

Too real, too sad too, even now, as I reminisce hours later, sinking low into the enveloping folds of the grand old leather armchair of the chalet. I let myself be hypnotised by the dance of the revived flames as they bite into the new log. Marie-France has just stoked the fire. Joceline, stretched on the rug near the fireplace, is playing a little game of Scrabble with Emma. The flames back-light the baby-fine blond hair of one and the rich chestnut brown of the other.

I remember having gotten up from that terrace like a wounded animal searching for shade. I walked into the first dimly-lit café I came across and, almost blinded by a sudden and incongruous chiaroscuro, I made my way to a table, following an instinctive need for a cool and dark corner out of the way at the far end of the room. And there I sat head bent, looking at my hands splayed against the coolness of the tabletop.

"*Oh, la belle!* Caramélised by our radiant sunshine! Right here in my bar!" The wide and rounded vowels and the rolling r's of a *montagnard*'s jovial brogue startled me.

A frown of irritation creased my brow. Loud voices have always jarred my nerves, so I glowered from afar, feeling as I always do about loud, self-important males. My eyes tried to retrace the path the voice had taken to reach my ears. But what is one male voice amongst many?

Then a tall lumberjack figure came towards me swathed in a large green corduroy shirt, black padded ski trousers, braces dangling against the hips. Long-john white sleeves pushed up high above thick, tanned forearms, a self-assured smile splashed across a russet beard. I looked away, hoping to avoid the intrusion, but the reflection that looked back at me from the mirror panel on the wall to the right of my table arrested me, in mid-movement.

A face, tanned to the deep hue of copper, frowned back at me. The fluorescent pink bandanna I had rolled across my forehead earlier that morning was still tight against my forehead. My own reflected forearms, naked and folded over the tabletop, were indeed the colour of melting caramel. The leather thong holding the two snowshoes was still stretched across one shoulder. A snow Indian, I thought to myself, surprised by my appearance as the man stood by my side trapped, too, inside the gilded mirror panel.

I turned to face him. Gentle giant, he stood there, as if ready to wait all day for a smile. As he saw none forthcoming, he bent towards me. "Welcome to my bar, lovely lady. I didn't mean to offend, though ... I think I did." He stroked his beard thoughtfully. He added, "It's just that, when I saw you come out from the sun, glowing from our mountain sunshine ... I thought –" he stopped again, hesitant.

It is only then that I realised he had been the one whose voice had boomed across the half-full room. And that I had been the one he had addressed. I could tell he had meant no harm. The time had come to rescue this big puppy from further muddled apologies. I smiled. Relief visibly spread over his features, and once again, his white teeth flashed through his red beard.

"Let me get you a drink," he said, adjusting his braces over his powerful shoulders. "On the house. What'll it be?" I quickly tossed between a strong black coffee and a second *pastis*, opting for the latter.

"*Eh, bon sang,*" the bar owner said cheerfully, "a woman who's not afraid to drink before sundown."

He probably guessed more than saw my re-emerging frown of irritation, so he splayed his hands in front of him, his palms outward, in a gesture of male helplessness, and grinned, good-humouredly, before turning on his heels. I slid the snowshoes to the wooden floor, keeping them wedged between the mirror wall and the table legs. Before long, the man was back, bringing with him a tall glass of cold sunlight, and a large bowl of olives.

"We don't grow them here," he said, smiling again, "but my *grand-mère*, she lives closer to the coast, she prepares them for my customers. You'll how good they are. Everyone loves them." He hesitated before adding, "You too, I hope."

"Well, then, to the olives," I said lifting the glass to my lips. As I raised my head to take that first, most refreshing sip, I noticed that a waitress, back at the bar, was following our interaction with great interest while loading glasses on a tray. I saw her pick it up, her eyes trained on the bar owner, trying to see past him, or simply, through him.

As if in slow motion one tall glass, brimming with a frosty bright green *sirop de menthe* swayed on its base as the waitress raised the tray above her shoulder. The glass tapped its neighbour full of a Martini-red liquid and, as if doing the Saint-Guy dance, both glasses swayed

and knocked the other three on the tray now level with the waitress's ear. I would swear I actually saw the split-second moment when the five glasses jumped over the tray, splashing and splintering as they crashed, one by one, on the counter. Ice mingled with glass fragments slid across the glistening counter and seeped into the sawdust-scattered wooden floor. And yet they skidded further and further, beyond the first row of tables and chairs.

"Ah, merde," exclaimed the waitress between clenched teeth, "*Y en a partout!*"

The bar owner exclaimed grudgingly, "*Ah, les femmes!*" while raising his hands to the ceiling, maybe in a parody of something he had seen done on TV, and he made his way towards the bar.

With a little chuckle and a sigh, I settled back on the comfortable cane seat, letting the inviting smell of crepes and molten cheese lull me into a relaxed state of being. I did not want to turn my thoughts back to you. Too painful, too hard. I wanted something simple to think about while the strength of the *pastis* warmed up my heart.

Little Emmanuelle, or Emma as she prefers being called. '*Trop d' lettres*, too many letters in my name. They make me feel old,' she complained to me a little while back. So cute, really. Have I told you she is only nine years old? Can't remember. In any case she is a true bundle of blond energy. Quite loveable I am sure, but then again, I still do not feel entirely comfortable around her, around children in general. The thing is that I do not know what to do with her, with them. I do not know what I should talk to them about. I always feel they want something from me, something that I cannot give them. Even when, like Emma, they ask for nothing. Maybe it is simply I who feel I should give them a little more ... of something. Unsettling.

Like death, really. No, no, hold on. What I mean is that like death that I have not experienced close up, as in through the death of a loved one, I have no experience of little children either. I mean, my friends do not have any. I, for one, decided on a permanent moratorium on sperm, regardless of its packaging, be it from a well-intentioned randy pal or the handy turkey baster. IVF was not an option then, not that it would have changed anything about my decision.

Besides that, I am an only child, one who has spent a lifetime away from other children relatives. And when I was a child myself, as I said before, I do not remember any friends of my own, except ... for Lauren.

Lauren and I were boarding school friends. We used to compare the flatness of our chests, desperately trying to convince the other that our own had started showing a definite ... swelling under our little brown nipples. Ah, and then there was Mary, but that was different again.

Mary. I do remember her but when was the last time, aeons ago, when I had last thought about her? Goodness. Tall and gentle Mary. She might have been seventeen. I was about eleven. She looked after me like the big sister I had never had but so desperately wanted in those days. She used to shine my shoes on Inspection Days, she used to help me make my bed and do my homework. She had been assigned to me as a buddy of sorts; the older girl looking out for the younger one. I remember that upon my arrival at the school, I had been given the bed next to hers. And because I hated being at Saint Bridget's, always surrounded by other children and worse, being expected to belong, I had over time made myself thoroughly miserable. And so she would hold my hand until I fell asleep. I adored her. I owe my very first heart-aching flutters to Mary.

The café was filling up around my table by the mirror-wall. People were drifting out. More were drifting in to reward themselves for yet another beautiful day on the slopes. Or maybe for not having broken any bones either in their bodies or, worse but utterly possible, in someone else's. Bits of melting snow still clung to their boots. And many had the high altitude sun's mark etched on their skin in tones varying from intense pink to deep mahogany. Except for the white areas that had been sheltered by sunglasses.

It was getting late in the season. The sun had gotten quite strong. Closer to the base of the mountain other resorts were preparing to convert to their summer activities. But here, on top of the world, we still had all the snow we needed. Everyone looked healthy, smiling, energised by their day high up nearer to the sky. Some were weary, too, and they dragged their boots across the floor to get them to move forward. A healthy weariness that would see them fast asleep tonight. Others were loud and playful. Good-naturedly so. Nothing like the gratuitous, rambunctious and unnerving chaos engendered by bored, suburbia-penned-in, young males at play.

I used to hide little surprises for Mary, candy mostly, that I would tuck away deep inside her drawer at her assigned place at the head of a very long dining table where she had to sit with other older girls. I would furtively look in her direction to catch the moment when she would find the surprise hidden in the dark recesses of that drawer, under the white neatly folded napkin that she kept fastened with a multicoloured knot of rope. I could always tell when Mary had come across the candy. A most delicious smile would play on her lips and when our eyes met she would wink at me. She would nod, too, a tacit encouragement for me to finish eating all my soggy vegetables. The alternative to that would see me assigned to table-clearing duty.

When Mary failed to return to school at the end of the summer holidays, once past initial disbelief, I remained devastated for months. Like abandoned. The bag of chocolate I had talked Mayanne into buying for my best friend ever, turned pale within its cellophane wrapper until one day someone in charge of cleaning threw it away.

Adrienne, I have realised, in that café at the bottom of the slopes, that my reaction to the loss of Mary when I was only eleven must have set the template for my pattern of responses in the face of similar pains of abandonment to come. It all makes perfect sense to me.

The adult that I have become still struggles with that obscure sort of pain in the same haphazard, ineffectual way. Anxiety, panic attacks, an uncontrollable urge to alter the unalterable. That is what I still do when faced with emotional crises, such as ours, that are beyond my control to fix. I duplicate the painful shimmery feeling in my stomach, the shortness of breath, the relentless drive, the energy drain, the longing for what is unattainable.

The strong and moving strains of an enduring tune, *Femme Avec Toi*, wafted through the bar from speakers fastened against the stucco walls. I closed my eyes, letting the woman's voice put you back to the forefront of my thoughts. Why did I fall in love with you, you who, unlike the object of the singer's desire, do not smoke, are not Italian, and who has no particular interest in horses, not even the white ones that galloped, as in the song, across long forgotten lands, *sur les terres d'antan?*

You see, the memory of that first time feeling is very similar to how I feel now, how I feel about not being able to hold you. About not being able to hold you long enough to really, really, reach you. You do know what I mean don't you, Adrienne?

I felt very strange seated at that table having just conjured up the memory of those bygone days with Mary. I felt as if I had somehow come across a forgotten DNA printout, one on which my reactions as an adult woman had been encoded all along. A perfect match with that well-worn, twisted and fathomless sort of helpless confusion of now. Why such lack of control from the grown woman that I have become? Why the crippling self-doubts that whisper to my subconscious that if I had been more lovable, right from the start, Mayanne would not have left me behind? She would not have been able to. Mary would not have abandoned me, her little friend, to the woes of boarding school life. And if I were more lovable wouldn't you already have found a way to clear your head, to garrotte your guilt and snuff out whatever else is still getting in the way?

It's all very simple really. If the little girl that I was had been 'adequate', then the ones who, like you, came to her of their free will would not, then, turn away from her. You would not even think of abandoning her.

A freaky thought has just entered my mind, Adrienne; how much of my actual turmoil really belongs to you, to our specific circumstances? When will the pain of unresolved issues dissipate and leave a clear path for the present? Why is my attraction to you so strong? Is it truly so strong that a genuine determination to cut you loose, like a beautiful but unmanageable kite, would still not free me of you?

And so the last few days rolled on: trekking by day, drinking pastis in that bar where, strangely, I had felt at home in the late afternoon, sitting by the log fires by night with Marie-France, Emma and gently probing Joceline, listening to music and getting lost inside our separate thoughts.

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## Baie Des Anges, Nice

Back in Nice, almost on the eve of my departure for Paris, from beyond the mountain range a maddening wind was sweeping across the Promenade. *La Tramontanne* irritated all my nerve endings. The usually blue sky had turned to pewter. A sense of loss, of sadness, had seeped inside each of my pores. I thought I might already be missing 'my valley', its silence, its immaculate coat of shimmering crystals and its stillness. An impulse urged me away from the windblown Promenade des Anglais. I thought all I needed was to block out the shrill whistle carried by each gust as it raced into even the tiniest of alleyways, snapping angrily at the storefront awnings that slowed down its mad race to nowhere.

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In the mailbox, an unexpected letter from you lay in wait. I recognised the little blue envelope. My eyes seized on its corner, slightly askew, as it lay in the untidy bundle left by the mailman. A presentiment of dread descended on me like a shroud.

We had spoken over the phone on the night of my return from the Hautes Alpes: everything was set for our desperate bid to find release in the few days of stolen togetherness. You had even sounded as impatient as a child at the base of the Christmas tree. I was simply relieved to hear you confirm that, this time, no unforeseen obstacle was going to deprive us of our reunion. However, as I stood by the mailbox, looking at the blue corner of envelope that I knew bore your handwriting, a tingle settled in the tips of my fingers. Delicately, so as not to upset the bundle that I had wanted to leave in its cache away from the wind, I pulled your envelope out from the others to lift it to my eyes. Just then, as if to shelter me from its content, a gust of wind almost wrenched it from my fingers. I looked at your handwriting, neat and firm, devoid of unnecessary curls and flourishes. I looked at the date of its postmark, as I stood by the mailbox, bent forward against the push of the wind at my back. Where did it want me to go? You had mailed it the day after our last conversation. Inside this envelope lay, I knew it, the real cause of the day's unease.

I released the pressure of my fingers ever so slightly, slowly raising the pale blue fold high above my head, an offering to the wind. Greedy and starved, it snatched it from my fingertips, lifting it higher and higher. Against the dull, grey sky the pale blue rectangle fluttered and danced like a kite that no longer felt the tug of its line.

It tumbled and plummeted towards the street. The wind, too, having lost interest had released its grip. It is then that I should have turned my back on this last letter from you. Instead I felt compelled to follow its course until the moment it would disappear from sight. I saw it roll one more pirouette, set on a course leading to the churning waters of an overfilled drain at the bottom of a garden path. Then, suddenly, that little fold of paper stopped dancing. It lay there, blue against the brown soil, flat against it, as if holding on to it, as if waiting for me to come and rescue it.

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'Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin our descent over Paris. Please, remain seated and fasten your seatbelts.' The piped voice brought me out of my daydream. "*Paris, la ville des amoureux*", I whispered to myself, sighing. A glance through the porthole window revealed only a thick cloud cover spread over the City of Light. Another glance at my watch confirmed we would be disembarking at the *aéroport d'Orly* at around 9 p.m. I forced myself to breathe deeply and counted to eight before exhaling. And again. Breathe, Alex, breathe! I reprimanded myself one more time for having allowed that shallow breathing pattern to creep back in and tighten its grip inside my ribcage.

I swallowed hard to loosen the tightness in my throat but the content of your last letter, retrieved in the nick of time from the gutter where the wind had abandoned it, brought back a bile-like taste to my mouth.

I opened the powder blue envelope that lay in my mailbox. A little like the much-famed Pavlov dog, my heart had learnt, not to salivate, but to pound, at the sight of that soft blue paper, lying in wait. As I reached the door, I paused, the envelope balanced between two fingers, still calculating the risk involved in opening it.

Arms akimbo, my heart in limbo, I realised that I should have listened to the intuitive voice that had warned me against the content of your letter in view of the off again, on again nature of our Paris reunion. I should not have opened that blue envelope. By reading what you had intended for me to read, I had allowed myself to get hooked back on your line, back to you, to better be dropped once again. Indeed, I was not half as wise as I thought I was. But again I had to know, didn't I?

How was I able to guess the gist of that last letter? I had had no wish, no impulse to read it. I just knew that, once again, the words couched within that soft envelope would be words delineating your fear, words that, once again, would negate me, words written to force me to cancel my trip to Paris. I had truly wanted the exasperating gusts of wind to snatch it up and symbolically rip you away from me, quickly, permanently, in a way that I had not been able to achieve by myself. But Fate had her own machiavellian plan. She had wanted me to read. She had wanted me to see. She had wanted me to suffer just a little more.

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Paris, 13 May

Dear Alex,

*A delightful picnic in the woods with Eli, Isa and, of course, Sophie. Eli was once again pleasant towards me. She seemed to have recovered from the aggravation she had felt on Sophie's behalf, when she suspected my infatuation with you.*

I fiddled nervously with the corner of the page and once again looked at the cloud cover below. It was thinner now and I could already make out the diminutive rectangles of farmland and fields, in all shades of browns and greens, nicely laid out side by side, like patchwork on a quilt held together by knobbly seams. As soon as my eyes had found the word 'infatuation' I knew I had been right. A rush of nausea had risen to my throat. But, like a voyeur hooked on an act of indecent prying, I had read on.

*Sophie, too, was at her best, witty and charmingly brash as she can be when the mood takes her. No longer acting like the shadow of her former self, at least not then. At the end of the day, we agreed that Eli should spend the night at my place, and Sophie would stay at Isa's. What for, I hear you ask. Well, it's quite simple really. During the afternoon, it'd become obvious that the four of us wanted to feel better about the gap that had formed between us. Because of my silence and passive resistance. I needed to talk to someone about what had happened. To someone other than Sophie. I also needed someone, anyone, to know that nothing had actually happened between you and me.*

*As it turned out, Sophie needed to begin healing in one direction or another. Like maybe move away from me altogether to begin a grieving of sorts. Or grieve about what had been and make more room for what there might still be. I don't know. What I needed was simply to give in, out loud. To out my confusion of these past months.*

*Eli, though another of your ex-lovers like Sophie can, unlike her, afford to talk about you, though maybe not totally objectively. She still sees you as a bit of a ... what was her expression again? Something about a loose canon. Can't remember the exact words but whatever she said seemed to fit at the time. You probably know what she meant.*

*So, while Sophie and Isa paired up for the evening, Eli and I spent that time together, with me talking about the weird turns and twists that I had considered. It was all very positive, really.*

The vibrations of the engines changed patterns. The plane had begun its descent. I tightened my seatbelt further, gesture symbolic of the tightness inside my chest.

*Alex, during our last phone conversation, on the night of your return from the slopes, you said that you had been able to regroup your energies during your long solitary walks through fields and forests. You said that you were feeling something like a sense of well-being and now, I need to be honest with you too. You see, there is something I realised, but only after I had hung up after our last phone conversation.*

*Fifteen days without hearing your voice, and I no longer see you. You understand what I mean by that, don't you? I no longer have to organise my work around the privacy I needed, until recently, just to think of you. The urge to write is gone. I no longer feel like the smoker who can't move from one room to the other without taking cigarettes, ashtray and lighter with her. I feel suddenly unencumbered.*

*Sophie has cancelled her trip to Brussels. But this time both know why. We need time to consolidate what remains.*

The searing constriction around my lungs intensified as the plane tilted its nose towards the numberless garlands of lights, now all a glitter far below the plane belly. My eyes went back to your words, masochistically, to rub more salt in the wound.

*So, there is no need for you to come to Paris. Not any more.*

No need! No longer a need, not even one borne out of a longing or simply one out of a frustrated sexual desire. No need anymore for me, though the very need to see me, to hold me, to write to me, to hear my voice had filled and transformed the quality of all your waking moments, leading up to and including our last phone conversation. No need, not even one for a decent finality. You had written, 'The storm has passed.'

My equation was simple and as direct as the wording you had couched in that last letter. No need equated with no desire which in turn equated with no longer a need for you to pursue the elusive ghost of an ephemeral emotional connection with me.

Jim Morrison's doomsday voice reverberated from somewhere, from within a cache where old memories lie forever trapped in time, 'This is the end ... my friend ... This is the end, my friend.' But why had you lacked the courage to deliver your message directly from your mouth to my ear, live? Why hadn't you dialled my number back in Nice, one last time, to deliver the message of your newly-found need to nurse a fledgling peace of the heart with Sophie. And I read on.

*I'm sorry for the lack of tenderness in my words, but I need to be clear about my new priorities. I want to give all the attention I can to my father who is still fighting, mostly I suspect, to stay with my mother another day, one more day at a time. Yes, he's made it beyond Easter. He's still in Lyons and that makes it even more difficult in a way. All I can do for now is call him every day. And of course, my other priority is to find ways in which to reconnect with Sophie, ways in which I can let her get closer to me. There too, it's got to be a one-day-at-a-time affair.*

*I don't think the airline will refund you the plane fare at such short notice, so please, Alex, put your pride aside and cash the cheque I've enclosed for that purpose.*

The cheque; your formal signature, seen for the first time, elegant, neat, compact; the sum rounded off a little over the price of a return fare. Torn, shredded in anger, in pain, in humiliation ... but mostly in anger.

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## Montmartre, Paris

The fog was low over the Sacré Coeur, the top of its massive, white *coupo*le partially eaten by the mist. From where I sat, sipping a piping hot *café au lait*, the world was indeed golden.

On the other side of the street, the Venetian merry-go-round, at the foot of the *butte*, was ablaze and glorious. Its ornate gondolas glistened under their gold leaves, angry stallions from another era were frozen by time, nostrils flaring; Equus, turned to plaster, in memory of his master's sin. Here I was, a stone's throw away from your apartment in Rue Gabrielle. No, not for me the shared pleasures and the secrets whispered from the depth of the bed I had so fantasised about.

With a sigh, I reprimanded myself; I had boarded the plane, earlier that evening, strengthened by the resolution to make the most of my pre-paid ticket. That trip to Paris would actually be good for me. Why, indeed, waste a perfectly good plane fare, to Paris of all places? Among its many enticements, it can be said that Paris is a magic city, even for the depressed. Some would say, especially for the depressed, so vibrant, so energising it is.

I also knew that I could use some of my time there to meet up with other relatives, on Mayanne's side of the family, the ones I had planned to visit when I had first landed here, back in January. As it had turned out, I had been so busy and involved during those few days with the four of you that I had not made the time to contact them.

And then, on the evening of my second trip to Paris, the Sacré Coeur dominated the Montmartre panorama, enormous, in shades of dingy white, against the grey white of the encroaching night. Making my way back to the hotel through the lively but winding, narrow streets of the Butte, I plotted the next day's activity, to the rhythm of the music escaping from the many little restaurants and side-walk cafes jostling each other along my path.

Into the night, back turned to the hive of lively entertainment, I took in the skyline blocked by the century-old slate rooftops, bristling with TV antennas planted amongst the long chimney pots. Naked light bulbs cast crude, strange shadows that slid across the windowpanes.

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The bells from the little church of St Augustin, on rue de la Bienfaisance, tolled three times. The majestic, black and gold wrought iron gate to the parc Monceau lay straight ahead through Boulevard de Malesherbes, then left on Boulevard de Courcelles, only a ten minute stroll away.

The pull of the park was too great to resist. The temptation to go back to our green park bench, to smile at the ducklings frolicking in the pond, once germinated, quickly took root. My watch confirmed five minutes past three. Mid-afternoon: you would be either tucked away inside the dark-grey, impenetrable façade of your office building or at the Palais de Justice. At that time of the afternoon, Ms d' Anville would not be feeding pigeons in a park.

I did not wish to see you. That was very clear to me. I simply needed to finalise our entanglement with what I construed as an epilogue of sorts. By visiting one last time the place that, through our long-distance involvement, had become so important to us. I wanted one last pilgrimage to the mystical shrine of our mythical togetherness.

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I reached the intersection of Boulevard Malesherbes and rue de Monceau. I hesitated. I had reached the immediate vicinity of the park too quickly. I was not ready to go through its black and gold gates. Knowing that I could be sitting on our bench within five minutes proved to be a sort of anticlimax. I needed to delay that moment further: six months, so many hours and just a little longer. I turned left into the rue de Monceau, as it is not, in spite of its name, the one that leads, directly, to the park, then left again into rue Murillo, to reach the front entrance of the park the long way around.

And there it was, on my right, the smallish artery with the pompous name of Avenue Velasquez, and the thick, grey façade behind which I could almost sense you, at your desk, eyes lowered, poring over your most pressing briefs, in that office I had never visited; in that office where you had put the bouquet of tulips I had offered to you, long ago, it seemed; in that office, the one that has great windows that you liked to open wide to the park to listen to its sounds, when you missed me; in that office where you will now, forever, remain focused, your eyes neither sparkling with sunshine, nor clouded by the helplessness that comes with being too afraid to do any more than desire.

My heart fluttered, it missed a beat. I missed a step. But I hurried on to put more distance between you, inside your walls, and me in the street below. I could have cut right through the park by going through the side gate in Avenue Ferdousi Ruysdael but I decided against it. I had to earn the pleasure of sitting on my little green park bench by delaying the moment further, and I had to go in through the main gates. I had watched you come through them, once. I had watched you tap an impatient tan court shoe on the sidewalk, that day when the anticipation of making visual contact with me, of sitting tightly wedged against me on a park bench had visibly agitated all your senses. It only left room for your impatience towards the unrelenting traffic on the Avenue. Its uninterrupted flow stole minutes from us, minutes that you thought, then, were too precious to waste. I passed Avenue van Dyck that also traversed the park, making my way to the other side of Avenue de Courcelles.

I breathed deeply as I made my way towards the wrought iron entrance still a little distance away. I passed in front of the restaurant where you had taken me that day, the restaurant so impossibly close to your office that it could not offer you any privacy from passing colleagues.

Behind the glass of the enclosed terrace, I saw a couple seated at our table. Whereas you and I had hardly touched our meal, their plates were empty except for the skeleton of a fish on one and chicken bones on the other. These two are obviously not lovers, I thought to myself. I can tell.

It was at that table that you asked me if I had been a victim of rape. 'A survivor,' I had glibly replied in a vain attempt to side-step your question. As things turned out, that question of yours had taken both of us on a journey, a hard journey, through very dark days. At the same time, though, it had provided us with something concrete, something intimate to share. Yes, intimate and very personal and yet removed from 'us' as we cautiously began the long mile towards emotional intimacy.

But then, when during our lunch in the restaurant close to your office, you had reminded me of the other conversation Eli or Isa had started the night before at Le Prince Noir, I had not known that our short conversation would have struck a more direct chord in Sophie, the topic having been the sexual abuse of children. More so than the rape of adult women. Though, as is most often the case in our society, we talked about little boys' sufferings and not little girls'.

At the time, you see, I had quite forgotten what little she had told me of her own ordeal with her brother. Though this is neither here nor there, I find it amazing how male violence has a way of lashing out, swiftly, brutally, as efficiently as the lurking goanna's jaws crack the thin protective shells the mother-bird has so cleverly hidden. Snakes that slither on their bellies are only different in that they swallow the whole thing. I have come to realise that male violence cracks chunks of our lives. You, my love, seem to have been overlooked. You must have been born under a lucky star and the angel of violence has left your door untouched. I wonder about little Emma's door and hope your talisman is on it.

So many half-baked thoughts foamed inside my brain but all I was truly focused on, at that very private moment, were the wrought iron park gates. I swallowed harder, needing to stop the pounding of my heart as I passed through them. It was there, the park was there, neat and contained, familiar and yet foreign. Perhaps it was because bloom and foliage had taken over every branch and every piece of protected soil.

Winter frost on naked, gnarled brown branches was, too, a memory. Now, little *pâquerettes* had made it their business to sprout through the otherwise manicured grass, as soon as the gardener had trimmed the last blade. Maybe it was the afternoon light that, today, made everything bright and cheerful. The pond itself had not changed, it had only added more sparkle to its mossy water. No ducklings in sight, they must have metamorphosed into the large and

majestic ducks that glided past, as if reviewing the day's parade of onlookers. Yes, I thought sadly, feeling suddenly empty even of apprehension, time has moved on.

My next objective was to find the bench. A sudden thought yielded something akin to panic. What if it is taken by a mother watching her child feed the ducks? Where will I sit? I had not waited six months, and a few hours, just to sit on any park bench. Briskly, I made my way around the pond, circumnavigating tricycles and little dogs that were walking their mistress on very long retractable leashes.

And then I saw it: vacant and not a child in sight. It was, as I had remembered it, scaly paint in a *camaieu* of green, a little to the side of the white marble Muses: a solitary bench in a romantic photograph. I touched its roughness. I could not have guessed the number of scales of a different green that were now exposed. Before sitting down facing the pond, legs tucked in tight against its rounded lip, eyes closed, I caressed the wooden backrest feeling for marks made by the passing of years, fingertips grazing other lovers' benchmark moments scratched into the paint. I sat on that little park bench letting the gentle sun ease the tightness in my brow and the pressure away from my heart. Away from my throat.

I played back that day in January when you had taken me to the kiosk, a little further inside the park to buy us a *crème de marrons* waffle, another topped with powdery-white icing sugar and two strong, very hot coffees in thin plastic cups. To your coffee, you had added a *nuage*, a cloud of milk, so little in fact that I had asked you why you even bothered.

'*J'aime cette couleur,*' you said, eyes shining from the cold but also from the shimmery feeling uncoiling once again in your lower belly. '*La couleur de ce café ... it's almost the colour of your tan. Tantalising and rich.*' You had leaned a little closer to me but you looked away as you added, 'Just as rich and full of promises.' And now, as I walk alone in this park, I shake my head, *désabusée*, jaded by the suggestive power of the words that roll off the tongue of a woman in lust!

At my left a toddler's sudden shrieks startled me into a more upright position to check that he was all right. I opened my eyes.

My heart hiccuped, thumped and kicked inside my ribcage like a wild stallion in a stall. You, there! Standing still, frozen in mid-stride while rounding the bend that lead to the front part of the pond. You had already caught sight of me. I saw you a fraction of a second too late. At a showdown at OK Corral, your bullet would have pierced my heart, while my hand had only begun gripping the pistol butt.

Fight or flight: a decision needed to be made. No time in which to make it. I remember hearing myself think, 'You're seated ... stay seated.' A second, truly frozen in time, freeze-frame. As in an echo chamber, or the other end of a stethoscope, only my heart kept on pumping, wildly. Something had to give. It did. You moved forward, slowly. I watched you, as I might have watched you on a big screen. In this scene the slim auburn-haired woman, smartly dressed in a soft-grey business suit looks stricken, as if in the clutch of strong emotional turmoil. In her hand a briefcase. Over one shoulder the strap of a handbag the colour of her suit. Each of her tentative steps brings her forward as the gravel crunches underfoot. No one yelled, 'Cut!'

I saw you look at the trail, at the centimetres of trail, as they disappeared under each of your shoes. One step and another, and another. You had, finally, fully rounded the bend of the little gravelly trail. You kept on coming towards the green bench, obeying the urge you had felt, back in your office, to just go out and sit on our bench.

The knee-length hem of your dove-grey suit had brushed against my jeans and became still. I looked away from it and upwards. Our eyes met. Flashes of desire uncoiled from where they had nested, in my lower belly. They wiggled and quivered up and down my spine, to my groin, through my thighs, back up through my belly, through my heart and around and around it they danced.

You were here. You were motionless, your face bent slightly towards mine, your eyes squinting, almost peering into mine. As if to make sure, doubly sure. Again, something had to give. It did.

"Adrienne..." said my voice huskily, "I ... I thought ... I didn't think ... you'd be in the park." Was I apologising for my unscheduled appearance in this park, on this bench, for a second intrusion in your life, for being on your territory? "I ... assumed you'd be ... at work," I added somewhat more firmly.

"I was." Your eyes softened as you added softly, "But I got called away." I looked at you, quizzically. I patted the empty space next to me on the bench, an offer for you to sit down. As you did, I slid a couple of centimetres away, to give you more space, to not give your thigh the option to not settle against mine. You looked straight ahead in the direction of the marble Muses.

"There I was, doing what I do best ... and then," I saw you hesitate. Were you afraid of divulging a vulnerability that you had hoped to have, by now, buried deep, deeper, so deeply that you had believed it to be forever inaccessible? "But then ... I don't know what happened." Your hands moved away from your lap to brush the air in front of you, a gesture that emphasised your incomprehension of the whole thing. "I just had to come down here ... for a walk."

Bile rose to my throat for the second time since reading the opening paragraph of your last letter of cancellation. 'Infatuation.' I almost snorted out loud. Instead I sneered silently. Your need for a walk had to have been dictated, solely, by a need for fresh air. Obviously not by any emotional impulse to connect with me one last time, in absentia.

Long seconds slid silently past while we remained awkwardly quiet, staring ahead. The photographic potential of a tight close-up of the moss as it rose from the pond's surface to creep over the Muses' marble feet still appealed to me. It stained the lower folds of their robes a fuzzy, dark-emerald shade of green.

But the pond became blurry. The Muses suddenly looked unexpectedly ghostly. Loose and imprecise whitish shapes. The children's voices were muffled, as if trapped under a thick layer of snow. I made myself swallow hard and blink. I sensed you turning towards me.

I heard you ask softly, "Why are you here?"

The bitter taste of bile gave my words an edge I had not intended, "Where else should I be?" I glanced at your face and I turned away from it, adding, "You do remember, don't you, that I had been planning a visit ... to Paris?" I hesitated wondering whether or not to labour the point further. "You do, don't you?" And more words fused, with a mind to challenge you, with a mind to hurt you, "In spite of many twists and turns, all *inexplicably* convoluted ..." I had used words you had written in that dreadful letter because I could. Because I wanted to deride you. I was angry. I wanted to hurt you. "... I bought a ticket. I boarded the plane yesterday as planned and ... here I am. " Trying to sound nonchalant I added, "Pretty simple really. I am happy to see Paris in full bloom. It is a first for me, you know."

"I know," you said very quietly, choosing not to acknowledge the double entendre intended. I fought against the urge to look at you, to look into your eyes, to look into your face. To take it between my two hands and shake you asking, 'Why, Adrienne, why?' But I did not. Instead, I made myself breathe, deeply, surreptitiously to protect my pride. Self-control. Composure always, if only on the outside. You were not going to see me dissolve. I was not going to whine. I was not going to ask ... anything. And surely, you were not going to be callous enough to ask whether or not I had received your letter on time. Surely, you were not going to ask why I had not cancelled my trip.

"No reason whatsoever. Or at least no good ones."

Stricken, I realised I had spoken my last thought out loud. I turned to you. Our eyes met squarely for the second time since we had met so unexpectedly. I was hoping my face was wearing its mask properly in place, the hard one, the one created for just such a moment.

You said, "Alex?"

I arched an eyebrow, lifted my chin and said stiffly, "Yes?" I watched you look away, again in the direction of the pond. Your eyes trailed behind a hairy little dog. Untied from its lead, snout in the air, it trotted past our bench. And then, you dragged your eyes back to mine.

"Alex, nothing I could try to explain would make sense to you."

Right. Don't try me! Not anymore.

I moved a hand towards your words, to stop the flow of what I thought would be an apology of some kind. I did not want one. I had no use for one. Words can never excuse the pain created by other words before them. At best, they can only redirect. They can only justify the intent. They can never cancel each other. Though, as mere words they are free to beg. They can actually beg for forgiveness, on behalf of the one who had carelessly given them life. Some react well to that. Some even say they forgive. When they do, though, they are also asked to forget. The reply to that is often, 'I will. Just give me time.' And there the matter rests. Everyone seems content with

that. Both parties pretend to believe the lie. A lie it has to be. A lie said and done in the name of one's love for the other.

"Sophie ... she's away. She's in Brussels ... as planned. Well ...at least I think she is," you added turning to face me. I stopped breathing. "You see ... God, Alex ... there was never any talk about her not ... not going. About her not going to Brussels as planned ... yesterday."

Something lurched in my stomach. I stared at you, at your eyes, searching for clues that would help me make sense of what you had just said. What had lurched in my stomach solidified almost instantly into an ice rock. A rock, not a block. A heavy jagged rock. And yet, at the same time the rush of hot anger rose from it to my chest. How did I ever manage to just sit there with the sphinx's stoicism? Oh, how I wanted to hate you, Adrienne. You would have seen me tense as I looked away from your face but you could not see the conflict of emotions that whirled within me at that precise moment.

I cannot explain clearly what happened, or more to the point what I felt, not even now, but at some stage the Muses, the pond, everything receded to the end of a long black tunnel. I knew you were talking to me but I did not hear your words. Not even muffled sounds. To this day, I do not know what you were saying at that very specific moment.

And then I felt a tug at my sleeve. The dark tunnel between me and the pond was still in place, sooty-black and palpable. At the other end of it the pond was tiny and bleak and far away as if seen through the wrong end of a spyglass.

Another tug at my elbow. I became aware of my own breathing, of my chest rising and falling. Of the air coming in through my nostrils and cooling the back of my throat. I blinked. Bits of the tunnel became cleaner, clearer. Other fragments curdled to better separate and vanish. The pond and the Muses zoomed back into the normal full frame focus. A little child was laughing somewhere close by. The late afternoon sun was warm on my face.

"Alex, *parle-moi ... Je t' en prie.*" You wanted me to talk to you! What did you want me to say to you? Was there anything at all you could not wait to have me ask?

Teeth clenched, I dragged my eyes back to your face. The brown of your irises was soft, gentle, though intense in its focus. Just as I had remembered all these months. Though your face was not and your lips were not, your eyes were smiling at me. I sensed a smile of my own soften my jaw, my mouth, my lips, but I had not put it there. I did not want it to be there. Not so soon.

"Alex ... *écoute ...* " You had begun the unravelling of your confusion. You pursued your thoughts more gingerly now. "Sophie and I did ... we did have a very pleasant time that day away with Eli and Isa. It was like a break, a break from what had become our routine ... during ... well during the past months. It was nice, really. We did have a feel-good talk of sorts with each one of them, I mean me with Eli and Sophie with Isa. Eli did come back to my place. She had a good go at you. I think she'd been saving it, probably not aware of it herself since whenever. Anyway, she did try to knock some sense into me, to convince me of the foolishness of ... of ... well ... of any involvement with you."

Once again, you looked away towards the pond. I watched you smooth the grey fabric of your skirt under the palm of your hand, patting its hem against the soft pearly sheen of your stockinged knee.

My eyes had followed your hand to the angular, sensual shape of your kneecap and I made myself look away, suffused with a re-emergence of desire. I was confused, not knowing whether to bring back my anger or to just let it die out, and let a sense of relief peak in its place. I forced my thoughts back to your words. I needed them, if anything, to soften the fresh scar tissue on my heart.

And by the time you turned to face me, I was finally able to let my eyes float over your face as they wished, relinquishing any control I had previously exerted over them.

You continued slowly, deliberately, "She's right, of course." I frowned and almost glowered again. "But not for the reasons she gave."

Fair enough. I could well imagine Eli's reasoning. Many, many, many years had passed but some wounds, though healed, remain tender to the touch. Just like I knew mine would. In Elisabeth's case, she had just turned nineteen, I had just turned twenty-five. We were both August Leos. She had gone on with her life and had recently found Isa. However, the slightly raw spot that might have lingered, in spite of the passing of years, could certainly have prompted her to warn you off.

She would have reminded you, too, as any good friend would, of the worthiness of the feelings you could still salvage for Sophie. If only you tried. If only you chopped me away from your consciousness. Yes, I could replay that night's discourse, as accurately as if I had been there. Subtext and all.

And of course I had to grapple with the notion that, once again, you had chickened out. Again, you had sold me out in a panic. Panic selling. Panic ditching. Or was it out of a sense of duty? Out of a sense of responsibility? Because of your guilt, maybe? Because of an acute sense of loyalty? I did not say anything. I did not ask anything, not then, and not later. You and I had skirted that quicksand pit often enough to know that if either one of us were to dip in more than a big toe, it would swallow us whole. Too late, then, to clutch at words and crawl back to the safety of dignity and reason.

You said that you had no idea why you told your secretary, Helene, that you needed to go home early. There was nothing awaiting you there. Up to that moment, you said you had been totally focused on finding the best outcome for the client firm whose name was written in black block letters across the cover of the thick file open in front of you. Then you looked up from the sheaths of paper. You had tried a vague stretch. You had thought about getting yourself a cup of coffee, but you knew that it was not a need for caffeine that had interrupted your concentration. You said that the sounds of the park, though filtered by the large windows closed behind your desk, seemed to have become louder. Enticing you. It is then that you thought of the coolness of the pond, of the dense bloom that covered every shrub and every branch, and of the late afternoon sunlight, as it would dance across the foliage that hung above the little park bench.

It is then that your connectedness to the present had fully returned. You had identified the cause of your unease. You remembered that, if you had not posted that last letter you would, indeed, have been in a tremendous rush to leave your office early. With trepidation, you would have rushed out to find me in the park, on our bench, to sit briefly next to me, your eyes alive with desire; the desire to take me to a place where you, where I, where we could finally embrace, devour, love each other.

So, as it were, you had heaved a heavy sigh, sad again and still not comprehending your own reasoning. Then, you admitted to yourself that the time for undivided concentration on your work had passed and that if you were going to mourn whatever might have been you needed to do it, now, alone. An anonymous woman, on an anonymous bench, in an anonymous park.

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## Heaven was nearby

"Alex? *Chérie*, now that I've managed to tear myself from this bed, from you ... mineral water, tea, coffee ... Tell me, what would you like?"

"Well, actually, there is a little more choice here than you might think. Even without resorting to room service." You looked at me quizzically, short love-tousled hair sticking out at odd angles, uninhibited by your nakedness.

I grinned, imagining a waiter coming into the room with a trolley laden with pre-dawn snacks, the kind lovers indulge in. He would find you, as you were, by the large ornate mirror that encompasses three quarters of the room; a tasteful imitation quite likely intended to remind the tourist that the real splendours of Versailles were no longer that far away. And then he would find me on the big double bed, visibly naked too beneath the loosely twisted sheet thrown sideways across my body.

"There's a fridge inside that console over there," I said pointing at the cleverly sculpted piece of furniture in the corner.

"*Ah, mais c'est super ça!*" you exclaimed, a little surprised. "*Très pratique*, but not very *Montmartrois*. And this brings in a nice touch, too," you added, patting the leafy plant set atop the *secrétaire*. "*C'est vraiment charmant ici.*" I was pleased you were pleased with my choice of hotel, of décor. "Glad you didn't book yourself into one of those impersonal franchised hotels like the *Mercure*. So sterile, they give me the creeps every time I have to go in and visit someone."

I watched you move around the room, shaking that imagined creepy feeling off your slender shoulders. You moved back towards the little fridge, opened its little door and peered inside. The tan marks you had accumulated each summer, and especially those of last summer, the summer Sophie and you had gone to Turkey, divided your body into two distinct parts, each separated from the other by the band of alabaster cream etched across your slim buttocks. Contrasted with that pale silkiness was the soft tan you had retained, more pronounced on your upper back, more diaphanous, I had noticed earlier, over your small breasts and belly.

Little did I know back in Brisbane, when on the coffee-table I had scattered the pictures Sophie had sent of your recent holiday around Istanbul and Cappadocia, that a few months later I would be making love to you. That you, the one in the turquoise bikini who smiled so sweetly at the camera, visibly dripping wet from a dip in the hotel pool, would, so soon, become my obsession. And I a Jezebel.

"So, now that we have all these things to choose from," you said, pulling out the makings of an incongruous snack, "tell me what you would like? *Là, tout d' suite.*" Right here, right now.

Your back still turned to me, you were near the large reproduction of one of Degas' studies; the naked back of a woman bathed in the warm and earthy tones that gave her body a quiet and deeply sensual strength. This pastel might well be entitled *Woman Drying Her Hair*. You, by comparison, looked very frail. As my point of focus shifted, I saw you looking into the depth of the mirror, and I became aware, that all along, you had been quietly studying my own reflected image framed by the gilded mirror.

"*Chérie, alors?*" you asked again, smiling smugly before pivoting to face me. In your hand was a fully ripe mango, a fruit from another world. I had bought it the night before, during my solitary walk through the streets of Montmartre, as I had found my way back to this hotel. In a disbelieving sort of way I pondered the turn of events that had led to your presence, here in this room. To you, naked in front of the bed where we had made love, frantic and desperate love, satiated love, sleep-waking love until dawn. To you, holding at breast level the fruit I had bought from an Arab vendor, in rue Caulaincourt, at the time when, unaware as you were of my presence in your neighbourhood, you would have been tossing in your own bed. Possibly regretting having sent your last letter. Possibly imagining yourself in my arms. Possibly feeling sorry for yourself, despite your endeavours to make sure that would never happen. Because of that and all the rest.

"Would you like it now? It's a beautiful fruit, big enough for two."

Unaware, you had struck the pose Botticelli had carved in Italian marble for *Le Fruit Défendu*. You did not know that, while in the early throes of desire for you, I had brought back from the Louvre a black and white reproduction of that masterpiece. That was on the day before I left you, having just found you, to board the plane for Nice. That was on the afternoon of the night

that had led us into our first dawn; that most awful of dawns spent pressed against each other, pressed against the door to Eli's flat. Too afraid to let ourselves in. Too afraid to lose control. Too afraid to have our exploding desire lead us into an inextricable remorse. Instead, for you, for me, that night became one of regrets. Regrets of not having dared.

As I lay there watching you, propped against the headboard, in room 23, hotel du Cheval Blanc, you were unwittingly taking me the full circle. I sighed contentedly, only because I had never learnt to purr.

"Or, I could make us some little camembert and *saucisson* canapés. Little toasts, yes?"

"Adrienne, you really want to know what I would like now? Beside more of you?" I asked teasingly, back to the here and now. You detached yourself from your twin, your own reflection in the mirror, and came back to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Actually no, Alex, *chérie* ... too late for that now." Gently you brought my thighs close around your buttocks. You leaned back against my breasts and caressed the back of my knees. "I'm the one who is going to tell you what you can have." You turned to face me and brushed your mouth against the tip of my nose. "Lover ...," you began with feather-light lips against my eyelashes. "*Chérie* ... right now," you whispered on the contour of my cheekbone, "right now, Alex, you can have all of me." Your voice trailed off in a low murmur. You held me tightly, your breasts pressed against mine, your legs intertwined with mine. "You can have as much of me as you want and ... I'll even throw in a strong black coffee for two ... later." The soft tip of your tongue moistened the corner of my mouth, igniting a trail of desire, as it travelled away from my chin, down to my throat, tentatively into the hollow of my collarbone, flutter-light around one nipple, and down into the hollow of my navel. "Just the way ... I know ... you like it."

I sighed as your breath, warm against my pubic hair, tightened the muscles in my sex.

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I woke up in that rumped bed. The faint rays of pale light that filtered through the shutters and the muted sounds that rose from the street signalled that dawn had let in the morning. Your arm was folded over my breasts. You were pressed against my back, the curve of your body tightly moulded against mine. Your breath came softly, regularly, as you slept, forehead against the nape of my neck. Instinctively, I reached behind to caress the small of your back and for the satiny feel of your buttocks. A sigh and a smile of well-being met on my lips. And I lay there, your arm around me in the large bed not yet bathed in the Montmartre morning light. I watched it creep inwards though, mute, frail and ghostly, through the dark shutters as I watched over your sleep. As I listened to your slow breathing. As I counted the rhythm of your heartbeat right below my shoulder blade.

We were only a stone's throw away from the Venetian merry-go-round at the base of the Sacré Coeur. A stone's throw away from your own apartment. And the words you had uttered earlier floated back to my consciousness, "Right now you can have all of me."

"Yes," I sighed, "for right now, right now I can, have all of you." You stirred against me. I shifted position to caress your hair the way one does to soothe a child who should sleep a little longer. I wanted to remain silent that little moment longer, alone in our cocoon.

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"*Alors, Mesdames*, ready to order?" A waiter clothed in the Parisian black and white tradition, had finally made his way to our table wedged between the great counter and the wall. The hem of his thick black linen waistcoat rested gently on the top of the long, white, immaculate apron folded across his middle,

"*Pain Poilâne* for two, *s'il vous plait*, the Henri IV cheese platter *et ...* your *plateau de charcuterie Périgourdienne*." You glanced at me seeking confirmation and switched to the wine list. "And a bottle of your Nuits St. Georges. This one, right here," you said, pointing to the list.

The waiter, confident in his knowledge as wine advisor, as all waiters had to be at this Henri IV restaurant, arched his eyebrows, and clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"May I suggest ..." he started but firmly, albeit politely, you confirmed the choice you had made on my behalf.

"Non, non, *j'insiste*." And smiling at me you added, unabashed, "*It's Madame's favourite wine*." I grinned back, mimicking his quiet 'tsk, tsk' of disapproval, as the waiter moved away. You reached for my hand and caressed my fingers letting the warm chestnut of your eyes melt into mine.

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Your hand tucked in mine, inside the large pocket of my linen jacket, arm against arm, shoulder against shoulder, we strolled to the tiny, ever so quaint Place Dauphine, only a couple of streets away from Quai de la Tournelle but seemingly forgotten by time. The bay windows and terraces of the half dozen restaurants that lined it on either side glowed softly to the swaying rhythm of the candles, alight, on each table. The chatter of voices spilled into the narrow street, though muffled, as we ambled, hand in hand, without a word, too contented to talk. Then you took me to la Passerelle des Arts, that frail metallic bridge painted cast-iron green that links the narrow part of the Seine on the Rive Gauche to Quai du Louvre on the Rive Droite. You wanted to share the white fullness of the moon with me.

Anonymous lovers, we leaned on the parapet as the Bateaux Mouches glided below us trailing shimmery ribbons of light, blue, green, gold, red, and orange on the glistening back of the river. I turned towards you, to look into your eyes blackened by the night, to reach for your lips, to take their warmth, their desire unto mine.

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Later that evening my thoughts had turned towards a bed for the night. I had assumed we would go back to our safe-haven in room 23 but you said, "Non, *chérie*, not tonight." Your tone was unexpectedly sombre. Not tonight as in 'Thank you m' am'? As in, 'Don't call us, we'll call you'?

My heart sank. We had not yet reached the stage of easy comfort with each other. And it was far too soon to take you or your desire of me for granted. How to control the old fear that spikes each time little Alex, surely it has to do with a child-within thing, feels she is about to get left behind? How to hide the acuteness of my distress at the thought that you and I had so suddenly reached a cul-de-sac; that you had ventured as far as you had felt it safe to do; that this was it. *Pendant que tu pouvais encore rebrousser chemin*.

You were struggling for the right words but the words you were after did not come easily. And so, an awkward silence had settled over us as I let you lead me away from the traffic of the main street. I was bracing myself. Whatever truth you were having difficulty formulating had to be faced stoically. A mad inner scramble to rebuild defences rendered utterly ineffectual by the last couple of days of total abandonment churned into a self-protective mind-set, the shield I needed at such times when I did not know exactly where the pain would come from. From you of course, but from what part of you? The lover-you or the faithful partner-you? The lustful-you or the guilt ridden-you? You stopped walking abruptly and turned me around to face you, one hand on my sleeve.

"Alex, it's about Sophie." I held my breath, the shield not yet in place. "Before she left ..." you began guardedly, "... she said she'd call a couple of times." Surprisingly your voice softened and your shoulders relaxed into your words in unison with mine, "Only once actually, as opposed to ... to every night as she would normally have done ... before." I exhaled stale breath and breathed in, deeply and strongly, wishing to gulp the cool night air. I could deal with what you needed to do. It had been a false alert. You paused and raised your chin to the lamppost that towered over us, "She said she'd only call once ... on her third night away, before she went to bed." You glanced at

me and softly, you added, "... just to see how I am." Your eyes held mine squarely. "You understand?"

"I understand," I answered flatly. I did understand, of course I did. I had obviously assumed, without dwelling on it, that Sophie would call, at least a couple of times, during her five days' absence. Yes, of course, to share the highlights of the conference with you, but also to check up on you. But the fact that it was to be tonight – and that I knew she had been totally accurate in her overall suspicions, both jarred against the silken smooth backdrop of our evening. Something else jarred, albeit differently – you had not told me about your obligation to be home that night at any prearranged time. That made me irrationally angry. I felt that I could easily slip and vent some of that anger by throwing a tantrum, 'No problem, Adrienne!' I could say in that hard-hitting, clipped tone that becomes mine when I want to be cutting. 'You go home now. Make sure you're nicely tucked in bed by the time she calls. You can always find me at the hotel when you're done.'

But I did not. You would not have understood and it would have left me with a nasty feeling to dispose of later because that outburst would have been unjustified. Besides, I reminded myself that I did not do tantrums. I gave them up in the Congo.

"So, I want you to come home with me." Your eyes met mine. "I want you to see where I live. And I want to get there before she calls." You slid the cuff of your sleeve upwards to glance at your watch. "Anyway, I can't live forever with the one change of clothes I happened to have had in the back of my car, right? So, a night at my place will take care of that, too."

So that was it? No impasse. No farewell under a lamppost. What to do, then, with my half-in-place shield? Which command to give shield: Upgrade to total deployment! Abort! Dismantle! Stand by?

The truly nasty thing about that basic insecurity of mine is that the alarm it triggers, even once dissipated, never yields an equivalent strength of euphoria, not even of release. It just thins out.

Behind the resorption of my initial fear lurked another. That one did not stem from not wanting to see the mailbox where all of my letters had lain waiting for you to find them and secret them away. It was not connected to your apartment, the living room in which you had spent so many hours, painful ones lately, on the phone to me. It was not even because I minded spending the night there with you that this other fear had settled there. It was a simple resentment borne out of having been left in the dark in terms of your evening arrangement with Sophie.

And once my first uncertainty had been assuaged by your placating tones, I understood that my residual unease, my reservations about spending the night in your apartment were grafted on something you had said at the parc Monceau. And that something had remained sticky in the back of my mind.

We had reconnected on the green bench facing the pond, and you had just admitted that Sophie was after all in Brussels, as planned, but you had added with a flitting frown, "Well ... at least I think she is."

That hook had stayed embedded in a dark little corner of my thoughts all this time and I had not dared show it to you. And even as I trailed a little behind as you stepped into the lift, I did not know how to broach the possibility that Sophie might have been giving you just enough rope with which to hang yourself.

But I let you lead me to your landing, and to your door. You were aware of my reticence too, but I doubt you had identified its cause correctly. How could you have? To your credit, though, you did what you could to ease away the shadow that had descended upon us too quickly. Like the night sky that comes too suddenly at the end of a winter afternoon. I, on the other hand, must admit to not having done anything to help you in your attempts. Passive resistance was, I admit, a poor front behind which to let my apprehension run wild.

After the last turn of the bolt you opened the front door and moved aside to let me go in first. I shook my head. I could see that your apartment was in total darkness, and I had just had an alarming image of Sophie sitting patiently on the sofa, lying in wait to greet us with an exultant, '*Alors les nanas?* Surprised?' as the lights went on inside the living room. I tried to reason away my qualms, or was it my guilt? But it was only after you had visited all the rooms, looked under the bed and inside the wardrobes, at my request, that I agreed to sit, albeit atypically stiffly, on the sofa next to you.

You soon got up again to pour us a drink. Walking past the console on which your telephone and answering machine were set you noticed an accumulation of messages, for you activated the message bank, perhaps absentmindedly. A voice that could only be that of an elderly woman filtered back to me. She sounded worried and tired. She wanted to know that you were all right. She wanted to know why you had not called for news of your father during the last three evenings. He had asked after you and the caller who was obviously your mother had told him a fib to keep him from fretting any more. She had signed off saying, *Addy, appelle-nous demain matin.*" You would. Tomorrow you would be back at your office and you would return your mother's call.

A digital voice with an incongruous American accent informed you that the call had been placed at '9 oh 2 pee emm.' Then came another voice, pleasantly sensuous and clear. I was a few seconds late in recognising the contralto tones of Eli's voice. She and Isa wished to have the two of you over for dinner soon, any night next week. Then came the series of beeps that usually indicates that the next caller had hung up. And again. A frown creased your brow. You opened your mouth to speak but you remained silent while you poured some whisky into two heavy cut glass tumblers and added a couple of ice cubes to each. Distractedly you took the tumblers with you, one in each hand, to the other side of the living room instead of setting them on the coffee table. I was watching you sort through a stack of CDs when the phone rang. Its electrical pulse jarred all my nerve endings. You turned to look at me; you were ashen. You snatched the receiver from its cradle.

*"Allo. Chérie, oui ... .. Ça va? .... Oui, ... .. Oui, pourquoi? ... .. Mais pourquoi tu demandes? ... .. Ah, non."* You looked awkward. You sounded awkward. Avoiding eye contact, I moved to retrieve one glass from the bookshelf where you had set them. *"Mais oui, bien sûr. Tout va bien d' ton côté? ... .. oui, oui. ... .. Raconte un peu."* Your eyes met mine where I had retreated, to the other side of the living room, my own heart aflutter. *"Non ... .. mais non! ... .. Ben oui, comme d'hab.* Yes, late from work ... No, not with Helene. She left way before I did. No ... you know ... the usual stuff ... .. Yes, I did but only from a walk ... .. Around the block of course. ... .. Why am I out this late? *Mais enfin!* Because I felt like a bit of fresh air. *Il fait superbement doux ce soir.* It's a beautiful night here ... So, how's the conference coming along?"

You glanced at me, lips tight, as you listened to Sophie's reaction to your first overt lies. One fist nervously clenching and unclenching near your thigh, the other tight around the phone, you frowned to a near squint, teeth firmly set on your bottom lip. She obviously wanted to know more about how you had busied yourself during these past two nights. Had she picked up a trail, a clue in your initial hesitation, a suspicious break in your voice? Or was she simply the same caring lover-partner she had always been, simply surprised to find you a little strange? Smiling awkwardly, you moved one hand in my direction to make contact and cocked your head to one side. I read your pantomime correctly; you were sorry. You could not help whatever it was you knew you were handling badly. I left the room to afford you the privacy you needed to pull off what was obviously a difficult conversation.

I guessed Sophie had called earlier, earlier than had been planned. Around dinner time. Not finding you at home poring over your briefs, as you should have been or would have been if ... she had hung up without leaving a message, suddenly spooked by the number of beeps she had heard before your machine had allowed her to hear your taped voice. The telltale beeps told her that you had not yet listened to the evening's messages. Why was that?

She would have called back, bypassing the redial key, just to make sure she had dialled the right number, all the time acutely aware it was a rather silly thing to do. Hadn't it been your voice who had told her that you were too busy, not *able* to pick up the phone but that you hoped she would leave a message you would be sure to return at your earliest convenience?

Then, in her hotel room, one eye on her watch, the other on the TV set because she was no longer able to concentrate on her own work, she would have waited for the agreed hour before calling again. She would have started the conversation by teasingly suggesting that perhaps you had not been where you should have been that time of night. And were you having fun? Did you swallow the hook and choke on it? Did she, in an omniscient sort of way, already know of your betrayal?

Intuiting, though not absolutely knowing, what had made you falter from the beginning of this conversation, her metaphoric teeth were justifiably locked around your ankle. While your own

efforts were geared towards making her talk about her work at the conference, she was not making it easy for you to free yourself.

Standing at the balcony I had found adjacent to your bedroom, I sipped the whisky you had had time to pour. I breathed in the night, the muffled sounds that came in from above the trees. Here, above the irregular rows of apartments, yours was sheltered from the noisy exhilaration that prevailed in the streets of Montmartre, particularly at this time of the year, when the tourist season was well under way. Paris in springtime.

The sips of whisky made their way down to my belly, soothing, smoothing my constricted muscles as they went. I forced myself to give in to the warmth that had begun to radiate from my solar plexus. I breathed in.

Strong and deep, Alex. I breathed out, loosening the tension in my shoulders, back to the real situation you and I were in. You and I, Adrienne, had reconnected against all odds, in a synchronistic sort of way. We had made love passionately. We had made love tenderly. The 'in love' kind of love. We had walked through some of the most beautiful streets in the world. We had walked through them hand in hand.

'*Deux femmes amoureuses*,' I whispered into the night. Two women in love. The waiter at the Henri IV restaurant could certainly be Sophie's witness in a court of law. 'Ah *mais oui*, of course,' he would state categorically. 'It was obvious that these two women were *amantes*. Lovers, for sure.' So might other passers-by, the ones who had whipped around to double-check that, indeed, they had just passed by two women in love. These would have been us, as we kissed on a bridge overlooking the Seine; us, walking hand in hand as opposed to arms linked, as is the customary way for women, for lesbians to do, even in 'swinging' Paris. These would have been us too, stealing a private moment by the moat of the castle of Vaux en Vicomte where you had driven me for a little dose of romantic French history. That would have been only moments before a goose, a white goose, a huge snapping, wing-flapping, cackling goose had come upon us on her way to somewhere. She had chased us away from our solitary vantage point. Back towards the flock of historically minded tourists.

All these moments combined had been but a part of the reality of our time together. As I looked, eyes unfocused, into the night, something disquieting was taking place inside your living room, settling inside your head. And that was the other part of our shared reality, a bigger picture type of reality. The reality you shared with Sophie, one which she could not let go, one which you needed to hold on to.

And no matter what had happened between us I was still the only truly mobile member of our trio. Only I was able to move on, to move away. All the way. The difference between us was only one of aptitude. I could if I wanted to. You could not even if you wanted to.

I had come to Paris for my own form of healing, not to see you. I had had more than I had ever expected. Lady Fate had smiled upon me for the first time since the beginning of our entanglement. She had given me unexpected moments of stolen pleasure. I should not anger her. I should not be greedy. Like the gambler, I should know when to pull out.

The clink of ice cubes sliding around in a glass brought me back to where I was on your balcony. You had finished your conversation with Sophie and you had come to find me. I did not turn around, opting to let you choose the move you felt comfortable to make. I stood immobile, now focused on the glittering city lights that peered at us through the trees. One hand on the balcony railing, the other holding my glass, I felt the warmth of your breath behind my ear. I felt you move closer in behind me. I felt your forehead against my neck, your arms around my waist. I felt you gently pull me backwards against you. I had not realised I had been holding on to my breath as much as to the railing, until it came out through half open lips, long, deep, emptying.

Inside your embrace, I turned to look into your face. Your eyes were dark, dark as the dark glistening Seine as we had gazed at it, before gazing at each other, earlier that night. I felt your desire as surely as I felt the widening crack on the brink of which your emotions teetered.

"Did Sophie believe you?"

Callous question. Though I had spoken softly, the words, or was it the implication behind the words, startled me. Your fingers twitched, where they lay, against the small of my back.

"Yes and no," you sighed wearily. "I'm not sure really."

I could have added somewhat caustically, 'Surely it can't be from the lack of trying.' But I did not. I waited for you to say more. Instead, you took my hand and led me back through the

chiaroscuro of your bedroom into the subdued halogen lighting of the living room. The phone was back in its cradle, mute and once again reduced to its state of inanimate object, no longer a channeler of lies and fears, no longer the relayer of sweaty palms and half truths. No longer able to denounce you to Sophie.

You motioned me back to the bottle-green velvet sofa but you sat, at my feet, on a thick and colourful rug. A beautiful rug obviously Moroccan in design and colour. I had not immediately noticed it but, as I watched you tuck your knees under your buttocks and rest an elbow across my knees, totally unexpected pictures superimposed themselves, rapid-fire, behind my eyes.

Sophie, cross-legged in front of the sweat-stained Tangiers vendor. Sophie, proudly unrolling her golden-fleece rug for my appraisal in the little white-washed courtyard where our affair had begun.

The rug, where she had spread it, at the foot of the bed in her resort bungalow. That rug, your rug, the rug on which, exuberantly, she had wanted to make love. 'Once christened that way, that rug will have real sentimental value,' she had said teasingly, beckoning me to her side on the rug. 'Come here, darling,' she had urged, reaching for my hand. 'Feel how soft it is.' How more awkward can this whole thing get? She had obviously given you the rug but had she also given you the sentimental story that was attached to it? I was not going to ask. I was just going to feel awkward about it.

"So, how is she?" I asked relieved that, head bent as you sat, you would miss my blush of embarrassment.

"*Stressée, fatiguée*, and ... suspicious," you answered, non-committally, your eyes on the lovely pattern of flowers on the rug's inner border.

"Might she come back early ... just to be certain ... either way?" I inquired trying to sound equally remote. "After all, she's only a couple of hours away." I meant to add, 'It's not as if she were on the other side of world.' But I did not.

"No, I don't think so. Sophie wouldn't leave anything half finished. Even if Paris were burning," you said fidgeting with the woollen fringes, "I don't think she'd abandon her work at the conference." I remained doubtful. "Besides, she wants to believe me." As you looked up I knew how helpless guilt looked in your eyes. "After our talks with Isa and Eli, that Sunday, she seemed more hopeful, more confident. More trusting than ... you know."

Great! That *really* makes me feel better! You stopped abruptly aware of what you had just said. You remained silent to better feel the echo of your words before, one elbow resting on my knee, the fingers of your other hand tangling the rug's woollen strands.

So I leaned forward to soothe the soft auburn ruffles of your hair, "And ? ... Or is it a 'but' you want to tack on to what you just said?" I said, attempting a little light-heartedness.

You smiled weakly, "But ... if that silent hope of hers didn't make me feel better at the time, it makes me feel even worse now."

"Why now?"

"Because, then I had only one fear in mind."

"And now?"

"Until yesterday afternoon when I came upon you seated on our little park bench, my only fear had been that you might always be dancing just at the edge of my mind, and with that had come the realisation that I actually wanted to keep you there. On the edge of my thoughts. *Dans mon jardin secret*. My fear was knowing that I didn't want you to fade away, ever."

"And now, what's changed?" I asked pointedly, stroking the nape of your neck as you hid your face against my knees.

"What's changed?" you asked jerking your head up to meet me square on.

Your eyes were brimming with tears. "What's new..." you began, discreetly wiping the corner of your eye, "What's new ... is that up to the moment I found you on our bench, Alex, I could toy with the idea that I might have fabricated an aspect of you." You paused searching to connect with the next thread of your thoughts. "I was feeling reasonably safe while I was thinking that it was only in my mind that you were the absorbing person who was keeping me awake at night and away ... mentally away ... from my work during the day." You looked up again. "Now, I know you are that way ... for me." You dropped your forehead against my knees, banging it a little. "I've had you in my arms, I've kissed you ... I've walked and eaten with you. We've spoken non-stop. We've fallen asleep together and woken up together." You raised your head once more. Your

voice was quivering, "Now, Alex, what's new is that, now, I know why I fell in love with you ... the way I did." You paused. Confused, vanquished? Shouldn't I have been transported by the sincerity of that acknowledgement? We both sipped from our glasses. I knew some of your mannerisms already well enough to know you had more to add. And so I waited, sphinx-like, my heart in my mouth.

"Alex ... I cannot afford to move further into it ... into us." Your voice was once again firm. Ominously controlled. "I cannot give in to that love." The *couperet*, the blade had fallen. You pushed yourself up, away from the rug and away from me. You stood up, whipping a quick hand to your face.

"*Allez, chérie*, another whisky. This isn't the time to be sad." Then, did I hear you mutter, 'Ça, c'est pour plus tard.'? Or was it the ugly twin of my love for you, my dread, that had whispered that the time for sorrow would come soon enough?

For the sake of getting my blood pumping again I got up to stretch and have a look around your interior while, your back to me, you topped up our drinks from the antique, wrought iron trolley that served as bar, at the other end of the room. Warm, welcoming, intimate; three words that best described your decor. Yes, I could understand that a sterile hotel room, colour coordinated in shades of grey, would give you 'the creeps' as you had said back in room 23.

An impressive bookcase lined the wall to the left of the sofa. Books, books and more books: law books, easily recognisable by their old-world leather and gold spines, juxtaposed with what probably amounted to Agatha Christie's complete collection translated into French. Anais Nin, Luce Irigaray, and Ellen Kuzwayo shared another shelf with many others, while Françoise Giroud, Doris Lessing and Hanan al Shaykh were on the one below tightly pressed against, perhaps oppressing, a Kandinski biography.

Somehow I was relieved to detect an apparent lack of order in the way these hundreds of books had been stacked in the bookcase. They were arranged neither by theme nor by alphabetical order, and obviously not according to their date of publication, as another friend of mine had tried to make me do with my own books.

FNAC concert tickets on the console near the phone. Intrigued as to where your taste in music lay, I picked them up for a closer look. Two tickets for the Opera Bastille to see none other than Erica Vaughn-Dreis, the twenty-nine year old mezzo-soprano the operatic world had already hailed as the rightful hybrid heiress to Leila Guensche and La Callas.

I would have given an eye-tooth to see, to hear Vaughn-Dreis live. At the edge of the ticket, the date for which these seats were reserved was clearly visible: the evening of my flight back to Nice. Two nights away, the night of Sophie's return. Here in my hand was the indisputable confirmation, did I need it, that you had intended all along to go on living your life with as little disruption as possible. These seats at the Opera would be a loving way for you to welcome her back into your old life, her old life. They were the tacit understanding that, steadfast in your decision to stay by her side, be it out of guilt or weakness, you were going to make sure your lives remained full and rewarding. Either way, I wondered how long ago you had bought these tickets. Before or after you cancelled my trip to Paris? Before or after the letter that had cancelled me back in Nice? Why not share that very special recital with me? To celebrate a different, worthwhile moment.

I had made up my mind. I would finish the drink you had put inside my hand before disappearing into a hallway. Then I would rise, plead a sudden tiredness, decline your offer to drive me back to the hotel, and call for a taxi. I would take my leave and go. Yes, the time had come. The decision felt right. Why postpone? It would never get any easier.

"Six months is a long time," you said interrupting my thoughts. I looked up. You were standing by the sofa holding out a tray, heaped with slices of *foie gras*, smoked ham and crackers. Your face was tear-stained, like that of a child. Your ruffled hair showed where your fingers had raked through it. You pulled the low table on the other side of the arm rest closer to me and lay the laden tray on top of it. "See how neurotic I am ... six months with you ... but six months without you. With you in my thoughts, but without you ... here, like tonight. And now that you are ... here ... in this living room where I so often imagined you ... right here, next to me, I've spoilt it all." You laughed a little hollow laugh as you headed back to the trolley to retrieve your glass. But instead of coming back to the sofa, to the tray of nibbles you had thrown together, you stayed there, your back turned to me.

And your back rose and fell as you breathed deeply, to steady your nerves. And I did not come to you. I did not come to you until I could not stand it anymore. Then I got up. I came up behind you and encircled you in my arms, both hands on top of yours as they lay, curled tightly around the brass rail edge of the trolley. As I snuggled behind you, my lips brushed past your ear. And you let me hold you. And we stayed immobile in the middle of your silent living-room. I think we stayed that way for quite a while. Together and yet lost to each other. Separately lost.

And when, finally, you stirred, your cheek brushed past my lips. Spontaneously, I tightened my embrace and, like a familiar lover, I circled your ear with the tip of my tongue, circling in and around its fold. Your body relaxed as you leaned back against me. We rocked gently back and forth, back and forth, standing feet slightly apart. Slowly, you released one hand from under mine. I felt you run it, tentatively, down your hip and across, to meet in the middle, in the warmth of your thighs. Your buttocks hardened against my lower belly.

Over the thin weave of your shirt I cupped your breast. The hardness of your nipple rubbing against the palm of my hand electrified my untimely desire of you. We were breathing in unison, more quickly now, my lips on the side of your cheek, in your hair, my breath at the nape of your neck. My hand found its way under yours, frustrated by the unyielding, unfeeling, rough seams of your jeans. Palm open you guided gently across the mound of your sex. I cupped your sex as I had your breast, gently, firmly. You arched your back. Your tight buttocks pushed back against my hips. My body, still anchored to the trolley by one hand supported yours, from head to toe, as we stood there rocking while the cool night air outside your window ruffled the curtains.

You slid my hand against the firmness of your belly. I caressed your thighs. My free hand guided by yours reached for your belt buckle. I curled a finger under the top rivet of your jeans and around the second, the third and the fourth. Slowly, you guided me under the knobby seams of the denim, under the silk of your panties to the soft, springy curls of your pubic hair. Hesitantly, my fingers found their way into the wetness of your lips, around and across. They fluttered across the little ridge of flesh, throbbing against it like tiny little heartbeats. As it hardened under my touch, my whole being focused on your soft, wet warmth. Your breathing was shallow and fast.

You had moved your left hand back to the liquor trolley for support. With your other hand, you pushed your jeans impatiently away from your crotch, down below your knees. Loins on fire, my hips and thighs pressed against the tautness of your buttocks, I surrendered to the blinding white light that your shudders had unleashed in the pit of my stomach, in the depth of my own sex.

"*Chérie ... sur le tapis.* The rug," you urged, your breath short and throaty. "Alex ... *vite.* Now!" You guided me to Sophie's rug. On, no! Not on the rug! And there we collapsed. As I lay there disoriented, you exuberantly pulled your shirt up and over your small, erect breasts, over your head and flung it aside. Then you lay down on your side, your back turned to me. You sensed my hesitation, so you reached for my hand, to wedge me against you. "*Comme tout à l'heure ... Alex ... like before,*" you whispered, between quick breaths, your face nuzzled against my shoulder. I resumed the position we had been in, my breasts tight against your back, my sex against your buttocks. Then, in one deft movement you rolled from your side onto your stomach, bringing me on top, astride you. I closed in around you, hips, stomach glued to your back, my mouth brushing your ear as you rode my fingers, as they gently pushed upwards and against your sex. And together we rocked, locked in unison, locked in our embrace.

A moment later you stopped suddenly. You arched your back. Your body shuddered under mine and a breath of air pushed through your lips. You lay still for a few seconds.

"Alex ... *chérie...*" you murmured, twisting around to clasp me against you. "Alex ... look ... look at me," you whispered, reaching again for my lips, pushing me away to see my own desire still trapped under closed eyelids.

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You stirred, then rolled to one side, pulling the sheet with you, then wedged your warm body against my belly, inside the hollow made by the angle of my tucked up knees. I tugged a little of the sheet back across my own back and closed my eyes, wishing for a little more sleep. The

muffled sounds climbing up from the street to this bedroom, somewhere on the third floor of a building in rue Gabrielle, suggested that it might be nearer to morning than dawn. I straightened out my legs and tightened my arms around you. It is then I heard them: the soft hum of the lift and the thin metallic scraping as its doors slid open. The soft jiggle of keys and a scrape into a keyhole. One turn of the lock. Another scrape. Sophie!

I sat bolt upright, my heart pounding, panicked at the thought that any second now, Sophie would come in through your front door, through the hallway and through the half open door of this bedroom. I did not know whether I wanted to hide, or jump out of bed, or get dressed, or run to the sofa while there might still be time to pretend I had spent the night there on my own. The vision of our clothes flung over the carpet and rug, of the half empty whisky glasses and the tray of unfinished delicacies added to my alarm. And you, you lay there, peaceful in your sleep, unaware that your life was about to take the one turn you had been too indecisive to initiate yourself.

In a flash, I imagined the expression of pain, of betrayal, or would it be one of surprise, that would be the first to twist Sophie's features as she found us, naked in this bed. No, no, one thing was sure, I reasoned, grappling with colliding thoughts, if surreptitiously she had come back to Paris, so close to dawn, it would have had to be with the precise intention of exposing last night's lies. She would not be genuinely surprised then. Instead, she would be vindicated, the suspicions of the past months legitimised at last.

I did not know how to wake you, how to tell you there was no time. But you must have felt me stir and move as I touched one toe to the floor. You tried to pull me back to your warmth, mumbling something my seized up brain was not able to process. I whispered to you the immediacy of what was about to happen. You stiffened. You listened. We both heard it. The sound of a closing door. I had expected you to fly out of bed and do ... something ... anything but instead you sagged back into the mattress. The rigidity that had, momentarily, overtaken your sleep-softened body, had left as abruptly as it had taken its hold on you. From deep within your lungs came a sigh of intense relief. Only then did I understand my mistake.

"It's next door, isn't it?" You nodded silently. Though the danger had never been there, you had tasted some of my panic. You did not trust yourself to talk. A red hot flush of anger surfaced and burned my cheeks. That anger was only directed at myself. I was angry for having allowed myself to be in such a ludicrous situation.

"Nothing's happened, Alex ... *C'est rien*," you said, trying to lull me out of the space I was in. "It's OK. It's all right. Come ... *Viens là*. Against me. Here ... let me hold you." You scooted behind me encircling me in your arms, whispering soothing sounds to my ear, gently pulling me against you, rocking me.

While you thought you were soothing away my fears, I was in fact, coming to terms with them, understanding them. And much later that morning I recognised that we had come through another full circle. To the place where the starting and finishing points met. To the exact second when a final decision has to be made. And kept. I turned to you. I gave you a gentle kiss, and a reassuring smile, and I mussed further your sleep-tousled hair.

"*Allez*," I said perhaps a little abruptly. "I'll race you to the shower. And then, because, it is after all ... only six fifteen, I will treat you to a delicious breakfast, the kind I could only dream of back in Australia. The kind I was dreaming of in Nice for an entirely different reason. What about a couple of freshly baked croissants *au beurre* and a *café au lait*? Like when I was little but with you, my lover, to gaze at." I grinned, pleased with the romantic idea of an early breakfast in a Montmartre café.

"Oh, yes," you smiled back teasing me, "Please! How can I refuse such an unusual and daring treat in this neck of the woods."

"Now, you emotional illiterate, don't you go pretending you don't know how significant such a trivial moment will become ... for me, once I'm back in Nice." I retorted, with pretended annoyance. "Anywhere between here and your metro station will be just fine. Your choice."

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"I really don't feel like going to work you know. I mean really, with you right here! How will I be able to concentrate while I imagine you walking alone, somewhere between here and Le

Marais?" You looked up from the rim of the wide breakfast cup you held in front of your lips. Your chestnut-brown eyes seemed to dance on that white arc of porcelain. "Just can't take another day off, not even an afternoon."

"I know. That's cool. I can keep busy on my own." You looked sad.

"Hey, can't be too greedy. I have had you all to myself. Almost two whole days and *considering*—" I added that playfully, not finishing my sentence, but you frowned, not wanting to be reminded of the 'weak way', [your words], in which you had tried not to face our situation. Which meant that you were unable to shift any significant slot on your schedule. I patted your hand to placate that frown, to see your eyes sparkle again.

You pulled your leather-bound diary out of your briefcase. Ms d' Anville was going over her day's commitments. You flipped through a couple of pages, pulled out your Cross pen from its sheath inside the diary cover, scribbled a couple of notes, crossed out a couple of lines and looked up, pleased with yourself.

"The bad news, *chérie*, is that we won't meet for lunch. I'll be at the Palais de Justice from 12 to 3. The good news is that I should be back with you by around 6. I'll pick you up at your hotel."

You looked up wanting reassurance that it would be OK. I nodded. "Then ... " you said reaching for my hand, across the marble tabletop, "... tonight's on me. First stop will be Chez Lipp for a couple of drinks and to watch the world go by. I'd like to go back there with you. I'd like to be there with you to remember that night, that first night we ... Well, that first night we *connected*." You noticed my raised eyebrows.

"A bit daring isn't it? You might bump into someone you know."

"I might but the odds are slim on a weeknight. And it's only really you-know-who ...our two friends ... I'd worry about. But Isa and Eli don't do the café scene much anymore. And as I was saying most of us don't really go out weeknights. We entertain at home. Simpler in many ways." You paused, thinking ahead, "But before that ... we could go for another stroll, around the Odeon district ... or Saint Michel. Or Rivoli. It's going to be such a pleasant evening, yes?" I smiled. Visibly, that prospect had just added a touch of colour to this otherwise bland day at work. You were smiling again. Your eyes were warm and shiny. "Then, I'll take you to Chez Paul. We ... I don't go there often but I'm sure you'll like it. Lovely and quaint. Lots of artworks on the wall, *partout*, and a lot of plants. And the food there's delicious. Will you be in on this plan?"

"I'm in." I tried to muster up a cheerful smile, for myself, for you, but poised on the edge of your seat, one hand on the handle of your briefcase, you were glancing at your watch.

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An absent-minded glance, as I walked past la Fontaine Des Innocents, in the Chatelet district, and the plan you had formulated, over breakfast, came back to me; a stroll around *quartier* Saint Michel, at dusk. The wish to walk there, now, on my own, was growing stronger, perhaps because on the afternoon of my arrival in Paris I had sat by the Saint Michel fountain and had watched him, frozen in bronze as he slew his dragon. That was shortly before my steps had started me on the long walk towards our park.

As I ambled through the streets, casting a cursory look at the displays spread inside the shop windows, I revisited the early morning incident that had startled me out of my wits. The measure of my guilt. I wanted an explanation not for that awesome rush of adrenaline that had left me weak and shaken, but for the irrational anger that had followed. With hindsight, I was coming to the realisation that it must have been more, much more than the sheer fear of an embarrassing moment caught in the glare of Sophie's eyes that had struck such a panic chord.

So I sat on the edge of the fountain, letting Saint Michel, as he held his dragon at sword point, tower over me. I breathed in Paris, Paris on a sunny morning, shiny and clean in the morning light. Should I have told you, any earlier, of the awareness that had, insidiously, crystallised in me? When did it get there? I only became aware of it this morning.

I think that each time you aborted our plans, at each of your cancellations, during Sophie's phone call last night, and particularly afterwards when you reiterated that in spite of your feelings you could not, would not, give us a chance, a little something must have grown though I did not know it was there. It must have remained undetected behind the constant screen of my anxiety.

Maybe like the grain of sand trapped inside the oyster shell calcifies into a pearl. In my case, though, that something is more akin to an emotional ulcer. In any case, that awareness and the anger felt this morning have already twisted themselves into a lump as hard as fossil coal. Adrienne, as the French say, *la boucle est bouclée*. The circle is complete.

At my feet, the erratic rhythm of the pigeons' emerald green necks propelled them, in their never-ending cobble stone picking quest, as they warbled gently inside their throat.

The imagery of the felled oak, the metaphoric poem quickly etched, months ago, on the plane that had taken me away from you, to Nice, raw from having just discovered you, had returned to me. It had flitted on and off, during the past couple of days, as I saw us ostensibly creating a careful parody of the 'carefree lovers'. The perfect cover photograph for the Lesbians' guide to the City of Lovers.

Some lines came back to me: 'A monolith set deeply into earthy foundations, two lives entwined, the forest curls up on itself, in pain, in shock blinded and deafened, its heart cries...' Was it that envisaged devastation which had put me in such a state, earlier this morning? Was I, in fact, attempting to shy away from the direct responsibility of being 'the saw' that bites into the centenary oak, the saw that, though it might jam, will have inflicted its fatal wound?

You and Sophie were too enmeshed in her insecurities, into your weakness-induced guilt. You would never know how to tell her of your newly found desires, of your wish for autonomy, not even of your wish to simply stop and breathe, to reassess, if only briefly, the direction your life might need to take.

As I sat there, immobile, I understood that any palliative arrangement with you would always be with the thought of her, betrayed, bleeding, a ghost rattling your chains. You were immobilised, and so was she, being as she had become, too emotionally dependent on you. I, on the other hand, had always been mobile, maybe even too much for my own good. Certainly too much for your own tranquillity. Was that freedom my Achilles' heel? It clearly frightened you. Or was it just a pretext? Something conveniently questionable in someone my age? '*Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse*.' Something about a rolling stone not gathering moss.

Going through life solo is a two-way street. How had I made that choice? At what point of my life had I made it? Had I made that choice or did circumstances make it for me? I remember the moment when I chose to become a lesbian, as opposed to being a woman who had simply dabbled, experimented in same-sex love. I clearly remember, too, when I decided to not have any children. I remember the circuitous path my reasoning had meandered through before reaching that conclusion. But I do not remember having ever decided that from a particular day onwards I would do my best to remain single, footloose and fancy-free. Was it Luck or was it Fate who had guided other choices? Or had it been simple laziness? Had I been too lazy to work hard at making some of my relationships more successful than they had been? Too lazy, or simply not committed enough?

As I stood still by the fountain, as people brushed past me, I was acutely aware of my own resilience. I was dependent on no one. Not for the good times, organised just for one. Not in the bad times when the price to pay for solitary living, penalties and limitations befell no one but me.

Inside my line of vision stepped a young man wearing little dark round glasses perched on the thin ridge of his nose. With long black hair loosely tied into a *queue de cheval*, he looked like a young poet, maybe too, because of his much wrinkled, black linen suit, shiny with wear, the sleeves a little too short above his wrists. Under one arm, he held a pile of papers that I imagined as a compilation of his own poems. He looked restless, fidgety, not unlike the pigeons at his feet. Raw and vulnerable, he seemed. As if trapped inside an unexpected beam of light from which there was no escape. As I saw him sit on a bench and spread his sheets on his lap, my thoughts took me deeper into my own introspection.

My lack of reliance on anyone is what has kept me mobile in a way you and Sophie could no longer be. Like the mighty oak I held in awe, you rested on the strength of your combined roots. Enough with that metaphor! Away with it!

Abruptly, I sat upright on the marble edge of the fountain. It was as if the dragon of bronze had unwedged itself from under the saint's avenging sword to bite my backside. A jolt, a blinding flash of insight.

You often use the word 'benchmark'. You used it in your letters to me, you used it again last night, after Sophie's phone call, to explain how your lies to her had ratcheted more tightly the

level of deception that stood between the both of you. And as I sat by the side of the fountain I reached a *benchmark* of my own. Nothing had ever been so clear, not since the moment our lips, our hands, our bodies lost reason, not since we had lost ourselves in unfulfilling embraces jammed against the door of Eli's apartment. I stood up, aware that I had to move quickly now, if I was truly determined to dismantle the thin backdrop that had been put in place during these precious couple of days "... and nights," I added, wryly. Then, a violent bump interrupted me in mid-thought.

"*Mais enfin ...* Watch where you're going!" I exclaimed, more startled than angry. And there he was, the young poet leaning forwards, taller than I had guessed, thin and pale, fumbling with his loose pages as he did with his apologies.

"Oh ... *Excusez- moi ... je ...*," he began. "*J' étais...*" Then he bent lower down to pick up the other sheets of paper the impact of our collision had scattered at our feet. I bent down too, to help him. Each sheet was covered with the lines and elegantly drawn notes of a musical score.

My young poet was in fact a musician. I smiled as he renewed confused apologies mingled with thanks. He felt the need to explain, "I wasn't ... watching." And as I was still squatting beside him, trying to keep his sheets from fluttering away in the breeze, he gained in composure. "I started this piece months ago, for her ... for Mireille ... She needs to come back to me, I need her back ... to finish ... this." He was pointing at the sheets he had clumsily wedged under his elbow. I looked at them, secretly hoping he had remembered to number each one of them as he had composed, his heart in his fingertips, on the keyboard. The silly thing was that, just then, I was wondering if indeed, sheets of music were also numbered, like pages of prose. The fumbling young man was intent on unveiling more of his predicament,

"You see ... without her by my side, it's no good ... I start things ... it's slow in coming ... she got impatient. About that ... and other things." With his sigh as cue, we both straightened up.

I handed him the last handful of sheets. He smiled a sad little boy smile "*L'amour, you see—*" Then, as if suddenly aware of the intimacy of his disclosure, he turned away from me, hesitated briefly, then disappeared into a narrow street to the left of the Saint Michel fountain.

"*Ah oui, l'amour!*" I said wistfully. We had something in common, my musician and I: good at starting things, lousy at finishing.

Thus chastened, I affirmed my decision. I pushed on through the streets of Paris, drafting as I went the most painful letter I had ever had to compose.

I needed to make my way back to Montmartre, back to l' hotel du Cheval Blanc, back to room 23. I needed to pack my travel bag quickly. I needed to flag down a taxi that would take me to Orly airport. I needed to stay there until I could board a plane on stand-by, a plane that had Nice as its destination. But first, I needed to find a florist. I needed to have the attendant create a bouquet, a *feu d'artifice* of colours. Tulips were no longer in season, but I needed to offer you a bouquet, a huge bouquet, one that would wake up the walls of your office. I would have it delivered at your office between one and two, while you were at the Palais de Justice doing what you do best.

My throat constricted around a particular memory of you; that of you, happy as you were this morning, as we played under the shower, as your eyes shone large and brown above the white porcelain of your cup. You were looking forward to our evening together. All that had been only a few hours ago. So much since then. *Mon dieu!*

Preferring to avoid, for this last time, the claustrophobic rank atmosphere that always prevailed in the metro, particularly on such a warm pleasant morning, I hastened over the Pont Saint Michel. I crossed over to l' Ile de la Cité, bypassing the incomparable charm of l' Ile Saint Louis in view of the long walk ahead, and aimed north on the long rue Montmartre.

I imagined your surprise when, returning to your office, you would discover the bouquet, its profusion of colours laid tenderly across your desk by your clerk. I imagined your delight as you would tear open the sealed envelope on which my handwriting had already given me away as the sender. I imagined your pleasure as it would turn to disbelief as you scanned the lines I had penned for you. Then, the calm-headed lawyer that you are, you would ring l' hotel du Cheval Blanc, asking for me in room 23. Then, the coldness of incredulity cloaked in dread would flood you from within.

I imagined you might, then, run downstairs in too great a haste to wait for the old 1920s wood and wrought iron cage of the rickety lift. I pictured you, once more, tapping an impatient

shoe against the sidewalk. I saw you, once more, as you waited for the traffic to allow you through, into the majestic entrance to the parc Monceau. I pictured you, walking briskly towards the little green bench by the pond, half sure, half hoping you would find me there, repentant, a little sheepish for having caused you such a fright. You might push as far as the kiosk where you would hope to find me ordering a cup of coffee in a thin plastic cup and a waffle au *sucre glacé*. And the understanding that I had been true to the words accompanying the bouquet steadily grew at each turn.

Then, you might retrace your steps. Oblivious to the tight schedule you had, only this morning, confirmed for what remained of the afternoon, you would sit on our little green bench, letting its cool greenness seep into you. You would let the pond and the Muses and the twittering birds and the gleeful cries of little children at play calm your erratic heartbeat. And you, too, would breathe in, deep and strong, as you retraced the intensity of the last thirty-six hours, indeed, of the last six months. You would be hurting, you would be torn, but you would know, deep inside your bones, it was for the best.

You would understand it was the one unselfish act of love I could ever do for you. It is only then that you might reach inside the pocket of the fawn jacket I had picked for you as you were readying yourself for work. From its recess you would retrieve the crumpled letter you had shoved inside it, before rushing down the three flights of stairs.

And then, only then, would you be ready to listen to my heart as it had chosen the words that would help you understand why, as you read, I would already be high in the sky. I would already be somewhere above the forests and lakes and mountain ranges that separate Paris from the South of France. You would understand, too, why I was asking you, begging you, not to resume your phone calls to Nice. Not to resume a correspondence with me.

So, I pushed on through the streets of Paris, into rue Fontaine, and through to La Place Blanche, mentally composing the most painful letter I would ever have to write. That letter, pinned to the bouquet, would set both of us, indeed the three of us, free.

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End