I didn't know what to reply to this question. But it didn't matter. It had only been a rhetorical one. He had never intended for me to answer it. He had already moved away from me.

Though his back was turned I recognised the tone of his voice for what it was. He was mocking me, ridiculing me, and he was trying to manipulate the members of the jury towards the conclusion he had orchestrated for their benefit – that my stupidity defied logic.

A red flush of humiliation rose to my neck. I cringed, as far back as the unyielding high back of the witness chair would allow. As the heatwave spread I stared blindly above the blur of heads that packed the courtroom. I trained my eyes on the round-faced clock affixed to the back wall. 5.32 p.m.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, these panties that you see right here, these panties the witness testified are hers, these panties found at the foot of the defendant's bed show no rips, no tears. Not one single sign of violation."

He then turned back to me, still dangling my underwear from the tip of his pointer, close to the microphone, close to my face. A limp flag of my defeat.

"You did state you had fought violently to protect you virginity. You did, didn't you? And yet—"

"Objection!" My heart sank further as I watched Mr Smith shake his head slowly then remove his glasses.

"Objection sustained!"

Wearily the Assistant DA rubbed his eyes. Then, without looking up, he pulled a white handkerchief out of his breast pocket and slowly, very slowly, wiped each lens.

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Self-preservation overrides pain. It did help me override my fear. I was alive. I had survived! Once spent, Josh had ordered me to strip naked.

'Get on that bed and sleep,' he had ordered. I heard the sounds he made scratching his body. And he had flopped against me, one arm across my waist in a parody of male protection of the weaker sex. The stench of him. The raw pain between my legs. The mad tattoo of my heart. The pain in my shoulder. Stillness in the room. Seconds stretched into minutes. And then came the sound of my reprieve. The rumbling sound of snores. *The bastard's asleep*, I spat silently into the heavy darkness of the room. *My God, thank you!* A slow motion escape from under his arm, away from his hot, clammy body. Only a few millimetres at a time. *Please, God, don't let him wake up now.* Movements hampered by the tinkle of tiny Arab coins threaded as an ankle bracelet. *Can't remove it without slicing through the leather thong.* Movements hampered by the loud groans of the mattress as I slid my weight across its width, one slow centimetre at a time. Movements timed with the rattles of the air conditioner. *He must not wake.* Minutes into hours. *If he wakes up, I won't survive the next assault.* The image of the Bowie hunting knife that I had

seen glinting on the Formica counter kept me inching away, slowly, gently, while my heart beat madly inside my chest. *Grope around for clothes. Shoes! Daylight's breaking.*

And I realised daylight was indeed breaking dully. It was breaking on the other side of a blanket. A blanket nailed over the length of the window. It is then I understood the total darkness that had hampered and ultimately defeated me in my struggle, the pitch-black darkness that had me fighting blind.

The door. I could see it in the dingy grey light that now permeated the room. Softly, slowly. *Please, please don't squeak.* The hallway. Clothes under one arm. *A phone.* The phone on the other side of the kitchen. The hunting knife glints dully at me. *Take it! Leave it. Don't look at it. The phone. Ann. Oh Ann, please! Find me.* The dial released an unexpected, eardrum-shattering, grinding roar. *Oh, my god! What if – Has he heard it? No, no, he's asleep. Call Ann.* Another grinding rumbling sound. Louder than the first. And another. *No. Can't dial the whole number. Too loud. Can't risk it.* He'll be awake by now, surely. *Get out! Now! Where's the front door?* Wild pounding in my heart. *The lock. Can't undo the fucking lock.* Numb fingertips. Seconds into minutes. *He's got to have heard. All that noise! He's going to come looking. He'll find me. He'll grab me. He'll grab me again. I hurt. I ache. I can't think.*

Survival instinct overtook the onset of hysteria. It made its priority over pain, over fear, over irrational panic. *Hold on to the clothes. The window! Closed. Open it. How? Jammed. Slide it. Slide it!* The fracas released from the aluminium frame was thunderous. Two storeys up. No time left. *Jump! No. I can't. He's coming. Stay alive! Live through this! Jump!*

And I had jumped. I had landed, heavily, clumsily, naked in some kind of garden bed. The noise from the window. *He must be awake now. He's after me. Run! My clothes. Got to get dressed. Not here, too close. Run some more. Hide!* And so I had zigzagged through the sleepy suburb, crouching behind parked cars. Listening for his footsteps. Naked. A bundle of clothes under one arm. Dogs barked as I passed their gate. My heart pounded against my ribs, my pulse raced at my temple. *Ann!*

Eventually, I had risked stopping long enough to throw on the clothes I had with me. I had mistakenly taken his jeans, and my top, but only one of the shoes was mine. No time to lace it. One hand holding up at the waist, over my naked sex, the 501's of the man who had just raped me. I ran and I ran ahead, bare feet, lost.

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Mr Bartley was coming to the end of the final rebuttal for the Defence. "In my right hand I hold a pen, while in my left, I hold the pen's cap. Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, I ask you: how can this pen find its place inside this cap? How can this pen penetrate this cap, if my left hand keeps moving, if the cap keeps on moving?"

There would not be any penalty-setting phase. The fourteen women waiting to confirm Joshua D. Bell of 1604 Valleyridge Drive as a repeat rapist had already been dismissed by the Prosecution.

And Robert O. Smith for the Prosecution concluded his own final rebuttal after the jury had listened to Bartley's remarks for over an hour. "Ladies and Gentlemen, you've seen why so few rape cases are ever tried in our state. In our country," he stormed at the jury. "You've seen, you've heard the reason why this courtroom has been packed for all of this week with lawyers, law students and journalists. They are here because they do not get to observe rape case proceedings. They do not get to observe rape cases because women, our women, our wives, and our daughters, are afraid to press charges. They do not press charges because, as you have seen, the entire judicial process is cruel and humiliating for the victims. Rape, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, is the only crime in our land where the victim has to prove her innocence." Mr Smith stopped to slide the glasses off his nose. Maybe, too, to give time for his words to penetrate the weary minds of the twelve people he had been addressing. "As you move off to deliberate I urge you, not only for young Alexandra who has been so courageous from the moment her rape began to the last word of her testimony, I urge you to be courageous

yourselves. I urge you to set an example. Set a precedent you can be proud of. A precedent the state of Texas can be proud of."

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There you go, Adrienne. It's all out now. And I have been able to bring back just enough of the fear, of the pain, of my helplessness and the humiliation I experienced, particularly in the courtroom, to exorcise some of the residue of this murky, dark and dank memory. Maybe this final recall made for you can act as an *exutoire*, the deliberate act of freeing one's mind of an emotional fog of guilt, fear and pain that occasionally threatens one's ultimate sense of being.

But hold on, there's a little more you need to know. One day, years later, in Brisbane, Australia, I received a letter from Ann with whom I had maintained an intermittent correspondence. In the meantime she had married an older man who owned a chain of furniture stores scattered around the state of Texas, but she had eventually divorced him after discovering one too many infidelities.

I was always a little disturbed by Ann's letters for they brought out in me a desire to feel superior about her heterosexual misfortunes yet, at the same time, a desire to shield her from more hurt. I began reading with some curiosity.

*Austin 6.28*

*Dear Aly,*

*There's something in this envelope that'll probably make you want to yeehaa with joy. Well, maybe not joy as such but with relief, at the very least. See if you find it. Won't say anymore. On the topic of my hysterectomy, no need to fret. All done, all gone. No time to think about it. No need to even tell you about it. Cervical cancer. Nothing anyone could have done about it, except of course get rid of the damn thing. Done! I wasn't fixin' on having any kids anyway. So now I have the perfect excuse no to. Look at it this way: I'm very sexually active if you know what I mean. Must be all this red deer and bobcat meat that my father still tries to feed me when I visit.*

*Remember when we used to go hunting with him? And how we had to get going before dawn and how you hated that pre-dawn part? That and the skinnin' afterwards! Well, anyway, the good thing is, I don't ever have to worry about taking the pill any more or about a guy being careless with his condoms. Mind you, now that I think of it, neither do you.*

*Anyway, I've been out of hospital for three weeks now. I'm resting at my parents'. I still have the same bedroom, though dad has built an extension. I still have the same stuffed toys in there, you know? Never bothered redecorating. It's my childhood room, same décor as back then. Same as when I went away to college. Just keeping it that way. The only difference is that it's in this room that I keep all the pictures I've ever had of you.*

*My parents really loved you, you know that. My mother still asks after you. And dad still calls you his 'lil' French gal'. Anyway I'll be back at work by the end of the month. By the way, Sgt. Sam Dean sends his regards. Little one, you take care now.*

*Love and lots of hugs,*

*Ann*

Sergeant Sam Dean? Sergeant *Dean*? My gosh! That was truly a blast from the past. He was the arresting officer to whom I had had to tell my tale back then. The same man who had taken a personal interest in my well-being during the trial because I had reminded him of his daughter. Okay, where was that thing Ann had enclosed? I shook the envelope. A tiny square of paper fluttered to the floor. As I bent down to pick it up I recognised a newspaper clipping. A very small one. An advert for something or other? I read it silently the first time, then spoke the words out loud as I read it a second time. I needed for my ears to corroborate what my eyes had already understood the first time around but could not believe.

Adrienne, it was a little News in Brief article, *un fais divers*, as you would say. It simply said that a Joshua D. Bell, of 1604 Valleyridge Drive, had been found slumped in the doorway of his

domicile. Dead, from an overdose of heroin! Men's justice had let me down. Be that as it may. However, Poetic Justice was alive and well, riding fearlessly on her white stallion!

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Paris, 27 February

Alex,

I know I won't get any letters you might have sent until Monday, as I'll be spending the next three days at Sophie's. I can't even begin to explain how terrible I feel at the thought of this imposed wait but it's something like panic. There I go again, carrying on like a silly schoolgirl in love. Am I into my own remake of *Claudine à l'École*? Colette would turn over in her grave if she knew. The truth, though, is that while, age-wise, I should be well past such silly nonsense, I still find ways to re-live, daily, the heady moments spent with you.

I have to make do with your absence, and I give in to panic attacks. I have to be patient, though I'm torn apart. I'm as totally helpless as any schoolgirl in love with an impossible love. What makes it worse is that I don't feel there is anyone to blame. Who to punish then, as I look for an exit?

And on the topic of love, I'm now dreading the dinner Sophie's planned with Eli and Isa this Saturday night. She's invited them, most likely to socialise with them the way we used to do before ... and probably to spare us another weekend like the last.

No matter what we did, I felt totally disconnected. Not even Besson's latest movie, one I had missed seeing the first time it came out, gave me an escape, if only for a couple of hours.

Back at home, I felt like a ghost gliding past a shadow every time I brushed past Sophie. Now, I hate the thought of that dinner party. I'm afraid of what they, but mostly Eli, might let slip, or insinuate, in front of Sophie, in regards to your visit. *Plus précisément*, I'm afraid she might slide in a couple of her astute observations, as she did with you in Provins, and try her luck at getting me to confirm what I'm sure she's already guessed. You know how our gentle, caring Eli's been known to undergo a personality change come midnight and a fifth glass of wine? Anything is possible.

On a totally different note: much of the letter you wrote while on your solitary walk through the mountainous hinterlands was sheer poetry. I'm afraid my usual bland expression needs something more than a lawyer's jargon to transform it into memorable love-letters.

And then, in another thick envelope, written another day and in a totally different style, I found the last instalment of your ordeal. I don't think you should underestimate the power you pack behind that realistic writing style. I'll probably say more about that later. I've read this one again and again, like each of the previous ones you've already sent. I read it on the little bench in the parc Monceau where, as you know, I often walk and sit when I need to take a break from the office. Or lately, when I need to be with you, if only for a few moments.

I tried to reach you earlier this evening, as I left le Palais de Justice, hoping to hear your voice, right there, as if waiting for me, as if hearing my voice was important to you, too. So I called but D-ring! D-ring! D-ring! No one answered, no one was home.

I rang to find out how your lunch with Tashinka had gone and about everything else that you might have done, dreamt or felt since our phone call last night. I'm really glad you've decided to let her know you were in Nice. I'm glad, too, she made the time to drive down. I'm glad because a little blast from the past, one of that kind, is usually a pleasant experience and I'm glad because, finally, something 'live' is happening in your life down there. I mean 'live' as in right there in the flesh, as opposed to 'in your thoughts'. So, anyway, I hope you'll let me know how it all goes.

Here's something to make you smile: from what you've indicated about your father, I think I already kind of like him. He seems to be into good wines and good humour. You find him fastidiously meticulous and not very spontaneous in the way he relates to the world, but for some of us that can be a plus. Well, maybe not his military precision for everything.

Do, please, write more about your past. How was it, initially, with your mother, Mayanne, when she took you away from your grandparents to live with her? You were already seven years old, you said. That must've had a great impact on the little girl that you were.

Tell me about that little girl. Like everyone who's ever been in love, there's so much I want to know about the focus of all my thoughts, about you. Maybe your grand-mere could give you a picture of you when you were a little girl. Maybe she would enjoy looking through a photo album with you, if it hasn't been done already. Even if she doesn't remember the 'when and the where'.

You see, if you don't allow me a picture of you as you are now, maybe I could still have one of little Alex? Her face would only be an *ébauche* of yours as it is now, a sketch of sorts, but it would be lovely. I imagine a picture of little Alex's dark-green, brooding eyes under a thick fringe, a stubborn pout on her lips, and a defiant tilt of the chin. I imagine your *grand-mère* would have left your hair long but cut in a straight line across the forehead, low above the eyebrows as was the fashion for little girls de *bonne famille* in those days.

I could tuck that picture away, somewhere in my office. As it is, I can only read from and about you. While I read, though, you're here with me. I actually see you, and I ache to touch you. But back to your father.

From your description of his early weekend wake-up calls, I gather he rises briskly and happily. But above all he has a wonderful daughter, exotic and delightful, visibly not big on tidying clothes (at least not during a whirlwind stay at Eli's – yes, I did have time to observe that much, that dreadful dawn), but one who writes things that make me capsize. I wish you were here, snuggled against me.

My hands need you. They daydream of caressing the length of your tawny body. This longing is such that it's too painful to indulge in, so I'd better stop here.

Don't forget to tell me about your lunch with that sexy mother of two who had turned your head, way back when. I hope it went well and as smoothly as you had anticipated.  
*Dors bien, mon amour.* Sleep well.

Adrienne

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Paris, le 15 Mars

Alex,

The hunger for you and the compulsive urge to write still wins out in the end. Every time it wins I lose, though I've tried to keep the promise you managed to wring out of me. Let's say that I've honoured that promise for as long as I possibly could.

I've tried to push you out of my system, out of my mind, out of my heart as you had ordered me to do. I tore up the many letters I so desperately wanted you to read. I dialled your number many a time, but found the will to hang up quickly, before the first ring, knowing that if you happened to pick up the phone, I would then lack courage to hang up.

Today, now, seated on our little green park bench, I surrender.

You do remember the parc Monceau, the only place where we were able to steal a moment away from the rest of the world? You loved the little ducks frolicking in the icy water of the pond, and on our bench, the bench where we sat, shoulder pressed against shoulder, thigh against thigh, in spite of the thickness of our winter coats, you enveloped me in your own warmth. I remember every detail of that crystallised moment. It was the day before you left, the day after the most frustrating night of my entire life; the night I spent fighting off every impulse, every cell in my body that demanded we make love.

Today, the air smells of spring. Today, as you're not by my side, it's with the tiny *piafs* picking the gravel by the bench that I share a waffle topped with *sucre glacé*. The fine sugar sticks to my fingers, as always I'm sure. But I as sit here wiping them on a handkerchief, I think of your lips. I think of the tip of your tongue. I think of the soft warmth of your breath on my face.

The lines of your face that used to be clear have begun to blur. I saw you such a little time really and mostly only at night, in dark bars, over dinners, though I now know, that from the moment we shook hands at Chez Lipp, I always had you in my line of vision. The important thing is that, for the moment, particular expressions and the memory of your voice are still intact. In fact, they still jump out at me at the most impractical moments, like during a consultation with a colleague, or when with Sophie.

It happened again this morning. Your voice, a happy chatter, came over something she was saying as we were about to get into the lift, only for a second, but long enough for my heart to stop and for me to stub my toe on the way into the lift.

Something to make you smile: a few days ago, my clerk looked up from his manual on international law and handed me the pile of new briefs the courier had just delivered.

As he did, he stuttered and his boyish cheeks turned pink, 'You know, Ms d' Anville, I'd ... I'd like to say ... but pl ... please, don't misinterpret me...' And then, as if his thoughts had gathered momentum, '...Ms d' Anville, I can't help but notice ... for a while now, you've had ... a ...(he cleared his throat) a ... twinkle in your eyes ... and your smile, it's...' He then got up so suddenly, his chair rolled backwards into the wall and a hollow thump saw him out of the room. There I stood, grinning from ear to ear, nodding to myself, knowing he was right, acknowledging the secret origin of my inner glow.

I need to add, though, that the flip side of that mental *étourdissement*, of this giddiness (I looked up that word this morning) is total physical exhaustion. It's not just an emotional exhaustion. It comes from lack of sleep, loss of appetite and from knowing that I'll never see you again.

You've made me agree to that. I wish I hadn't called you when I did but you were so adamant that even if I hadn't, you would have written it down for me to read. To read and re-read, all the while hoping I had misread your words the first time around.

You want me to stop thinking about how and when we might, one day, sneak in some time together. You made that very clear. But I think that what you really want is for me to stop agonising about how the tenuous balance I am so far able to maintain with Sophie might be altered should we ever be in a position to do that. Mind you, I can certainly understand how you might be totally fed up with the wait and my dilly-dallying. Anyway, I promised. I tried and I failed.

Agreeing to stop fantasising about a reunion is one thing, but it's not easy pulling you out of me. I often ask myself what it is about you that makes me melt so. I can't explain the extent of my attraction. It goes against what I always believed about myself; that I was reliable, reasonable,

settled, and totally immune to this *folie hormonale*. That's what this is, isn't it, a hormonal delirium? It has to be.

I wasn't looking for anything to change in my life. I didn't want more than what I already had. This must sound ... limited to you who wants so much out of life, out of ... everything. I was thankful, you see, for the quality of my relationship with Sophie; for the calm, loving, and settled aspects it brought into my life. We communicated well, we understood each other. We were happy. But tonight, I need to look at our old photo album to remember how it might have felt ... back then.

Ah, yes, I almost forgot. A while back you asked about her past. She's already told you the gist of it but yes, that would've been a very long time ago. Anyway, I don't think it'd be a breach of confidence if I told you a little more about it. Listen to me speaking of breaches of trust! Really! Truth is I would like you to know the whole story. It'd help if you understood better the trust thing with Sophie. Anyway, it's such a horrendous story I'll get this done as quickly as possible.

Have you ever seen the film, *War Zone*? If you have, it was a bit like that but it's her brother who used her for his incestuous needs, not her father. The poor man had died a few years earlier. So they lived in the countryside somewhere north of here. She was only eight when one evening Patrick found her in the bathtub. She was already old enough to wash herself and she still thinks he genuinely didn't know she was there when he barged in. He was on his way out on a date. He's some twelve years older and he had forgotten his aftershave.

For some reason, he didn't just splash his eau-de-Cologne on his face and leave as he had intended doing. Instead he stayed in that bathroom and he talked to his little sister and she was not disturbed by his presence. The thing is that though he had never walked in on her that way before, she didn't have any reason to fear him. Little girls are not usually aware of their bodies, you know, nudity, *pudeur* and all that, and he was, after all, her big brother.

Because he was so much older he wasn't around a lot, but when he was, he was always nice to her. The usual big brother stuff, you know, like carrying her on his shoulders pretending to be a galloping horse, that kind of stuff. And he always smelt nice. And so he had sat by the side of that bathtub and he gently splashed water at her. And he made her giggle. And when he pulled the sponge out of the bath water he ran it over her back and she giggled some more. Then he left, closing the door behind him. Sophie finished her bath, pulled on her flannelette nightgown and went up to bed. Her mother was already in her fifties, I think. Anyway, she came in to check on Sophie as she usually did, turned off the light and left. And Sophie fell asleep.

She woke up with a start, though, surprised to find her brother sitting on the edge of her bed. On his lap he had a little stuffed lion. And the lion said, 'Shhh ... *petite Sophie*. Go back to sleep. It's all right, it's only Patrick.' And little Sophie went back to sleep and so it went until one day, Patrick touched her. He caressed her, her legs, ever so gently under the sheet and always in a playful manner. Always with that toy lion that he had brought to her that night as his accomplice. He wouldn't drop in every night, of course, but a few nights every month.

And then, one night he slipped his hand under her night gown and left it there on her little sex. She squirmed and wriggled but he somehow found a way to soothe her out of her instinctive recoil, probably with the help of the toy lion. From here on, Sophie doesn't remember much at all. Only glimpses of ... sex. Of his sex near her face. Of his thumb hard in her mouth, hard against her tongue. Of a thick and red penis in his hand, while the bed shook. And the smell of cheap Aqua Vital cologne.

She can't explain why, in the early days, she didn't run straight to her mother. But when she did, some time later, her mother slapped her violently across the face. She was a simple woman, you see, with simple values like the many who only know country life. And like a woman possessed she went through Sophie's room to find these horrible pictures that she accused her daughter of having looked at. She was sure her daughter must have gotten hold of some pornographic stuff, maybe from a school friend. And that these *saletés*, these filthy things, had warped her daughter's mind. Not finding any, she locked up Sophie's bicycle in the garage and kept her away from school for a whole week. To this day, Sophie is sure that her mother never even tried to test Patrick out.

Alex, I really want to get to the end of this horrible story. This one, too, is an awful one to write about, but I think it's important for you to know why the trust that Sophie's placed in me is, to

her, like a vital organ. You understand what I'm saying here? It had taken her some forty years to stop punishing other women, including her lovers, for her mother's betrayal.

She knows that Patrick, eventually, went all the way with her. She knows he penetrated her. She remembers the blood on her thighs but not the pain. Patrick wiped that blood off. With the bath sponge. She thinks he stopped coming to her room when he somehow found out his little sister had had her first period. And that was that. She hardly ever saw him afterwards. He went into the army, as was the thing for young men to do in those days. No finality for her. No counselling. Just a nightmare that never got a closure.

She ran away at thirteen. She was running away from the memory of that turgid sex, from the smell of sperm and Aqua Vital that, she said, still clung to the wallpaper of her room, inside her head. She was running away from her mother's betrayal too.

You see, Sophie had tried to talk to her mother a second time. She had taken the toy lion with her, down to the kitchen. She thought that the toy would be the irrefutable proof that her mother wouldn't be able to ignore. But for her mother, there was nothing there but a toy lion and her young daughter's sick ravings.

As further punishment she stuck Sophie in a nearby boarding school of sorts, run by nuns. Can you imagine, in those days, what it would have been like in a place like that? That was the kind of place where orphans, wards of the state and other miserable children like that would be sent. She never saw her mother after that day and later she ran away with only a tiny suitcase. She didn't go to her mother's funeral either, though that was only a couple of years ago. I'll stop here on this story. I don't want to write any more about it. Not now. Later. Another day.

And I should really cross the street and go back to the office. But no, no yet. On a somewhat simpler note, the dinner party with Eli and Isa turned out to be pleasant enough. Two things though: first, everyone concentrated on not mentioning you at all, not in any way, not even a brief mention of the great times we all had, together during that mad week you were here. Second, when Eli, who's never been known to volunteer for the task, offered to help me load the dishwasher, I felt trapped.

Thank goodness Sophie made such a fuss about guests never allowed in the kitchen that even wine-brash Eli realised she had only one option: to remain seated, near Sophie, in the living room. I don't think you can imagine how relieved I felt, alone in the kitchen, even in the company of dirty plates and platters. I didn't even mind the smell of cigarette stubs piled high in ashtrays beside the sink.

Anyway ... I'm still waiting to hear about your Tashinka. Since you've told me about her, I've been quite curious to hear what she's been up to, all these years, beside raising her little boys and sailing Europe on her catamaran.

*Un baiser*, a gentle, loving kiss for you. If only...

Adrienne

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The glass of pastis sweats droplets of freshness. They glisten along its stem on their way to the tiny, circular puddle, where the glass joins the white, plastic tabletop. It is wonderfully pleasant, here, sheltered from the strong sea breeze busy blowing tufts off the cresting waves. I would love to close my eyes and let the gentle winter sun seep through me and melt my insides, but I cannot. I am far too tense.

I am waiting for Tashinka. The excitement I had initially felt as I read that, yes, she would love to drive from where she now lived in the hinterlands of Cannes and meet with me over a lunch had been tremendous. I was very much looking forward to reconnecting with her after so many long years of episodic correspondence. And ours had been such a dramatic connection!

Once we had resumed writing, having established early on that she had chosen to remain married to Ashleigh for reasons best known to her, she had added little about her life. She mainly wrote about her involvement with sailing, both as an instructor at the local yacht club and as a solo catamaran racer. She also wrote about frequent trips to the snow fields of Europe between the months of November and May with her now grown-up boys who had, apparently, become wonderful skiing buddies. So I had already decided that I would do my best to shake her out of

that quiet, introverted, health-nuttish groove. After all, she was still far too young and had been too vibrantly sensual to not be ... involved anymore.

But having come to this cafe overlooking the bay too early, having sat there for over half an hour with nothing to occupy my mind other than my purpose for being there, I felt myself slowly becoming anxious.

By now, Adrienne, I can say I am totally spooked, maybe even transfixed, at the thought of our imminent reunion. Not sure why really, but there is one thing I have been fixating upon and that is the awkwardness that I fear will prevail over my clumsy, stilted initial exchange.

We have not seen each other for years. And so many years have surely taken their toll. What if we are unable to recognise each other beyond our new outside appearance? What if the women that we were no longer are? As in not there any more ... vanished?

What if we just fritter away our time together in a desultory banter, you know, something *décousu*, and cannot find the thread to lead us into a meaningful conversation? I am old now ... older. I have changed, maybe too much, maybe the wrong way.

An immaculate red Triumph is now parked across the street where a postal van had stood only a moment ago. I straighten up in the uncomfortable white plastic chair. A need to swallow contracts my throat.

In one of her recent letters she had written about the pleasure and excitement she was getting from her most recent toy, a fully reconditioned British roadster.

'*J'ai acheté une p'tite TR4,*' she had written, 'all red and beautiful! *Tu vas l'adorer.* I'll take you for a spin along the Corniche. We could keep going all the way to Monaco.' It must be the one on the other side of the street. There can't be that many mint-condition red Triumphs around, sporting a totally non-vintage but very sexy snug sport bar, low behind the seats. Not even here. So, she's made it to our rendezvous!

She's here, somewhere, but where? Slowly, without seeming to, I survey the immediate landscape, eyes sheltered by the dark lenses.

The Tuesday afternoon fishermen are lined up, lines dangling, along the jetty; each has brought a coloured plastic pail and a folding chair. My shoulders are tensed and my eyes squint to probe deeper into the crowd milling below. The onset of a panic attack has my heart beating far too fast. God how I hate feeling this way. I do not recognise her silhouette anywhere, but I know she is here, nearby, I sense her presence.

One woman stands alone on the furthest edge of the jetty, I could say she is looking at me, but at such a distance I cannot be sure. She does not have Tashinka's willowy silhouette, but I look away all the same, unnerved. I really hate everything I am feeling at the moment. What can I compare it to so you'll understand?

This feeling is somewhat familiar to me. I have felt that way waiting to be interviewed, say, for a job, that at the time seemed to be my Golden Fleece. I have felt that way, too, minutes before an exam I knew I could fail but needed so desperately to pass.

And here I am again, anxiously fretting behind a mask of studied passivity, not wanting to be caught unawares. I remember my mother's admonishments in other nerve-wracking circumstances when I was only a child, '*Mais enfin, Alex, sois naturelle.*' But I can no more let go and be 'natural' now than I could then. A masochistic penchant towards self-control, or at least looking composed, seems to have girdled me since very young. The more my mother would urge me to let go, at the times it suited her purpose best, the more I held on to my already emerging wall of surface indifference.

Looking back to those childhood days, there must have been something there that had led me to believe that the line of least resistance involved hiding my fears and hiding my tears. Maybe it was simply my mother's constant and contradictory admonishments to be brave, to be strong in the face of adversity, that somehow wedged me deeper behind my barricade.

I might have cried over a scraped knee. I might have cried because of a sense of helplessness in the face of a blatant injustice. Or as my heart broke upon learning of my puppy's sudden death. Or, much later again, at the moment of my first heartache. And I knew Mayanne would be expecting me to quickly dry those tears and pick myself up, either literally or figuratively. She wanted me to be emotionally strong. And, in those days, it meant that I should not cry. And that my sad heart had best be quickly sent on its way. Those lessons, I guess, are the ones that I

have internalised best. I did not cry when the 'not guilty' verdict was confirmed, later on that evening in Mr Smith's office.

Even now when I feel I can no longer contain tears welled up behind my eyelids, I despise my weakness. And I make myself swallow harder and faster. A couple of runaway tears might, at extreme moments, slip through my shut-tight eyelids but most will not. So for now, as I wait for Tashinka to find me, I am concentrating on projecting self-control and remoteness.

The ice has melted inside the glass on the white plastic table. All traces of coolness have by now evaporated. The yellow liquid is too warmly sweet to yield any kind of refreshing pleasure. I am aware of my shallow breathing made worse by a slouched position on this hard plastic chair.

I need to free up my ribcage. I need to regain control of my breathing but I do not want to get up. I do not want to make myself overly visible. I'll just sit and wait. But I need to focus my thoughts on something simple, on something pleasant. Oh, yes, that seems appropriate: a travel back in time, to my days at the American School of Algiers, to that particular morning, the morning of April the third. I have not had time to tell you that part of our story.

Though that, too, happened many years ago, I still see the date she had so boldly written across the top right-hand corner of my blackboard. The night before, on the rooftop terrace of her Moorish mansion by the beach, we had fallen asleep in each other's arms and at dawn, on the third of April, we had made love again before separating.

She had to wake her young sons, Niko and Julian. We had to get ready for our school day. Before all else we had to grapple for control of our emotions. I remember the many days in the preceding months when I knew I would find her ready for her students, ready for their Phys Ed class: a beautiful, proud, feline young woman, sporting long, tanned legs topped by a little pair of white sport shorts. Her dark curls were all tangled despite the grey and green bandanna tied on her forehead. With an inscrutable look in her eyes, she had reminded me then, as she often had, of the heroine of some teenage romance novel who, posing as a pirate, had crossed many seas and encountered many hardships to find love. Except for the white Adidas shorts.

But Mrs Tashinka Jennett was not only married; she also had two gorgeous little boys, so I would force my mind back to more accessible topics.

One day, at the very end of March, she had strode into my empty classroom, looking both defiant and uneasy. Bypassing any form of greeting, she had crossed over to where I was standing, by the blackboard. She had stood there, looking at me, silently rocking on the balls of her feet. And then, in halted tones she had let her fragmented discovery tumble out.

Apparently, that very morning at the end of March, as she had been drying her hair, she had caught her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. In the space of that fleeting moment, a dawning had arrested her in mid-gesture. At first, she said, she had been too struck to analyse its deeper meaning, but that a veil had lifted at that fractured moment. She became aware that she had fallen in love; that she was in love with a woman. I remember having looked at her intently, fascinated, but wondering why she was confiding in me that very private understanding. Then, as if through a haze, I had watched her move closer to me, close, very close. So close, I had felt her breath on my cheek as she had whispered, 'Alex ...I am ... in love with you.'

So, my basketball warrioress, Mrs Jennett-mother-of-two had fallen in love with me after all. I had never dared envisage such an outcome though I had been infatuated with her from the moment I had caught sight of her as she played a frenetic style of basketball with a motley group of senior boys, her runaway locks, wet with perspiration, coiled around her throat. That was on the second day of posting at my new school in Algiers, North Africa. It had taken her most of the school year to meet me on that threshold.

"I can see you haven't changed much! Always lost in another dimension." The warm depth of that forgotten voice startles me back to the here and now, where I sit in a white plastic chair. My eyes snap open behind my sunglasses – Tashinka's tall frame is shading my face from the sun.

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She left the red Triumph parked where it was and led me into a brisk walk to the nearby beachfront restaurant where she had already reserved our table. We caught each other casting shy and awkward glances, I, for one, trying to surreptitiously assess the inevitable changes that

had to have occurred during the many years since I had last seen her but, beside a different hairstyle, found none immediately stood out.

Dressed in a navy blue linen shirt and those narrow hips trapped inside a pair of white jeans, she strode towards the restaurant, in the easy feline gait that I remembered, half a step ahead of me, turning back to catch what I was saying. The first snatches of conversation, as we had come face to face with each other, had been more like rapid-fire. Adrienne, I cannot explain how I would have liked that first moment to go but as it was unfolding, I knew that what I had dreaded was happening.

Off balance, *décontenancée* at finding myself looking into her eyes after such a long absence, I clumsily cut into most of her utterances. And then the trivial nature of our initial conversation brought on a nervous sort of cold panic. I prayed for a divine intervention, a voice from above that would shout, 'Take Two', and allow us, allow me, to redo this scene in a more controlled, detached way. Anyway, she now wears her hair short and back-combed, level with her jaw line, but it still curls in rich dark brown, unruly tendrils.

Soon after we were seated, I signalled the waiter over for the menus, for something to focus on, in silence while I regrouped. And we chatted a little more about totally trivial things before the conversation settled somewhat more comfortably on safe topics such as our respective daytime occupations and my life in Australia. The waiter came for our order and, after he had arranged the bottle of *rosé* in its little silver bucket and had wrapped a starched napkin around its neck as if to protect it from a rising chill, she asked me about my father.

So I tried to describe my clumsy attempts at reconnecting with him because he had allowed a career in the army to take over his life after he and Mayanne had divorced. These choices had obviously led him to remain unattached too long, visibly beyond the point of no return.

The crazy thing is that, though single, he had not remained chastely alone throughout the last thirty years. Far from it in fact. But that prolonged solitude, in turn, has led him to become more of an opinionated square head than, I suspect, any woman in her right mind needs as she contemplates the freedom of retirement.

I asked Tash about her boys and she explained how they had finally become young adults and, how they were still her pride and joy. Better yet, the three of them had become the others' best buddies and accomplices in times of mad capers.

Adrienne, you know what struck me first as I listened to her talk about pleasant moments with her sons? What struck me was that she does not smile anymore. Or if she does it is not the radiant, easy, and exuberant smile I remember.

Then, I asked about Ashley. As his name passed easily through my lips I became aware of an odd calm; I did not feel the familiar shards of anger that used to bite at my guts whenever I happened to think of this man. I guess all bile must have finally drained out of my heart when I wasn't watching. I just hadn't noticed.

Ashley the husband. Ashley, the gentle man turned madman. Ashley, the one who had made me eat sand through the nostrils, in an attempt to satiate his rage. The man who had try to suffocate me in the Algerian sand-dunes, leaving a ring of fingertip bruises around my neck. Ashley, who would have had the better of me, if his wife had not been strong enough to get him in a stranglehold herself. Ashley, who had blackmailed her into sequestering herself in her own house, well after I had caught a plane out of the country. The only alternative he had offered her had been to expose her as an unfit lesbian mother while he would seek a divorce that would separate her from her little boys.

"That day, when he forced me, physically and through emotional blackmail, to stay away from you, though I was crazy with worry not knowing ... how you were," she said shaking her head sadly, "that day was the last time I spoke to him as a wife to her husband." She raised her eyes cautiously towards mine and sighed softly, "But the damage had already been done. You had flown out of Algiers and settled in Mallorca. You were out of harm's way and I agreed that, for the boys' sake if not entirely for mine, it would be best to go on sharing the house and start pretending."

I watched her eyes. They are still clear, still deeply green and they are now the only place where a real smile can be detected if one looks closely. There, and in the pale lines that run up from the corners of her eyes, hidden under the tanned and smooth skin, to her temples. Her lips are still full but her mouth has lost some of its natural upward curve. She now keeps it firm and

tight. Like the rest of her, really. Through the thin weave of her shirt and its open collar I could almost feel the sinewy tautness of her shoulders, the control that lies in her stomach, flat as a board, bound by the leather belt that matched the green and blue of her suede deck shoes.

Another change I had not noticed at first glance is that she has lost weight and that her body that had been lithe and luscious in the prime of womanhood, though still supple and athletic, seems to have grown hard and taut. The dishes came and went; only asides to our conversation.

At some stage she moved her chair a little sideways from the table to stretch her long legs and crossed one knee over the other. Her right foot dangled loosely closer to my chair, its paler inner side facing me.

Ah, Adrienne, I need to tell you a little secret if you promise not to tell. I do not normally like feet at all as they tend to either be bony, gnarly or podgy but I've always had a thing for feet, naked and tan, inside deck shoes. I do find that combination very sensual. Maybe the turn-on lies in the slim curve of a golden foot looking delicate by contrast to the thick seams and chunky leather of that particular type of footwear.

Anyway, I became aware that she had stopped talking, visibly waiting for my eyes to move away from her foot and back upwards to meet hers. I am sure I detected a glimmer of amusement in her eyes and I felt a heat rise inside my chest.

She did not get side-tracked. "When I felt it was safe to contact you again ...you sent me back to him, to the boys. *Tu t' souviens, Alex?*" I nodded again. Yes, of course, I remembered. "You and I had managed to steal a few days on our own in Paris. *Juste toi et moi.*" Green eyes, wide eyes, wind-tanned cheekbones. "You sent me back, Alex, and you made me promise to shut the door on us." Slowly she inhaled, pressing her long fingers on either side of her nose. I felt disconcerted by the intensity of her voice. "And so, many years later, Ashley and I are still pretending to be a couple. We're still pretending, though the boys are now independent. We pretend for the benefit of his Board of Directors, for the few friends and colleagues we need to entertain jointly. He thinks I pretend for some type of convenience, but he knows I despise him. I only ever speak to him when others are present."

I didn't say anything. What could I have said besides express my total lack of understanding for such an impossible lifetime compromise? Instead I averted my eyes again, this time choosing to tease the crumbs that lay scattered on the tablecloth, waiting for the conversation to take an inevitable, more personal turn.

She sipped her wine. "*Tu sais*, it's really quite a practical arrangement," she said slowly. The corners of her deep green eyes crinkled in what I was learning to recognise as her new way to smile. I must have looked at her dubiously for she clarified, "Well, remember, even back then, he was often away on business. Now, he's seldom home at all. He's gone higher up the corporate ladder and travels to more distant, more exotic business destinations."

She saw I was still unconvinced about the practicality of her having remained in their home, if not so much by his side, even after the boys had become old enough to understand a straightforward divorce. She said something that, in a still obscure way, seemed to explain the barely veiled amusement that still played in her eyes. "*Tu vois*, his long-term mistress lives in Toulouse; hours from where we live. He's made her flat the base for his stopovers but it's a totally unpractical place for him. She cooks for him, though. She washes his clothes and takes his suits to the dry-cleaner's. She loves him, you see. She makes love to him. I don't. Not any more. Not since well before that night in the dunes. Not since the end of March ... that year."

And I waited, still not understanding why all that would make her eyes smile.

"Besides, Alex, the point is that all these years I haven't needed the type of freedom a divorce would have brought me."

"*Pourquoi pas?*" I felt the tight knot in my eyebrows. Why not, indeed?

"*Eh bien, quoi, Alex? Souris un peu,*" she urged, back-combing her dark hair with a hand. "You still don't smile much, do you? And you still frown the same way, you know, like faced with a serious problem that needs solving on the spot."

I was so wrapped up in trying to understand that impossibly dry and wasting relationship she had with a husband she did not even resent anymore that I had not realised that I was the one who needed to smile and lighten up. But what could be worse than having chosen to prolong a life within the lonely, empty shell of a marriage that had stopped being?

"Look, maybe you won't approve, but I've made my choices. Quite a while back now." She had moved forward, leaning her forearms on the space in front of her now that the waiter had cleared away the plates. "But when I look back, the truth is that I don't regret having remained Mrs Jennett. Don't you see?"

I didn't see, so I shook my head.

"Divorcing, once the boys could deal with it better, would have ultimately been offering to Ashley an easy way out. A way out of his guilt. A way into a fresh new start. You see, I like knowing that he knows that I don't need him for anything. If we divorced, by law I would keep half of all we own together and that would amount to a tidy bundle. So for him to still bring home his income is neither here nor there. A divorce would cost him a good lot more." Her eyes glinted as she spoke about her ongoing resentment of her husband. "No, you see, my revenge for what he did to you and me back in those awful sand-dunes is to pay him back in kind. I want him to think about my lovers. I want him reduced to being a simple commodity in my life. Oh, I know, that's not charitable. But, as Niko says, remember my youngest?" I nodded with a smile. Golden little Niko, beautiful boy. Used to give him piggyback rides. Of course I remembered him. "Well, his favourite expression at the moment is, 'I don't give a flying ... fox about that.' On the other hand, maybe my attitude helps him keep his Simone at bay. I'm sure she'd rather be a wife than a lover." With a sly grin she added, "And ...he knows, even though I say very little, that I have a hell of a better time than he does with his middle-aged widow." She looked at me expectantly.

"What?" The dry quality of my tone startled me. What's with me? She's having the time of her life while punishing Ashley. Not charitable but great. Why are my jaws clenched?

"Well, I thought you'd be ... happy. Alex?" She reached across the space that separated us and very lightly covered my hand with hers. Happy? Ah, yes. Yes, happy; happy she's found a way to turn the situation to her advantage. But not happy as in yippee yahoo happy. More like squishy-happy. "You used to worry about my shrivelling up inside."

"Yes, I know. I did. But, now that I hear you talk like that, it feels strange..." I felt flustered by the onslaught of mixed feelings I had not anticipated while I had been sitting on the uncomfortable white plastic chair of earlier.

"What does?"

"What does what?"

"Well ... what you've just said. Something that feels weird about my—"

"Well yes, you know ... imagining you and ... lovers." Would I have reacted differently if she had used the noun in its singular form?

"Oh, don't get carried away. It's not like I have hundreds at the same time." Her lips curled upwards in the rare smile of old. That, too, amused her. I forced myself to stop blushing. After all she could not read my mind. All there was to read in my face was that I was nonplussed by it all and yet I couldn't stop the hot sensation from creeping up my neck and spilling on to my cheeks. I won't ask any details. Don't even want to know ... No I don't want to know if they are ever females.

And then to make things worse for me, Adrienne, a flash memory of roof-top love- making on our first dawn as lovers played itself on the white tablecloth as clearly as if on a makeshift screen. Her hand still lay lightly over my own. Heat rose again to my cheeks and aware that I was keeping my eyes averted made me squirm inwardly. I silently berated myself. Don't go there, Alex. Leave well enough alone. What does it matter? That was so long ago. Just think of the lovers you've had yourself. Don't be a hypocrite. And so what if she's still heterosexual? Oh, no! Even worse. Not males. That'd be too gross. Too gross to imagine.

With a sinking feeling I did my best to struggle from under that clinging netting of childish insecurities but that was not easy. You and I can talk about that later. But I think I had been, in some kind of a hypocritical way, prepared to feel sorry for her. Prepared to be judgmental of her choices. I thought she had settled for being a Mrs Average who still could manage to be civil to her husband when he was in town, but a Mrs Average who was dead inside, as the empty chrysalis that clings to a twig.

However, while I was prepared to shake her out of such a horrible, wasting groove, I had not been prepared to hear how she had refused that groove many years ago; how she had refused to play the game, anyone's game. I was struggling to appreciate that my Tash was totally in charge of her sexuality and was standing by the choices she had made.

My Tash? Get a life, Alex. Even now, as I write to you, Adrienne, I really can't explain why I felt the way I did. Crazy.

Droplets of warm condensation slid down the smooth curves of the ice bucket. Breadcrumbs, tan and pale, were lying embedded into the lacework of the tablecloth. I chose not to look up, not to meet her gaze, not to remove my hand from under hers. Instead, I turned it palm up, to better hold hers in mine. But I did, ultimately, have to look up. She was smiling a slow smile. Deep-green eyes wide on my face.

"Hey, you want to know something?" she asked.

I shrugged at the paradox she was unwittingly presenting me with. She did not wait for an answer. Maybe she remembered I was not very good with the idea of her and lovers, be they plural or singular. Luca was his name. He had been her lover before me. But not after me.

"What I enjoy most of all is the freedom I have. The freedom to sail my catamaran. To enter races anywhere I want around here or the Atlantic. I should've brought some pictures. I think you would have liked some of them. Action ones. Sunset ones." She paused. Her eyes covered mine briefly but she lifted her hand away from mine to brush it through her hair, tucking the right side behind the ear as she moved away from the tabletop. "See, Alex, the honest truth about the whole thing with Ashley, for me, is that besides it being my sweet revenge, I enjoy not having to ask permission of ... anyone. It's not really about my lovers. I mean, to all intents and purposes I'm single, right? I just give plenty of advance notice to ... whoever might ... feel concerned. And I go away for a few days. On my own. Or with the boys. Nothing weird, nothing kinky." She glanced at her watch and I remember thinking that she did look in charge ... of herself. She was living by the choices she had made. And surely, I, of all people, had to be glad she did. "But of course, some people feel insecure when faced with such a freedom," she added. "Some feel insecure knowing that I would drop everything in mid-stride if my boys needed me ... for anything. Some just don't understand why I'm not divorcing. Why I don't want to start a new life ... with them. I could tell them ... but so far, I haven't felt that was essential." She looked around, as if for the waiter, but continued. "It could be argued too, that I haven't felt I wanted to be dissuaded from that choice made so long ago."

I just sat there, Adrienne, feeling she had covered every trail. She did not need any advice from me.

"*Tu vois*, Alex, only Ashley and I know why we're still 'together'. And you, now. And well ... there's a price attached to the fact that I don't commit. Not in the conventional ways that people recognise easily. And so there's a high break up rate, you know, in my relationships." She sighed, fiddled with a little piece of baguette and caught me off guard by asking, "But you haven't said much about yourself. You in Nice. You, at this very moment of your life. Tell me what you're up to."

"Oh, well, it's ... it's pretty much as I said in my letters." I was not going to tell her about you. About us.

So I reminded her of my correspondence. "You know ... my letters have told you pretty much all about my life. You know all about my attempts at looking for happiness." Initially these attempts had been about finding a post-Algiers, post-Tashinka happiness. Then they had been about finding a post-Diana release. And then ... and then as I had gotten older they had finally been reduced to a never-ending, convoluted search for an elusive partner, one with whom the post-lust lull would grow into a satisfying, deepening relationship: And so on.

And here I am, involved with you. You in Paris, me here, and my old friend-your partner and her silent vibes are keeping us at country lengths from each other, as surely as if she had us manacled at different points of this rather small country.

Now, in some of my letters to Tash, while I was still in Australia, I had written about moments when I thought I might be succeeding. And so, I had written her about the woman with whom I was falling in love and unfortunately, later, about the woman with whom I had already fallen out of love, though she might not necessarily have been the same person, between one letter and the next. You see, Tash and I, like Sophie and I in a way, managed to keep a correspondence going, good year, bad year, but it was always at an episodic level, on and off, if you know what I mean. With many, many gaps and silences in between.

"But at the moment I gather you're free ... footloose and all that? Yes?"

*Footloose*, she said. I saw that word neatly shaped on your blue correspondence paper. The way you had written it so many times already. Tashinka's question hung in the air between us, unclaimed.

"*Alors*, Alex?" She moved closer to the table, peering into my eyes, almost as if she had suddenly become near-sighted.

I hesitated. Adrienne, as I said, I had not planned on telling her about us. And yet, she had just presented me with a choice. And I realised that I did not want to leave her with the impression that I was, as she had said: 'free and footloose.'

"No ... in fact ... No ... I'm not. I mean, footloose. I should be ... but I'm not." It must have been my imagination, no doubt, but I would swear that even the gentle sea breeze, that had accompanied our conversation so far, held its breath as seconds fluttered by.

"Actually, neither my heart nor my mind are free at the moment." I looked at her squarely but threw my hands up in the way the French claim helplessness. "*Je n' suis pas libre.*" Circumstances beyond my control. I'm not free at all.

Adrienne, I told her about you. Did I invoke your name as a protection of sorts, as an oral talisman against ... something? Maybe I did, maybe I did a little. But I can clearly say to you that well before that conversation was even begun, well before that day, I had been needing, almost desperately, to bounce the sound of your name against one other being. I wanted to give you life, a life outside my brain, as you are, after all, more than a simple figment of my imagination. To make you happen 'live'.

Now that I have walked you through my lunchtime conversation with Tashinka, I am sure you are on the edge of your seat wanting to know how we parted. You did ask for the long-play version, didn't you?

Well, we parted quite simply, really. Though she seemed to be genuinely surprised that I should be in love, again and so soon after my arrival here, she listened while toying with more breadcrumbs by the side of her plate. I walked her through an abridged version of how you and I had met and separated. I think it is the love part (not preceded by 'in') that she found most surprising. That, and the fact that you and I had not yet found a way to meet and make love. And the fact, too, that in spite of my feelings for you I had asked you to give up the idea of a contrived encounter.

After a while she had stopped interrupting and did not ask any more questions. Once I had finished we both sat in silence. I, for one, was again too full of you to casually step back through the gateway that had been opened. I could not come back to the here and now as quickly as one snaps out of a hypnosis session.

After a couple of minutes she simply leaned towards me, "*Tu m'excuses*, Alex?" I nodded assuming she was on her way to the restrooms. However, when she returned to the table a very short while later she didn't sit down. Instead she stood by my chair, her narrow hips impossibly close to my face.

I had to look up past the vague contour of her sex, there, behind the thick double stitching of her white jeans and past the green and blue leather belt-buckle that rested flat against her stomach. And upward past her breasts that still do not require wearing a bra. As in slow motion I watched her run a hand through her hair to brush it away from her face. She bent her head to look down into mine. I felt the dry warmth of her other hand on the back of my neck as I tried to stand up. It all happened very quickly.

Once I had more or less made it up to eye level, she simply said, "*Allez*, Alex, Let's call it a day ... I don't think you're in the mood to drive around Monaco, top down in my little red car."

"Well, no ... I mean..." I felt disoriented like I feel when I am awakened too brusquely from a nap. As I reached for my bag I remembered the bill, "*Attends*. Let me fix up the bill."

"I've already taken care of the bill. Alex?" I looked up. "I thought we might ... Never mind. I'm off. Gotta go!"

I swung the bag over a shoulder, "Yes, got to go too, but ... Hold on!"

Her deep-green eyes were once again right there to meet mine squarely. "Alex, I've heard what you've been saying ... about Adrienne. Let's just say ... I was hoping my timing might be better ... just this once." She brushed the air with a hand as she grinned sheepishly " ... if only for a little while." She swung her bag over a shoulder and skirted the table. "Take good care of yourself, Alex. And keep in touch," she called out.

"I will," I promised automatically.

She did not linger for a farewell, a hug or a kiss. She simply kept on walking past the array of cane chairs and tables and crossed the street. When she was halfway across, she raised her hand in a wave behind her head. She knew I'd still be looking. From where I was standing I could see the little red Triumph parked at the far end of the street.

Without looking back, she stepped over the low slung door not bothering to unlock it from the outside. She eased her body down into the seat, indicated quickly and held a dark four-wheel drive at bay long enough to break into the traffic. I need to be totally honest with you, Adrienne, and so will admit that I plopped back on the seat, a definite lump in my throat accompanied by a momentary sense of loss. I stayed seated right where I was and ordered another strong coffee.

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Paris, 19 March

Alex,

*Chérie*, how should I start this letter? I must admit that I'm upset by the conversation we had this morning. A weird malaise, in the French sense of the word, has latched on to my skin and won't let go. I'm upset, too, by the contrast between your words this morning and the tone of the two letters I found yesterday when I got home. The mail does take its time getting here. It's often that on the same day I get letters that you've written many days apart.

Of course I understand what you want, what you need. It's also my want, my need. But how can I give that to us? I'm not strong enough to 'abandon' Sophie. I'm not strong enough to ask you to forget me. I'm not strong enough to push you away in earnest. It's true; months go by. And yet we're not getting anywhere. I feel as if a spider web has us and won't allow either of us movement toward the other or away.

As you said, it's also like the needle stuck in a groove, or as the record stuck under the needle, we go around and around, unable to break free of the dizzying circles. You're right, we go around but not forward. The sharp tone of your voice betrayed you this morning. And I'm drained.

My father's taken yet another turn for the worse but I'm still allowed to visit him most evenings. You might remember it's already been five days since he was admitted. My sisters have decided to take turns in coming up from Lyons. It's now Christine's turn to stay with me, in my apartment. She sleeps in the living-room, on the sofa-bed. No real privacy either for her or for me. I don't have any time to myself.

When I go to the hospital, I can't possibly get home before nine. Then my sister wants to know everything about papa's mood and state. Then, I have to call Sophie who also loves him dearly, and fears the worst, as we all do. She still spends the night at my place but less often, now, while either of my sisters are here. It just gets too hectic in the mornings in that flat. And I can't just leave and go to Sophie's. There are a few reasons why I don't want to do that. Then let's add the workload at the office, the growing number of briefs to review, research and process. Anyway, *c'est infernal*. I'm like on edge, raw.

Then, there's the fear that's been in my guts since this morning when I realised that you might be about to give up. As you said, rightly again, something has to give. Too sarcastically, you said that you were the footloose one. 'I'm the only one who's free to move,' you said, '... in any direction.' You're throwing that 'footloose' thing at me because back in January I said that was what frightened me about you. Your unreliability, or is it your independence, already then, was making me feel inadequate. Yes, already then. But you're right. You are the only one who is free ... freer to move.

The mad thing is that I tired myself even more by thinking that you might, one day, see me as I am, tedious and plain, not really able to keep up with your energy and your enthusiasm. You are after all quite a bit younger than I am. I spin my wheels, I get stuck in the mud, I feel sucked into it, as in quicksand. Like you though, I believe our confusion would be less painful if we could own it and be allowed to deal with it together. But for now another threshold, another benchmark, takes me *plus loin*, further away, from the solid and stable person I used to be.

Anyway, *Chérie*, don't forget I love you; not 'a lot', not 'incredibly much', just simply: I love you.

*Je t'aime.*

Adrienne

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