

***Is That What You're Wearing?***  
**Gender Diversity in Contemporary  
Fiction,  
A Novel and Exegesis**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

January, 2012



## **Abstract**

The methods of production of gender diverse characters within mainstream literary texts are an under-researched area from a creative writing standpoint. *Is That What You're Wearing? Gender Diversity in Contemporary Fiction, A Novel and Exegesis* is a creative writing doctoral thesis which critically interrogates the signifiers and tropes that are employed to produce gender diversity in contemporary fiction, and their effects and impacts. The exegesis, *Gender Diversity in Contemporary Fiction*, contextualises the theoretical ground concerning gender diversity. It critically explores issues of cultural and material access to literary works featuring gender diverse protagonists. In addition, it compares and contrasts the production of gender diversity in three contemporary novels: Chris Bohjalian's (2000) *Trans-sister Radio*; Jeffrey Eugenides' (2002b) *Middlesex*; and Ali Smith's (2007) *Girl Meets Boy: The Myth of Iphis*. Most significantly it discusses the manner in which these two aspects inform my creative writing practice in the novel *Is That What You're Wearing?* The exegesis argues that creative writers require an increased awareness of issues of representation when writing about marginalised groups, such as gender diverse individuals, to avoid perpetuating problematic and commonly used representations that otherwise sustain their marginalisation in society. The novel, which features three gender diverse characters, is the practical outcome of this critical theoretical research. As per the requirements for Victoria University creative writing theses, the creative component forms 67 per cent of the thesis, and the critical exegesis, 33 per cent. The preferred reading order for the thesis is the novel (Volume One), then the exegesis (Volume Two).

## **Student declaration**

‘I, Kristy Lee Davidson, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Is That What You're Wearing? Gender Diversity in Contemporary Fiction, A Novel and Exegesis* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.’

Signature

Date

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisors Associate Professor Barbara Brook and Dr Jenny Lee for their support and invaluable feedback. I would also like to thank Dr Bronwyn Cran for her supervision during the candidature process, and Dr David Sornig who provided supervision while my primary supervisor at the time was on extended leave. Nicole Lindsay provided proofreading for the entire thesis. Daniel Loton provided additional proofreading for the exegesis with regard to the referencing style. My colleagues in the School of Education at Victoria University also deserve my heartfelt thanks for their support and patience, and for allowing me to take a period of study leave in 2009. Thanks also go to the School of Communication and the Arts who provided me with a grant to travel to Berlin in 2004 to conduct research for the second part of the novel. While in Berlin, Dr David James Prickett, who was then working for the Magnus Hirschfeld Society, gave me valuable assistance with their archives. I'm also grateful to the former Victoria University Institute for Community Engagement and Policy Alternatives for giving me a grant to present the paper, *It's a Straight, Straight World: Redressing the Absence of Gender Diversity in Contemporary Non-genre Fiction*, at the The 6th International Congress on Sex and Gender Diversity: Reflecting Genders in Manchester (10th to 12th September 2004). Some of the material presented at this conference appears in Chapter Two. In addition, some of the material on the medicalisation of gender was given as a lecture at Victoria University in 2006. I am also grateful to other colleagues at Victoria University who gave me help and support at different times, in particular: Dr Enza Gandolfo, Grace Schirripa and the staff at the Office of Postgraduate Research. I'd also like to thank Bek Duke for her assistance in

tracking down some of the magazine articles surveyed in the thesis. And finally, the biggest thanks go to my family and friends. It's been a long hard road. I couldn't have done it without you. Mum, this novel is dedicated to you for inspiring in me a great love of reading and writing.

Last but not least I wish to acknowledge the writers whose lyrics I have quoted in the novel: 'Thirteen' by Christopher Bell and William Alexander Chilton. © 1972 by Birdees Music Corp. and Koala Music.

The quote attributed to Simon Dach is taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1846) translation of Dach's poem 'Anke van Tharaw [Annie of Tharaw]' in *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*. Retrieved from Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1365/1365.txt>

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**Volume One**

***Is That What You're Wearing?* A novel**

## **PART ONE**

### **Melbourne, Australia**

## **Chapter One**

Klaus' street was blocked off by police cars. Red and blue lights flashed ominously, tinting the blanket of smoke hanging in the night air. I used my sleeve to wipe away the condensation on the window of the taxi but it was impossible to see through the haze outside. What had I gotten myself into?

The taxi driver cleared his throat to get my attention. He wanted me out. I pushed twenty dollars at him. "Wait here," I said, hoping the extra five on top of the fare would keep him there.

"Sorry, luv," he replied as he folded the notes and pocketed them in his tight fitting shirt. "No can do."

"Excuse me?" The tension in my body spread through to my jaw. The driver had spent the ten minute journey from my place tutting sympathetically at my breathless concerns about the old man. He'd even run a red light for me.

"Can't wait. Waiting's money. Got three kids and a mortgage. And the wife's..."

I pushed another five into his hand.

He folded the money with the same meticulous care as the first notes. "Go find your friend and hop to it."

I had my doubts that he'd stay but couldn't think about that. I needed to find Klaus.

He was slumped against a fire truck, staring blank-eyed at the water-logged remains of his home. His arthritic hands held a photo album tight to his chest.

“What happened?” I asked. Klaus avoided my eyes and shook his head.

A gaggle of neighbours sat on a low brick fence whispering amongst themselves. A shrill laugh punctuated the hiss of the fire hoses, muffled giggles followed and then a whirring click like the sound of camera shutter. I looked around but couldn't see any photographers.

I took another look at Klaus. He wore a short fire-fighter's jacket that barely covered the sheer pink frills of a nylon negligee that fluttered in the breeze; his knotted old man's knees protruded beneath. The heel of one of his marabou slippers was bent at an angle leaving him lop-sided; the feathers attached to his shoes were sodden and limp. His wig was also set askew and bedraggled; a combination of powder, rouge and soot ran in rivulets down his cheeks.

“Mummy, why is that lady crying?” asked a wide-eyed child.

There was another snort of laughter.

“What's funny, mummy?”

A woman with short hair and hard features grabbed the child and turned it about-face to look straight at Klaus. “Does *that* look like a woman to you?”

The child stared at Klaus through tear-filled eyes, confused by the question.

“Well?” the mother prompted with a jab to the child's chest.

“Look, *lady*,” I called out. “My friend's just had *her* house burnt down. Some compassion might be in order.”

“Who the fuck are you?” The woman sneered at me, looking me up and down. “Or should that be: ‘*What* the fuck are you?’” She nudged a thin balding man who hunched

his shoulders and folded them inwards as he laughed.

Involuntarily I touched the coarse hair at my upper lip. The neighbour's comments weren't anything new. My face still flushed as I walked away.

"Fucken freaks," the woman called after me. A small voice followed it, echoing the mother's sentiments.

"I'm Elle, Klaus's friend," I said, introducing myself to a blond fireman who stood wiping the soot from his brow. I refused to call myself Ella, even if people did often mistake my name for Al. There weren't as many gawping double-takes that way. "Is there a blanket I can borrow to get him home?"

"Yeah," he said, his eyes avoiding mine.

"You too?" I sighed.

"It's not that," he said, as he passed me what looked like a large sheet of aluminium foil. "I really feel for her. I...I had something similar happen myself."

As I puzzled over what he meant, he put his helmet back on and swung up onto the truck. He looked back at me for a second, and then called down, "She's lucky to have a friend like you."

I wasn't so sure.

Klaus and I walked in silence along his darkened street. I hoped desperately that the taxi had waited. I shot a look at Klaus, the aluminium sheet wrapped around him crackled violently with his shivers.

“About bloody time,” the driver said as I opened the door for Klaus. “I was about to leave.”

I could see the meter had just ticked past twenty-five dollars. I wasn't sure how much more cash I had with me. I went to check but my wallet wasn't in my pocket. I groaned. I'd heard something hit the ground as I spoke to the fireman but had ignored it.

“What now?” asked the driver.

“I'll be back in a minute.”

I ran down the street to the truck, and shone my mobile phone at the ground. My reflection glowed blue in puddles on the road, but there was no wallet. A scrap of soot-blackened newspaper landed at my feet. The word “Mauer” was on the fragment, but I could read little else. It crumpled to ashes in my fingers. How would Klaus cope without his collection of newspapers? Or his dresses?

And where would he stay? Not in an old people's hostel surely? Not like the one my father was in after his stroke? I imagined old women and men with arthritic claw hands, bird-like and batty, perched in rocking chairs constantly in motion; the hot smell of stale urine rising from geriatric under-garments. His only visitor: a nurse dispensing sedatives and mashed-up meals. Klaus would hate it. I would hate it.

Maybe it wouldn't be like that. There'd be at least one flamboyant woman living in the home, a quick-witted ex-ballerina with a purple rinse and sequined frocks who'd take Klaus under her wing and chat to him about gladioli. Who was I kidding? I was picturing Dame Edna Everage.

I'd have to let him stay with me for the night. It was too late to work out something else. I planned to get on the phone first thing in the morning to find him alternative accommodation. I had no intention of becoming his carer.

But first I had to find my wallet. Not only did it contain my cash and all my cards, inside was my house key. A wallet with a chain would have been more sensible, but I found them too blokey, even for me.

The fire-crew were now rolling up their hoses. I ran over. They hadn't seen my wallet. The neighbours had lost interest and gone inside. I hoped none of them had picked it up. I was certain they wouldn't return it to me. I had to find it. The walk back to my place would take over an hour and Klaus was in no condition to be on his feet.

I retraced my steps again. I checked over by a white 1970s Torana covered with a veil of ash. One hubcap was missing. A split tennis ball bobbed in sooty water that filled a pothole next to the wheel. I shone my phone at the hole but it wasn't deep enough to contain my wallet and the ball.

Water running down the street flushed into a drain. My neck prickled with heat, but the air in my nostrils was cold. Surely my wallet would've been too bulky to be washed through the grating? A quick flash of my phone showed me twigs and a plastic soft drink bottle bobbing against the opening. The debris would've caught my wallet, if it had been there. It wasn't.

I kicked a can at my feet, not realising it sat in another puddle. Dirty water splashed up all over my jeans. The urge to lie down in the street and kick my feet like a spoilt child was strong.

Smoke still lingered in the air; my eyes watered. I looked around one last time. There was a ghost gumtree on the nature strip, its skeletal branches stretched out through the haze towards the power lines in front of one of the houses. Its bark shone luminous; as pale as Klaus' face when I found him this evening. I hadn't been anywhere near this tree, but I'd reached that point of mingled hope and desperation where

anything was possible. Someone had tied a rope to a dead branch; a green milk crate was tied to the other end. I couldn't figure out why.

There was a brown rectangle at the foot of the tree. I made the mistake of sucking in my breath, and choked on the acrid air. Light-headed and coughing, I reached out to steady myself on the tree. My fingers caught on the rough edges of peeling bark, then grazed against the silken wood beneath. I rubbed my eyes dry and bent down for my wallet. My fingers told me what I did not want to know. It was a folded paper lunch bag. I wondered whether it had once belonged to Klaus.

When I finally reached the end of Klaus' street, the taxi was gone; as was Klaus. The only sign of life was a grey moggy sauntering across the street, tail swishing in the air.

All I wanted was to crawl into bed again. My home was a fifteen-minute drive away, and with my wallet gone I had no cash and no house key.

Klaus couldn't have gone far. I wrapped my coat tighter, sat down on the kerb to wait and reminded myself how I got into this mess.

#

Klaus and I met for the first time at my local Laundromat around the time of Mum's fifty-fifth birthday. I remember writing out her card on the spin cycle and the machine shrieking in protest because it was off-balance: I'd overloaded it. As usual I'd left my washing for far too long. I got up to fix the machine. When I returned to my seat I found a toothless old man in long socks, short shorts and a floral body shirt hunched over

Mum's present – a tin of chocolate-coated shortbread. I caught him dropping the biscuits one by one into his paper bag. Streaks of chocolate curved upwards from the wrinkled corners of his mouth like a jester's smile. He looked like a guilty child. How could I be annoyed with him? I decided to buy Mum another tin. I took a couple of the biscuits for myself and gave the rest to the old man. He stared at me with moist eyes while my clothes clunked around the drier.

I always took a packet of chocolate biscuits to the Laundromat after that; just in case. I only went once a month, but each time he appeared to be there waiting for me. Whenever I walked through the door he'd look up expectantly, his eyes brightening. He reminded me of a teenage girl waiting for her date to arrive. He'd stay seated, legs crossed demurely, while I'd load the machine. Once I was done I'd sit beside him and offer him a biscuit or two. Sometimes he brought in magazines for me to read. They all had lurid screeching headlines like: "MY MUM IS DATING MY MAN!!" and "HORROR STORY: HER FATHER IS THE FATHER OF HER KIDS!!" We would never talk. The only sounds were the creak and whisper of the pages of our magazines as we read, and the metallic clunk and whir of the dryers.

Once he surprised me by bringing a thermos of tea with him. A name was printed on it in Gothic script:

**Klaus Schmidt**

I wasn't sure if it was the brand of the thermos or the old man's name, but I took to referring to him as Klaus after that. The container was battered and rusty, but once I got past my initial misgivings I found the tea was strong and good.

On this particular day, the warm Laundromat had made me sleepy. I'd almost dozed off when something prodded my thigh. Klaus stood there staring at me through

watery eyes. I sat up straight and motioned for him to sit down beside me on the bench. He seemed against the idea for he shook himself, almost like a dog would after paddling in a river, then reached down with a nicotine-stained hand to help me to my feet. “Ve go to mein Haus, ja?” I tried to pull away from him, not because I objected to going with him but because I hate people touching me. It was useless though; his grip was firm.

“Where is your house?” I asked. More to the point, why did he want me to go there? He blinked at me. I tried to rephrase, dredging up the minimal German I’d learnt in one term in high school with a balding exchange teacher from Dortmund. “Wo ist deine house?” He cackled and slapped his hands on his thighs then rubbed his palms together, whispering “deine Haus” over and over to himself until: “Jetzt! Die Strassenbahn!” And with a tug on my arm he pulled me towards the oncoming West Preston tram.

I went because I was headed in that direction anyway. There was no way I intended going with him to his home. I had no idea what he wanted from me. Probably someone to wash his laundry. Not that I knew why he’d want me to do it though; hanging out with me in the Laundromat would’ve shown him the miserable extent of my domestic abilities.

Once on board the tram, he fell silent, preferring instead to stare out of the window. He took particular interest in the clothing stores along Brunswick Street. He stared wide-eyed at it all: the fluoro raver gear, the neo-hippy tie-dyed goods, the deconstructed dresses, the distressed denim. Each store held his attention equally; he didn’t discriminate.

There was something childlike about him as he pressed both liver-spotted hands to the window to peer outside. Watching him gave me an odd sense of déjà vu, as if I’d

once seen him as a child pressing his girlish hands, with pink-polished nails, to the window of a trolley-car rattling down the cobble-stones of a German street. I didn't know whether they even had trolley-cars in Berlin.

I turned away to look at the people on the tram. A guy with a lurid constellation of scabs across his face was rubbing cream into his skin. His lank hair shielded his eyes. I noticed everyone was giving him a wide berth. Then I got a look at the label on the tube: lice treatment. He got off the tram at Polyester Records. The bland masses clad in their grey business attire breathed a collective sigh of relief. I wanted to snarl at them. They were as strange and aberrant living in their 'nine-to-five' worlds of middle management and meaningless financial markets, as he was to them.

The tram jerked along past the Edinburgh Gardens. Klaus had given up looking out the window and was re-folding the tops of his socks with unsteady hands.

Three stops past Piedemonte's supermarket and I'd be home. With his sock adjustment now complete, Klaus appeared to have dozed off. It would make it easy to do a runner on him.

As the tram pulled to a stop my front door came into view – with a man standing right there on my doorstep. A ladder and a bucket were alongside him.

I'd forgotten that my landlord's friend was coming around to clean the gutters. Running into him was the last thing I wanted to do. He was nice enough but due to prior conversations with my landlord, who referred to everyone as 'he' in his muddled English, the landlord's friend had gotten it into his head that I'd make a good husband for his daughter. I'd tried multiple times to explain to this person that I'm not a man, but somehow the conversation would always become a little confused. He would rub his moustache and say "Yes, I think you are the man. You're just a little shy."

I resigned myself to going with Klaus. At the time it seemed the lesser of two evils.

Klaus had nudged me at the end of the route, and beckoned me to follow him. It was strange that he lived in West Preston given his regular appearances at my Laundromat in Fitzroy. It wasn't until sometime later that I found out he'd been seeing a German-speaking doctor nearby. We walked for quite some time down several streets and through a park before I realised I hadn't introduced myself. I didn't know for sure that Klaus was his name, nor did I know how to ask him if it was; for all I knew Klaus Schmidt was the brand of his thermos. I decided to try English. 'Klaus' came the swift reply. He then began scrabbling in a bulging pocket, extracting and scrutinising in turn: a large checked handkerchief (stained brown in places), what looked like a shrivelled orange, and a small lint-covered ball. He held out the last item to me, but shoved it into his toothless mouth the very instant I shook my head. Finally he pulled out a key.

His home possessed a peculiar pungent odour, a thick and greasy olfactory stew of overcooked cabbages, burnt onions, stale sweat, damp carpet and tobacco smoke. It was a smell that was almost sentient; I half expected it to emerge wraith-like from the stained and torn wallpaper to drape itself across my shoulders like a sleazy guy in a bar.

The room that Klaus had led me into was furnished in art deco gone to rot. A Chesterfield lounge disembowelled, a credenza with peeling laminate, a mirror hazy with damaged silvering, an auto trolley wheelless and tarnished, overladen with copies of yellowing German newspapers – the copy I picked up was dated 1987. The walls were crammed with framed photos of severe figures standing stiff-backed in Victorian suits and dresses with even stiffer moustaches and hairstyles. An ashtray on a scratched and crippled stand was filled to overflowing; the weave of the oriental carpet threadbare and worn. Everything in the room had a nicotine orange tinge to it, from the yellowing

stack of newspapers to the frayed and ragged curtains. The room had an air of resignation about it, as though all good times were now long past.

Klaus returned to the room wearing his usual socks and sandals teamed with a hot pink frilly skirt. He then dropped a heavy book onto my lap and hovered by my chair swishing that hideous skirt, grinning like a loon.

The red leather cover bore no traces of the nicotine stains that permeated the rest of the house. It was the only object that had escaped the orange tinge. I opened the book and found page after page of carefully mounted black and white photographs of people, each with commentary beneath in the same precise Gothic script that was used on the thermos.

I flicked at the first couple of pages. I've never been one for other people's nostalgia. A lot of schmaltz and over-sentimentalisation. When my father died my mother used to sit for hours in front of her albums, tears streaming down her face, staring at pictures of him. Nothing got done in the house unless I did it. She kept the curtains drawn and the television blaring as if to muffle her thoughts.

I could sense Klaus hovering over me. His rheumy blue eyes looking down at the page then up into mine. Maybe I should see about getting him to a doctor and getting his eyes checked? I looked down.

"Shit!" I almost threw the book from my lap. Klaus seemed pleased by my reaction for he gave a delicate little clap then swished his skirt around. He snatched the book from my grasp and gazed at the picture with rapt adulation. "Meine Frau," he sighed to himself. I was still dumbfounded.

The resemblance was uncanny. It made me queasy. I'd refused to allow anyone to photograph me since the death of my father. If not for the clothes, I would have almost

sworn the picture was of me. The woman was dressed in a double-breasted pinstriped suit with bulky shoulder pads; a hat was set at a jaunty angle on her head; a cigar in her hand. She stared out of the picture as if challenging the viewer to pass judgement. She stood beside a seated man. He wore an obvious wig styled in a chin length bob with a straight sharp fringe. He was dressed in a black outfit with a skirt that fell just below the knee; at his neck was a single strand of pearls encircling a high collar that did not quite reach his Adam's apple. His hands were demurely folded in his lap.

I read the caption – ‘Sara und Ute, September 1944’. I flicked through more pages. I looked up at Klaus. “This is you, isn't it? And your wife?”

“Ja, ja”. He grinned.

The other pictures were informal snapshots. Ute and Klaus with a large German car – a Daimler? Playing cards with friends. A picture of a party. Klaus' face darkened as I turned to this one. He stabbed his finger at the page, “Otto – Dachau. Rebekah – Dachau. Wolfgang – Mauthausen. Anne – Brooklyn...Klaus – Vest Preston.” The names rolled on. Only two survivors out of a group of 15. I waited to hear what had become of Ute but he did not say. Klaus murmured her name and traced a finger down her stern and stiff figure. A tear began to make its way down his cheek. I reached out to take his hand but he shook me off and in near perfect English said, “I think you must go now.”

## Chapter Two

I woke to find myself sitting in a gutter in a suburban street. The smell of charred wood still lingered in the air. It took me a moment to get my bearings.

Then it all came back to me: the fire, Klaus' house. Klaus! Where was he?

I blinked hard as a tall blonde bent down towards me. I wasn't sure what time it was; no one else was around and the sun was starting to come up behind the ruins of Klaus' house. According to my watch, I'd only been asleep fifteen minutes. It seemed longer. My feet were cold and my back ached.

"Are you Al?" the woman asked, squinting at me as though she needed glasses.

I stared back at her without answering. I wondered how she knew me. There was a ladder in her pantihose at her left ankle where pale hairless skin shone through and her coat was buttoned up the wrong way. She looked familiar but I couldn't remember ever having met her before. I decided she was probably a customer at the discount bookstore where I work.

"Are you?" she repeated.

"Depends on who's asking," I said, taking an instant dislike to her.

"Lucinda Markham," she answered, pumping my hand and helping me to my feet. "I'm simply appalled by the way those people treated your friend tonight."

"You and me both, sister," I couldn't keep the sarcasm from my voice. "Where is he?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. “I work as an advocate for the GLBTI Alliance of \_\_\_\_.” She was talking so fast I didn’t catch what she’d said. “I live over there. Sara is waiting at my home.” She gestured off behind us somewhere. “I’ve known of her for some time. I sent the taxi off as I’ve offered to drive both of you home.”

The grainy photo of Sara and Ute flashed into my head. It dawned on me that she meant Klaus. “That,” I said, gesturing towards the ruin behind us, “was *his* home.”

Lucinda gave me a sharp look. “Sara gratefully accepted my offer.”

“We don’t need your charity. I’m the one he called, you know,” I sounded petulant but I resented her snooty expression. “And your coat’s done up wrong.”

She smoothed it with her hands and said haughtily, “If you must know, it’s Vivienne Westwood.”

“Whatever. Just take me to Klaus.”

I wanted this night to be over.

Lucinda’s home was as irritating as her personality. Everything was orderly and a spotless cream colour. Even a spiked ball that I assumed was some kind of modern sculpture. It rested artfully at the edge of on an ‘occasional’ table – it certainly wasn’t a child’s toy. Children definitely did not feature in this world. Lucinda’s books were aligned precisely on the shelves; magazines were fanned neatly on a coffee table. Roses, also the coloured of clotted cream, were arranged mathematically in a matching vase. All the off-white décor made me feel like I’d fallen into a vat at a dairy. I even imagined I could smell something sweet and milky. Strangely, it reminded me of the kind of smell given off by small children.

Klaus was sitting on a leather couch wearing a long fur coat, furry knee-high boots, and a blissed-out grin which puzzled me. His beloved album sat beside him on the couch. Every now and then he sipped at a steaming mug. His pinky finger was extended and curled like he was at a tea party drinking from fine bone china. The mug had a love-heart and the letters GLBTI were printed on it. There was that acronym again.

I couldn't understand why Klaus seemed so relaxed. Who looks that pleased after their home is burnt to the ground? I turned to Lucinda. "Did you give him something?" I asked.

"Simply a shower and some clothing, my dear." She looked over at Klaus and smiled. "Sara loves my sable. I imagine that's why she's so happy. Fur is so passé these days. I'm glad it's going to good use."

If Lucinda was so fond of Klaus maybe she could keep him. She must have read my thoughts, for she click-clacked across her cream kitchen tiles, picked up her keys with a jingle, gathered up a shopping bag made from thick cream-coloured card with sumptuous ribbons for handles – presumably filled with Klaus's dirty clothes, and said to him, "Come on sweetie, Aunty Lucy's going to take you to Al's house now."

Klaus fell asleep in the back seat of Lucinda's car, nursing his matted wig and album. I stared gloomily at the road ahead. It was strange to think that seven months had passed since my visit to Klaus' house; a house that no longer existed. When we arrived at my place, Lucinda jumped out and trotted around the car to open the door for Klaus, offering her arm for support. I had hoped she was going to stay in the car. Now I would have to expose my incompetence and tell this witch I'd lost my house keys. At least it

meant my wretched housekeeping skills would stay unseen.

I sat there for a moment, trying to work out what to do. I had security windows, a deadlock on my door, and no way to call a locksmith without asking for help from Lucy dearest.

Lucinda opened the rear door of the car, leaned in and said “Chop. Chop”. She made a karate chopping motion into the palm of her other hand. I didn’t think I could despise anyone more at that moment.

I looked up and saw that the front door of my apartment was already open. “What the f...?”

Lucinda gave me a sharp look.

I bit my tongue. My first thought was that someone had found my wallet and key and burgled me.

The house was a mess. All my kitchen drawers were open and clothes were strewn all over the lounge room. I looked around to see if anything was missing. I sighed with relief. The house looked exactly as I’d left it. I must’ve left the door open in my haste to get to Klaus.

I slumped onto the couch, relieved this night didn’t have any more nasty surprises in store for me. All I needed was to make Klaus some sort of bed and then I could retire to my own, where I intended not to wake for a very long time.

“Well, I shall leave Sara in your capable hands then,” Lucinda sniffed as she pushed at a pair of my dirty jeans with the pointed toe of her shoe. She brushed her hands against that badly buttoned coat of hers and then left.

There was no answer when I knocked on the bathroom door. I creaked it open millimetre by millimetre, fearing Klaus might've had a stroke. He wasn't in there. He wasn't in the yard either. I couldn't believe I'd lost him for the second time in one day. Then I checked my room. There he was, passed out on his stomach, in the middle of my bed, still wearing the fur coat and boots combo. I tugged the footwear from his legs. He snuffled then rolled over, exposing an expanse of pale white flesh I'd rather not have seen. I shuddered, then went back to the couch hoping that sleep would be swift, but it wasn't to be. I sat bolt upright.

How did Lucinda know where I lived? I was certain I hadn't given her my address. Had I really left my door unlocked?

### Chapter Three

I wasn't asleep for long when something scratched my arm. I sprang off the couch as if I had a rocket launcher beneath me. It had to be a mouse; its tiny but sharp claws scrabbling for purchase as it ran over me. I stumbled through the house in search of the broom. I didn't want to face this rodent unarmed. On my return to the lounge room, I ran into Klaus. He blinked at me twice then returned to my bed. I suddenly saw myself as he must have – wild sleep-rumpled hair, sagging greyish singlet, sagging greyish boxer shorts, brandishing a broom as if going into battle.

At the flick of the light switch I rushed towards the couch, expecting the mouse to come scurrying out. Two swift jabs of the couch revealed my adversary – a folded twenty dollar note. What I'd mistaken for mouse claws was the plastic edge of the note. I settled back to sleep feeling sheepish but happy.

After what seemed like mere minutes, I woke once more to Klaus tugging at my blanket. "What?" I said, pulling it away from him and jamming it hard up under my chin. I shut my eyes tight against the daylight and against Klaus who was still wearing that ugly fur coat. I rolled over and buried my head in my pillow. As I nestled in I smelt the faint but sharp odour of smoke on my skin. Smoke from Klaus's house. I dragged myself out of bed. He was probably hungry.

I chopped the mouldy bits off some cheese, slapped the good pieces on some bread and put the sandwiches in the griller to toast. A thin smile curved at Klaus's lips. He nodded and then shuffled back to my room.

It was then that I realised my laptop was gone. I was sure I had last left it on the kitchen table. A sudden irrational fear overcame me; for a second I suspected Lucinda of stealing it. Not that I could fathom a reason for her to take it. She looked like the type to already own a high-end computer. My money was on a Mac with a custom-made case in cream. I shoved clothes and dirty dishes out of the way. A bowl fell to the floor and smashed. A shard grazed my foot; blood welled up and dripped onto the floor.

I hobbled to the bathroom to get a Bandaid and heard the slow clacking of keys coming from my bedroom, as if someone was typing with two fingers. Klaus smiled up at me when he saw me in the doorway and blinked his rheumy eyes.

"Make yourself at home why don't you," I muttered. He blinked again and kept typing. Once more I noticed the faint tang of smoke on my skin, reminding me what had happened the night before. Looking over Klaus's shoulder I saw that he was using the internet to find photographs of roses. I decided to leave him be.

When I returned to the kitchen to sweep up, I saw the bowl had broken into four almost evenly-shaped pieces. In all my time spent making things from discarded pieces of pottery I'd never seen anything like it. I picked up one of the freakish pieces and realised it was what I needed for the bird sculpture I was working on. That was for later though; I needed to get some groceries. After feeding Klaus, I realised I had nothing left for myself.

Once in the supermarket I headed straight to the refrigerated section, but soon realised my mistake. Frozen meals were my mainstay, but on twenty dollars I'd be lucky enough to buy me and Klaus a single dinner each. What do old men on minimal incomes eat anyway? A quick survey of the contents of a lone geriatric shopper's basket told me it was soup, lamb chops, and potatoes. I grabbed ten tins of different varieties plus the cheapest loaf of bread I could find and hit the register. A thought struck me. I backtracked to the biscuit aisle. Despite the cost, I ditched two tins of soup and picked up a packet of chocolate shortbread instead.

I arrived home to what sounded like an injured crow trapped in my kitchen. I rushed inside to discover it was Klaus laughing. He had company. The two of them were speaking in German. A chess board was laid out in front of them on the kitchen table. The visitor wore a long red wig and a white angora sweater tight over small breasts. An image of Candy Darling I had seen in an Andy Warhol book came to mind. Klaus was wearing one of my bed sheets, draped toga-style around his body.

The old man had spent one night at my house and already he'd taken over my bedroom and was bringing his cross-dressing friends home. Klaus ignored me, but the visitor sprang to his feet. "You must be, Ella," he said in a warm voice as he reached out to shake my hand. I shook it without thinking. I was too busy wondering how I'd get rid of him to even bother telling him I preferred to be called Elle.

"I'm Zee. Please join us."

*Please join us*; as though it was his house. "I'm busy," I said and dumped the groceries on the table. Zee's king rolled off the board. Klaus caught sight of the shortbread packet and tore it open. I didn't stick around long enough to see his chocolate-smearred fingers.

I shut the loungeroom door hard against the guttural noise of their laughter and fired up my laptop. I bashed out a diary entry, pounding hard against the keys. My house no longer felt like it was my own.

Half an hour later I could still hear them laughing. I held my aching head in my hands. Oddly, I could smell the sweet powdery scent of roses on my fingertips. The fragrance mingled with something that smelt like freshly cut cucumbers. The combination was intoxicating. When I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, I could almost see green grass surrounding a bed of blood red roses beneath clear blue skies, hear the buzz of bees and feel the sun warm on my skin. I couldn't help smiling. Then I realised: the perfume belonged to Zee. I crept out of my bedroom to wash my hands.

I came out of my room an hour later when I heard the front door slam shut. Klaus was making slow progress back to the kitchen, so I held out my arm for him. He took it with an imperious air, as if he were royalty. Again, I wondered whether I'd made the wrong decision allowing him to stay. It's not as if I was in touch with my own family, let alone have them around. I hadn't even seen my mum in nearly a year. Why complicate my life by allowing an elderly stranger to stay with me?

As soon as Klaus had eased himself back into one of the kitchen chairs he began waving a crooked finger and pointing behind his back. It really was going to be like

living with the queen mother. I fetched a cushion off his bed, *my bed*, and tucked it behind his back. He thanked me by leaning into me and letting out a thunderous eruption of gas. He grinned and held out a piece of paper to me. It was a flyer depicting Zee in a long, curve-hugging red dress. Printed above him were the words: “La Bite, The Sailors, and the Fragile Soldiers. The Tote.” Zee had jotted a note on the other side. “It’s a wonderful thing you’re doing for Sara. Please come to the gig. Your name will be on the door.” I looked at the flyer again. The gig was that same night.

At that moment the doorbell rang. Klaus cocked his head like he was expecting someone. Two visitors in one day? He motioned for me to get it.

“Get this straight,” I said. “If you’re going to have people over you can start answering your own bloody door.”

Klaus looked back at me impassively. My curiosity got the better of me, so I got up to see who it was.

“You?” I said. “What are you doing here?”

It was Lucinda Markham. She pushed at the bridge of her glasses with her middle finger and stared down her nose at me. “I thought Sara could do with a casserole.”

I rolled my eyes. The look she gave in return could have curdled milk. “I’m sure you’ll forgive me for saying so, but I don’t have much faith in your culinary abilities.”

I looked behind me at the same pile of dirty dishes that had been there the night before and the empty tin cans on the sink. As offensive as she was, she had a point. She pushed past me and busied herself with washing my dishes. Klaus appeared to be in an oblivious rapture at the smell coming from the heavy cream-coloured dish.

“Leberspätzle in chicken broth,” Lucinda called over her shoulder. “Similar to chicken noodle soup but the Spätzle is enriched by liver. Sara needs to keep up her

strength.”

Without realising it I'd wadded up Zee's flyer into a tight ball. I couldn't stay in my own home a moment longer. The only thing for it was to go to the gig.

I went in through the heavy black door on Johnston Street. A security guard wearing the ID number 666 held the door open for me. I was so nervous that my hands were clammy; I wasn't sure why.

The front bar was full. The juke-box was playing Turbonegro. I had to shoulder my way through an endless wall of guys in black t-shirts, all singing the obscene chorus and punching their fists in the air. I thought about leaving. A group of people came in behind me, jostling for space at the bar, propelling me further inwards. I headed into the band room. Sure enough my name was on the door list for free entry, just as Zee had promised.

It had been a week of temperatures in the mid teens, and tonight the forecast low was 12 degrees Celsius, although it was much hotter in the venue. The heat was trapped in the room; cigarette smoke swirled above me. There didn't appear to be any ventilation except a single door to the beer garden. Like many of the other people in the room my t-shirt was soaked with sweat.

The Sailors came on stage with a swagger and songs about gay men. A red-headed guy, who had taken his t-shirt off and slung it around his neck, poked me in the arm and slurred, “They're a bunch of poofas, but they're not really homos, you know.” I wasn't sure what he meant or why he needed to tell me. “Nah, mate,” he said, though I hadn't said anything, “they've all got girlfriends.” Fortunately, he then spotted someone he

knew and stumbled after them.

I decided to go out into the beer garden for some fresh air. I pushed my way through the crowd by the door trying to find a space to sit. "Want a sausage?" asked a sleepy-eyed guy with long hair. The disgust must have shown on my face. He gestured at a barbeque. I then realised my mistake. "There's vego ones too," he said. I shook my head and aimed for the back corner of the garden.

Before I made it there, a guy with greying hair wearing a Powder Monkeys t-shirt grabbed me in a bear hug. "Linda," he yelled at me with a grin. I was simultaneously mortified and pleased. Despite being mauled by a stranger, at least someone thought I looked like a Linda. He then stepped back from me but didn't release my hands; instead he looked deep into my eyes. For a moment I had an irrational fear he was about to kiss me. "How are you?" he asked with a look of deep concern. "Have you been well?" Without waiting for an answer he grabbed me in another bear hug, patted me on the back and said, "It's so good to see you, Linda. Would you like a beverage? I'm about to get one myself."

His mock serious use of language made me smile in spite of myself.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"It's a rare pleasure to see your smile again." The man clasped my arm and stared deep into my eyes, "Are you sure you wouldn't like something? It's been too long."

"No, really. I'm fine thanks." He then disappeared back inside, but not before embracing the guy at the barbeque first.

I'd just sat down and lit my cigarette when a deep voice beside me asked if I had one to spare. I could smell roses and cucumbers. I almost didn't dare to look up.

Zee took a cigarette from the pack I offered him. His long delicate fingers had me

mesmerised as they brought the cigarette in a slow perfect arc to his mouth. I lit it for him, hoping he wouldn't notice my shaking hand. He blew a ring of smoke away, then turned back to study me. "I wasn't sure if you'd come." He smiled, as if something amused him. "You're obviously a very busy person." He raised an eyebrow at me. "Oh and thanks for the cigarette."

"Yeah." The words stuck fast to my tongue. "No worries. And ah, thanks for the door spot." I sounded like an idiot.

Zee nodded as if it were nothing. He took a slow drag on the cigarette and then turned his head to blow another ring of smoke. "Pre-show jitters," he confessed. He didn't look shaky to me.

My heart began hammering hard. For a second I panicked that he could hear it. I stood and pushed through the crowd away from Zee, past the barbeque – this time declining an offer of a hamburger – until finally, I'd fought my way back inside.

I visited the women's bathroom to splash water on my neck. My heart pounded as I opened the door. Thankfully, no one so much as gave me a second glance; no one hounded me out as if I had no right to be there.

I was tempted to leave; to go home and forget the whole thing, but my curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to see Zee perform.

Once more I pressed through the crowd; sticky flesh pushed against my bare arms; bodies bumped into me as they passed. I found myself a spot over to the right side of the stage and waited.

I noticed a DJ in a booth on the other side of the room. She was a petite brunette in a red dress, and was playing a mix of glam rock, punk and rock'n'roll. One song after the other I heard: David Bowie's *Rebel Rebel*, T-Rex's *Twentieth Century Boy*, Little

Richard singing *Lucille*, some singer I'd never heard before crooning the lyrics to *A Girl Named Johnny Cash*, The Barbarians doing *Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl*, Jayne County doing *You Make Me Cream in My Jeans*. She'd obviously chosen her set with Zee in mind. I suspected she was trying to impress him. She looked like the kind of insipid girly woman who'd love hanging out with a guy in a dress. I could imagine her saying in a high-pitched squeak, "Zee really gets me so much better than all the other men I've been with. I mean we not only share clothes and make-up, but we also share beauty tips." I took an instant dislike to her.

The next song she played surprised me. It was the unmistakable rasp of Marlene Dietrich singing *Lili Marleen* in German. The song ended, and the stage lights came up revealing Zee in ankle-length dress covered in sparkling emerald sequins. "Hello," he said in a breathy voice, blowing kisses to the crowd. Already I found his performance pretentious. One song and then I was out of there.

"This," he said, gesturing at his band with a flourish, "is La Bite". I noticed that he pronounced it 'beat'. Then he lowered his voice to a stage whisper, "It's French for 'cock'."

The crowd laughed in drunken response. What idiots. I prepared myself to hate whatever pallid brand of glam rock or cock rock he was about to maim. I usually didn't bother going to gigs; all musos struck me as cheap copies of members of more talented bands.

It turned out glam rock wasn't Zee's thing; instead the band strummed the chords of a gentle pop song. The crowd cheered at the opening bars. It was a cover of Big Star's *Thirteen*. The shirtless red-head appeared by my side and jabbed me again. He shouted into my ear, "Good isn't she? Sounds just like Alex Chilton." But I wasn't paying

attention to him. I couldn't take my eyes off Zee. His singing made me feel like he'd carefully prised open my ribs and taken my heart into his hands to stroke it with silken fingertips.

"Would you be an outlaw for my love?" He was now at my side of the stage. His eyes had found mine. I held my breath as he drew out the final word of the song. Then he turned away and the song ended.

I panicked after that. I pushed past the redhead, who blocked my way. "What's wrong with ya?" he said. "Ya wouldn't know talent if it bit ya on the arse."

I pushed past him and ploughed through the crowd.

All moments in between were a blank. I woke face-down on bright orange carpet; my head pounded like a blunt rock was slamming into the back of my skull. I couldn't work out where I was. The room whirled and rocked like an off-kilter carousel and closing my eyes did not help. I managed to stave off a bilious attack and then the carpet started to irritate my face. And the amount of detail I could see at floor level made my stomach churn: a frayed yellowing toenail, a ginger pubic hair. At my discovery I sat bolt upright; not the smartest thing to do when you'd been lying under a bathroom sink. A vision of Zee in a red wig flashed into my throbbing head.

I couldn't have, surely? No matter how alcohol sodden my brain cells were the night before, surely I couldn't have drowned the vital ones that would have insisted those long delicate fingers of his stay well away from my thighs? I calmed myself with the thought that a red wig doesn't always add up to red pubic hair. In fact, that equation was highly unlikely. Redheads hated having red hair. People always want what they

can't have.

I still couldn't remember what had happened after I left the Tote. A vague memory of sitting on a bar stool in the front bar came to me but after that, nothing. Then I inhaled the hair. Why is it that when you wind up with a hair in your mouth you can never grab the thing? Just like my slippery memories of last night, I could not grasp it.

I was curled on my side brushing frantically at my tongue with the back of my hand when I saw a pair of feet. Feet with red toenails. Feet in red patent leather mules – with kitten heels. Looking up I could see fishnets; stockings too given the glimpse of thigh that I spied beneath a red satin dressing-gown. Long red curls cascaded about me as a manicured hand reached down for mine. The sweet smell of a powdery perfume tumbled down to me too, as if someone had just sprinkled rose petals over me.

My heart started hammering in time with my head. It was Zee.

I couldn't stop staring at him. He'd made me a cup of green tea and handed me a pack of aspirin. We were now perched at his retro-styled kitchen table. Zee tapped his immaculate fingernails against his tea-cup, pursed his perfectly made-up lips and sipped at his tea.

I looked at my own ragged nails and sat on my hands. The thought struck me that only children sit on their hands. I shoved them into the pockets of my jeans and leant back in what I hoped was a casual way to stare him in the eye. It was then I noticed his eyelashes. Why is it that so many men have long and luscious eyelashes?

“So...,” I asked, petrified of his answer. “What did we get up to?”

“You don't remember?” Zee smiled, revealing ultra-white teeth. I did a mental rewind and tried to remember getting close to those pearly examples of dentistry. Nothing came to me. I shook my head. Zee stood and walked to the refrigerator. The

door opened with a wet sucking sound that disturbed me. I shook my head again. I didn't want to think about it. Zee bent down towards the crisper. His gown rode up exposing smooth hairless thighs. I cringed. I'm hairier than he is. It wouldn't have surprised me to learn that he was naturally hairless.

Zee removed a long flaccid stalk of celery from the crisper and brandished it at me whip-like. "Bring back any memories?"

"Christ! Put that away," I gasped gagging. "I told you I hate the stuff."

"So you do remember." Zee shut the fridge and returned to his seat glaring at me through those heavily fringed lashes of his. He shook his head and sighed, "Not a thing happened last night. You drank far too much. I tried to make you a Bloody Mary and you ranted about hating celery and then passed out cold."

"But," I protested.

"You were in the bathroom for a very long time." He added pointedly, "By yourself."

I sank to the table and buried my head in my hands. It was all coming back to me. "Look my head hurts and I really should go."

"Go then." Zee stood and walked to the door. "Go then." I could hear his voice tremble. The Big Star lyrics popped into my head – "*Would you be an outlaw for my love?*"

It was impossible; I couldn't be what he wanted me to be. "I'll call you," I said, not knowing whether I would or not. Not knowing anything because my head still hurt. All I wanted to do was go home to sleep it off and put the whole sorry mess behind me.

Zee looked at me suspiciously. I got the feeling he wanted to believe me. He gave me a dry kiss on the cheek and said okay.

The door clicked open again as soon as he shut it. "Don't forget this." He handed me a limp set of cat-o'-nine tails.

"I..." I started, but he'd shut the door. "I definitely don't remember these."

## Chapter Four

I kicked the gate open when I arrived home, nearly tearing it off its hinges. Despite being away all morning and the night before, I didn't feel ready to face Klaus nor to sleep. I was too keyed up. I comforted myself with the idea he had both Lucinda's casserole and my laptop to take care of his needs, so I snuck in around the side gate and went out to the shed. The metal dials on the combination lock chilled my fingers as I turned them to the correct number: 115. November fifth: the date of my father's death. The padlock kept sticking. I swore and jiggled it hard until it opened and fell away into my hand.

Looking around my shed always calmed me. I kept it far tidier than my house. One wall was filled with shelves of the sculptures that I'd made, while the other was stacked with broken and chipped ceramics of all descriptions: patterned plates, gilt-edged tea-cups, kitsch salt and pepper shakers, and assorted other knick-knacks that I'd either found in op-shops or that friends had given me. One happy day I'd gone out the front of my place to find someone had dumped a small pile of chipped cat and dog ornaments on my lawn. I guess word had gotten around.

On yet another shelf, I had sorted smaller ceramic pieces into plastic containers according to colour and shape. One container held decapitated dolls' heads. Another three containers held pieces of porcelain elephants, cats, and horses.

For the time being I needed to smash some more plates. A couple of weeks ago I'd found some with ornate oriental patterning, in shades of emerald green, peacock blue, and black. I put on my safety goggles, and then slid a plate into an old rice sack. Normally, I'd work with an upturned plate on my workbench inside a hessian bag and whack it with a hammer but this time I craved a bigger bang. These pieces didn't need

to have any particular precision. I enjoyed their imperfect edges. I held the bag closed, grabbed the plate and hit the side of my workbench. Neither the noise, nor the action was as satisfying as I had hoped they would be, so I scattered the pieces on the bench and went to work at them with a hammer. I wanted to destroy them.

The sound of coughing made me look up. Klaus stood there leaning against the doorframe and twirling a finger in his hair as if playacting a movie seductress. I waved him in. He inspected each piece with quiet contemplation as if I'd invited him to a gallery. He paused for the longest time before one of my recent pieces, a wastepaper bin covered in porcelain dogs' heads, legs and tails; all jutting from the surface of the bin as if they were burrowing into it or out of it.

The statuettes had belonged to my grandmother. As a child I remembered them covering multiple shelves in her dining room. She took great care of them and spent an hour dusting them each week; even so, she'd let me take them down to play with them. If she had time to spare, the two of us would have pretend races with one another; both of us down on all fours laughing and yapping as if we too were dogs. Not long after her death, my father handed me a plastic bag full of the things. Most had broken in transit – a leg missing here, a tail there. As I got older Mum was always at me to throw them away but I refused.

The most difficult part of the sculpture was getting the dogs to fit just right on the surface of the bin; so that each and every piece appeared to be in their rightful place, as if there were no better spot they could fit instead. The whole thing had taken me almost two months to finish.

Klaus reached out with gnarled fingers and grazed them across the figurines, and then he turned around. Without so much as a look at me, he was gone again. I picked up the sculpture and studied it closely. I began to see flaws I hadn't seen before.

#

The following week went by in a blur. My boss had given me six days in a row of ten hour shifts at the discount bookstore. I barely saw Klaus, yet somehow I still had enough time to think about Zee. The missing hours of the night that we'd spent together bothered me. I'd sworn I was going to change my drinking habits. It didn't make sense anyway. I'd had maybe six or eight shots of vodka over the entire night. Not enough to obliterate me. No, something was up and I was going to work out what it was. I decided to call Zee the next day on a break from work.

I rummaged through the laundry basket until I found the jeans I was wearing that night. There it was: a business card, complete with a tasteful rocket logo. *Zee Sternberg Design*.

I made the call from a phone booth on Johnston Street. It was a bit silly really since I used my mobile but there was no other place to go without being overheard.

"ZeeSD. Zee speaking."

I hit the cancel button quickly. His voice was deep and smooth; the kind of voice that slides down your spine and right into your knickers leaving a trail of sparks behind.

Christ! My heavy breathing was steaming up the glass. I gave the finger to some teenage boys who sniggered at me as they walked past. Then my phone rang. It was Zee calling me back. I nearly dropped my phone, my palms were so slick with sweat.

“Hello,” said Zee, “I believe you rang?”

“Ah, yeah,” I croaked, feeling like I was choking.

“Are you okay?” Zee asked. I could hear the concern in his voice. “You sound like you’re having an asthma attack?”

“It’s Elle,” I manage to wheeze out.

“Ella,” he exclaimed; annoyingly he persisted in using my full name. “I was hoping you’d ring to confirm our date. We’re still on for eight tonight aren’t we?”

*Date?* I couldn’t remember anything about a date.

“Umm...where are we meeting again?” I asked, with difficulty.

“How about the Fitzrovia?” he said. “It’s a bar on Smith Street.”

“Okay.” I suddenly had a terrible thought. “Just don’t come wearing a dress.” I blurted out the words before I could stop myself.

My hands shook as I put away the phone.

My boss gave me a look and tapped his wrist as soon as I stepped back inside.

Thankfully, he spent the rest of the day in the back room doing data entry for the new stock.

The last customer left not long after six and after a quick sweep and tidy I headed into the office. I felt queasy.

Dave didn’t even look up, he kept typing. I put the day’s takings on the desk beside him. Finally, he saw me standing there. He gestured his other shoulder towards some boxes. “You’ll need to unpack those before you go.”

I took a deep breath, “Dave...”

“No time for talking,” he said.

“I...” My voice faltered. I coughed and tried again. “I need an advance.”

Dave whirled around in his chair and leant backwards, hands folded across his stomach. “Pay day is another week away. No can do.” He spun back around and started typing again.

“It’s an emergency.” I hated begging, but didn’t know how else I’d manage to feed Klaus. We were down to the last can of soup and the bread was starting to go mouldy.

“Everything’s an emergency,” said Dave. He waved his hand toward the boxes, “They’re an emergency. Snap to it.”

I decided to try again once I’d unpacked and stacked the books. “Any chance of a loan, then?”

Dave laughed. “That desperate are we?”

I sighed. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

He turned to face me. There was a glint in his eye. “You know the conditions.”

I nodded miserably.

Dave reached for the safe box. My box cutter was still in my pocket. I wish I had the nerve to pull it out and stick it into the back of his hand. Instead I gritted my teeth and smiled as he gave me fifty dollars.

“Here,” he said, thrusting a piece of paper at me. “Sign this.”

The note had Dave’s loan terms written down in his anally neat writing: 7.5 percent daily compound interest until the loan is paid in full.

“Just so you know what you’re in for...” He paused while tapping some keys on his computer. He’d already set up a spreadsheet to calculate the interest. “Come payday, you’ll owe me \$82.96. Let’s just call it \$83 even, shall we?”

I had no choice. I signed the note and slammed it on the table.

I arrived at the Fitzrovia just on time. Zee was true to his word; he didn't wear a dress. Instead he wore a red miniskirt with silver knee-high boots – kitten heels again, and a white mohair v-neck. I noticed then that he wasn't wearing falsies and that a few ginger chest hairs were mingling with the fine strands of wool at his neckline. I looked at him suspiciously, annoyed that he'd put one over on me.

He sat there perched on a bar-stool, one leg crossed gracefully over the other. I cursed under my breath. I never look that ladylike. I'm a clumsy oaf when it comes to movement of any sort. Once I took a sip from a drink and came up with a drinking straw hanging out of my nose like a ridiculous side-show act.

I couldn't remember much about the night I'd spent with Zee but I began to dislike him more and more with every moment. I didn't need some smug tranny with a perfect French manicure and neatly trimmed pubes showing me up in a cloud of expensive perfume. I decided to have one drink, it was all I could afford anyway, and then I'd get out of there.

## **Chapter Five**

I woke in Zee's bathroom for the second time in two weeks. Once again my head throbbed.

I managed to crawl out of the bathroom and into the passageway. The whole place was spinning and I couldn't remember whether Zee's room was upstairs or down.

I made it to my feet and stumbled upstairs. Despite my sensible shoes, I was so determined not to fall that I hauled myself step by step up the stairs, holding onto the railing as if it were a life line.

I remembered opening the first door I found, hoping it was the right one. In the dim light my fuzzy head registered lime green sheets. Zee loves that colour. I pulled the sheets back and crawled into bed.

Sometime later, the weight of a body pressing against mine woke me again. A warm and naked body. And worse, at that moment, what may or may not have been a penis was pushed hard against my hand. I couldn't tell for sure. It could've been Zee's leg. My complete and utter state of inebriation didn't help the matter. So I twitched my little finger sideways to try to confirm my suspicions. Moving the rest of my hand was the last thing I had wanted to do at that particular moment.

I wasn't sure how to escape. In the end I flung my body upright and extracted my

fingers in the process.

Zee didn't even twitch an eyelid. I'm sure he was awake and silently laughing at me. In the orange glow of the streetlight coming through the window I could make out the lines of his face.

In the dim light Zee looked like a man. Without his wig I could see that his hair was cropped short. He had sinewy muscles, a defined jawline with a peppering of stubble. Why would he want to spoil it all and dress like a woman?

If I was to be honest with myself, really honest, it wasn't so much his cross-dressing I had problems with; it was that he made a more convincing woman than me. I despised the idea of being attracted to someone more feminine than me. It was like a headline from one of those trashy women's magazine that Klaus loves. I could see it now, in bold letters right across the cover: 'Butch Girl Meets Drag Queen for Unconventional Love Story of a Lifetime'. I had no intention of becoming a tawdry headline.

I dressed carefully to avoid waking Zee, in case he really was asleep. The rest had done me good; I was still drunk but the room was no longer spinning. I made it downstairs without tripping over, but once there I had a different problem to worry about. All around me were closed doors. Although I'd been there the night before I still wasn't sure which one led to the front door and which belonged to Zee's flatmate's bedroom.

I tugged on a heavy wooden door with a lock that looked promising. A pile of bath towels fell at my feet. I scooped them up and tried to shove them back into the cupboard while looking over my shoulder in case Zee appeared. It was useless. No matter how I

placed the towels they kept tumbling back out at me. Sweat started to prickle at the back of my neck. I had to get out of there. The towels would have to stay where they were.

I flung another door open at random. The subtle scent of roses and cucumbers lingered in the air. For a second I was certain I'd stumbled into Zee, but no one was in the room. It was a bathroom. I could see a crack of light at the far wall. It had to be an external door. I crossed the cold tiled floor in three long steps and hoped it wasn't deadlocked. Sweet relief! Grey morning light revealed an expanse of grass and two bikes chained to a drainpipe. Stepping outside I was overcome by the sour aroma of overripe apples and damp earth. The fruit littered the ground beneath a gnarled tree that looked ominous at this time of the morning. Beyond the tree were a couple of corrugated iron sheds that took up the entire back fence. There was no escape that way.

I stumbled down the side of the house in the other direction. It was darker here. Some sort of vigorous climbing plant covered a trellis above me. Its tendrils brushed against my face. I tried not to think of spiders.

All of a sudden something rushed at me from out of the undergrowth. It disappeared past me in a flurry of feathers and indignant squawks. Heart racing, I ducked beneath a window sill. A light shone out the window briefly. I held my breath. It went out again.

My next step confirmed that I'd indeed run into a chicken. I felt the splintery crush of a shell and then the still warm stickiness of yolk oozing beneath my bare feet. My shoes! I'd left them behind. There was no way I was going back to get them. I'd have to climb the fence at the end of this path that led to the front yard.

Sweat-soaked and puffing hard I made it to the top, cursing the idiots who'd designed a backyard without a gate. I looked down to find a safe place to land only to

see Zee looking back up at me. He wore that silky gown of his and an amused smile. My shoes were in his hand.

Red-faced with more than exertion I took them from him. I couldn't meet his eyes. I was determined not to let him get to me. I squared my shoulders and started off down the path. I would not look back.

Behind me I heard a soft creak, like the sound of a gate opening. I turned around and saw the flash of Zee's gown disappear through the gate I'd just climbed over.

## **Chapter Six**

The sound of a slammed car door and screeching tyres woke me. My neighbours were arguing again. When the noise from next door died down I could hear Klaus at my computer once more. I wasn't sure if he'd even left the house in the previous week.

He barely gave me a glance as I entered the room. He was sitting propped up on my bed, still swaddled in one of my sheets, hunched over my computer looking at roses. I decided he needed to get out and see some real ones, but first I needed to find him another outfit.

The door to my built-in robe jammed as I tried to open it. With a hard yank at the door I not only opened it, but ripped the handle off.

A guffaw erupted behind me. I turned to see Klaus doubled over and slapping his thighs, his eyes twinkling with merriment. He angled himself off the bed and shuffled over to me. He took the broken handle from my hand and laughed some more. Despite my mood, I laughed too.

Klaus gently moved me aside so he could peer at the jumble of things crammed inside my wardrobe. He plucked one thing out after another, discarding each with a noisy sniff. At the very back of the wardrobe he found a black dress that I'd almost forgotten. It was the shapeless cotton shift my mother made me wear to my father's funeral. Even at twelve, I'd already developed the solid figure that I've got now. "Built like a brick shithouse, that one," Dad's brother had said on the day. My face flushed at

the memory.

Klaus snatched the dress from the hanger with surprising dexterity and shimmied out of the sheet. I turned away. After a long moment of much rustling and soft grunting noises, he tapped me on the shoulder. His grin was as wide as the day he stole my chocolate biscuits. He'd taken the tasselled curtain tie from my window and used it to cinch the dress in. Altogether it didn't look too bad. Much better than my bedsheet, at least. Again I wondered why neither Lucinda nor Zee had given Klaus something to wear. Somehow, he'd become all my responsibility.

I dug through my laundry basket and found him a pair of khaki army pants to wear beneath the dress. He folded his arms and looked at me sternly. It was going to be the dress alone or nothing. I sighed and motioned for him to follow me. In response, he gave me the self-satisfied smile of a spoilt child who'd gotten his own way.

We made slow progress down St Georges Road. Klaus clung to my arm but held his head high against the curious glances of passersby. I did my best to avoid their eyes. He looked into every clothing shop along the way, but balked if I attempted to take him into one. As we rounded the corner into Alfred Crescent, a dog ran up to a gate and barked at us. Klaus froze and trembled behind me. I had to walk him across the road away from it. He refused to pass it otherwise. At the time I thought nothing of it; lots of people are scared of dogs.

A little way further around the road, Klaus let go of my arm and clapped his fingers together lightly. He'd caught sight of a lush garden belonging to a terrace house in the distance. The dog was forgotten.

We could smell the roses before we even got near them. Unbidden, Zee's face popped into my head.

Meanwhile, Klaus had increased the pace of his shuffling. He was beginning to look red-faced with exertion. I started to worry that I'd done the wrong thing by taking him there. He stopped in front of the house and stooped to smell the nearest rose. It was a delicate shade of apricot. His smile could have lit up a theatre. His eyes were soft and dreamy for a moment as if he were elsewhere. Then he poked me in the arm with a bent finger. He pointed at the rose.

"Really?" I asked.

He nodded.

I tried snapping the stem but it wouldn't break. "Shit!" A thorn pricked my skin. A dot of blood welled up. I stuck my finger into my mouth.

"Can I help you?" asked an elderly woman whose head of greying curls popped up out of the garden in front of me. Klaus stood with his arms behind him, looking off into the distance. That's right, I thought, pretend this wasn't all your idea.

"I'm sorry," I said staring at my shoes. "I didn't realise."

The woman adjusted her glasses and looked from Klaus to me and back again.

"Why didn't you say it was for your grandmother?" she asked smiling. She snipped the stem and passed me the bloom. "Would she like a cold drink and a biscuit too?"

I looked around, ready to say no, but Klaus was already half way up the garden path.

We'd only just made it home again when the trilling of the phone disrupted my thoughts. It was Lucinda. Her voice was saccharine laced with arsenic. "Sweetie, is Sara home? I want to check in on her."

I bit my tongue to stop myself swearing. “Can’t you take him for a couple of nights?”

“*Him?*” she said. “Al, surely you of all people know better. And besides,” she said breathily, “what you’re asking is impossible. Please let Sara know I’ll be there at midday tomorrow.” The phone went dead. She’d hung up on me.

As soon as I put the receiver down, it rang again. I grabbed the handset, almost pulling the cord out of the wall as I did so. “What do you want this time?” I said.

“What do I want?” A note of bemusement was in Zee’s voice. “Why I merely want to know whether you made it home without further difficulties?”

My face flushed as I recalled climbing his gate. I gritted my teeth. “Yeah, fine, thanks,” I said. Then I had an idea. “You didn’t happen to see my wallet anywhere? I went to get Klaus, I mean Sara, some groceries but had to leave them behind.” It wasn’t strictly a lie but my face reddened again regardless.

The line was silent for a moment. “No. No, I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m sure I would have seen it if it were here.”

I let out a sigh.

“How about this,” he said. “Are you working tomorrow?”

I told him no. My boss had told me there were no shifts for me until Wednesday.

“I’ve just finished a major project and I’m pooped, so I’m taking tomorrow off. If you accompany me on a picnic to the zoo I’ll spot you enough dosh for some groceries.”

*Accompany*, I thought, like he needed a chaperone. And one he needed to bribe at that. The idea struck me as ridiculous; both the picnic and the ‘accompanying’. And why the zoo? Questions were pointless. It wasn’t as if I had a choice. Between

Lucinda's impending visit and my need for some cash, I had to go.

I met Zee at the Elizabeth Street tram terminus. He wore a white three-piece suit complete with a fedora set atop his long curled wig, a red cravat and a perfectly trimmed pencil moustache. On his feet: red patent leather high heels. I took one look at him and thought *is that what you're wearing? Is that really what you're wearing?*

We travelled by tram as Zee thought it added to the adventure. Personally, I thought it was so he could show off his outfit to as many people as possible.

Several times during the trip he jumped up right away as soon as an old lady shuffled on board. Never mind the height of his heels. "Here's a seat, love," he said to one old biddy. She smiled back at him and said, "Thank you dear. You're a good girl." She appeared oblivious to both his deep voice and thin moustache. Zee smiled back at her with a wink that could have charmed the pants off angels and said, "Indeed I am. Indeed, I am."

"Which animal would you most like to see?" Zee asked once we'd arrived.

Both the tram ride and his outfit had put me in a foul mood so I decided to mimic his pompous language. "I don't much care for animals," I said, with my nose in the air. "I find them most unpleasant, both in odour and of habits."

He was unperturbed and laughed instead. "My dear Ella, their foul habits are what makes them most interesting." He then slid his arm through the crook of mine. "Let's go see the primates. They're wonderful for that sort of thing."

We first stopped by the baboons. “Look at that one,” Zee pointed. “The sly-looking one with the silvery tuft on his head. His arse, I do believe, bears a very strong resemblance to Mikhail Gorbachev.”

I laughed in spite of myself and despite the mingled smells of urine and overripe fruit. “That little one in the corner looks like my next-door neighbour.”

“How unfortunate for him. Let’s hope the poor fellow doesn’t have similar equipment.” Zee wagged his little finger and we both burst out laughing.

The day went on like that, poking fun at the exhibits; doubling up childishly at the frenetic coupling of the bonobo apes; remarking that the colobus monkeys looked like flying carpets.

“It says here that colobus means mutilated,” said Zee peering at a plaque, “and that they were so named because they have stumpy little thumbs. Poor buggers, I imagine it makes wanking rather difficult.”

A group of nuns chose that moment to walk past. One of them gave us a withering look of disapproval as she swished by us. “She’d curdle milk,” Zee said in a stage whisper.

We couldn’t suppress our giggles, so Zee grabbed my hand and we ran for the picnic area where we flopped onto the ground.

I smiled up at the sky for a while, admiring the patterns made by the fringed leaves of a tree against the cloud-blown sky. I realised I was having fun and frowned to myself.

I looked over to find Zee staring at me with a strange expression on his face; as if he were in pain. I decided to ignore it and went back to looking at the sky.

Zee began whispering. Even against a background of children’s squeals, whoops

and cries I could still hear him. He moved closer until his breath was against my ear. "When I was a child," he said, "I never really thought of men as people." I wasn't sure why he was telling me this but I didn't interrupt. I studied a cloud that looked like a one-eyed dragon as he spoke some more. "Any males I knew, including my father, I saw simply as 'men'; these pathetically incomplete half-beings."

I turned to meet his eye for a second then looked back to the clouds. The dragon was now blind but had grown furred eye-brows. I was only half-listening now; I didn't want to hear the confession that was about to come. Zee continued. "Whereas most women I knew I saw as 'people'; the word woman was inadequate, it didn't really apply to them. They were people; whole beings.

"Perhaps it was because most of the women I'd known growing up were very androgynous; they cooked, cleaned and did embroidery but they also rode motorbikes, had cropped hair and knew carpentry. The men acted so very masculine that they appeared incomplete, to be half made. I didn't want to be like them."

I had heard what Zee said but I feigned sleep.

"Ella?" Zee asked in a low voice. He sighed and I could hear him roll onto his back.

After a while he sat up and pulled me to my feet. "I have an idea for another adventure," he said, eyes glinting with mischief. "I want to take you to a surprise destination. Will you allow me to blindfold you and take you there?"

I agreed, more because I was relieved that he'd changed the topic of conversation than anything else.

I watched as he unknotted his cravat. The smooth triangle of flesh at his neck was covered in a constellation of freckles. I longed to reach out and touch them. They

looked as if they would smudge away beneath my fingers.

He stood close to me. I could feel his breath on my neck. His fingers brushed at my cheeks as he smoothed the blindfold down. It smelt of his perfume. I took a deep breath.

Zee took my arm and guided me along a gravel path. I imagined the curious looks of the other zoo goers and tried to put them out of my head. The sound of un-oiled hinges told me that he'd taken me through a gate. It was more than the memory of climbing the gate at Zee's house that made my cheeks flush – the air felt warmer here. We paused for a moment as Zee opened a second gate. The place that he'd taken me was hot and humid.

“You're in the butterfly house, my dear,” he whispered, his lips on my ear as soft and light as wings. Once more I felt as though he'd reached inside my chest to stroke my heart with his gentle fingers. He reached out to take my blindfold off but I shook my head. I wanted to remember this moment without seeing what he was wearing.

We kept the blindfold on as we left the zoo. Zee said he had somewhere else he wanted to take me. When he slid his arm around me to guide me onto the tram, I didn't move away.

“Here we are.” Zee removed my blindfold and tucked it into a pocket at his breast. We were outside my home. “You're going to show me those sculptures that Klaus has praised so highly.”

I flushed a little, pleased that Klaus had liked them. I squinted at Zee. I wanted to share the contents of my shed with him, but everything in there reminded me of my family. Not only that, everything of me went into making them.

He reached out and squeezed my shoulder, as if to say that it would all be okay.

My hand shook as I unlocked the shed. I held my breath while he looked at my

work.

He studied each item for an eternity as if he wanted to take in every single detail. He paused beneath a shelf of my early sculptures. They combined dolls' heads, bells from old alarm clocks and teapot spouts.

"You've been making little intersex people," he exclaimed, laughing at a large rounded vase that had six GI Joe and Barbie dolls' heads attached to it. "These bell domes could be breasts." He picked up the vase. "And these," he said inserting his pinkie-finger into one of the many teapot spouts jutting out of the piece, "are a cross between a vagina and a phallus."

I snatched the sculpture off him.

"Out," I said, holding the door open for him, trying not to let him hear the quaver in my voice. I should have known better than to show him. It's not as if I'd been putting bells on chests and spouts at groins. And besides, it was a vase, nothing more. My hands shook once more as I slammed the shed door and locked it shut.

"You should hold an exhibition," he protested.

"No," I snapped.

"But they're too good to keep hidden."

"I think you should go."

He cocked his head to the side and stared at me as if he didn't understand. I'm not sure why but the look on his face infuriated me. He obviously thought the trip to the zoo had changed things between us. He was wrong. And I was wrong to have shown him my sculptures. I was wrong to let him get so close. The whole day had been a mistake. No more. Everything was going to stay under lock and key.

The smell hit me as soon as I opened my back door. It was if a chain-smoking florist had thrown a stink-bomb into my house: it was an odour that punched you right in the face. It was the smell of tobacco smoke and roses. For a second, I thought once more of Zee. I clenched my teeth.

I followed my nose and found Klaus wrapped in a hot pink dressing gown propped up in my bed. A vial labelled Bulgarian Rose Otto was spilt on the floor. He was watching a Marlene Dietrich DVD on a wide-screen television, while a cigarette smouldered in a full ashtray on my bedside table. Interestingly, I didn't own a television, or a DVD player. Somehow, in the time that I'd been at the zoo he'd managed to purchase all these objects and had even found a ghastly white and gold lacquered cabinet to house them.

I tried hard not to laugh at him. As if this vision of a bent-up old man in a lurid gown was not enough, scattered around him was a pile of fabric, a shimmering sea of pink. It looked as if a fairy floss machine had disgorged its contents onto my bed.

The swathe of colour turned out to be a mound of dresses: petalled fabrics, silken webs and sequins, lace and lycra, feathers and fur. It appeared as if Klaus had decided to make the most of losing his former wardrobe, and had bought every pink frock he could find. He patted these garments every now and then with a shaky hand as if to reassure himself they were still there.

“Where did you get all this stuff?”

Klaus fumbled within the folds of his gown and produced a credit card which he showed me with a grin.

I decided it was best not to ask any questions or look too closely at the name on the

card. Until payday, beggars could not afford to be choosers, as my father used to say.

Klaus dug out a space for me on the bed and motioned for me to sit down. I'd never watched a Dietrich film before. The DVD pack beside him showed Marlene posing in stockings, a corset and a top hat. *Blue Angel* was the film. *Blaue Engel* in German, with subtitles. The smell of the Rose Otto was making my head spin. The smell and the film were conspiring to make me think of Zee.

Klaus restarted the movie once I sat down. Surprisingly, it was good. I smiled at him. He nodded back at me and put his gnarled hand on top of mine. I could just see the faded blue worms of colour tattooed on his inner arm. He caught me looking and turned his arm over so I could see the numbers. They appeared to be same blue as the veins running beneath his pale wrinkled skin. I didn't know what to say. Klaus nodded grimly at me, and then returned his attention to the film.

I tried to concentrate on the movie once more but those numbers continued to glow in front of the screen. Klaus seemed to know where my head was at. He patted my knee and pointed at the television with a crooked finger. Marlene froze mid-song. Klaus had paused the film on her stockinged legs. He bent forward and with some difficulty, threw the covers off his lower half. He too was wearing stockings and a little frilled skirt.

He was incorrigible. I pulled the sheets back over him. He gave a laugh that rasped in his throat and started the DVD again.

Watching the film I came to understand Dietrich's appeal; her harsh femininity; her aggressive sensuality. There was a certain manliness to her, but somehow she was still all woman. She was a lively contradiction and mesmerising to watch. I didn't even mind when Klaus replayed his favourite scenes.

We'd watched Marlene sing *Falling in Love Again* for the third time when the

doorbell rang. Dusk had arrived without me realising. We'd been sitting in the dark with only the glow of the television to light the room. Klaus passed me the remote control, before pushing himself up with a sigh and shuffling to the door.

When I got up to check on him I found Lucinda seated at my kitchen table. Twice this week. She squinted at me, then at Klaus, as if to check whether I should be allowed in the house or not.

"I thought you said midday," I muttered. I gave Klaus a pointed look but all he did was shift in his seat and inspect the lace hemline of his skirt.

Lucinda was wearing that same awful jacket from our first meeting. Again she'd buttoned it up incorrectly. I fought the impulse to wrench the buttons open and realign the edges for her.

"Sara's timekeeper, are you?" she asked, pursing her lips.

I ignored her barb. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" I intended politeness but it turned into a snarl the second it left my throat.

"I've simply come to visit Sara, and to collect my dish," she purred. "Surely you're happy to allow your dear friend a visitor or two?"

"Or two?" I spluttered. She gave me a withering look and brushed at the front of her coat. "You've invited someone else over?"

"Don't knot your knickers, sweetie, it's a figure of speech."

I bent across in front of her and began to clear the table, intending to stack dishes in the sink. Then realised I was doing it because I thought she was judging me. I stopped and sat down beside Klaus. I didn't want to let her get the upper hand.

"By the way, I found this." Lucinda tossed my wallet on to the table.

I shook my head. "Where?"

“You ought to be more careful, my dear. I found it at my house. You must have lost it when you came to pick up Sara.”

Her explanation didn't ring true. I was sure I hadn't lost it then. I flicked it open to see if all my cards and cash were still there. They were, as was my house key.

The sound of Lucinda's red fingernails tapping on the table interrupted my thoughts. “Are you done with my dish?”

“Huh?”

“My casserole dish, dear. I'd like it back if it's all the same to you. It's a Le Creuset.”

The problem was I wasn't sure where Klaus had left it. “Ah. It's still in the fridge,” I said quickly.

“I supposed you don't have any Tupperware containers either, do you?”

“As if,” I muttered.

She made a tutting noise and said, “Well, I shall come back in a few days' time to collect it then.”

And with that she got up and left, but not before kissing Klaus once on each cheek. He grinned and presented each cheek to her like he was offering up a priceless gift. Little did I know.

## Chapter Seven

I wanted desperately to be in my own bed, even if it did have a geriatric and all his dresses in it. The idea of old man farts and possible incontinence made me choose to sleep on the couch once more.

I couldn't sleep. My thoughts were racing all over the place. Klaus's pink frocks made me think of Vicki, a high school friend. I hadn't thought of her in years. She held a party around the time I'd convinced myself I should dress more like a girl, whatever that was supposed to be. So there I was at Vicki's seventeenth birthday party in a dress that was not only pink, it had multiple rows of lace frills around the bodice and the hem. I felt like a gorilla in drag. I was on the school shotput team at the time and with the physique to match. I tried to fit in by teasing the top of my hair like the other girls did but instead looked as if a bird had tried to nest there.

Of course, my mum was still too wrapped up in dad's death to see that I looked like a goose in that outfit. She murmured, "You look nice, dear," and kissed me on the cheek while staring straight through me as she always did.

When I arrived at the party Vicki hugged me tight and pretended not to notice my outfit. She may have been young but she wasn't stupid. She could see that I'd be hurt if she commented.

Her parents sat tight-lipped in a corner and watched over the festivity, if you could call it that. Around 15 people were milling around in a hall built for over a hundred. A

large woman like me clad in a dress the colour and texture of fairy floss would not go unnoticed. A freckle-faced guy that everyone called Brando came up to me and said, “Al, your dress is stuck in your knickers.”

I whirled around trying to look over my shoulder to see if he was lying. That group of guys were always playing tricks on me. Long was doubled over laughing, coughing his drink out his nose. Tuan slapped him on the back and was laughing too. “Hey, you got legs like a guy,” he yelled. “Hairy too.”

I pulled my skirt down and rushed into the bathroom with my cheeks burning. Vicki raced in to find me trying to tear the lace off my dress. She had her father’s coat in her hands and offered it to me. “Here, you’ll feel better if you put this on,” she said.

A few days after the party, Vicki had asked me a peculiar question. “Have you ever wished you were born a boy?”

I said I hadn’t really thought about it, but she got me thinking. I knew she wished she had been. Her brothers had a much easier go of it than she did. They didn’t have to do any work around the house. They could come and go as they pleased, while she had to come home from school, cook for the entire family while her parents worked, mind her younger siblings and then find time for her homework. I didn’t have her problems; mum always left me to my own devices. When I thought about it hard, it wasn’t that I wanted to be a boy; it was that I wanted to look more like a girl.

I finally drifted off then woke to the thought that I’d never asked Zee what it was he wanted to be. It didn’t matter anyway. I’d had enough of him occupying my thoughts. His wild interpretations about my sculptures was the last straw. Whatever he was I didn’t want any part of it. We were friends; nothing more. I resolved to tell him that.

#

All week I fretted over what to say to Zee. I woke up not long after the sun rose on Saturday morning and headed out to the shed. Normally, I didn't have any difficulty thinking up new things to create; looking at my containers of broken pottery often suggested new projects. But today I couldn't concentrate.

I slammed the hammer down hard on another section of plate. A shard hit my cheek almost instantly. I'd forgotten to use the hessian bag. It was a lucky miss. I'd done the unthinkable and had forgotten to wear safety goggles. Trying to create something today was not going to work. I'd end up losing a finger or an eye instead. I decided to go and speak to Zee.

Even though I didn't know Zee very well, I could tell as soon as he answered the door that he wasn't himself. He seemed distracted. He led me into another room and waved a hand at me, as if to say sit down. I did and he left the room.

It was filled with bookcases and at least five lamps on tables covered with red and purple scarves. There was a matted sheepskin rug on the floor which was surrounded by cushions the size of small mattresses. A stick of incense was smouldering on a stand in the corner of the room. I had the vaguest recollection that Zee had told me his flatmate and bandmate, Leggy, was responsible for the interior design. He was also the artist responsible for a large painting on the wall that showed a man in a turban penetrating a woman from behind while plucking at one of her nipples with his fingers. The man's outstretched fingers made me think of the way Klaus had held his teacup at Lucinda's.

The association between the two images wasn't a connection I wanted to make.

While waiting, I got up and looked over the books on the shelves. They were your usual sexed-up hippy fare like *Tantric Sex*, *The Perfumed Garden*, and *The Kama Sutra*. I knew without spotting it that there'd also be a copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* somewhere on the shelf, and most likely several volumes of Richard Bach, Paulo Coelho and Carlos Castañeda too.

But then an unusual title caught my eye. The book was called *Gender Trouble*. The cover depicted two children wearing dresses. The one whose hair was cut short like a boy looked as uncomfortable as I had at Uncle Mo's wedding. This uncle had married when I was ten years old. My brother James resented the wedding invitation; he hated family outings, as did I – but mostly because my mother would always make me wear a dress. I sulked for weeks leading up to the event. The pale green lace dress I was to wear hung behind my bedroom door. It tormented me as I went to sleep and then again when I woke. Three days before the wedding, I took a pair of scissors from my mother's sewing basket, and cut a jagged hole the size of a dinner plate in the front of the dress. When mum saw it she put her hand inside the hole and stood like that for several moments. I couldn't help smirking when she turned to face me. In three short strides she was by my side; she slapped my face so hard my ear rang.

At the dinner table she showed my father the damage I'd done. James kicked me under the table, and thrust his chin out at me in that way that meant, "Ha! You're gonna cop it now." His face fell when dad instead yelled at mum. "You're a damn fool to waste money on a dress that you know she won't wear."

I narrowed my eyes and stuck my chin out at James. He knew what I meant by the gesture. Mum stared down at her meal, jaw clenched, chasing a potato around her plate with a fork.

Dad started in on her again “Why the hell do you want her to be a girly girl?” He threw his cutlery on the table. His fork rebounded and clattered to the floor. “God knows, one sissy kid in this family is more than enough.” He stood and left the table. The three of us sat there in silence. The look James gave me was ice cold daggers. I shivered despite myself. I didn’t feel like I’d won anymore.

I no longer wanted to tell Zee that it was over between us. I wanted to tell him the story of the dress and about James. If anyone would understand it would be him. I looked back down at the book. I hadn’t read *Gender Trouble* – it wasn’t the sort of thing we stocked at work. Our literary canon ran to whether the book was remaindered or not. I flicked it open and read a line at random: “Does being female constitute a ‘natural fact’ or a cultural performance, or is ‘naturalness’ constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” My head hurt to read it; to untangle what the author was saying. I hadn’t ever thought of things like that, whether being female was an act. Some actor I was.

When Zee returned to the room I asked if I could borrow the book. He sat down, nodded and waved his hand again without so much as looking at the title, obviously meaning that I should take it. Instead he muttered something about seeing his father earlier in the day. He picked up a large book that was on the couch and sat chewing on his thumbnail while flicking through the pages. The rest of his nails were bitten to the quick.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Huh?” Zee looked up at me for a second before returning to his book.

I tried making a joke. “Is your manicurist away?”

He didn't even ask why I wanted to know, he just kept staring at the book in his hands.

“What you reading?”

He flipped the cover towards me: it was a world atlas.

“Planning a trip?”

Zee's lips parted then closed again, as if he was about to say something but thought better of it. I sat down again and pretended to read the book I'd found, but secretly studied him. He looked paler than I remembered.

I heard another sharp intake of air but still he didn't say anything. It was obvious he was working up to a confession of some description. I shifted in my chair. I tried crossing my left leg over my right. I uncrossed them and tried right over left. I tried resting an elbow on one arm-rest, then the other. I could not get comfortable. Zee appeared too preoccupied to notice.

“Ella?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking up from a de Beauvoir quote: “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.” It was all too confusing.

“There's something I want to tell you...”

At that instant I felt like my intestines had been gripped by an ice-cold hand. I felt certain Zee was about to tell me that he wanted to become a woman; or worse, confess that he loved me. I stood quickly. The book fell to the floor. In one sweep, I bent to retrieve it, then took two steps towards the door.

“I've got to go,” I spluttered. “There's...there's something I forgot to do.”

I decided to go for a walk around the Edinburgh Gardens. With luck the fresh air would help clear my head so I could work out what to do about Zee. The previous week I'd decided I didn't want any more to do with him, but after seeing him I was unsure again.

All I did know was that I wished I could talk to Zee like he wanted; to tell him about my family. The instant I thought about them it was as if I was ten again.

"Hey, Boo-Boo," Dad called from his bedroom waving a pair of pantihose at me. "I got another ladder. Your old pa needs some more Suppose."

"Will you just make that appointment?" yelled mum from the kitchen.

"Stop badgering me, woman." Like me, my dad disliked doctors. He refused to get his varicose veins stripped. Or perhaps he just liked wearing stockings.

He smiled as he dropped the coins into my hand. "Now you know what I need?"

I nodded, "Supp Hose. X-Tall Ladies. I'm meant to be doing my homework though. Can't you get them?"

He paused for a moment, then gave me a grim look, "A man should not be seen in women's lingerie."

I couldn't figure whether he meant literally or just the shopping aisle. "But the doctor told you to do it. Why would anyone care?" I asked.

The look he gave me was enough. I never asked again.

I found a bench and sat down. In the distance, a hyperactive Dalmatian chasing a Frisbee dragged a small child in a red dress across the park. Two cyclists rang their bells as they rode by me. A tall guy with a large afro picked up a toddler and held the kid up in the air. It squealed with delight as the man placed it on his shoulders. A woman in a long hippy dress slipped her hand into his and they ambled past me. A sour taste rose in my throat. My childhood wasn't so happy.

One night long ago I woke to shouting. It was James and Dad arguing. I got up and crept to the kitchen door to listen.

“You're a disgrace to this family.” Through the gap in the door I could see Dad yelling into James' face. Dad had him pushed back against the kitchen bench. James kept clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Where have you been getting it? Stealing it off your mother? Your sister?”

I couldn't see James from my hiding spot to know what Dad meant.

“I bought it myself.” James shouted back. “In Myers – at the Revlon counter. In front of *everyone*.” He shouldered past Dad and shoved the door open. Tears streaked through black eyeliner that ran down his cheeks. I slid back against the wall. “You know what,” he said turning back sharply, “you're a fucking hypocrite. ‘Suppose’, my arse.”

I heard the sick thud of what sounded like a dropped watermelon. It was the sound of my dad's fist pounding into James' face.

That was the last I saw of my brother. I heard he had couch-surfed with friends for a while, then went to Japan. Mum left his bedroom untouched, always hoping he'd

return, but he never did.

I thought he'd come back for the funeral, but he didn't. I snuck into his room that night and tore down his posters: Bauhaus, The Birthday Party, Joy Division, and Siouxi Sioux. I tore them all to shreds and left them there on his bed.

Things weren't the same in the family after James left. I stopped buying stockings for Dad and he stopped wearing them. Some days I think that maybe, if I hadn't been so stubborn and had kept buying them for him, he'd still be alive. I know it's stupid to be fixated on that but it was a clot that got him in the end. A clot that travelled to his heart: deep vein thrombosis. I asked a doctor about it recently. She said compression stockings wouldn't have made an iota of difference. The likelihood of that clot travelling was great, regardless of the kind of hosiery he was wearing. I didn't believe her though.

## **Chapter Eight**

On Wednesday I had a doctor's appointment. My GP thought my irregular periods and my excess facial hair might be hormonal, so she'd sent me to see a 'Specialist'. I didn't think there was much that was special about him. He was a short-necked man with a mottled bald head and a beaked nose. He reminded me of an ancient turtle and moved as slowly. His head tilted towards me in increments so tiny that I imagined him as the minute hand on a death clock. He coughed several torturous times, dabbed at his mouth with a monogrammed handkerchief and then went back to shuffling a sheaf of papers in front of him. Looking over the tops of his glasses, he swallowed hard and said in a wavering voice, "I'm afraid I have terrible news, Ms..." he coughed again, "Ms Estrella. It appears that you have multiple cysts on your ovaries."

"Cancer?" The word shot out of my mouth before I had a chance to contain it.

His turtle-head moved slowly, first to the left then to the right, then back again. I was sure that a minute had passed as he did this.

"Oh, no," he wheezed. "My word, no."

"What then?" I snapped.

"You have an excess of male hormones which are a direct result of polycystic ovary syndrome. The effects of these hormones are generally super-abundant body hair and acne."

He looked me up and down. "In addition, you will most likely have a predisposition to infertility. I'm sure that won't be a problem for..." he coughed again, "for a person,

such as yourself.” He looked at my hair and clothes in a pointed way that made me blush.

“And what do you mean by that?” I gripped the arms of the chair.

He looked at me over his glasses again, “For a person with your...*lifestyle*.”

“Again, I seem to be misunderstanding you.”

He exhaled with a rumble as if it exasperated him to talk to me, “Someone of the...*Sapphic* persuasion.”

“Just give me my prescription and I’ll be out of here.”

He started to explain the dosage but I snatched the script from his hand, scrunched it into a ball in front of him and tossed it into his bin on the way out. As if I’d take the medical advice of that ignorant idiot.

I kicked a drink can out the front of the clinic. It rebounded off a black Audi. I hoped it was his. I couldn’t believe his gall. I don’t know why I even bothered seeing him. All doctors were the same – same stupid assumptions.

I was in no mood for Collingwood today. I snarled at the innocuous single-storey workers’ cottage on Easey Street – the site of a double-homicide in the 1970s. It passed for one of the identical neighbouring houses packed together. Look different and people thought you were ‘different’ and yet so much was hidden in plain sight. I stamped my way past homes with small neat yards and trim hedges, and others grown over with weeds, some with sagging lounge chairs collapsing on a veranda. Then up Wellington Street past a fume-filled petrol station and factory buildings. Past more workers’ cottages, and more factory buildings – now converted into homes for wealthy morons.

Past two pubs, and over Alexandra Parade, dodging the post-work freeway traffic. I slowed down on Woodhead Street. The trees there quietened me for a moment, their greenery looked like leafy afro hairdos atop slender pale trunks. Then I finally reached St Georges Road, and walked past fast-food stores with faded fluoro signs painted onto windows, and the greasy scent of fish and chips, then at last to my home on the corner, near tram stop No. 25.

When I first moved in I thought it would be an amazing place to live, so much within walking distance: the Italian restaurants on Lygon Street and the mad buzz of voices at the cafes and bars of Brunswick Street a short walk away. And yet I couldn't have felt lonelier there. Everyone had some place to go, or someone to talk to, someone to confide in. Everyone but me.

The noise never stops. Day or night. I've never met any of my neighbours in the street. Probably just as well given the kinds of neighbours Klaus had. I couldn't imagine that mine would be any better. Would telling them that I have polycystic ovaries make a difference?

The PCOS explained all the hair but the diagnosis didn't reassure me in the slightest. Every day was a constant battle against the reforestation of my body, as though a masculine force inside me was running rampant, trying to break free, and if I let slip I'll be overrun with wild bushy hair sprouting from every pore. To top it off my acne was bad that month, and my weight had gone up so much that my jeans chafed. I thought about calling my mum to tell her about the doctor, but then thought better of it; we hadn't spoken in nearly a year. It was Zee who I wanted to see.

My mobile rang while on the way home from the Specialist. It was Zee. He asked me to come over. Despite wanting to see him I was apprehensive. I could tell from his tone that it was something serious. When I arrived at his flat in Carlton he was shaking. He'd received a letter from some hospital in Berlin. My own medical appointment paled in comparison. Without a word and before we'd even sat down, he handed me the piece of paper and waited while I read the stark black type.

"You have a brother?" I asked puzzled. "You never told me about him." I realised in that instant I'd never told him about mine either. I bit down hard on my lip. I thought for a split second about telling Zee, about asking him to help me look for James on the internet. I dismissed the idea. Zee had his own brother to worry about, he didn't need to concern himself with mine, nor my visit to the stupid Specialist for that matter.

"Half brother it seems," Zee said. "Newly acquired." He sat down on the edge of the couch; his unsteady movements belied his glib statement. "If you read the rest of the letter you'll see that they've contacted me because he needs a kidney transplant. He has no other living relatives. I'm it. They want to know whether I'll consider being tested as a potential donor."

I stared at him dumbstruck.

"Dad called earlier in the week to tell me to expect the letter. He's in shock too. He didn't know either. Apparently mum had been writing to Tomas a couple of times a year, despite not receiving a reply. She must have given him their number."

"Will you do it?" I bit at my lip, afraid he would say yes.

Zee was staring out the window, distracted, and didn't hear me.

I asked again.

He sighed. "I'm booked to have the tests in a month. If I'm a match, I'll worry

about it then.”

My fingers itched and flexed involuntarily. I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder. I wanted to say something, the right thing. I wanted to tell him I'd be there for him. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket and looked at the floor. When I braved a look at him his head was still bowed and a large sweep of his hair had fallen forward forming a dark shadow across his face. He looked at me with tears in his eyes, “Ella, I don't understand how mum could've done it.”

“Her affair?” I asked.

“No, Tomas was born before she was with dad. I mean leaving him there in Germany. How can a mother abandon her child like that?”

“I don't know, Zee. She must have had her reasons.” I bit my lips against the words as soon as I said them; they weren't what I wanted to say. Why was it I could never say what I wanted to say?

Zee stood suddenly and gave me a fierce look. He looked almost as if he wanted to hit me for suggesting that. “Well, I'd never do it,” he said with the kind of ferocity I'd never heard from him before. “No matter the circumstance. Not to my own flesh and blood.”

## Chapter Nine

I avoided Zee for a while after the conversation about his brother. The whole bloody thing kept making me think about my own brother. I busied myself with Klaus. He was trying to teach me how to play chess. It was hopeless. I couldn't beat him. Strategy wasn't my thing.

Two weeks went by before I heard from Zee and then he called as if nothing had happened. He wanted me to come around for dinner that Friday. He didn't mention his brother. I decided not to bring it up.

Leggy was home when I arrived. Zee had baked a whole trout with ginger, garlic and lemongrass, and stir fried vegetables. The three of us ate together.

"There's one thing I want to ask you, Leggy," I asked. "How'd you get your nickname?" Leggy wasn't particularly long and lanky; more short and stumpy instead.

"My name's Paul Le Guin," he explained. "You know how Aussies are, they say it Leg Win."

"So Leggy Le Guin?"

"Yeah, like that science fiction writer. Apparently, she's a distant relative."

"Anyway, I'm off." Leggy had eaten so fast I couldn't imagine that he'd have tasted the food. "Got a date. You kids have fun."

He kissed Zee on both cheeks and then came over to do the same to me. I recoiled.

“It’s French,” he protested. “It’s how we say goodbye.”

Zee shook his head and laughed. “You were born here.”

“Zo?” Leggy shrugged smiling at me to show he wasn’t offended. “Doesn’t mean I don’t have the feeling.”

“Don’t you have a date to go to?” Zee said pointedly, waving his hands at him.

“Ah, but oui. And a lady to French kiss.” Leggy winked at me then bowed with a flourish. “Au revoir, Mademoiselle.”

The instant he’d stepped out the door, Zee jumped up and changed the music. “I think we could do with some Little Richard,” he called out to me.

I hadn’t realised Zee was also a fan. After hearing his Big Star cover I imagined him into quiet jangly pop bands like Elliot Smith, and Teenage Fanclub, not raucous old school R’n’B.

Zee sang along, screeching ‘Lucille’ as loud as he could. He grabbed my hand and dragged me from my chair to dance with him. I tried to pull away.

“C’mon. Sing with me,” he said with a glint in his eye.

I relented to both the dancing and the singing and sang as loud as Zee. We spun breathless and singing around the loungeroom.

Then the doorbell rang.

“Uh oh.” Zee looked sheepish.

“What?” I was confused.

Zee motioned for me to come with him as he answered the door. He pulled me close and I could smell that subtle scent of rose petals and cucumbers that he wore. He inched the door open. My heart beat fast.

It was Leggy. "I forgot me keys."

Zee slumped onto my shoulder in relief. "I thought you were Mrs Browne come to complain about the noise."

"Ha-ha. Nah," Leggy laughed. "Lucky. You'd have never gotten rid of her. Should do what I do and hide under the couch."

I stifled a laugh at the idea of both Zee and me trying to fit beneath any piece of furniture, let alone a couch.

He grabbed his keys then looked us up and down, saying with a wink, "Remember kids, if it's not on, it's not on."

The door slammed shut as the next song started. Bunker Hill doing *The Girl Can't Dance*. We both tried to sing along but couldn't match the fast-paced lyrics, tripped over our tongues and sang giggled gibberish instead. We whirled around some more; dipping and spinning and twisting; faster and faster. Then somehow my foot caught on the corner of a rug and we went tumbling to the floor. Zee was still in my arms. He brushed his lips against my brow. The sensation made me shiver as if ice water had flushed through my veins, replaced by a bloom of heat at my chest. I shut my eyes against the sight of Zee's heavily made-up eyes; against Leggy's neo-hippy interior decorations; against it all and gave in to the warm and soft fullness of Zee's lips as they grazed kiss after kiss after kiss against mine.

For once I didn't want to think about who he was or what he was; instead I wanted to forget it all, forget myself and be with him.

He looked deep into my eyes, asking every second of the way whether I was okay. His long fingers trembled as he unbuttoned my shirt; slipped off my singlet; unbuckled my jeans; sliding them down past my hips, past my knees; past my ankles, then off. My

hands shook too as I unzipped his dress and pulled it up over his head. The freckles on his shoulders never failed to surprise me, even though I'd seen them before. I bent my head and touched my lips to them. Then Zee untied the scarf he'd used for his hair and pressed it against my eyes. I nodded and bent my head forward, to allow him to tie it fast. And with my blindfold in place, I could hear the last whispers of fabric as he removed the remainder of our clothes.

First he kissed my neck, then traced a line of kisses down my breast bone. I struggled to concentrate on the delicious feeling of his skin against mine, instead of imagining what he could see: the sloppy breasts; the darkened hairs circling my nipples; the trail of hair up my belly, up my thighs.

“Shush,” he whispered, as he kissed me, as if reading my thoughts. “Shhh.”

My knees clamped together as he reached down to part them. He stroked my belly some more until I relaxed. His hand shook as he ran his fingers along the inside of my thighs. Moving closer and closer.

I reached up and pulled the scarf away from my eyes. Zee froze. “We can stop,” he told me, his voice quavering a little. I shook my head and pulled him to me. Brought his lips to mine. Slid my hand underneath him and felt his cock, warm and hard in my hand. I shut my eyes, turned my head and pressed my hips upwards until he was inside me.

“Shouldn't we get a condom?” he had whispered into my ear.

#

The sound of my stomach gurgling woke me in the middle of the night. It took me a moment to recall where I was. I'd spent all day in bed with Zee and then crawled

straight into my own bed without eating when I got home. I pushed thoughts of Zee and his long fingers out of my head and remembered that Lucinda's casserole would still be in the fridge. It had been four and a half days since the witch had last delivered some food. She'd visited while I was at the Specialist. Surely it should be alright? I scooped out a bowlful and then microwaved it on high for five minutes, hoping that if there were any bugs in it I'd nuked them out. Surprisingly, the chicken casserole wasn't too bad. I went back to bed feeling like I'd got one up on that Lucinda cow. Despite my full belly, I instantly fell asleep again.

I woke and sprinted to the bathroom in the grey morning light. I made it just in time. I sat down with a thud, the wet bowl clammy on my skin. Klaus had left the lid up. There was no time to worry about that. My stomach was spasming violently. I swept the shower curtain aside and twisted sideways to throw up into the drain, as wave after wave of hot liquid shot out of me. After twenty minutes my stomach settled enough for me to get up again. I cleaned everything off and threw substantial amounts of disinfectant into the toilet and the shower.

I started back to my room but another round of nausea hit. I didn't make it back to the bathroom in time. I threw my clothes into the shower and stood in there along with them, blasting everything with hot water.

It took five more relay dashes to the bathroom before I could lie down without instantly needing to get up again. Exhausted and sore I fell asleep as sunlight began to pierce the curtains at my window.

#

Wow. Neat trick. The bed was far, far away and I was somewhere near the beige ceiling floating, trying not crash into the light fittings. Why were magazines flying around me? Their covers flapped like wings, but I couldn't feel a breeze, only hot air. I could see pictures of Klaus and Zee as their glossy pages fluttered. One that looked like Lucinda dive-bombed me. I tried to swat it but missed. Whoops. Went into a spin. This plane was going down, down, down. Everything had gone out the window now. Truly it had. This bird had flown the coop and was out there soaring above the streets. I saw Southbank beneath me. Why was I in town? Shouldn't I be in North Fitzroy? No matter, at least I seemed to have outflown the magazines. It was a warm night, stifling in fact. Odd for the middle of August. I couldn't understand why I wasn't shivering though. It's hard to fly while you're shivering. Can't flap your wings properly. I looked to my left. No feathers there. Nope, none on the right either. I still seemed to be in the air though. Must have flown too close to the sun. My skin was burning. Better be careful not to get sunburnt. Lucky for my olive skin. Although, given the hole in the ozone layer, I could still get a melanoma. Maybe I already had one despite what the doctor said? Maybe this was what cancer feels like? Hot, but shivery?

"I'm sorry," I murmured, whispering to the wind. But there was no wind. My breath was the only breeze and it was hot and fiery and scorched my lips as it came out. I was a fire breathing dragon. I didn't want to breathe 'coz it hurt and I was afraid I'd set the people down there on fire. But it was only steam I was breathing. It billowed all around me covering me with its wet blankness, tangling all around me. It wiped me away. Into blankness.

#

My eyes felt as though they were gummed together. A memory of a dream of flying magazines lingered; I got bruises when I had levitated and hit the ceiling. I tried to reach up and touch my forehead but there seemed to be a problem. I wasn't able to move. I could still see although my vision was blurry. I could almost make out a face. Well something face-shaped at the very least. Someone who leant over me, looking concerned. Why concerned? I squinted at this face hoping that it would come into focus. The goop in my eyes did not help though. I was unable to move to brush it away. The face moved away. Out of my line of sight. Then it returned and brushed a cool delicious wetness over my face. Slowly and gently. Wiping my eyes clear so that I could finally see again. The face then came into focus.

“You look like shit Zee. Go put some make-up on.”

Zee and Klaus smiled back at me as if it were Christmas.

## **Chapter Ten**

After my extended bout of food poisoning, I went into work to find I'd been fired. There was no use in giving Dave the doctor's certificate that confirmed "Yes, indeed she was out stone cold delirious with visions of levitations and clouds and dragons for three whole fucking days, then could not move for another three, but was kindly tended to by a 6'3" Drag Queen. Thank you very much," because he tore it up no sooner than I handed it to him.

I had no clue what I'd do for work. Becoming a dominatrix was a possibility. Although I'd lost weight I was still big and scary enough. I could imagine my clients down on their hands and knees scrounging for small change while I brandish a cat-o'-nine tails.

I stopped and held my breath. Why did that seem familiar?

I decided to head back to Zee's while he was at work to see if I could find an answer.

An electric shock ran through my fingers as I opened Zee's closet. His clothes hung in fragrant rows on rails suspended from the ceiling by a chain. The contraption swayed as I browsed, making my head spin. I completely forgot why I'd gone there and buried my face into a pink satin gown. I could still catch the faint sweet scent of roses mixed with cucumbers. The dress looked like the one he was wearing on his graduation day. I

checked it against the picture on his bedside. His parents and grandmother stood on either side of him, beaming radiant grins. It must be nice to have that kind of support and unconditional love.

The floor creaked and I caught my breath, but heard no further sounds. I held a red knee-length skirt to my hips but still couldn't tell whether it would fit.

It was strange to have lost weight. This new body of mine was familiar yet at the same time foreign, like what I imagined it must be like to have phantom limb syndrome; as though the ghost of the weight I'd lost was still hovering around me. To look in a mirror and see a slimmer version of me staring back was somehow wrong, as if I was seeing someone else, not me. I no longer had a strong, muscular body. My flesh had become softer; almost feminine.

I don't know what compelled me to do it. Perhaps it was the fact that none of my own clothes fitted me anymore. I undid my belt, stepped out of my jeans then began to wriggle into the skirt. As I inched it up my hips I heard the most horrific noise imaginable. The seam had split. I managed to extract myself from the ruins of the skirt and dropped it to the floor. I figured that Zee's wardrobe was sizable enough to not notice one little skirt missing so I planned to throw it out with the garbage later on.

My sudden desire to try something on and have it fit overtook my fear of being caught. A flash of emerald green caught my eye. It was a knit top. I struggled a little getting it over my head. All these fitted things were kind of new to me. Then I found an a-line black skirt. The button at the waist didn't quite do up but at least the seams didn't split. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. It was useless. Even with all the weight I'd lost I still looked like a tranny. And my knickers had bunched up over my hips and made me look deformed and lumpy, I hadn't bothered to buy any new pairs since losing

weight so they were sagging. I slipped them off. I looked better but still felt like a freak given the amount of hair on my legs. Zee mustn't feel that way when he wears his clothes. But I felt like a female impersonator.

I got another electric tingle down my spine as an idea struck me. How would people react to me dressed like this? I wasn't brave enough to find out.

I had begun to take the clothes off when Zee walked in the door. He looked bemused. I tore the top off, threw it on the bed, then snatched my clothes from the floor. He reached out to stop me, but I shouldered past him.

He followed me to the bathroom and stood at the door watching me as I dressed. "None of my clothes fit," I snapped.

"I can see that," he smiled. "I guess mine didn't fit too well either," he said gently as he dropped the torn skirt into the bin.

He was right, and it wasn't just the size of the clothes that didn't work. I should have known better. My face flushed as I apologised.

Zee called the next day. The destruction of his clothes mustn't have bothered him. He wanted me to join him on an adventure to distract him from thinking about his brother. I was a little jealous that his graphic design business was successful enough to allow him all this time off. His employees, all five of them, had told him to take the leave.

Apparently, he was such a good boss they were willing to pick up the slack. Now that I'd lost my own job I had nothing better to do so I agreed to go with him. Klaus

appeared happy enough alone in my place so I decided to leave him there. Before I left, I emptied his ashtray and told him to be careful. He nodded and smiled at me. I'm not sure that he understood me.

Zee had asked me to meet him at Platform Three on the Flinders Street end of Parliament Station. The escalators were so steep they gave me vertigo. Looking at the little picture plaques of Parliament House on the dividing barrier didn't help me either. The only thing for it was to stand still and hold onto the railing instead of running down.

I arrived late as usual to find Zee wearing a white ruffled shirt. He once again wore slim satin pants but this pair had a white ribboned stripe down the outside of each leg; again he was in high heel shoes – this time black patent leather Mary Janes. His hair was styled in a high pompadour. I couldn't believe it but he looked like a taller pasty-faced version of Prince. In other words, not someone I wanted to be seen in public with, and not while in the confines of public transport. Being unnoticed and invisible was going to be impossible given his outfit.

I was about to turn on my heel and ditch him but I'd left my run too late. Zee spotted me and with a warm smile and an exaggerated wave, he came over to greet me. I flinched at his touch when he hugged me. Hurt flickered across his eyes for a second and then the warm light came back.

“Where is it that you're taking me today?” I asked. “Promise me there won't be any animals involved.”

Zee threw back his head and laughed a rich throaty laugh. I hadn't realised previously, but he didn't have much of an Adam's apple. In fact, I could barely see one at all.

"My dear Ella, beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

His answer was equally cryptic. "One man's animal, is another man's bear." He gently touched my arm as if he was afraid I would jerk away again. "But enough of that now," he said as the Werribee line train pulled in. "Our chariot awaits."

Despite now knowing which line we were travelling on, I still couldn't imagine where he was taking me, unless it was to Williamstown, but then he wasn't dressed for strolling along the beach.

At Footscray Station he motioned for me to get off. I'd grown up in Croydon and never had reason to go to Footscray previously. All I knew about that suburb was that it housed a large number of Vietnamese shops and restaurants, there was a university there, and that it was a place to score heroin. I began to wonder whether 'going on an adventure' was slang for doing drugs. Maybe that was how he stayed so cheery in the face of a dying brother?

We crossed over the railway tracks via a pedestrian bridge and were hit by the warm sugary smell of doughnuts coming from a caravan nestled beneath the foot of the bridge.

Zee stepped up to the window. The man working inside grinned and clasped Zee's hands tight in his while kissing him on both cheeks. He handed us each a bag containing a piping hot doughnut and refused to accept payment from Zee, who thanked him and

asked him about his wife. I walked away and looked at the for sale notices in the window of the real estate agents.

“Have a look at this,” Zee waved me back to the van. “This is the best bit.” He then picked up a dolphin shaped object from the counter, pushed its snout into the middle of his doughnut and squeezed. Bright red jam began oozing out. I couldn’t help laughing. Today might be enjoyable after all.

Zee’s next stop was a supermarket sized op-shop called Savers. I couldn’t believe I’d never been out here before. I was sure Zee would disappear on me to look at clothes but instead he took me over to the centre aisles. There I found row after row of porcelain figurines and statuettes. It was a treasure trove.

“Look at this one,” said Zee with a grin handing me a statuette of a boy playing a recorder, or who would have, had his hands not been empty.

I took one look at it and almost coughed up a piece of doughnut. “I can’t believe they’re selling that.” The statue appeared to be miming a blow job.

“I think you should get him. With luck you’ll also find him another instrument to blow.” This time there were no nuns around to hear our childish giggles.

We also found a figurine of a child in a nightgown on his knees in prayer, a pair of pink, purple and blue angelfish salt and pepper shakers, a statuette of a girl in an Edwardian-style dress holding a frilled umbrella, a pink poodle which had a golden chain dangling from its neck, and a rotund chef-shaped cookie jar. We took everything to the checkout except the cookie jar.

Zee gave me a wink and whispered, “Let’s see if I can get you a discount.” I nodded, happy for him to try.

“Excuse me,” he said to a frizzy-haired woman in maroon t-shirt, “we’re wondering if you could assist us with these items. We’d like to purchase them, but they all appear to be slightly defective.”

She snapped her gum and asked him what the problem was.

“Well...” he said placing one hand on his hip and the other on the counter, “the poodle is off its leash, the shepherd is missing whoever he’s trying to blow, and the kid praying is patently cracked. Can we get a discount?”

I had to bite hard on my lip to stop myself from laughing.

The woman snapped her gum again and without so much as blinking said, “Ten percent.”

I nodded at Zee, still biting my lip. He then picked up the statuette and gave it a closer inspection. “Hmm...I’m not sure that’s sufficient. Look at the state of this lass,” he said handing the shop assistant the figurine. “That’s not a bee in her bonnet, it’s a chip.”

She rolled her eyes and stifled a yawn. A customer behind us in a stained t-shirt that didn’t quite cover his stomach muttered “Hurry the fuck up, will ya.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Zee said turning to him, “but would you not agree that these are the fish that John West would reject?”

The man blinked behind his milk-bottle-bottom glasses, nodded at the condiment containers, then looked up at the cashier. “For fuck’s sake, give the lady a decent discount, will ya.”

I started coughing and had to turn away.

“Twenty-five percent off, for a discount of \$2.50” said Zee as we left the store.

“Not bad, if I do say so myself.”

After a large bowl of phở in Little Saigon, Zee led me to the tram. On the way, two school girls in checked dresses stopped to whisper and point at us. Zee smiled and gave them a hearty wave. The girls both flushed red and turned away.

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you?” He might have been fine with the attention but I prickled with discomfort.

“Ella dearest, you can’t take life too seriously – all of it is merely a performance with but one difference.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

Zee laughed. “The supporting characters aren’t nearly as attractive or as interesting as you want them to be.”

I laughed. Perhaps he had a point. “So where are we off to now?”

“Our next stop will be the ‘high point’ of this trip.”

I groaned realising he meant Highpoint Shopping Centre. “I hate those places.”

“Come now,” he said patting my knee. “You’re with me. You know I’ll make it fun.”

The first place he took me to was a clothing store. I should’ve realised Zee’s intentions. “I’m not going in there,” I said planting my feet. Zee ignored me and waved to a woman working in the store. “Ella, come meet my dear friend, Nunah.”

Zee’s ‘dear friend’ was a petite woman with skin the colour of polished mahogany, waist-length silky hair, a broad smile and dimple in her chin. She was stunning. Her eyes glowed with a warm light that sickened me. She looked familiar and then it dawned on me – she was the DJ at Zee’s gig. She had to be his lover. He’d have to be

crazy if she wasn't. My jaw muscles tightened when I smiled at her. Then I shook myself, what did I care anyway? It's not as if I was jealous of her smooth and hairless arms, nor her soft and warm hands when she clasped mine.

"Zee tells me you're after a new outfit?" I shot him a look but he was busy examining some item of clothing. "How about this cashmere sweater?" Zee asked.

I gave in and pulled the black sweater on. Zee had me try on some tailored pin-stripe trousers to go with it. I studied my reflection. For once I looked a little more substantial, not like I was trying to fade into the background, like I was firmly planted in the world and happy about myself. I grinned at Zee. He smiled back and placed his hand on my shoulder. "You look very handsome."

I tore the jumper off, threw it at his feet and went back into the change-room.

"How did you go?" asked Nunah.

"No good." I dumped the clothes in her arms and left the store without looking back. I went straight to the food court and ordered two cheese burgers, super large fries, a serve of onion rings and a strawberry thick-shake.

A moment later Zee sat down across from me. "What's gotten into you?"

I took a bite out of a handful of fries and glared at him. I wasn't in the mood for talking and besides I was making sure my mouth was full.

"Elle, come on. Talk to me."

I took a bite of the hamburger and then slurped on my shake.

"That outfit looked fantastic on you."

I snorted.

"You looked very dashing."

I rolled my eyes. "Dashing. Handsome. Like a man in other words."

“Oh, is that what this is all about?”

I leant towards him across the table “Yes, if you must know, this is what it’s all about. It’s what it’s always been about.”

He sighed. “Haven’t we gone over this before? You are who you are and if you feel good and look good then what’s it matter?”

I put down my burger.

“I’m tired of being mistaken for a man. I’m tired of being called sir and being told to leave the ladies’ loos. It’s alright for you, you don’t give a shit what people think, but I want people to recognise me for who I am.”

Zee sighed again and picked at a chip. “Urgh,” he said pulling a face. “These aren’t even recognisable as chips, they taste like axle grease.”

“Yeah I know.” I laughed in spite of myself; I found it hard to stay mad at him.

He laughed and reached for my hand. This time I didn’t shy away. “Come on,” he said smiling at me. “Let’s go back and get those clothes. You looked great in them.”

A few nights after we’d gone shopping Zee called. “Are you free Thursday?”

Thursday was a week away. Zee knew it was my birthday but I wasn’t in the mood for celebrating. I’d been thinking about my brother. I often thought of him around this time, wondering if he too was thinking about me. When I still lived with Mum, I would rush home from school on every single one of my birthdays to ask whether I’d received a card from James. Every year, my mum would give me the same answer: “No cards, only junk mail.”

“Ella, are you still there?”

“Yeah,” I muttered, unable to stop myself from bristling once more at his use of my full name.

“So it’s agreed then.”

“Hang on a minute. I haven’t said yes to anything.”

“Oh come on, Ella,” he said, laughing, as if this was a game to him. “It will be delightful.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Here’s the plan. You can wear your new clothes, I’ll wear a divine gown.”

I tried interrupting him but he pretended he hadn’t heard me.

“I’ll take you to a fancy restaurant where we can gorge ourselves silly on fine food. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

He then hung up before I’d even had a chance to tell him no.

As soon as we sat down Zee got that look in his eyes that told me he was about to make some sort of announcement. I looked away, trying to work out where the bathroom was – without any luck.

“Ella,” he said. “I’ve been tested.”

I let my shoulders drop. It was about his brother and there I was trying my hardest not to think about mine. I let Zee continue.

“I’m a match. I qualify for kidney donation. I’ve had counselling, and read all the literature. I’m going to go to Berlin. I’m off in a week’s time.”

The short sentences startled me. They seemed brusque, unlike his usual phrasing. He reached out for my hand. I quickly went for my glass of water instead. Our hands

collided, the contents of my glass spilled into Zee's lap.

A waiter appeared as if out of nowhere with a towel. Zee dabbed at his skirt, sighed, then disappeared to the bathroom. I craned my head, curious to know which toilet he would choose, but of course they were located off in a discreet passageway.

I twisted my napkin between my fingers. He was off to Berlin. Just like that. The napkin was now a knotted ball in my hands. It was a good thing he was going. It meant I didn't have to make a decision about him. He would go and I would forget about him. I smoothed out the napkin, then refolded it neatly.

He returned to the table within moments, looking just as poised as when we arrived. His skirt was now dry.

He took a sip at his own water with a wry smile. "Ella..."

The waiter appeared again to take our orders. I hadn't even thought to look at the menu. Zee waved him away then continued, "I'm going to do it. Nothing can change my mind. If the situation were reversed, I'd like to think he'd do it for me too."

The rest of his words had spilt out so fast I felt as if I were sitting in a murky puddle of his thoughts. I considered just getting up and leaving. He was going away, so why endure another moment?

The waiter reappeared. Zee sent him away once more.

"Ella, I don't want to go alone."

I choked on my water, sending a spray through my nose all over the table. My face burned as I coughed.

Zee smiled. "A fine pair we make." He reached out as if to hold my hand again but when he caught sight of the look in my eye he withdrew it before making contact.

I reminded him of the vital detail that he had forgotten – my total and utter lack of

funds.

He was unfazed. "It's okay. I'll pay. Consider it work if you like, I'll need someone to help me out while I'm there."

"What for?" I asked, then wished I had bitten my tongue.

"Someone who'll stay with me while I recover."

My head whirled. What would I do about Klaus? No. What was I thinking? Zee was moving way too fast. Going to Berlin would never work. It was too much. Couldn't he see that?

Zee poured me a wine and told me that he didn't need an answer right away.

We had several more glasses. By the end of dinner my resolve had left me. We fell giggling into a taxi after the meal. My head spun so I leant against Zee's shoulder. "I like the way you smell." I whispered into his neck. His hand stroked my cheek as he bent in to kiss me. I froze and looked up. The driver was staring wide-eyed at us in his rear-view mirror. Horns tooted us as we ran a red-light.

Zee laughed. "Haven't you seen a couple in love before?"

It couldn't be true. I remembered the way he looked at Nunah in the store. The contents of my stomach pitched and heaved.

At the next red-light the driver pulled the car to a slow and careful stop. Alongside us was a vacant taxi. I looked at it, then at Zee. Without a second more, I jumped out and got into the other taxi. I looked back at Zee. He stared open-mouthed as we drove away.

## Chapter Eleven

I called Zee as soon as I woke. "I'm so sorry." The words tumbled out the instant he answered the phone. "I had too much to drink and I got cold feet and..." I held my breath for a second. "And I've decided I want to come with you."

"You had me worried, Ella." Zee sounded stern.

"Don't be like that, please," I said. "How about we meet tonight to talk?"

The line went quiet. "Okay," he said. "But let's have a dry one."

Relief flooded through me. I agreed. No alcohol.

As I dressed once more in a crisp shirt and the cashmere sweater and pin stripe pants Zee had chosen for me, a cramping feeling of nausea gripped my stomach. It settled a little after I'd thrown up, but not much. I rinsed my mouth out a couple of times and then ran my wet fingers through my hair. A quick look in the mirror startled me. I did look good in these clothes. I looked good, but I still looked like a man.

Quarter past the hour Zee still hadn't shown. He'd said he was going to pick me up at eight. I called his mobile but got voicemail. Nunah's radiant face popped into my head. I still couldn't understand why he'd ever choose me over sweet, petite, feminine Nunah.

I didn't bother leaving a message.

I sat down and flicked on the TV, some awful reality TV show about six men competing for a woman who secretly has a penis. The men were salivating over her and talking about how they'd all like to 'give her one'. I imagined Zee on a similar show. I certainly wouldn't be fighting over him. I couldn't figure out which was stranger: a woman who looked like a woman but who had a penis and who liked men, or a woman who felt like a woman but looked like a man or a man who looked like either on whom and felt like neither. Zee was over an hour late. I was certain he wasn't going to show.

I decided to go out for a drink.

I had already drunk several glasses of whiskey when I noticed a guy looking at me while I was sitting at the bar. He was attractive in a scruffy kind of way so I met his gaze. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asked. "My name's Yanni."

"Elle," I said, returning his firm handshake. He waved the barman over and ordered a whiskey for us both, neat.

He was a builder who had work on the Federation Square site; the kind of man my father would've wanted me to date. His eyes sparkled as he told me what an amazing building he reckoned it was, saying something about fractals and geometry, and about the beauty of the contrasting colours and textures of zinc, sandstone and glass.

"Rubbish!" I said. "It's a monstrosity. It looks like someone has barfed up a bowl of burnt corn chips."

He laughed. "You're an interesting one, Al," he told me, then he headed to the bar to get us both another drink.

I woke to the springs of a strange couch gouging into my back and a Germanic voice by my ear whispering, "You love him. Don't you?" I looked around in alarm. No one else was in the room. My stomach knotted and twisted. I must have been dreaming. I got up and looked in a couple of rooms. The first contained an assortment of gym equipment that seemed menacing in the early morning light. In another room in tangled bed-sheets the man from the bar lay snoring. I couldn't control my shaking and retched three times before throwing up.

I checked my pockets but couldn't find my wallet. It wasn't on the couch or the floor either. My heart sunk. I had no money for a taxi. I'd need to call Zee. It was 7:17am.

He began yelling as soon as he realised it was me. "Where the hell are you?"

I was nauseous and the sound of his voice did not help. Thankfully, there was an overdue electricity bill stuck to the fridge with an address on it. "154 Saunders Street, Prahran."

"Give me half an hour."

I went back to the couch to wait. The frayed tartan rug that I'd slept under the night before smelt of stale sweat and vomit. I wrapped it around my shoulders.

My hope that Yanni wouldn't wake before I'd gone didn't pan out. He wandered out into the lounge wearing nothing but a greying pair of jocks. He scratched his head and stared at me as if wondering how I'd gotten there. Then remembered his manners and stuck out his hand.

"Yanni."

“Yeah, I know.” I didn’t want to say my name. “Look, I’m sorry about last night, I...”

“Ah, no worries. It happens. Want a coffee?”

I shook my head. “My friend will be here in a minute.”

“It’s all good. Make yourself at home. I’m gonna jump in the shower.” He looked me up and down. “You can have one too if you want.”

I shook my head again and he left the room.

I didn’t say goodbye. I left as soon as I saw Zee’s car pull up.

The second I’d touched the car door Yanni came running out clad only in a towel. “You forgot your wallet,” he said, handing it to me.

Zee started in on me as soon as I got into his car. His hands clenched the steering wheel hard. He refused to look at me. Instead he stared straight ahead. “Is this where you were last night? At this dump?” He nodded over his shoulder. “With that guy?”

I looked out the window at the weed-filled lawn, the rusted car parts in the yard and the torn flywire on the door and windows. I remembered the night before. I remembered Nunah.

“I could ask the same of you,” I spat.

“I left a message on your machine,” was his answer.

We drove in frosty silence. The traffic wasn’t too bad given the time of day but the journey down Punt Road had never taken so long. The Nylex sign read 12 degrees and then flashed to 7.59am. I hadn’t drawn a breath since getting into the car, fearing that the mere sound of me inhaling would start another argument. I glared at Zee and turned

the radio on.

“A yacht sank off the east coast of Tasmania last night. The five-member crew are missing presumed drowned.”

I switched the radio off again. I felt out of my depth.

As we crossed over the brown murk of the Yarra, I looked back towards the city and swore at Federation Square.

“Ella, I won't let you do this to me.”

“I didn't sleep with him,” I snapped.

His hands tightened their grip on the wheel. He stared straight ahead. A car cut in front of us without indicating at the Swan Street intersection. It made it through the lights ahead of us with millimetres to spare. Zee slammed his palm hard into the horn as he pulled to a stop. “Fucking dickhead.” I'd never heard him swear before. I don't think he was referring to the driver ahead of us either.

A tall guy with a squeegee and bottle of soapy water bent over the windscreen and started cleaning it. He stood sucking hard at his cigarette and thumped on the window when he realised that Zee was ignoring him. I almost laughed at the look Zee gave him. We took off suddenly and the window cleaner jumped back, his cigarette falling from his lips as he did so. Another car screeched to a halt as the man bent in the middle of the road, one hand up to stop the traffic and the other fumbling for his cigarette. Zee did not even notice. Cold sweat ran down the length of my back, soaking my shirt.

“Stop the car.”

Zee ignored me.

“Stop the fucking car!”

We pulled over by the Punt Road Oval. I threw up over the boundary fence. When I

turned around again I saw that Zee had driven off.

I shook my head. This was not happening. I pulled out my phone and dropped it straight into the muddy puddle of bile at my feet. I snatched it up and wiped it on the grass. “You fucking bastard,” I yelled into the phone. Cars tooted at me like I was crazy. I didn’t care.

“Look up the road, Ella.” His voice was colder than the sweat at the base of my spine. “I’m parked up ahead.”

I hung up on him and then turned around. I’d be damned if I was going to spend another minute in his car putting up with his sanctimonious silence. He was the one who stood me up. He was the one who was all over Nunah. I hadn’t even so much as touched Yanni.

I crossed the road against the traffic. A flood of adrenaline surged through me as I stood waiting in the median strip for the cars on the other side. Where had all this traffic come from? My phone vibrated in my pocket. I ignored it.

“Ella!” Zee’s yells were muted by the noise of vehicles passing by. I darted through a gap and ran for the train station. Running made no sense. By the time he’d be able to do a U-turn to double back to get me I’d already be gone. I didn’t even know what I was running from.

He was parked out the front of my house waiting when I arrived home. There was no way I was going to talk to him. I checked my pockets and realised I’d lost my key again. I hit the doorbell hard. Come on Klaus.

“Ella.” Zee put his hand on my shoulder. I whirled around and shook him off.

“Don’t touch me.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Oh and how’s that?”

Klaus had finally opened the door. I pushed past him and went out into the backyard. Zee followed me.

“Ella, all you do is use me and I’m fucking sick of it.”

“Use you? Is that what you think I’m doing?” I spat the words at him. “Using *you*?”

“What would you call it then? You either stand me up or you come over, we fuck and then you’re gone.” His face softened a little as he said this, as if talking about it was hurting him.

“Who the fuck said we were in a relationship? Not me.” I regretted the words as soon as I said them but could not stop myself. I steeled myself and thought about Nunah. Nunah, with her petite little body and delicate feminine features. I didn’t want him to make a fool of me.

He was quiet for a moment. His voice shook. “Ella, don’t you think it’s about time you go see someone?”

“What the fuck are you on about?” I knew what he was about to say but I didn’t want to hear it.

“I know why you’re doing this. I know you’re scared, but you have to stop letting all that shit with your family affect your whole life. You can’t keep using it as an excuse.”

“Oh and you know all about my family don’t you.”

“No, Ella I don’t,” he said quietly. “All I know is that you shut off completely whenever anyone mentions your family. Don’t you think it’s time you saw a therapist?”

“Fuck off. As if you’re a paragon of mental health.”

“Ella, take a hard look at yourself. I love you and what do you do? You call me to get you after you’ve gone and fucked some other guy.”

I sucked in my breath. He still loved me! I stopped the smile that wanted to form on my lips and pushed the thought aside. He thought I was a liar.

“Fuck you if you don’t believe me then. You know what you are?” I shouted.

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“You’re the one who’s a liar. You’re gutless and dishonest. It’s you who needs a shrink, not me.” I tapped at my right temple. “I’ve read up on it on the internet. It’s called Gender Dysphoria, you know. You don’t have the balls to decide whether you’re a man or a woman. You don’t even know what you are yourself. You just mince around the edges.” I stood up and let my hand flop at the wrist and took a couple of little steps wiggling as I walked.

Zee’s jaw was set; his eyes bloodshot and burning. His fingers tucked into tight fists. I couldn’t care less. I was about to explode.

“You think you’re cutting edge – gender queer you call yourself? You’re just a fucking queer. You look like a twat with your angora sweaters and chest hair hanging out, prancing around like you’re Doris Day.” I sashayed some more.

“And you know what else, that dick of yours I don’t know why the hell you don’t just cut it off ‘coz you sure as hell don’t know how to use it.”

“That’s enough.” He spoke quietly.

“And...”

“Enough I said.” There was a sharp tone to his voice. “I’m going. You’re a drunken hypocrite and I’ll be glad to see the back of you.”

I looked at him. There was a stoniness in his eyes that I had never seen before. Everything I'd let loose had left me shaking. What could I do but let him leave? I heard the door slam on his way out.

The sharp retort of the door made me think of Dad and James and the argument on the night James left.

Now Zee too was gone.

Klaus came outside not long afterwards. He handed me a cup of tea. The hot liquid slopped over the sides as he passed it to me.

“What have I done, Klaus?”

He didn't answer; instead he shook his head and went back inside.

I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't do anything but think of Zee. As the days went by I started to think I was wrong about Nunah. Every little thing he did showed me that he was interested in me. I was an idiot to be jealous of his friends. He was right. My messed up family was affecting me in more ways than I cared to admit. I resolved to do whatever necessary to find James. I resolved to tell Zee about him too, and not just him, my mum and dad too. The thought made my stomach flutter.

Klaus was in my bedroom as per usual, typing away merrily on my laptop. I'd given up wondering what he was up to.

“I'm going to apologise to Zee,” I said, pulling at a thread that was unravelling on the bed covers. “I'm going to say sorry and then tell him how I feel.”

Klaus looked up briefly. His face was blank, but his eyes were moist as always. The loose end of the thread snapped in my fingers. I was afraid everything had come undone.

My fingers shook as I dialled his number. It turned out that Zee wanted to speak to me too. We arranged to meet at the Espy then find somewhere to go for a drink to talk. Zee had some kind of work function on there.

When the time came to leave the house a wave of nausea hit me and I ran to the bathroom. I retched three times; then heard my tram rumble by as I pressed my burning cheek to the cool porcelain. My stomach finally settled by the time I should've been at the Espy. I didn't have enough cash for a taxi there and back again. So tram it would be. The hour-long journey gave me plenty of time to think.

I texted Zee to let him know I'd be there around eleven.

"Fine," was his one-word reply. I tried not to let it bother me. I was going to tell him how I felt regardless. I'd make him see that I did care about him, that I did love him. I swallowed hard against the nausea.

The Gershwin room was packed solid when I arrived. I could see condensation running in rivulets down the walls. Teenagers wearing black nail polish, tartan, denim, leopard print and t-shirts in black. Hair shaved into Mohawks, styled into quiffs, mostly dyed

black, otherwise dyed red. All pushed past me in a hot, damp frenzy of noise and action.

I spotted Zee and lifted my arm to wave to him but dropped it once the crowd parted. He had his arm around a petite woman. The moment she brushed her silken hair away from her face I could see that it was Nunah. Zee smiled at her then bent his head down towards hers as he whispered something in her ear.

I felt brittle and dry, as if the next person who bumped into me would cause me to break into shards. Is this why he called me? So that I could see this? So that I could see that he'd moved on and that it'd be Nunah going to Berlin with him?

The sea breeze stung my burning cheeks as I stepped out into the cold night. The bouncer didn't bother to hold the door for me as he'd done for the two girls now shivering, hunched and huddled against each other, arms interlocked. They clattered down the steps ahead of me, the pleats of their tartan mini-skirts fluttering in the breeze. I envied them a little.

I lit a cigarette and contemplated my options. The smoke warmed me as I drew it down into my lungs.

I crossed the Esplanade and walked down onto the beach. Despite the chill I sat on the sand. I needed to feel something other than this vast spreading emptiness.

The lights across the bay scattered in a dotted line to my right. But not the lights of homes, instead the western suburbs' chemical plants. Coode Island. The eternal flame of Monsanto. Monsanto? My saint? My saviour? *As if*. Ahead of me, the blank emptiness of the bay.

As I stared out over the water, I reached down and ran my fingers through the sand, the damp grains sticking between my fingers. Then my phone rang. The light from the screen illuminated a small area of sand as I retrieved it from my pocket, a discarded

syringe lay close to the patch where I'd been scooping sand. A glance at the screen told me it was Zee.

I rose without bothering to brush down my jeans. The shrill ring was like needles behind my eyes. I hit answer, then threw the infernal thing out into the bay.

Immediately I regretted it.

Over towards the pier I could see the shadowy shapes of the men there fishing by torchlight, bent to their task. Fathers, husbands, lovers. I could only figure it as a means to escape. Why else would they be out on a night like tonight? The thought did little to cheer me.

A tram clattered dully in the distance. I returned to the stop to wait. Zee could go to Berlin with her for all I cared.

I arrived home feeling like my bones had turned to concrete. The idea of sinking into my bed was the one thing that kept me going. I stumbled into my room and started taking off my clothes. A muffled snore came from the direction of my bed. Klaus! I turned the light on and shook him awake. "Out," I said firmly, pointing at the door.

"Was?" he quavered in German.

"Get out of my room. *Now.*" I took hold of his arm intending to steer him towards the door.

He looked at me and blinked. "Ich verstehe nicht," he said unsteadily.

"Yeah, right. You understand me," I said pointing my finger at him. "You've been looking at roses and ordering things off the internet all week. Don't give me this 'I don't understand' bullshit." I swivelled his legs around so that his feet were on the floor, and

pulled him to a sitting position.

And then...

I don't know how it happened. Klaus was on the floor crying silently on top of a pile of my dirty laundry. I pushed my fingers against my closed eyes and willed that he was okay. Then I bent down and put my arms under his armpits like I'd seen a nurse once do when she moved my father, and hauled him back into a sitting position. Klaus clung to me. His nose streamed snot that soaked wet and warm through my t-shirt. I smoothed his hair and stroked his forehead. "Shhh," I murmured to him. "Shh."

I woke in the night to find him still clinging to me. He snuffled every now and then like I imagined a small child would. When I tried to get him to release me he let out a muffled cry, the kind of sound that cats make in the night.

Somehow, I fell asleep again.

The next day I woke to the smell of eggs and bacon. I could hear Klaus banging about in the kitchen but my bed was too cosy to go investigate. I drifted off again only to dream of a gigantic wooden mask hovering above me. Its features had become animated and its eyebrows waggled in a manner that was both comical and threatening. I was ready to bat it away with my fists when I woke with a start to find Klaus peering down at me.

"Frühstück," he exclaimed happily and thrust a tray at me. Orange juice slurped over the side of a glass and onto my sheets as he set the tray on my lap. I pretended not to notice.

"I am so sorry," I said. It should've been me making Klaus breakfast after what I'd

done to him the previous night. He didn't meet my eye but reached out instead to take a rose out of a glass on my tray to present to me. I could see large and yellow purple finger marks coming into bloom on his arm. My hand shook as I took the flower.

"Guten appetit, Meine Frau," he said gaily, as if nothing were wrong and flounced back out of the room.

It turned out I had more to worry about than injuring Klaus and Zee heading to Berlin with Nunah. My period was late – two weeks late. I wouldn't have worried about it ordinarily given my crazy cycle, but that night with Zee had me nervous. So there I was in Chemist Warehouse looking at a bewildering array of pregnancy tests: one-minute tests, mid-stream tests, one-step tests, tests with cups, tests with sticks. I wanted an either or option: pregnant or not pregnant – not a baffling decision between products.

When that kook of a specialist told me I had polycystic ovaries, he also said it would affect my fertility. Surely that meant I couldn't be pregnant anyway? I grabbed the nearest box and headed for the check-out. Thankfully, despite my heart beating hard and fast and my cheeks aflame, the woman on the register didn't so much as raise an eyebrow at me.

At home I peed on the tester stick. There was no way I could be pregnant. It was obvious I had an excess of testosterone or androgen or whatever hormone it was from the PCOS. All the masses of body hair were a dead giveaway. There's such ridiculous pressure on everybody to have their strands of hair congregate in such a small number of places that it's hard not to feel pangs of anxiety when they start sprouting elsewhere.

However, on this one occasion, my hairiness was cause for joy. There was no way I could be pregnant. A hairy body equals wrong hormones, adds up to no pregnancy.

I left the test on the bathroom sink.

As I sipped a cup of tea my nerves began to get the better of me. I heard Zee again, as clearly as if he just spoken the words: "Shouldn't we get a condom?" I'd told him that it would be fine. But I pushed that thought aside. *I wasn't pregnant*. Who'd ever seen a pregnant woman who looked like me? A woman so hairy she virtually had side-burns, and the makings of a beard. Imagine the magazine headlines: "HE'S HAVING A BABY!"

I'm not sure why but at that moment Lucinda's face popped into my head. I was thankful that Klaus hadn't invited her around recently. With all my other worries, the last thing I needed was her sticking her sanctimonious nose into my business, particularly at a time like this. As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

Klaus shuffled into the kitchen waving the test stick at me. There were two blue lines in the test window. Surely a plus sign meant you were pregnant and a minus sign meant you weren't? Who knew what two blue lines meant?

I pushed past Klaus in a panic to get to the door before he did. I flung the door open ready to let forth a stream of abuse at Lucinda.

It was the meter reader. He'd come to read my electricity.

As soon as I shut the door Klaus handed me the tester box to read. I felt sick. It all made sense. I'd been nauseous and throwing up in the morning. Klaus grinned at me and rubbed his belly. I wanted to hit him, then instantly had a pang of guilt.

I couldn't be pregnant. The idea was preposterous, but there it was: two thin blue lines confirming the impossible. I suddenly imagined my father wearing the same thunderous look that he gave James the night he came home from a Goth club wearing eyeliner. There's no doubt my pregnancy to Zee would've been stroke-inducing. I closed my eyes and could vividly see his face; a vein at his temple throbbing as it disappeared into his dark hair. "You disappoint me, my girl." White flecks of spit at the corners of his mouth, saying: "A pervert for a father? You may as well hang the kid already." His fist pounding a table. A glass crashing to the floor. Returning to my bedroom alone; scared beneath the covers. But I was no longer a child, and my father was long gone. The thoughts were like long needles prodding sharply at something at the very core of me. How could I be so stupid? I held my head in my hands as the realisation hit. It wasn't me that disliked the person that Zee was; it was my father.

I sat down on the edge of the bath feeling deflated, but my thoughts were a confused whirl. Every mean-spirited word I'd said to Zee was nothing more than me acting as a dumb mouthpiece, speaking my father's thoughts; regurgitating the exact kind of contempt he had for my brother, for girlish men, for femininity in general.

And if I was truthful with myself, hadn't a part of me despised my father so viciously the night of his argument with James that I'd wanted him to die? Deep beneath the blankets that night, I'd repeated it all night, as though it were some kind of voodoo curse: "Die you bastard. Die."

I couldn't have a child. I couldn't even keep track of my wallet. I could just imagine taking it to a park and forgetting to bring it home. Hell, I could barely look after myself, let alone Klaus. If it wasn't for Lucinda's meal service, he probably would've starved. But I knew I could not have an abortion either. How could I kill off

something that was part of Zee?

I tried imagining what this child would look like. Would it be a girl who looked like a girl, or a boy who looked like a boy?

I shut myself in the bathroom and carefully took off my clothes. My breath caught in my mouth. I touched my stomach in wonder and disbelief. Behind this wall of flesh, beyond the mottled surface of veins and fuzz there was a child-to-be. Part of me and part of Zee; the two of us combined into one new being. What strange, strange hybrid of us was brewing inside me?

I slid my hands from my belly to my breasts. They had been aching and were slightly fuller. My nipples had darkened slightly. Other than that my body looked no different than usual, but it seemed different. At once my breasts were both alien and at the same time more part of me than they ever were before. Now my body seemed more than flesh covered in stretchmarks and errant hairs, this belly was a place for a child to feed and grow.

Would people still think of me as a man once my stomach grew large and round? Would they now see me as a pregnant woman and give up their seats on public transport? Would they ask to hold their hands against my belly, to see if they could sense the quickening of the life inside? Or would they think of me as a man with an unknown illness – a cancer perhaps? Or cirrhosis of the liver – causing his stomach to distend in a freakish way? Would I be seen as someone deserving of contempt or pity?

Then I remembered the whiskeys I'd had the previous week and stood up to retch. I stared at the strings of bile in the sink and wondered if I'd somehow damaged our child with my drinking? *Our* child. Something that belonged to the two of us, together. Me and Zee. I turned the taps on full blast and was hit with a sudden and ferocious

realisation. I didn't care what this child looked like nor what it wanted to be; whether it was a boy who looked like a girl, or a girl who looked like a boy; whether it had two sets of genitals, one set or none; as long as it was healthy and well. In that instant, an intense heat seared my heart, as if the left side of my chest had been set alight.

I had to find Zee.

I grabbed my coat off the table and then realised it had been covering the answering machine. The red light on the machine strobed on and off.

I hit play. 2.27pm, October 21, 2004: "You have won a trip to Hawaii call 1300 506, 702, to find out how to claim your prize. Call charges of \$3.95 per minute apply".

Next message. 4.33pm, October 22. It was Zee. I could barely understand him for his sniffing. It sounded as if he was crying. "Ella, I don't know what to say. I really don't. It's not going to work. Is it? I've been ever so stupid to try. Stupid to think you could change. Stupid to think you could love me, like I love you." He paused and sighed heavily, "My flight's tomorrow. I'd like to think that you'll come see me before I leave but..." his voice was muffled and I couldn't catch what he said. Then the machine beeped and the message ended.

I couldn't believe it. The message was dated two days earlier. I checked the calendar on the wall to be sure. But there was no doubt about it, Zee had already left for Berlin. I'd missed him. Worse still, he would think that I didn't want to see him. I dropped my coat to the floor feeling numb.

I knew I had to follow Zee; to find him in Berlin somehow. I remembered his words when he'd found out about his brother. How vehement he was that he'd never abandon a child of his own. But how would I ever find him? Even if I somehow managed the impossible and made it to Berlin?



## Chapter Twelve

Leggy looked surprised to see me, but didn't pass judgement. He invited me to sit on a couch covered with a woven throw rug, while he sat cross-legged on a furry white rug on the floor. He had already made a pot of green tea so he poured me a glass and the two of us sat there, silent and sipping our tea. Every now and then he'd give me a funny look, like he was trying to make a decision. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

He finished his tea and then interlocked his hands together. He pressed his steeped fingers to his lips and stared out the window at a passing plane, then looked back at me.

"You love Zee, don't you." He didn't even phrase it as a question. It was a statement of fact.

I nodded mutely. I wanted to ask him about Nunah but I bit my tongue.

Leggy shook his head and gave me a wry smile. "I told hir you did, but ze wouldn't believe me." He sighed heavily. "Told hir to try go 'round to see you first, but ze was too stubborn." He looked at me again. "You're as stubborn as ze is, aren't you." He took another sip of tea.

My face flushed and his strange use of pronouns was making my head spin but I nodded yet again. "I thought Zee loved Nunah."

"Nunah?" Leggy snorted green tea everywhere. He looked as if he thought the idea was preposterous. I began to feel sheepish.

"Zee was Nunah's mentor in a program for kids who were going off the rails. Ze

loves her to bits, but she's like a little sister to hir."

He stood and looked at me carefully before speaking again. "I'm not sure that I should do this, but I'm going to. You were both too bloody stubborn to work it out on your own." He then sat down at a computer in the corner of the room. We were both silent except for the clacking of computer keys. Then a printer zipped into life.

"Breaking all my principles for love." Leggy handed me a sheet of paper with a flourish. "Zee'll be pretty pissed off if ze finds out, so don't tell hir, hey? I think you should read it though. It mightn't help you track the bugger down, but I don't reckon you should give up."

*Date: Mon, 24 Oct 2004 17:52:12 +0100*

*From: Zee.Sternberg@zsd.com.au*

*Subject: Berlin!!*

*Dearest Leggy,*

*Arrived in Berlin today. Alt Tegel. I love airports – arriving – departing. The delicious nervous anticipation of both. The babble of multiple foreign voices. Of getting away, leaving all the crap behind. And you know there's been a lot of that lately! Doing what's really important...helping Tomas.*

*Can you believe Dita von Teese was on my flight from London? I caught sight of her from behind – dark curls tumbling down a milky white neck. A red dress that clung to curves and a wasp waist. I desperately wanted to chase after her and*

*prove to myself that she is real. To feel the warmth of that ice white skin beneath my hands. To somehow slide within her skin and be her. It wasn't sexual though. More than anything I wanted to be her. Then she turned her head and the illusion was gone. It was a more ordinary woman who possessed those death-defying curves. She smiled at me but I couldn't bear to smile back. In that moment the weight of the miles I'd put between me and E. were utterly crushing, I felt as if I might suffocate beneath them. I still love her, as desperately as ever, despite the fact that she seems to despise me for who I am. How hopelessly foolish am I? I know how fiercely loyal you are, but don't hate her for hurting me. Please?*

*Yours as ever,*

*Zee*

*Xox*

*PS Work emails are already driving me bananas! Pietr has said he'll take care of things for me for a while, so I'll be offline now for a few weeks. Will be sure to send you a postcard though!*

I read it then hugged Leggy.

“Steady on,” he said throwing his hands up in the air. He looked pleased though.

“Hey,” he said with a laugh, “what are you still here for? Go find hir.”

I was now convinced finding Zee was the right thing to do. I only needed to figure out how I would do it.

He saw me to the door. As he held the door open a strange look came over his face,

as if he'd just remembered something. "Do you know a woman named Cindy?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Why?" I asked.

"Someone by that name came asking for Zee last night. Said she was a friend of yours."

I returned home to find the television, DVD player and the unit that housed them had all gone missing. I instantly panicked, thinking the place had been broken into and that my laptop had gone too.

Once again I found myself going through the house, trying to work out whether anything had been stolen or disturbed. Klaus wasn't at home so I couldn't ask him. Not that he'd be likely to be of any help.

Thankfully, my computer was sitting on my bed. Alongside it, I found two plane tickets: one in the name of Klaus Schmidt and one in mine. Melbourne Tullamarine to London Heathrow to Berlin Alt Tegel. Departing three days from now.

Could I accept a plane ticket? The cost of the ticket including taxes was nearly \$2,300.

I was still staring at the ticket when Klaus returned.

Without a word, he fired up my computer. With much peering at the keyboard, and shaky key-taps, Klaus composed a paragraph in German, then passed the computer to me. I hit translate.

*Dearest Ella,*

*I bought this ticket to thank you for myself and for apartments, the generously to your bed for me. Without you homeless without friends would be, and alone.*

*Klaus*

I wanted to hug him, but my arms were like lead weights. I reached out and patted his hand instead and said *danke schön*.

“*Bitte schön,*” was his husky reply.

The date on the ticket reminded me the twentieth anniversary of my father’s death was only 11 days away. I hadn’t visited him since the funeral. I don’t know why, but I decided to visit his grave before Klaus and I left for Berlin. I took the tram up St Georges Road, switched to a bus on Normanby Avenue, and then changed to a train bound for Fawkner at Moreland station.

It had been nearly twenty years since I was last at the Fawkner cemetery, yet somehow my feet still knew the way. I walked across the wide expanse of lawn, seeking out the palm tree near his grave. I’m not sure why but I liked the idea that my father was buried in the same cemetery as John Batman, the founder of Melbourne. He wasn’t in the same section though. My father’s grave was in the newer part; an area that had plaques set in the ground instead of headstones. A cemetery without tombstones seems more like a park than a graveyard, as if instead it were a place where lovers would stroll hand in hand and steal furtive kisses, smiling against each others’ lips; as if instead it

were a place where teens would come after dark to drink and get stoned, to joke and swear. But it wasn't a park. And no one smiled as they walked the paths to the graves of their loved ones.

I turned onto a sand and gravel path that led me to my father's plaque. The dull crunch of my footsteps made me remember a beach that squeaked as you ran on it. I must have still been in primary school because my dad was there. He had picked me up and spun me 'round and 'round as the sand squeaked beneath his feet. My mother yelled at him disapprovingly, "She's just eaten." The blurred whirl of the sky, the trees, the water, the sand, and then the two of us collapsed on the ground giggling at the sky spinning overhead. Then mum looming over us, blocking out the sun and dad pulling her down, her long black hair tumbling across my face, the two of us tickling her, until she was laughing too. That was the last time I remember her laughing.

Dad died when I was 12. After mum and I buried him, I shaved my head. I was thinner then, almost gaunt. Mum was too preoccupied with her own grief to notice. The photos of me then were of a different person, still boyish but with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, slim-hipped and long-legged; my clothes hung limply off me.

Then puberty hit with a bang at 13 (and I assume polycystic ovaries along with it). By 16 I'd grown into the solid shape that marked me as my mother's daughter, yet somehow she still managed to look feminine. I saw her face every time I looked in the mirror, but we barely spoke. It was only on birthdays and at Christmas or else not at all. A great chasm developed between us after dad died. It was not something that a telephone line could cross. We had both pulled away from each other until we were too

far apart to do anything about it.

I contemplated calling her to tell her I was going away but decided against it. The last time I called she was far too preoccupied about the new dog she'd bought to worry about my problems.

As a teen, I was also disinclined to tell her where I was going when I went out. Mostly I just went down to the park alone after dusk to smoke cigarettes on the swings. Despite being only 13 I was never afraid to be out there alone. What could hurt me more than my dad's death?

One night an older boy came by. I regarded him warily as he circled my swing. "Got a ciggie?" he drawled.

I pulled out my pouch and offered it to him. The trail of his saliva glinted wetly in the moonlight as he sealed the durrie. He smoked the cigarette, taking long arrogant drags; then ground it into the dirt with the Cuban heel of his cowboy boot. Kind of strange shoes for a kid I thought at the time. Most kids wore Blunnies or Cons.

"Now you're gonna suck my dick."

He unzipped his fly and pulled out the first hard-on I'd ever seen. It was short and slim, greyish in colour. It was not at all what I'd imagined an erect penis to be.

There was something absurdly funny about it all. The way he held it cradled in his hand as if protecting something of immeasurable value. I started laughing. I laughed so hard I got the hiccups. Tears sprang to my eyes.

"Fucken bitch," he called out as he zipped up and walked off. The gravel on the path crunching underfoot as he went.

I laughed all the way home but never returned to the park at night again.

Looking around the cemetery I almost expected to see the boy loitering by the palm tree, unchanged by time, hands in his pockets, sullenly glaring at me. Instead, a woman in a red coat walked by. She reminded me somehow of Lucinda. I looked again, but it wasn't her, instead it was an older woman carrying a bouquet of lilies in her hand.

I stared blankly at the flowers in my own hand. *Dad, I've found you the frilliest fucking bunch of flowers imaginable.* I could see him seething in his grave, resenting the frothy pink and white chrysanthemums and spray of baby's breath I'd purchased. I ripped the flowers from the stems and spread them all over the grass, until there was a blanket of pink petals above him. For a second, I thought of Klaus' dresses spread on my bed. "That's for James," I muttered. Then turned and left the cemetery, hoping that this time I had left my father behind for good.

Packing for Berlin was mostly easy. I borrowed a backpack off Leggy and threw in three long-sleeved tops, three t-shirts, and two pairs of jeans. I hadn't gotten around to doing my washing as usual so I gathered up fourteen pairs of knickers from my bedroom floor, packed ten of them still dirty and washed the remainder in the shower. I wasn't sure they'd dry in time, so I popped them into the microwave.

I set the timer for a minute before going to the bathroom. I caught sight of myself in the mirror while washing my hands; the dark hair on my upper lip and chin was noticeable in the light. I contemplated bleach again, but didn't want to risk another burn. The only time I'd tried it I left the solution on too long and was left with a blister stretching beneath my nose like a fluid-filled moustache. Worse still the hair that

remained had turned bright orange. All other hair-removal options were beyond my budget, and pain threshold.

A sharp beeping noise suddenly interrupted my thoughts. It was the smoke alarm.

I ran to the kitchen; smoke was pouring out of the microwave. I'd accidentally set the timer for an hour, not a minute. A small flame danced upon my rotating knickers. I yanked the plug out and looked around. The nearest container held grains of rice. I grabbed a handful and tossed it into the oven, hoping they would extinguish the fire. It worked. The house now smelt like molten elastic combined with the nutty odour of burnt rice.

Klaus hobbled into the kitchen and stood slightly bent forward with his hands behind his back, watching me. The irony of worrying about him burning down the house was not lost on me.

When I finally got to bed I found I couldn't sleep. I was worried about Klaus. He seemed organised but I was concerned all the same. It wasn't my place to check whether he was fit to travel or not, but I imagined all the things that could go wrong: heart attack, deep vein thrombosis. *A stroke*. Strangely I was beginning to feel closer to him than I ever did to my own grandfather. His calls tapered off after the funeral. Then by the time I turned 13 they'd stopped altogether. I remember the day of my birthday passed by so slowly. I kept willing the phone to ring. Whenever I left the lounge room to go to the bathroom I'd leave the door open, in case I missed hearing the phone. Then I'd dash back into the room, my socks causing me to slide and skid into the corner of the heavy bookshelf that still held all of dad's history books. I barely noticed the bruise that

developed yellow and purple on my skin.

He didn't call that day. Nor the next. It took a week before I gave up and resigned myself to the fact that he wasn't going to call.

I got up again to look in on Klaus. He was still awake and was using my computer. He stopped typing and patted on the bed for me to sit with him.

"Klaus," I asked, "will you be okay on the flight?"

The look he gave me was blank, as if he'd yet again seen the ghost of his wife. I wanted to shake him, sitting there hunched over blinking at me.

"I don't understand you at all." I pulled at a loose thread on my sheets. "I know you can speak but why won't you talk?"

He lifted a shaky finger and pointed it at my computer.

The screen was full of frilly pink roses. I noticed that most of them were named after men: *Paul Ricault*, *Jacques Cartier*, *Comte de Chambord*, *Paul Neyron*, *Ferdinand Pichard*, and *Duc de Fitzjames*. The name made me think briefly of my brother, but he wasn't a fan of roses or flowers in general. The other roses on the page had suggestive names like *Pink Fairy*, and *Pink Powderpuff*.

I had a sudden realisation. "Your frilly pink dresses remind me of these roses. Is that why you like them?"

He smiled then clicked on a link. A red rose appeared on the screen. The only red rose in the collection. Its name was *Lili Marleen*.

I decided to persist. "Do you need any medication for the flight? Have you packed a pair of compression stockings?"

Klaus did not answer me. He simply stroked the rose on the screen with his fingertips.

I gave up and went to bed.

I woke to Klaus sitting on the arm of the couch looking pointedly at me. I glanced at a clock. The alarm hadn't gone off. We were running late. I quickly pulled on my jeans and a jumper, not caring that Klaus was still in the room. As if he was interested in my body anyway.

I was nauseous again and ran to the bathroom. A car horn tooted out the front. I heard the front door open. A pot-bellied taxi driver was standing in the doorway. "Here love, lemme get your bags. I hear you're in the family way." I looked from Klaus to the driver, but neither of them was giving anything away.

"Aren't you surprised?" I asked.

The driver laughed and took our bags. "Been driving for 20 years now. Ain't seen nothin' new. The wonders of modern science, eh?"

We were on our way.

It wasn't until we were near Essendon Airport, so only ten or so minutes from the international airport, that I looked in my bag to check I had all my things. I realised I didn't have my wallet, nor my passport for that matter. "We're gonna have to go back." I yelled at the driver.

"What's that?"

"I don't have my passport."

"Nowhere to turn off for a little while, love."

This was going really well. We were going to miss the flight. Klaus however, was oblivious as usual. He appeared to be sucking hard on some sort of mint. I thought he was going to offer me one as he passed me his bag. It was only then I realised he was wearing trousers and a relatively ordinary shirt. I'd given up trying to figure him out and hoped he'd packed some aspirin. I didn't find any pill packets, but instead there was a folded square of leather. My wallet!

I looked again, and saw my passport was in there too. It appeared that I was the one in need of looking after, not Klaus.

“Don't worry about turning round.”

The driver looked at me in the rear view mirror. “Found them have you?”

I nodded. We were off to Berlin after all.

## Chapter Thirteen

We had just finished checking in when the cramps began. I asked Klaus to wait a minute while I went to the bathroom. I left him in the flight lounge and joined the queue inside the loo. A small woman carrying a backpack twice her size stumbled into me. She caught me off-guard and off-balance. The momentum propelled me forward into the fleshy form of a woman wearing a low cut "I ♥ New York" t-shirt. I mumbled my apologies and made my way into a free cubicle.

Sweat began dripping down my forehead and neck. Pain clawed and wrenched at my stomach. I looked down and saw the bowl was full of bright red blood and clots. My hands shook as I looked through my satchel for a pad. I didn't have one. My toiletries bag was outside with Klaus, and I didn't have any coins for the machine.

Feeling faint, I took a deep breath to steady myself. I stuffed a wad of toilet paper between my legs and pulled up my knickers and jeans. In the mirror my face appeared grey and clammy. I washed my hands, left the bathroom, grabbed the bag off a puzzled Klaus and then returned to rejoin the line.

I barely had time to stick the pad into my knickers before someone started pounding on the door. I ignored them. They continued knocking.

"Hang on will you? *Christ,*" I panted, clutching my knees as another cramp tore up through me. It was a searing bolt that bucked my whole body. I wanted Zee with a

desperation that was equal to the white hot pain in my belly. I needed his arms around me, his cool hands mopping my brow. My clenched teeth stopped the howl that was threatening to spill from my lips.

When the pain abated I opened the door to find airport security standing there. Two of them. "Come with us please, sir," the taller and balder of the two asked.

*Sir?*

We left the bathroom. The woman in the "I ♥ New York" t-shirt into stood outside pointing at me.

"That's him!" she said with a Texan drawl. "That's the pervert who grabbed at my bosom."

"Is that true?" asked the shorter thickset hairier guard. He looked simian. He could have easily passed for a gorilla in uniform.

I had difficulty understanding their questions. They asked me again. Finally I realised what she meant. "I was pushed," I snapped.

I tried to walk away from them. My head still reeled. I needed to sit down. I needed a doctor. *I needed Zee*. Breathing heavily, I bit my lip and shut my eyes – *I was no longer pregnant*.

"Y'all hear that?" the woman shouted. "He admits it! Worse he's got voices he's blamin'. Lock him up I say."

I stared at her through a haze of pain. Voices? Groping? What the hell was she on?

With difficulty, I enunciated clearly and slowly for my inquisitors – sweat once again beading up on my forehead. "I was bumped into by someone with a large bag. I stumbled and fell. If I touched this woman," I said glaring at her, "it was an accident."

I eyed off the crêpey sun-leathered skin which dipped into a darkened crevice

between her monstrous breasts. "Shit, with tits that ugly there's no way I'd touch them," I muttered.

"Well, I never!"

"I wish you hadn't," I snarled.

"I think you should come with us, sir."

"Will you stop calling me sir," I spat, clutching at my stomach. "It was an accident, you morons."

I glared at Klaus's twinkling grin.

"That may well be, sir but it still doesn't explain why you have been repeatedly seen entering the women's bathroom facilities."

"Get this straight, I am not a sir."

"Final boarding call for Mr Klaus Schmidt and Ms Ella Estrella," came a tinny voice from a loud speaker.

"That's our flight!"

"Mr Schmidt, please come with us."

"You imbecile." I reached into my backpack. The bigger of the guards tried to grab my arm. "Don't touch me!" I warned.

"Sir, we're going to have to detain you until the police arrive."

The woman smirked at me.

"Wait a minute. Just let me show you my passport."

The guards looked at each other. The short one nodded.

I shoved it at him.

"It's true." The guard looked incredulous, and stared repeatedly between the passport and my face. "He's a she." He passed my passport back. "Sorry for the

inconvenience and misunderstanding, ma'am. If you hurry you should still make your flight."

"What?" the woman shrieked. "You're gonna let this bulldyke molest me? What kind of country is this anyway?"

Klaus cackled and slapped his thighs. "Willkommen to Australia, lieblich."

As soon as the 'seatbelts' sign was turned off Klaus bent down and pulled something pink from the bag near his feet. I started to get up to let him past, presuming he wanted to go to the bathroom but he stayed me with his knobbly hand. I stared at it for a second; his skin was like tissue paper that had been balled up then smoothed out again. The tremor in his hands was more pronounced than usual; his touch was like a moth's wings. The numbers on his inner arm may have well been neon. I felt as if I could still see them even though they were hidden under his sleeve.

He dropped the skirt to the floor, shuffled one foot then the other into it and indicated that he wanted me to help him pull it up. He steadied himself on the seat in front of him and stiffly moved his hips as I pulled the elastic waist upwards. The woman seated beside Klaus smiled at him. "It's a beautiful colour. Where did you get it?"

Klaus ignored her and touched my arm again and handed me his rumpled support hose. He pulled up the legs of his pants with shaky hands to reveal legs so heavily veined it looked as if worms had burrowed beneath his skin. He then lifted an equally shaky foot to the foot rest. Thoughts of my father and of James threatened to overwhelm me. I managed to compose myself, then shimmied the hose up Klaus' scaly spider-veined legs.

Once his stockings were on, he gave the woman next to him a sly look, shuffled in his seat and then shut his eyes. I could see her nostrils flare and the muscles in her jaw tense as she pretended not to notice the odour that was now coming from Klaus.

This was going to be some trip.

My stomach had begun cramping again; I left Klaus and his flatulence to visit the bathroom. Everything was a knot of confusion. I would have only been four weeks pregnant. The thing inside me would have been no more than a clump of cells; I couldn't really even call it a foetus, much less a baby. I barely had the chance to work out how I felt about being pregnant and now I had to untangle everything again.

I'm not sure why, but it galled me even more than usual that the beast in the "I ♥ New York" t-shirt didn't recognise me as a woman. Looking in the mirror, I saw what she saw. My eyebrows dark and heavy, left that way because they made me look like a drag queen the one time I plucked them. My hair cropped short because it wouldn't sit right any other way. My chin and lip covered in dark hair, some strands fine, some thick and bristly. Why would I spend never-ending amounts of money on hair removal when I could buy materials for my projects and books instead?

It was tedious justifying myself and my existence to one moronic individual after another who thinks I'm invading her toileting space. I mean really, as if it's something to worry about. Even if I were a guy, everybody is safely tucked away inside their own cubicles.

And if it's not someone policing my bathroom habits, it's some meathead asking "What are you?" What kind of question is that? "*What are you?*" The last time it happened I was at *Kiss Me Quick* – an infamous late night band venue / pick-up joint, where come 3AM, the intelligence levels in the room plummet to sub-zero levels. This

particular example of astonishing intellect repeatedly poked me in the chest with a stumpy index finger as he asked the question. He was shorter than me, so I leant over him and said, “Quit that, or what I am will be the person that kicks your shit to sunrise.”

He stepped back with his hands in the air. “Don’t be harshing me, man.” He stumbled off and bumped into a woman, spilling her drink. He growled at her, “watch where ya goin’, bitch”.

Another intense cramping pain gripped my stomach. A light flashed to indicate that I should return to my seat. The flight attendant announced we would be experiencing some turbulence. Suddenly I had a dizzy spell. Then it cleared, and with it came a strange sense of relief that rubbed up alongside slivers of sadness and loss. *I was no longer pregnant.*

## **PART TWO**

### **Berlin, Germany**

## Chapter Fourteen

When we arrived at Alt Tegel, I realised that I hadn't organised somewhere to stay. I bought a German – English dictionary at the airport and managed to ask Klaus where we were staying. He ignored me as if I hadn't even spoken. He shuffled off in the direction of what I worked out was the baggage claim and then headed for a bus. I decided to trust him and see where it led me.

As the bus wound its way through Berlin, I felt like I was on a whirling carousel with revolving scenery. Dizzy-headed as I was, I recognised some of the sights: the glass dome of the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, and the golden wings of the angel on top the Victory Column in the Tiergarten. But for the most part the city was startlingly unfamiliar. Klaus ignored me and stared out the window, seemingly lost in his memories.

More than three million people lived in this city, in an area of 892 square kilometres, or so said my guidebook. Zee was now one of them. I scanned every face I saw, hoping by chance I would see him. I didn't.

After a trip on the U-Bahn and some shuffling back and forth up Skalitzer Strasse, where Klaus stood staring blankly at a kebab shop for a short while, he finally found the

building he was looking for. It turned out to be a backpackers' hostel. Miraculously there was a booking under his name for a small room which contained two beds.

Looking at the bed made me feel like all my body had slunk down somewhere into my shoes and had curled up there in an aching ball. So this is what jetlag is like. It was a sensation that overtook the ache in my belly. I crawled into the bed as soon as I could and was surprised at how comfortable it was.

The sound of reggae music and laughter woke me. Thankfully, my stomach cramps had abated. I ran both hands along the curve of my belly. The sense of loss that lingered was sharp and strange. I hadn't expected to feel so attached to something that was no more than a clump of cells.

I looked at my watch and discovered that it was still on Melbourne time. A flick of the curtain showed a shadowy courtyard where day had yet to break.

I tried to return to sleep but found that the guttural roll of Klaus' snoring not more than a metre away from me was going to keep me awake. But that wasn't quite it either, even if he had been quietly sleeping, I'd still be awake.

No man would want the likes of me; not Zee. No one would want me. Not anyone. My cheeks burned; sweat pooled between my breasts.

When I woke again Klaus was gone. I stumbled down the passageway to find a toilet. The sign on one door had a drawing of a stick figure with two circles drawn under its armpits. The other had a stick figure with two circles drawn beneath its waist. I chose the door with the higher up circles and hoped no one would bother me.

A sleepy-eyed girl in a yellow dress and what looked like the kind of high lace-up sneakers that boxers wear smiled at me as she stood in front of the mirror removing her make-up. She asked me where I was from and slurred the words slightly.

When I answered Melbourne, she told me she had relatives in Florida too. I thought she must have misheard me but I couldn't be bothered with conversation. I quickly did what I had to do and left the bathroom. I couldn't bear heading out into a foreign city on my own, so I crawled back into bed.

I woke again to Klaus slamming the door on the way in. He shuffled past me, eyes downcast and sat down on his bed studying his hands. I thought I heard him mutter big mistake, but I wasn't sure. I didn't reply. I didn't know whether he meant me or him. Instead I got up and opened the window. It looked out onto an overgrown yard, a *hof* according to my guidebook, which was hemmed in on all sides by what looked like apartment buildings, all four stories high. Across the yard I could see the silhouette of a man showering in an apartment. Through another window, light bounced off the hair of a woman bent over her desk. How the hell was I going to find Zee in this place? I cursed him for telling Leggy that he wasn't going to check his emails.

"I'm going out," I muttered to Klaus, but he didn't appear to hear me and remained intently studying his hands.

A rowdy group of Italian backpackers jostled in the foyer, talking loudly and swearing. Two of them were play-fighting and pretending to slap each other, while a heavily tattooed and dreadlocked receptionist I'd never seen before slowly checked the others in.

Asking her about a doctor was going to be impossible with that lot around. I sat down to wait on a love seat that had been set up in the reception area. A double bed with mirrored side panels was in the common room so I presumed the hostel was a dumping ground for the owner's unwanted goods. I too, felt every bit as out of place and unwanted as these pieces of furniture.

I'm not sure how long I'd been sitting there when the receptionist waved a hand in front of my face.

"Hallo, I'm Eva," she said. "Do you need some help?"

I shook my head, but my hand involuntarily reached for my stomach. Eva looked at it pointedly.

"You have been here in the Hollywood Swing for some time now with your head doing this." She scrunched up her forehead to demonstrate.

"I...I'm not feeling so well."

"Ah, I think I understand," she nodded. "There's an American doctor you can see." She wrote the address on a piece of paper and handed it to me. "You can go without making an appointment."

I walked slowly up Skalitzer Strasse, not really thinking where I was going. I arrived at the Strassenbahn stop near the Warshauer Strasse Station without having seen anything on the way. I mentally kicked myself. I was too busy thinking about Zee to keep an eye out for him.

The Strassenbahn arrived within minutes. Unfamiliar grey buildings flashed by. I missed my stop and got off again at the next one: Karl Marx Allee. The domes above the towers at Frankfurter Tor overlooked wide and near-empty roads; silent witnesses to the Nazi rallies of the past; silent witnesses to the pedestrians and traffic in the present. I shivered without reason, then turned and walked back down Warshauer Strasse. I followed Eva's directions and took the first left that I came to: Boxhagener Strasse.

A light rain had started. Tyres hissed in the water on the road. I looked up to see the street sign. It read: 'Simon-Dach-Straße' – Zee's namesake.

I'd once told him that his name annoyed me. Why can't you call yourself Zed, I'd said. You're not American after all.

He said it was short for Simon; pronounced like the Germans do: *Zee-mon*. Named by his German father after the seventeenth century poet, Simon Dach. Zee quoted him to me once: "Then come the wild weather, come sleet or come snow, we will stand by each other, however it blow." The idea of men in skirts and foul wind made me think of Klaus. Somehow I don't think this was what Herr Dach had in mind.

In a shop window red LED lights flashed the date: November fourth. Tomorrow was the twentieth anniversary of my father's death. The late afternoon air was cool but my eyes felt as if a hot wind had seared them dry.

All I have left of my father are frozen moments in my family's photo albums. Nothing is real about them; that smiling picture of my parents posing in front of my father's first business showed nothing of the man who was later left bleeding by the roadside in a hit-and-run.

At the time we were thankful his injuries weren't more serious; only a broken wrist and a mashed up nose. Could've been much worse, or so my mum and I thought. They

plastered him up and sent him home. Then bang. Two months later he had a stroke which left him comatose.

Photos had nothing at all to do with that thing kept alive through a wheezing steel machine. That is the father I remember; the one who smelt like disinfectant; the one who was still beneath stiff white sheets pulled tight across his body. I still remember how cold the dull metal of his hospital bed was to the touch; but it's the dark hairs on his knuckles and the backs of his hands that I see when I try to picture him.

I was 12 when mum finally asked them to turn the artificial respirator off to see if he could make it on his own. We knew he wouldn't though, that's why we stayed there. She begged my brother to come back to be there for it, but he refused.

My father lasted 17 hours, 3 minutes and 49 seconds. Mum and I stayed awake all that time; knowing that the inevitable would come, feeling every second beat its way past, each more palpable than his pulse which grew weaker by the minute. For those 17 hours I held his right hand and contemplated those bristly strands of hair. Her photos of him have nothing to do with that. They're shadows of memories; a distillation of feeling. If I close my eyes and think about his hands, I can remember him more vividly than anything else. I think about his hands and I think about the clot that moved to his brain. But also I think about James.

I wanted to let it all out, to shriek and wail like a banshee. Then it struck me that I could if I wanted to, no one knew me here in Berlin. No one would care. The knowledge made me feel somehow better. I didn't scream but instead continued to the medical clinic.

My hand shook as I filled in the patient details form. It looked like it had been completed by a five year old. I handed the receptionist the form and sat down to wait.

A stack of magazines was neatly arranged on a low table. They were all in German. I picked up the first and flicked through the pictures. They were much the same as Australian women's magazines. Headlines in lurid colours and capital letters. Tanned, toothy, hairless starlets leaning anorexically into tanned, toothy, hairless muscle-men. Before and after photo-shoots of gargantuan women in muumuus turned into svelte, pouting sex-kittens. A feature on a cross-dresser. I studied the page closely, half expecting it to be Klaus. It was a silly thought; of course Klaus was not the only German cross-dresser. The article was instead about someone called Charlotte von Mahlsdorf.

"Ella Estrella?" asked a stern-faced bespectacled woman with a slight American accent. I followed her into her office.

I took a seat across from her and explained my predicament.

"Do you know how far along you were?"

"Five weeks."

"Are you sure?" She looked at me hard over her glasses.

I nodded.

"And the bleeding?"

"It's been heavy for two days, but is lighter now."

"I'll need to give you a vaginal ultrasound to make sure that your uterus has naturally emptied all the pregnancy products. If it hasn't, I may need to refer you to have a D&C."

*Pregnancy products?*

I tilted my head to one side as she performed the procedure. Through a window in the street beneath me I could see a woman in a vivid blue dress walking slowly with a toddler. I jolted slightly as an unexpected pain shot through me.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Just a cramp.”

The doctor stood and dropped her gloves into a yellow bin. “Everything’s normal. You won’t need a D&C. You can get dressed now.”

I didn’t move from the table and pressed my hands to my eyes.

“I can refer you to a counsellor?”

I shook my head. The only person I wanted to talk to was Zee.

I stopped at the door as I left. “There is one other thing.”

“Yes,” she asked absentmindedly tapping at the desk with her pen.

“I have...” I paused, not knowing how to explain myself. “A friend’s brother is in hospital here. I need to find him.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Can’t you ask your friend?”

“It’s my friend that I’m trying to find.”

“You’ll find that privacy laws are very strict here.”

I sighed.

“Was your friend the father?”

I nodded mutely.

She pursed her lips, tapped a few keys on her computer, then printed out a page. “It probably won’t be of any help, but take this.”

It was a listing of all Berlin hospitals.

I caught a tram right away and rushed back to the hostel. My heart was beating fast. Eva was on reception.

“Did all go well with the doctor?” she asked, with a look of concern.

“Yeah, thanks.” I didn’t want small talk, I just wanted to use the phone. I took the handful of coins that Eva gave me and called the first number.

A soft voice said, “Hier ist Frau Nguyen von die Martin Luther Krankenhaus.”

I hung up the phone. Calling hospitals was not going to work. I felt sick.

I flicked open my guidebook, hoping it would give me some other idea of what to do. I didn’t know how else to begin my search. I’d already sent Zee several emails and despite checking daily, as expected there was no reply. I was clueless. My only thought was to roam around the city and hope that by some chance I would bump into him somewhere.

“What do you think?” I asked Klaus. He shrugged, but came with me anyway when I left the hostel.

I thought about walking but Klaus was limping a little more than usual. However, when I went to buy to a ticket for the U-Bahn, he brushed my hand away and steered me towards a seat. The train arrived in minutes. I was nervous about being fined. Eva had

told me that the inspectors will not accept any excuses, particularly not from foreign tourists. Klaus however, was unperturbed and fell asleep.

At Warschauer Strasse I shook him awake. We headed back the way we came and crossed the road. A young punk couple passed by us with a muscular dog of indeterminate breed straining at the leash. Klaus shivered visibly, just as he'd done on our walk past the Edinburgh Gardens, and hid behind me until they were several metres away. He then folded his hands behind his back and strolled along ahead of me, slightly hunched over. He walked as if he did not notice the 3.6 metre high slab of graffiti covered concrete wall running alongside him. At one point he stopped and removed something from his pocket. As I got closer I could see the shiny blade of a pocket knife. My heart beat faster.

He quickly chipped at the wall and then put the knife away. He took my hand. A flake of blue and red coloured cement fell neatly into my palm. I pocketed it, trying not to seem conspicuous, my guidebook mentioned huge fines if we were caught vandalising the Berlin Wall.

The next day Klaus and I went to the Stasi museum. If anyone knew anything about finding someone it was the secret police of the former GDR. The irony of me finding Zee at the museum would amuse him. It was a silly idea, but I couldn't think of a better plan. I pointed out the site to Klaus in the guidebook and told him I wanted to go. He took great delight in dressing as Sara and swished his skirts around as we shuffled through the wood-panelled rooms.

One display had black and white photos of people in their twenties. "Klaus," I asked, "who were these people?"

Klaus ignored me.

I suddenly remembered Lucinda, admonishing me for using the wrong pronoun. Sighing, I tried a different tactic, "Sara, who were they?"

Klaus smiled and examined the caption beneath a photograph. He tapped at one picture and said in a wavering voice, "Wolf Biermann".

I was none the wiser. Unfortunately all the exhibits were in German. Klaus bent close to read each one carefully but refused to translate for me. He spent a particularly long time examining several large jars that each contained a piece of cloth. I'd read about these in my guidebook. The secret police used the jars to store the scent of an individual under surveillance. At that moment I wished I had a jarful of Zee's scent, and an operative who'd track him down for me. Finding him myself was proving hopeless.

We'd wandered through several more wood-panelled rooms before coming to a prison cell. I wasn't sure whether it was a replica or an actual cell, but Klaus's face flamed bright red despite his thick and powdery foundation. His whole body began to quake violently, I put my hand on his arm and was about to call for assistance, worrying he was about to have a stroke. He shook me off and instead struck out at the prison bars with his umbrella. The metal clanged dully. I quickly steered him out into an office room that contained a display of spy gadgets. The colour in Klaus's face returned to normal and he stood peering into a cabinet that contained a camera concealed by a button. He appeared as if nothing had happened, while my heart still pounded in my ears.

The next room housed a large framed photograph of Mielke, the former Minister of State Security; head of the Stasi Secret Police. While here Klaus made the most unladylike and violent hawking noises. I thought he must have been having a stroke or choking on phlegm, or any number of other medical emergencies, but no. He was raising enough spittle to take aim at Mielke's face. His aim was terrible and I ended up with great gobs of the stuff running down the sleeve of my jacket. I clenched my fists. I wanted to throttle Klaus. Then I remembered the ugly bruises I'd caused a month or so earlier and again the sour taste of guilt flooded my mouth.

Security threw us out not long afterwards.

On the way back to the hostel, a tall thin woman with an obvious Adam's apple and a sharp black and white dress smiled at Klaus in passing, and commented in a husky voice, "schönes Outfit."

Klaus clapped delightedly and did something of a little skip, which in reality was more like a shuffle and a near-imperceptible bounce.

When we arrived back, Eva the receptionist greeted Klaus warmly. In fact everyone he came across adored him. I couldn't figure out why. "On Sonntag," she said, "Sara and me will go to KaDeWe to look at dresses. Are you joining us?"

I shook my head. "Shopping's not my thing."

I then excused myself saying that I was about to go out again. I didn't have plans but I didn't feel like talking to Eva. It was stupid but I was jealous of Klaus and the ease

with which he was making friends. Most people in the hostel were far too young for me. I couldn't relate to them. Most of the backpackers were barely out of high school and effervescent with a vacuous enthusiasm that annoyed me. All of it made me miss Zee even more. I'd finally come to realise he was one of the few people I was comfortable talking to, that I could be myself with him without feeling like he was judging me. He often surprised me by bringing up certain things I'd told him, things I was sure he would've long forgotten, but he never did. He remembered every single thing that came out of my mouth. I missed it. And I missed his devilish sense of humour.

I remember one night we were out in Fitzroy and a drunk staggering across our path yelled out *poofa*, at Zee.

"Where?" Zee had said looking about wildly with a simultaneous look of distaste and alarm. "I simply loathe those camp beasts flapping their hands about in a tizz, with their sordidly splendid taste in clothing and wonderfully offensive sexual habits."

The drunk looked confused. "You," he said weakly, pointing a quivering finger at Zee. "You're a *poofa*."

"Me?" said Zee. He stepped back in horror. "Now why would a solid upstanding gentleman such as yourself, think such a thing?"

"You're wearin' a fucken dress." The drunk swayed unsteadily.

"Pardon?" said Zee. He then looked down at his outfit and waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, you mean this old thing? I forgot I had it on." He cocked his head and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "You know how it is. Sometimes, you're in your girlfriend's room while she's out and you're kinda bored, so you rifle through her underwear drawer. And you think, now who would it hurt if I try on her panties. Just for a moment, mind you," Zee said holding up a finger. "You know how that is?"

The drunk nodded gravely.

I suppressed a laugh.

“Well I guess I went a little too far. I shall off and change right away.” Zee clasped the drunk’s sweaty hand in his and shook it heartily. “Thank you my good man for pointing this out to me. Goodness knows the kind of trouble I might have got myself into had I not run into a gentleman as understanding as yourself.”

No one else could deflect a situation with humour like Zee. Damn, how I missed him.

The following day I woke to the noise of construction work on the floor beneath me. I’d only just fallen asleep too. The night before a drunken Slovenian whose name I can’t remember took me to the Wild At Heart, a rock’n’roll bar. The place had been decorated by a kitsch tornado. Fake grass and flowers covered the ceiling. There were plastic horse heads on the walls, and assorted ceramic statues of Elvis vied for room with dogs, demons and bottles of alcohol along the bar.

A psychobilly band was playing, The Riptides, I think. The band was dressed as zombies for Halloween. They played fast and loud while the Slovenian and I drank shot after shot of Jagermeister.

A woman who was even taller than me, with amazingly coiffed pink quiff, grabbed me to dance with her. She stood a good three inches over me, even without the hair. We danced. She led. She pulled me close then kissed me hard on the lips. I tried to explain to her that I wasn’t attracted to women. It was then we realised we didn’t speak the same language and couldn’t understand each other. A skinny guy covered in tattoos

swaggered up to us and the two of them started talking in German. Ten minutes later they were in a booth wrapped around each other. She met my gaze over his shoulder, shrugged and smiled. I gave her two thumbs up.

The Slovenian and I found a booth of our own and started singing along to a Dead Kennedys song playing on the video jukebox, though neither of us could remember the words. We drank some more Jagermeister.

“Fuck him,” I said slamming my shot glass down on the table. “Fuck him, or her, or whatever the fuck he/she wants to be.”

“Fuck it?” the Slovenian slurred trying to be helpful.

I laughed as if it was the funniest thing in the world. But it wasn't. I missed Zee with an intense pain that sat heavy in my stomach, as if it were some kind of growth. “It's not a tumour.” I laughed, slurring the word. The Slovenian laughed with me. “Fuggen Arnold Schwarzenegger, motherfegger.”

I don't remember how we got back to the hostel, but when I woke my head hurt so badly that I thought I had indeed sprouted a tumour. The banging of the construction work from the floor below alternated with the throbbing behind my eyes. Thankfully Klaus had already left on his girly shopping trip, so I headed for the nearby Görlitzer Park. A quiet blonde called Kate, who was a school teacher from Eugene, Oregon, asked if she could join me. I shrugged my shoulders. The two of us walked in silence until we found a sunny patch of grass and lay sprawled on the ground.

I decided to go out again the next night. Klaus had been really irritating me since the Stasi Museum, so I was doing all I could to stay away from him. Ziggy, a Dutch

backpacker, came with me. She wore a cat-suit that made her look like she'd been dipped in latex. Everything about her was strangely feline. From the slinky sway of her hips to the way she stared at you blinking slowly, cigarette smoke curling around her head as she contemplated your questions.

We'd gone to White Trash Fast Food; a former Chinese restaurant that had become a combined rock'n'roll bar/eatery which kept the previous decorations. The act playing that night was Kleine Dinah, a Turkish drag king who did Little Richard covers. Ziggy and I sang along; loudly and out of tune. At the end of the show, Ziggy pressed up against me and snaked an arm around my waist, then pulled me from the club. As we left, a tall person in a red wig pressed a flyer into my hand. I had to look at her chiselled features twice before I realised she wasn't Zee. I ran after her and grabbed her arm. Perhaps she knew him?

"Excuse me," I said, shaking and breathless.

She smiled and shook her head, "Es tut mir leid. Ich spreche kein Englisch."

I had hoped that I might see Zee at the gig but was no closer to finding him. "All I'm doing is trying to keep busy until I find him," I told Ziggy, who licked my neck in response. I pushed her away and asked the driver to stop. He ignored me. "Will you just fucking stop!" I shouted. He braked hard and suddenly. I got out of the taxi and threw up. Ziggy handed me a bottle of water.

Not knowing how to find Zee was driving me crazy. I'd put up flyers in every club I went to, hoping he'd see them and email me, or leave a message for me at the hostel. He still hadn't answered any of the emails I'd sent him. For all I knew he had read them

but was ignoring me. I tried to think of what to do next but nothing came to me.

Everything was hopeless.

Klaus gave me a large gummy smile when I returned and insisted on modelling his new purchases for me. Eva set up something of a fashion parade for him, with a row of pages from *Zitty* magazine forming the runway. At least ten people from the hostel watched as he hobbled up and down the room treading along the glossy collection of paper as though it were a red carpet. The other backpackers whistled and cheered as Klaus swished his skirts. His face looked as though it might crack, he was so happy. His mood was contagious. I grinned despite myself.

Eva smiled at me. "On Friday, we will make a small party at my WG." She pronounced it *Vee Ghee*. "My share-house," she said seeing my puzzled look. "It is a dress fancy party. Everyone will make a moustache on their face."

I scanned her face but she didn't seem to be teasing me. "What if you already have a moustache?" I asked.

Eva squinted at me as if she didn't understand, then exclaimed, "Oh! Did you already bring a moustache to your holiday?"

I stroked the hairs on my lip.

She bent close to inspect them. "Al," she said with such seriousness that I nearly laughed. "We make the party on Friday. I do not think you can make a moustache by yourself."

I had to stop myself from hugging her.

She presented me with a plastic bag and said, "please choose."

It was odd to think that in Melbourne I had too much hair and that here I didn't have enough. It was as though someone had decided these things completely at random. The thought gave me a little start. Who was to say what was right and what was wrong if in the end everything is arbitrary? If other people can't make up their minds, I thought, then perhaps I should make up my own mind.

I chose the moustache that best matched my hair colour.

Klaus and I arrived at Eva's flat in Neukölln a little after 9pm on the Friday. Klaus wore a skin-tight Lycra dress. Pink, of course. His moustache of choice was thin, black and curled at the ends, or was meant to be; one end kept drooping. My moustache was a large and lush walrus style.

A tall man with a Dali-esque moustache opened the door, smiled warmly at us and steered us into the party. "Nice frock," I heard him say to Klaus. *Electricity* by Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band boomed out from unseen speakers. All around us sprouted facial hair of all descriptions: from modest pencils to ludicrous handle-bars. Klaus instantly began talking in German to one of the backpackers from the hostel who had seen his fashion parade. A short blond man in a mini-dress grinned at me, slapped me on the back and thrust a beer into my hand. I smiled back; it was nice to feel welcome.

I found Eva on a couch in the corner talking to a large and muscular woman with a shaved head who wore a thick ring through her nose and a Fu Manchu beneath it. Eva's moustache was styled like Frank Zappa's – a broad arc of hair above her upper lip with a square patch below her bottom lip. She beckoned for me to sit down and

introduced me to Max who was originally from London.

“So what brings you to Berlin?” Max asked.

“I’m trying to find a friend who is here, but I haven’t had any luck.”

“Love. It’s a pain in the arse.” She looked at me with a smile. “But only if she doesn’t use enough lube.”

I winced at her joke.

“That’s my girlfriend over there.” Max pointed out a petite brunette wearing a long blonde plaited moustache that swayed as she danced. She looked over and waved at us. Max’s expression turned soft and dreamy; more melted marshmallow than muscular.

I tried to steer the conversation elsewhere. “Have you lived here long?”

“Nigh on five years now. Spent most of that working at Der Weinerschnitzel. Drag Queens Friday Night. Kings on Saturday, if you’re interested.”

It was a long shot but I pulled out my wallet anyway and took out the carefully folded flyer that showed Zee in a red dress. I held my breath as I showed it to Max.

“She’s pretty,” Max commented. “I would’ve remembered her if I’d seen her.” She shook her head. “No.”

I bit my lip trying not to let my disappointment show.

“Sorry, Al.” Max cocked her head and looked at me, “Tuesday night is singles night. You should come along. Find yourself a new woman.”

Yet again someone had pegged me wrong. It wasn’t worth explaining. I finished off my beer and headed into the kitchen.

Eva grabbed me by the arm and handed me another bottle of beer. “I have a funny story.

Did you know that Osis do not say track-suit pants correctly?"

"Aussies?" I asked, confused.

She waved her hand and laughed. "No, *Osis*. East Germans. They call them 'yogging hosen'. They are too dumb to know that you say it 'jogging' like in English."

A thin man with a ragged piece of fake fur plastered to his upper lip stood abruptly, knocking over three beer bottles as he stumbled to the door. "I'm leaving." He glared at Eva. "I'm sick of this bullshit."

Eva and a male friend bent over and spluttered like it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen. "Osis. So sensitive," she laughed. Her friend's moustache fell off into his stein. Eva playfully grabbed it out of his beer and sucked on one end.

"Do you have a problem with me?" I asked, wondering if her prejudices extended to manly women.

Eva laughed again. "Only with Osis. Aussies like you are cool. "

I was starting to think that we'd been invited to the party for one reason – people like Klaus and me were somehow hip in Berlin. *People like Klaus and me*. We were more similar than I'd ever thought.

## Chapter Fifteen

A few days after the party I agreed to go out with Eva and Klaus. We visited Bulowitz Strasse, a section of Kreuzberg, that Eva said was once haunted by the author Christopher Isherwood. I couldn't figure out whether she meant his ghost or if it was somewhere he had regularly hung out. It didn't really matter anyway.

Klaus had decided to dress as Sara again for the day. I noticed that he was dressing as Sara more and more frequently as the trip went along. Sara took us into a shop called *Plaste & Elaste*, which translated to Plastic and Elastic. It was exactly the kind of shop Zee would like. I couldn't shake the silly feeling that if I spent enough time in there that he might appear.

Sara pointed to a corset. She had picked out a surprising black satin piece with lengths of lacing looped in neat rows across the back and then tied in a loose knot. Both Sara and Eva nudged me towards the change-room. Perhaps it would be my lucky charm, given that Zee had walked in on me the last time I'd been in women's clothing?

My hands trembled as I did up the hooks in front of the corset. Sara had been peering over the change room door and slipped in the second she decided I needed help. Her eyes sparkled wetly and her puckered mouth shaped into a grin as she took hold of the lacing and pulled hard. Surprisingly so for her age! The force nearly toppled me off balance. I grabbed onto a hook on the wall for support as she pulled harder still. Finally she released me. The corset was strangely comforting, like an ultra-tight embrace. I

looked up into the mirror and gasped. The inky blackness was stark against the pale colour of my skin. The corset had transformed my lumpen body into a perfect hourglass.

Both Eva and Sara applauded as if I'd given some kind of performance and in a way, I suppose, I had. There was still no way I was going to actually buy the corset. Zee was the only one who could convince me to buy clothes. And he was not here. The thought depressed me. I shoved the corset back onto the rack.

Soon the days began to blur together. I often didn't know what day of the week it was. I had barely any money except for my emergency stash of Australian dollars and the euros Sara gave me now and then. I accepted them without hesitation. It made up for all the nights I let her share my bed cowering against me, mewling like a near drowned kitten, while I was riddled with guilt about her arm.

On this particular day Sara had motioned me to come with her. I had nothing else to do, so I did. I shook my head at the memory of the first time I idly followed her; it was how I'd gotten into this mess. I was grateful too. Without Sara I'd have never met Zee.

I was suddenly overcome by an impulse to kiss Sara's cheek, to thank her. I checked myself in time.

We caught the U1 at Gorkitzer Bahnhof and changed to the U3 at Nollendorf Platz in the direction of Krumme Lanke: *what on earth was a Krumme Lanke?* Neither my guidebook nor my dictionary was any help. I looked at Sara but she was in a world of

her own. She kept cackling to herself while at the Nollendorf Platz Station. She then went quiet and led me outside the station to a triangular plaque on the wall. It read "*Totgeschlagen - Totgeschwiegen. Den Homosexuellen Opfern des Nationalsozialismus*". Sara, being Sara, didn't explain what the sign said. Instead she stood quietly in front of it for a moment bowing her head. Two wet streaks dissolved the thick powder on her cheeks revealing ruddy coloured streaks of skin beneath.

I flicked through my travellers' dictionary but couldn't find any of the words except '*tot*' which meant death. I realised we were looking at a memorial to homosexual people who were killed by the Nazis. I thought of the people in Sara's photo album with a shiver.

Sara then led me down Motzstrasse to Kalckreuthstrasse to a Plus supermarket on the corner. She stood out the front staring up at the building as if she saw something other than the orange, white and blue store sign. Her eyes again filled with tears but this time she seemed to be smiling. I stopped an elderly gentleman wearing a tan trench-coat and a salmon-coloured cravat, who had just come out of the store. I asked if he could speak English. He could. "What was this building?" I asked.

"*A kneipe.*"

"A bar?"

"Ja, the Eldorado, a gay bar. Then in 1933 the Nazis make the propaganda there."

He then spoke to Sara. For a moment they talked rapidly in German.

The man then turned to me. 'I would like to make an invitation to you and your friend to drink coffee with me. I work for *Die Schwules Museum*. I want to talk some more with you.

"What are Schwules? I asked.

“Why it’s someone like your friend,” the man paused and looked carefully into my eyes, “perhaps even you?”

I realised what he meant; once I would’ve blushed but now I was almost okay with labels that didn’t quite fit me.

He gave me his card, and asked that we meet him at the museum in two days time. The card read: “Herr Doktor Otto Ulrich, Archiv / Bibliothek”.

Sara then turned abruptly without saying goodbye to the man and walked back to the station slightly hunched over with her hands folded behind her back.

I quickly thanked the man then followed Sara back to the station. We caught the U3 once towards Krumme Lanke. I still had no idea where we were headed.

On the train, a plump goth wearing smudged eye makeup and chipped black nail polish sat across from us. I wondered whether this was what my brother now looked like. The goth stared across at us and raised a heavily plucked eyebrow at Sara. She blushed and then promptly shut her eyes as if she intended to feign sleep. But I could see her squint every now and then at the goth, who caught her every glance. I decided to ignore their little game and tried to keep track of the stations instead. They were unlike other stations I’d seen in Berlin.

Spichemstrasse: Pale blue tiles, dark blue poles. Hohenzollernplatz: ornate station with medieval pictures on the walls and large round ceiling lights. Fehrbelliner: another ritzy looking station, with yellow and brown tiled walls, and black and white photographs framed in a border of brown tiles. Heidelbergerplatz: vaulted ceilings and walls; domes with huge lamps. There were pictures of Heidelberg on the walls.

Then finally we were at Sara's intended destination: Rudesheimer Platz – where niches in the cream coloured walls of the station were covered in commissioned graffiti depicting images of Berlin, followed by women with roses. It was another station that reminded me more of a grand ballroom, given the ornate ceilings and lighting fixtures, rather than a mundane part of Berlin's public-transport system. Sara clapped her fingers together. We emerged from the station and walked slowly along the paths between the garden beds in the Platz itself, as Sara bent here and there to smell the roses.

She led me along streets filled with large homes with beautiful gardens. After a while we came to a grey concrete wall overgrown with vines. "It's me again and I'm back" was written in English in black spray paint on the wall. It was a strange thing to write. It made me think of reincarnation; of the ghost of my father hovering somewhere nearby, disapproving. I ignored his ghost and focussed instead on the jazz music coming from a house, the hum of traffic, and autumn leaves crunching as we walked along streets paved with small cobblestones. I could hear children and a woman singing what sounded like a nursery rhyme.

I realised that Sara had brought me to a cemetery: Friedenau Cemetery. I shivered a little, hearing an echo of my father saying, "you'll not be rid of me that easy, my girl". Just inside the gates, two old men sat on a park bench drinking beer. Sara nodded to them and they nodded back, seemingly nonplussed by her outfit; a pale pink dress with frills at the hem. I looked at him to see if she'd give me any idea as to why we'd come here but no; she gave me no answer. Instead she walked purposefully past row after row of immaculately kept graves. It was nothing like Fawkner where my father was buried. I thought back to its green expanse of lawn and the woman in red who reminded me of Lucinda. I thought too of the pink petals I'd spread over my father's grave. Here only

small rows lay between the graves, and the length of the graves themselves was probably only a metre or so. I was disconcerted to think we were probably walking across the legs and feet of the deceased.

People bustled about here and there with watering cans and plants and clippers. But I never saw more than two or three at a time, until we came across several students speaking in American accents. They were clustered about a grave without a headstone.

“Who’s buried here?” I asked a skinny guy, whose face was half-hidden by a long fringe.

“Helmut Newton,” he said disdainfully, as though I were mentally defective. “Only one of the most important fashion photographers of our time.” He then turned his back on me and resumed talking to his friends. “Dietrich is like, so irrelevant,” one declaimed. The others agreed and the four began arguing over which Dietrich movies they despised most.

Sara glared at them and looked as though she would strike one of them. I had never seen her look so ferociously annoyed before. I nearly burst out laughing at the absurdity of it. The students quickly took their photographs of the grave and went away.

Marlene’s grave was four to the right of Newton’s grave. On Marlene’s grave acorns and stones had been placed atop the tombstone; vines grew around the edge of the plot.

Sara bent towards Dietrich’s grave and reached out towards a rose with pinched fingers, as though she would pluck it from its stem. I looked at her horrified. She grinned at me, sharply stood upright, hands folded behind her back and shuffled off in the direction of the mausoleum or perhaps it was the crematorium? I wasn’t sure which. The columns of the balustrade reminded me of bones. The salamanders decorating the

stonework made me shiver. I imagined them licking clean the bones of the dead before they were cremated. I found Sara sitting on a bench nearby. She looked up at me, farted loudly then appeared to fall asleep. I shook her awake and pointed at the sky. It looked like rain.

#

The Museum was in Kreuzberg, near the Mehringdamm U-bahn station on a street lined with bookstores and Middle Eastern restaurants. We made our way past an exhibition on someone called Michel Foucault, which consisted mostly of German text and enlarged pictures of Michel's bespectacled and bald head.

Otto's office was a small room decorated with pen and ink drawings of a number of male faces. We bought a gift of chocolate shortbread for him. Amazingly, Sara managed not to eat any on the way.

"Do you remember the place where we met?" asked Otto after welcoming us warmly.

"The supermarket that used to be a..." I stumbled over the word, "a Knife?"

"Kneipe. Your friend went there at 16."

I looked at Sara who rearranged her skirts with a self-important air, and then began speaking.

Otto smiled and translated for me. "Sara has made a very beautiful story to me. When she was a small girl she saw the carriages passing her house as the people went to a ball. The first time, her mother held her hand and she felt excitement as her mother took her out into the lamp-lit street to watch the carriages pass. She said the fur on the

horses rippled and glistened like silk; while the carriages themselves, also in a sober black but edged with gilt-work, contained the most beautiful creatures. She could see rich jewel coloured fabrics, and masses of feathers and lace, powdered and rouged cheeks. It was such a marvel for a five-year old like her to see – a procession of fairytale people. One waved to her and tossed a rose towards her as she hid behind her mother's skirts.” The man smiled at Sara who blushed. “Your friend was a shy little girl. She says her mother retrieved the rose before it was crushed beneath the wheels of the next carriage and gave it to her. She was entranced. She had never smelt anything like it. Her mother laughed a pretty sound and hit your friend’s hand away as she tried to put the rose in her mouth.

“‘Bye-bye pretty lady,’ she waved. Her mother laughed again. Your friend says that when she recalls the memory she can hear tinkling bells and her mother’s voice saying: ‘Those ladies are men, little darling’”.

Sara shook her head a little, as if to bring herself back to the present. I looked at her curiously, “Is that why you cross-dress?”

Sara laughed heartily. The ends of her wig flicked against her lined neck as she moved her head side to side. The man once again translated for me. “No liebling, she was already playing ‘dress-ups’. She says that’s where she found her love for roses.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Come Tuesday, Sara was gone. I held my breath as I looked for the roll of Australian dollars I'd kept in my back pack. They weren't in the zippered section where I thought I'd left them. My neck prickled and my palms were damp. I upended the contents of my bag on the floor. I checked all six pockets on my cargo pants. I checked all five pockets of my spare pair of jeans. I unbuttoned all the pockets on my shirts, even though they felt empty to touch. I unrolled my clean socks, and shook out my dirty laundry. Then I looked through everything again. It was no good. The money was gone.

We were meant to pay for our accommodation that morning. My wallet contained a ten euro note and once I re-packed my clothes, I found another five euros in coins on the floor. It wasn't enough to pay for my own bed. I decided to wait until the receptionist needed to go to the bathroom then do a runner.

A total panic seized me once I left the hostel. An intolerable hunger gnawed at my stomach and my hands shook. My feet were unsteady as I climbed the stairs at the Gorkitzer Bahnhof. I'd decided to head to Alexanderplatz; with luck a tourist there would help me. At the top of the stairs I noticed a couple of ticket controllers issuing a fine. I turned around and headed back downstairs. A tall guy with lanky greasy hair, in a khaki jacket with an orange fur trim around the hood stood at the bottom of the steps. He seemed to be a permanent fixture of the station. He asked whether I had any tickets to sell him. He didn't seem to notice that he'd offered to sell me a ticket on my way up

only a moment ago. I shook my head silently and walked on.

I decided to avoid Skalitzer Strasse in case someone from the hostel saw me, so I headed down Wiener Strasse instead, towards Schlescheises Tor. The street was quiet at this time of the morning. My mind was a fog of confusion. What was I going to do?

I stopped out front of the fire station and looked at the wanted poster displayed there. Twenty people who had participated in the most recent May Day riots were shown. I wasn't in Berlin at the time but one of the guys on reception at the hostel told me about it. "They got the fucking Mollys and they were throwing them in the street. And two cars were on fire. And the *Booleh* can do nothing", he spat. His eyes shone as he told me, bouncing from foot to foot with pent up energy. "It was a mother-fucking riot."

I half expected to see his face among the young faces shown on the poster but didn't. I walked on.

I was tempted to walk through the park but the gleeful squeals of children and the smell of barbequeing Turkish food was too much for me. I resolved to buy myself a borek and some fruit once I got to Schleschiesses Tor. Once I'd purchased my snacks I was down to ten euros.

I headed left into Warschauer Strasse and stopped when I reached the bridge over the Spree. It was the bridge that crossed from Kreuzberg in the former West, into Friedrichshain in the former East ("Fried like fried chicken and rich like yo' daddy", the receptionist said when I ignorantly asked her how to spell it. I didn't tell her my father died when I was twelve). The sun glinted off the great metal statue of two men fighting in the middle of the river to my right, to my left and over the river the East Side Gallery: the largest remaining portion of the Berlin Wall. I felt even more miserable as I looked

at it.

The day before I'd overheard one of the backpackers commenting about it. "We went to the East Side Gallery and it was like this great big wall. And it had all this graffiti on it, but graffiti's not art is it?"

I almost started to tell them the significance of what they'd seen but thought better of it. How could any tourist in Berlin not know that they were seeing the Berlin Wall? How could they not recognise that the graffiti commemorated the fall of the wall and the symbolic end of the Cold War? I had wanted to tell Sara but she was already in bed, but most of all I wanted to tell Zee. It was cruel that he was in the same city as me, yet I couldn't experience it with him. It wasn't the same simply knowing how he'd react to their comments, I wanted to see that certain light in his eyes, the way he always threw his head back as he laughed. I wanted to hear his witty comebacks. You could never say Zee was someone who was afraid of laugh lines; his whole personality was contained in each and every one of his unselfconscious laughs.

I kept walking past the U-Bahn station and over the next bridge that crossed the train lines to the S-Bahn station. When I first arrived in Berlin I was repeatedly confused trying to switch from U-Bahn to S-Bahn. I couldn't find the stations until I realised they were often located hundreds of metres apart and you'd have to emerge from one to find the other because they were completely separate train lines, a remnant of the split between East and West Berlin. I too felt like I had an unreconciled split running through me. There was the me that I knew I was, and the me that everyone else saw. It was strange then, that in Berlin, this city of the 'wall in the head', I finally felt like I was coming together, even if everything else in my life was coming undone.

The chill morning air whipped me as I crossed the bridge so I put my hands into my jacket pockets. As usual they were full of scrunched tissues and other rubbish. I pulled out the wad intending to toss it into the bin. As I pulled out the handful, two crumpled fifty euro notes flew neatly from my hand and tumbled down the street, stopping only when the wind had plastered them against the chain link fence of the bridge. *Sara must have left the money for me.* I ran towards the notes, blood pounding furiously in my head, when a small dreadlocked child of indeterminate gender beat me to it and grabbed the cash gleefully. The kid held the notes aloft waving them triumphantly at its parents. I tried to grab the cash from its small grubby hand but the kid was too fast. I finally managed to grab the child firmly by the wrist but still it refused to give up my money.

The angry parents ran towards me, their combat boots thudding on the concrete path. They were shouting in German, swearing. One of them grabbed me and pushed me against the same fence. The warm breath of their Alsatian dog was hot against my leg. I tried to explain that the money was mine, first in English, then in my broken German, but they weren't having any of it. "You lie!" spat the woman. Her reddened face was only inches from my own.

My head whirled. "Okay." I pushed her away from me. "Take my fucking money," I swore sarcastically. I'd had enough of everything. I wanted to be back in Melbourne. I started blindly hitting at my assailants, screaming "You fucking shitheads. That was my last money." Invective after invective along with great streams of spit came pouring out of my mouth. Snot rolled freely down my face. I didn't care.

"What do you fuckers want me to do?" Hatred for these mindless idiots burned like acid in my throat. If only the bile I wanted to spit at them could cause them as much

harm.

“Steffi,” I heard one whisper to the other. The two of them spoke quietly to each other in German as I pushed past them, roughly bumping their shoulders as I went, muttering to myself. The man put his hand on my shoulder. I spun around wildly. What more could they want? My dirty laundry? “What?” I spat.

He spoke gently. “We cannot give the money to you. But with us, we get eating and beers.”

I shrugged my shoulders and wiped hard at my nose. Klaus was missing and I had nowhere else to go. And Zee? Zee may as well have been the ghost of someone I knew in another lifetime.

We rode on the tram down Warschauer Strasse to Rigaer Strasse. Their great shaggy Alsatian flopped onto my feet, its tongue lolling against my ankle.

Rigaer Strasse itself was crammed with buildings in various states of disrepair. Hand produced flyers, faded and torn, were plastered on most available surfaces. Peeling in thick layers, they adverted the gigs and events that were held in the houses along the street. The footpaths were broken; anaemic weeds poked through. Dog shit was everywhere, as was graffiti, tags mostly and slogans I didn't understand like “*Haben Sie Hunger?*” and “*Kein Mensch ist illegal*”.

We stopped at a place that Flo, my male assailant, told me was a *Volks Kuchen*; a people's kitchen, it was run by the residents of the adjoining squats. Here we only had to pay what we could afford for our meals, which in my case was not a lot.

I followed Flo as he returned his dishes to the kitchen and slipped some euros into a

box. "They will make a meeting here soon to talk about a room in this *besetztes Haus*. I will make an introduction for you."

The meeting was held at a set of benches outside the kitchen. Extra chairs had been dragged outside. A couple of the residents sat sleepily eating muesli. Some fifteen to twenty people attended the meeting; apparently not everyone could make it.

Only a small part of the meeting was conducted in English but I passed the first stage. I was offered a tour of the house.

The house was divided into two sections which revolved around two kitchens. One kitchen was for the meat-eaters, and the other for vegetarians. In addition, one wing of the house was reserved for women. I was offered a room in the women's section which adjoined the vegetarian kitchen. The divisions puzzled me. I was still being put in a box; only now the category had expanded to include me.

I could see the domes of Frankfurter Tor from my window. I was unsure if this was a good omen or not.

I spent the night shivering. I didn't seem to be able to stay warm. Zee and Sara were competing for attention in my thoughts. Had Zee had the operation already? Was he doing okay? I imagined him in pain and alone, staring out a hospital window. Would he be thinking of me? Would he wish that I were there with him?

And Sara. I could see her shuffling through the slick cobblestone streets of Berlin, confused; looking for Ute as if it were the 1930s once again. Her thin dress plastered to her legs, blue with cold.

In the morning, I ran into Flo again at the Volks Kuchen. He looked at me carefully and then began a story.

“Ten years past, there existed a besetzt Haus by the name of the Tuntenhaus.”

I interrupted him. I understood that besetzt Haus meant squat house but the other word was unfamiliar. “What is a *tunten*?”

A punk in a shapeless grey sweatshirt and floppy red Mohawk answered for him. “Someone like Pia. She lived there.”

He waved Pia over to the table. She wore combat boots and a floral house dress. She held her hand out delicately for me to shake, then sat with us. Something undefinable about her reminded me of Zee. I caught my breath. Perhaps she knew him?

“Tell Al about the battle of the Tuntenhaus,” prompted Flo.

Her eyes lit up. “It was a squat on Mainzer Strasse, here in Friedrichshain. Everyone who lived there were either trans folk or gay. Much like yourself.”

I decided not to correct her.

“We used to have such wonderful parties.” She smiled and tilted her head as if remembering. “Everyone would dress up marvellously. But then the government decided everyone was having far too much fun.” She fell silent.

“What happened?” I asked.

“They sent the cops in. The battle was legendary. We thought if they’re going to get us, then we’ll go down in style. Each and every one of us dressed in full drag; ball-gowns in fact, elbow-length gloves, stilettos. Top-to-toe we looked divine.”

The punk nodded in agreement. Pia squeezed his hand. He smiled and continued for her, “They all went to the roof and were flicking Tunte Mollys at the Bulleh.”

“Lit cigarettes, dear,” Pia translated, upon seeing my puzzled look.

“How did it end?”

“Water canons. We’d come prepared and each had umbrellas, but we were no match for those nasty brutes.”

I sighed; it would’ve been the most obvious place to find Zee. “So it no longer exists?”

“No, unfortunately.” Pia stared at the table, then brightened. “I live here now, it’s not quite as fabulous, but the people are very sympathetic.” She stroked the punk’s shoulder, then kissed his cheek.

It was a long shot but I decided to ask her. “Do you know an Australian called Zee?”

She thought for a moment. I clenched my teeth hard willing that she did. Then she shook her head. “No dear, sorry I don’t.”

Later that day I headed back to Kreuzberg. I decided to visit Max at Der Weinerschnitzel to see if she had any leads on Zee.

“Ella!” I turned around to see Eva, the *Schlaf’ Gut* receptionist waving at me. I was walking down Oranien Strasse, past the Hard Core record shop. “Where have you been?” she asked. “We had to sell your bed.”

I looked at her, puzzled.

“Sara paid us. Before she left. She did not tell you?”

I shook my head. “Shit. I thought she’d done a runner on me.”

“Ho!” Eva laughed. “I understand. So you ran too.”

I nodded.

“If you come later, I’ll be working. You can get some things Sara left. A book, I think.”

I headed back to the hostel in the evening. Eva told me that Sara had paid for an entire month for me. “We didn’t see you after some days. We saw your bags were gone too so we started renting your bed. You can’t have the money back but you can stay again if you want.” She paused for a minute to serve a backpacker who wanted a packet of Erdnuss Flips, she then opened a drawer in the reception desk and pulled out a bunch of keys. “Also Sara has something in a locker. I will give it to you.”

Eva closed the reception desk and took me to the locker. “Hey,” a dark haired guy in a leather jacket called out. “You work here, no?” He was seated at one of the hostel’s computers. It looked like the internet had frozen yet again.

“Please wait one moment, Ella. I will make him a new pass-code for the other computer,” Eva said and then returned to the reception desk.

“Where are you from?” the guy in the jacket asked me.

It was the same conversation I’d had multiple times since staying at the hostel. I really didn’t feel like having it again knowing that I was mere moments away from discovering what Sara had left for me.

“Melbourne.”

“Oh cool. I know the bands from Melbourne: Bored! The Powder Monkeys, Cosmic Psychos, God, Dirty Lovers...”

It surprised me that he knew so many Melbourne bands but I really didn’t care. I

wanted access to that locker. It was so tantalisingly close.

“Last year here I saw Bored! They are one hundred percent the best rock’n’roll.”

The guy then started playing air guitar and singing “Little Suzie”.

*Where was Eva?*

“Do you know the band God?”

I nodded mutely, knowing that he’d launch into singing *My Pal*. And sure enough he started howling the song until he was red in the face.

Eva returned, apologising. There had been three backpackers from New Zealand waiting to check in. She quickly sorted out the rock’n’roll fan and finally examined the set of keys in her hand, trying to work out which one opened the locker. She then shrugged and said, “We try them all.”

I tried not to let my impatience show. Finally, she hit upon the correct key and removed the lock. “I must go back to the reception now,” she said pocketing both the keys and the lock. “Good luck.”

I turned the handle and pulled. The door refused to budge. The door was jammed shut. I pounded on it with my fist and rattled the door again, but it was useless.

Rock’n’roll Fan jumped up from his computer and said, “I will make it work for you.”

He yanked hard and the door screeched open. He insisted on shaking my hand. “One day, I see you in Melbourne.” He then slapped me on the back and returned to the computer.

The locker contained a shopping bag from Ka De We. The contents had stretched the plastic, poking holes in the bag. I could tell from the red corner peeping through that one of the items was Klaus’ album. The other appeared to be a manila folder filled with

papers. I pressed my forehead against the locker and shut my eyes; I didn't want to think what the album meant.

When I returned to reception Eva waved me down. "There's also a letter for you." Eva handed me a grubby brown envelope which I opened.

"It's in German," I said. "I can't read it."

I showed Eva the letter. It was several pages long. "My boyfriend can make a translation for you," she said. "I'll have it for you here on Thursday when I work again."

## Chapter Seventeen

Once back at Rigaer Strasse I made myself a coffee and retreated to my room. As I reached into the bag, the hairs on my arm stood up with static electricity.

I couldn't imagine what could be in the manila folder. There were more than ten pages in total; all in English; all type-written. Curiously, there was also a page torn out of a magazine. It appeared to be a recipe. I began to read through the type-written pages, at first thinking Eva had made a mistake and the papers were meant for someone else. I checked the folder again. A name on the cover had been crossed through multiple times with a heavy hand. I tried to make out the letters but couldn't. My name was written beneath in Klaus's neat Gothic script.

The first page had a handwritten note scrawled down the side of the page. It read:  
*Sections for book?*

The rest of the text read:

*Obtaining the CD was easier than I imagined. I visited A's house when he wasn't home. S. let me in and showed me which folders I needed for my story. I quickly copied the necessary files then left.*

*The rest of my day was disastrous. My car broke down not far from A's house (a pigsty of the likes I'd never seen).*

*I called the RACV only to find my subscription had lapsed. They said they were happy enough to send someone out to assist once I had given them my credit card*

*details. However my card did not seem to be in my purse.*

The image of Klaus pulling a credit card from his pocket and grinning at me suddenly flashed into my head. If S. stood for Sara, could the author have thought Al was my name? I read on:

*I tried to recall when I last used it, and decided I must have left it at home. However, that did not help me in the least given my current circumstance. I was politely told to take a taxi home and that as a measure of goodwill I would be reimbursed for the cost once I had renewed my subscription. Of course, I was unable to take a taxi as I had neither my credit card, nor sufficient funds in my purse. I was forced to resort to public transport.*

*On the bus ride home a man who wore black oxford lace-up shoes and pale blue socks that clashed terribly with his silky green tracksuit kept staring at me. His skin had a pale and sticky look to it. His black hair was parted severely to one side and was plastered to his scalp. A liberal coating of dandruff was spread across his shoulders.*

*From the corner of my eye, I could see him leaning forward slightly and his jaw working. It appeared he wanted to talk to me so I busied myself with looking for the book I'd taken from A's house. As I took it from my bag the CD that I'd put there for safe keeping slid out from between its pages and out into the aisle of the bus. The gentleman in the tracksuit retrieved it for me. He held the CD this way and that in the light.*

*"Doesn't look like you scratched it. No," he said in a nasal monotone. He pursed his lips at me, squinted and lowered a brow, nodding his head repeatedly as if his neck concealed a spring. More dandruff drifted towards his shoulders as he did so. "No, I'd say you're very lucky indeed." He looked at the CD again. I fought the urge to snatch it*

*off him. "You see you've got to handle them very carefully," he continued, "scratches and dirt and fingerprints and such like will make the laser skip in the compact disc player and then it won't read the data. No, it won't unfortunately. Now I read on the internet somewhere that you can..."*

*I smiled through gritted teeth and held out my hand. He ignored me.*

*"...put the compact disc, commonly known by the populace as a CD, into some type of machine that will..."*

*Thankfully, my stop came up at that moment. Despite feeling a deep and profound empathy for plight of the mentally ill, I didn't think I'd be able to take any more of his conversation.*

*"Thank you for your assistance," I muttered at him and with that I snatched the CD back.*

*"Who is Ella Estrella?" the man yelled after me. He'd obviously read the name written on the CD.*

*I looked up at the bus as it left and I could see him staring balefully back at me and shaking his head at my CD handling technique, I gave him a half-hearted wave and headed home.*

*The tracksuited gentleman, despite his rather obvious mental deficits really had me concerned that dropping the CD had damaged it. I could see light scratches on the surface of the disc. After all the trouble I'd taken to obtain it, I did not want to have to try to get another copy.*

*I slid the CD into my computer and browsed the contents in Windows Explorer.*

*There were over twenty files on the disc and a couple of jpegs.*

*I decided to check the first Word file.*

*The first page was dated as were every other couple of pages. I strongly suspected I was looking at a back-up copy of Al's diary!*

This person had stolen a CD from me? Why would they want to? None of it made sense; neither the theft, nor the pages I read. Even more puzzling was the fact that Sara had then somehow gotten hold of this person's papers.

***Notes re: A.***

*A. is a 24 year old pre-operative Transman living in the inner city of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.*

*A. has short cropped brown hair, and a light down of hair at his upper lip. She is approx. 180 cm tall and weighs around 85kgs. I would describe him as being slightly overweight. Based on numerous conversations I have had with A, she appears to have an above average IQ. [Note to self. Remember to use the correct pronoun!]*

*A. often wears large shapeless jumpers presumably to hide his breasts. I have looked closely but cannot discern whether A. 'packs' or not.*

*Note: "packing" is a term these individuals use to describe the wearing of a fake penis. [www.jdaldjsl.com](http://www.jdaldjsl.com) states that transmen who cannot afford a prosthetic penis might instead use a condom filled with hair-gel which is then enclosed in a second condom. The site warns that the user should ensure that each condom is knotted firmly before strapping into place.*

Transman? Pre-operative? The pages shook in my hands. I felt more alone than ever. I wished Zee were here with me to read them. I needed his arms around me. I wanted his advice.

The identity of the author puzzled me. Someone I knew? Who on earth could it be? Not Leggy, that's for sure. I once asked him if he thought I had lesbian tendencies. He replied, "You love the person; boy, girl, what's it matter? What is this?" He grabbed at his crotch. "People make too much of this. Love is from here and here." He tapped his stomach and his heart.

So if not Leggy, then who? I barely talked to anyone before leaving for Berlin, save Zee and Sara. I read on hoping I'd find a clue.

*It was something of a revelation to discover that A. was lonely. He seems so cocky and arrogant, so completely at ease with himself, but then again the text books that I'd been reading about transpeople said that a lot of people with Gender Dysphoria Syndrome (GDS) experience depression and anxiety about their condition. I've learnt recently that GDS is the correct psychological term for these people as taken from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual Volume IV, the handbook that all psychologists use to make diagnoses.*

*It had previously been called Gender Identity Disorder (GID) but people protested for it to be changed given that they didn't believe that feeling like you were the wrong gender was a disorder. So much research to read and take in! I'd been nervous about embarking on this book project but the advance was good. Not that I saw much of it after paying off that sly German. And to think I'd thought her so sweet and innocent. In*

*spite of this, I must admit she was a fantastic source.*

I surprised myself by gasping aloud, then had a coughing fit, spurring coffee all over the page. Book project? Was Sara the sly German? What did they mean by source? Source of what? And what about the pay off? Is that where he got the money for the television and the tickets?

*However, I've come to find that the knowledge I've gained throughout my journalism career has held me in good stead. I already know about the hardship and suffering that people like S., A. and Z. have to go through to be their true selves; the rejection they face from their friends and family. It really made me upset thinking about it. Particularly, given what those brutes did to my Samuel.*

I skipped over the next few paragraphs as the author waffled on about Samuel, then turned the page.

It read:

*These diary entries are particularly revealing, particularly in terms of the use of language. Most interesting is the revulsion that A. so obviously feels for Z. who is transgendered like himself. For example, A. repeatedly refers to Zee as 'pathetically camp', 'a screaming queen', 'a tragic she-male', 'a freak', and other terms that deride Zee's gender identity.*

*I wonder whether Al has had the operation? I can't tell whether he's had top surgery. Perhaps there's something about it in these files?*

I stopped reading for a moment. I felt like I was staring into a warped funhouse mirror; like I'd walked up a dead-end only to be confronted by an image of me I don't recognise. Instead of seeing me, I saw a grossly distorted image of myself, leering horribly back at me. A creature worthy of a freakshow, with freakish friends exhibited alongside of me for the entire world to see. Was I really so terrible to Zee? Did I really say those things? I read on. I had to know who had written about me:

*The first time I saw Al I couldn't stop looking at him. S. had told me where I was likely to find Al, at a cafe near his home. [NB. This was prior to the fire, I'd already been interviewing S. for some months after discovering that she lived nearby.] I didn't stare outright at Al of course. Instead I gave myself excuses to look out the cafe window, my gaze skimming over him as I glanced around, as if waiting for a late friend.*

*At first I had difficulty working out whether he even was a man. He was tall, at least six foot, with broad rounded shoulders, and a solid kind of plumpness, the kind that gives way to a certain type of androgyny. One in which breasts become indistinguishable from flabby flesh. I soon realised that I could get a better look at him in the reflection provided by the mirror behind the counter. Between the bobbing heads of the barista and the waiters, I stared long and hard at him. I had been looking for a transman for an article I wanted to write.*

*I wasn't ashamed to stare, nor wonder what compelled me to puzzle over his gender. What was it that I was after? Some sense of superiority, that I was able to penetrate something that was so personal and private to him? That he was unable to fool me? As if his gender was something he had done to me, in order to deceive me?*

*He sat alone facing the window. Occasionally he looked down to stir his coffee but didn't drink it. In the dim light of the cafe I could not tell if the darkness that he stroked on his upper lip was anything other than a shadow.*

*I strained for other clues. He wore a beige corduroy jacket and a black scarf at his throat, despite the warm air inside the cafe.*

*Then, without warning, Al abruptly downed his coffee and approached the counter to pay.*

*I too quickly finished my drink, and with my heart beating fast, paid my bill. I followed him. I had to know more about him.*

*His walk gave nothing away. His rolling swagger suggested manliness, but his feet looked particularly petite.*

*Lost in my musings, I didn't notice he'd stopped out front of his house until I was nearly upon him.*

*"You've been following me," he said, not unkindly, in a low voice that was neither particularly masculine nor feminine.*

*"You dropped something at the cafe," I quickly fished a \$5 note out of my bag. "I wanted to return it to you."*

*He raised an eyebrow like he didn't believe me, but took the money anyway. I wrote down his address as soon as he shut the door.*

*Some time after S. had moved in with Al I met Zee. I wanted to ask them both if they would agree to be interviewed for an article I intended to write. Zee was a polite woman who spoke with a deep voice. She had almost no trace of an Adam's apple. I imagined that her delicately boned face would make transitioning that much easier, when she*

*finally decides she wants to go all the way.*

*I told Zee about my story idea, and gave her a run down as to why, despite being a heterosexual natural born woman, I'm so passionate about gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex and transsexual rights. However, Zee, despite being touched about Samuel's story, declined to be in my article.*

*I tried to press upon her the importance that articles like mine have for the cause of people like herself and her friend Al, but it was to no avail.*

*It makes me angry that some people simply do not want to help themselves, nor actively assist in improving the situation for others like them.*

*I'm also annoyed that the files S. gave me had little print-worthy material in them. Fortunately what I've found so far has helped considerably for research into my article.*

I stopped reading at that point; a sharp pain hit me between the ribs. *Article?* By a journalist who thought I was a transsexual man? I heard Lucinda's voice mocking me once again: "Sara gratefully accepted my offer." The phrase now had a new meaning.

I turned over a page and there it was – a page torn out of a magazine. The headline screamed: "TRUE STORY: SHE'S THE 'MAN' OF THE HOUSE". My photo was beneath.

## ***She's the 'Man' of the House***

***Cindy Markham***

*Al and Klaus are not typical flatmates, and it's not simply their intergenerational age difference that makes them stand out in a crowd. Al, despite his tall stature, rugged good looks and slight stubble was in fact born a woman.*

*"I've always felt different. As a child I was a complete tomboy. I didn't like playing with dolls, but give me a toy car and I was happy," reveals Al, whose birth name is Ella.*

*His flatmate Klaus aged 81, is a quiet man with a fondness for roses, who on occasion prefers to dress as Sara, a petite elderly woman with a partiality for simple grey dresses and pearls. The friends became flatmates when a tragic accident saw Sara's house go up in flames, a blaze which the arson squad is currently investigating.*

*"Sara was left with nowhere to go," says Al, 24. "She had been having trouble for some time. People in the street tormented her daily. Freak, weirdo, pervert, you name it, she's been called it."*

*It's not the first time Sara has been persecuted. She narrowly escaped the Nazi death camps in her home country of Germany, where many of her homosexual friends perished. Sara, 81, finally made her way to Australia in the 1980s.*

*Sara and Al both have gender dysphoria, a psychological condition in which individuals feel they are born in the wrong sex. Happily though, the two have the love and understanding of the other.*

*Says Sara in the gentle lilt of her broken English, "Al is a very good man. Big heart." As she speaks tears brim at her eyes, "I would have nothing without Al. I would*

*be asleep in the street.”*

*Al is no stranger to unconventional relationships. Her partner of five years is Zee, a person of indeterminate sex who plays in a Melbourne glam rock band.*

Cindy Markham? Leggy mentioned a visit by someone called Cindy. Then I suddenly had a vision of a badly buttoned jacket. Lucinda fucking Markham! That witch is behind all this?

Despite my anger, I actually laughed at that point. She'd gotten so many things wrong. A 5-year long relationship? A glam rock band? Big Star covers and sweet jangling pop songs hardly made for a glam rock band. And me being into toy cars? Smoking cigarettes and reading was more my thing.

A photograph of Sara and me in front of the ruins of her house accompanied the article. I didn't agree to it; I didn't even know it had been taken. And much to my horror, a photograph I had taken of Zee was also included in the article. What are you supposed to do when someone misrepresents you so badly? I felt that a cast-iron fist had slammed right into my stomach. I wanted to call the magazine and shout at someone, anyone. I didn't care who, but didn't have enough cash to spare on calls to Australia. More than ever I wanted to find Zee to tell him everything. I'd finally realised that he was my closest friend.

I heard a knock at my bedroom door. It was Flo.

“Is everything going okay?” He stood in my doorway rubbing his eyes. “I could

hear loud words and noises such as this,” he stamped hard on the floor to demonstrate. He then touched my hand, “You are also making fists. Who do you have anger for?”

I decided to show him the article.

He read it grimly. Once he had finished reading he shrugged. “So?” he said, as if the article was of little consequence. “It’s not you. Why make your head hurt?”

“But millions of Australians read this magazine,” I protested.

He flipped the page over and read the headline slowly, “*The Green, Red and White Food Diet: Lose Kilograms in Weeks.*” He scratched at his dreadlocked head, then said sternly, “Why do you listen to this capitalistic propaganda? It is of no consequence.”

Before I could stop him he tore the article in two, crumpled the pieces and threw them over his shoulder as he departed.

I picked up the rumpled pages and smoothed them out again. The creases distorted the picture of my face. Perhaps Flo was right? A magazine article couldn’t change who I was. I was still me regardless. The thought made me laugh. How could I be so dense? Despite what anyone thought of me, be they a magazine writer, a drunken guy in a bar, or just some ignorant person in the street, I was still me regardless. *I was still a woman.*

I opened my window and leant out into the cool night air, then took a match to the article, dropping it just before the flames reached my fingers. The pages glowed orange as they drifted in the breeze, then faded to black.

Later that night I woke suddenly with sweat pouring down my spine. I sat up and turned on the lamp beside my mattress. In the dim light the uneven plasterwork of my bedroom walls looked as though multi-legged creatures were creeping up the walls. Then the realisation hit me – I could ask Flo to help me find Zee.

I could hear laughter and music elsewhere in the house so I dressed to see if I could find someone to talk to. Flo and some others were sitting around in the room that was used to show documentaries and political films. They were drinking beer and smoking. Flo's Alsatian had its shaggy head in someone's lap. Its ears twitched as I came into the room but the dog did not turn its head as if I were too much trouble to notice. I found a seat by Flo who offered me a beer. He looked at me with red-rimmed eyes, smiled lazily and offered me a joint.

I wasn't sure whether he would remember talking to me, but now that I had thought of it I needed to ask then and there. "I need to find somebody who is in a hospital in Berlin. Will you help me tomorrow?"

Flo said yes and nodded, but he looked like a man sleepily walking underwater.

I went back to bed knowing I would be unable to sleep. A surge of electricity had passed through my body, jolting my heart into life once more, as though it had stopped beating in the brief time I had been in Berlin. Flo would help me find Zee.

At 2pm Flo came to find me to ask what it was I wanted him to do. I was surprised that he remembered. I gave him the list of all the hospitals in Berlin. He began calling them all, starting with the ones closest to Alexanderplatz. After only fifteen minutes or so he handed me a piece of paper; on it he had written: *St. Hedwig-Krankenhaus, Große*

*Hamburger Straße 5 – 11, Mitte.*

I hugged him hard and he laughed, waving me off. “Do you know the Kunsthaus Tacheles?” I nodded. “The Krankenhaus is very near to there.”

He told me the quickest way to get there and I left straight away.

The red brick hospital building was beautiful, a mix of art nouveau and something else, something Gothic perhaps? Several of the walls were covered with ivy. The hospital was more than a world away from the graffiti-covered and crumbling Tacheles and the prostitutes who Flo told me lined nearby Oranienburgerstrasse nightly, each in vinyl thigh high boots and corsets laced tightly over denim jackets and lingerie.

As I reached for the door, my head pounded and my chest constricted. It was as though I was laced up again in a corset. I couldn't see Zee like this. What if he hadn't seen his brother yet? I didn't want to get in his way. I stood there at the door feeling hot and cold in turn.

“Excuse me,” said a man behind me in English. I whirled around, hoping but also afraid that it was Zee. He smiled at me as I stumbled out of his way. It wasn't Zee. I had the irrational impulse to chase him and ask if he knew him.

I lit a cigarette to calm my nerves. It didn't work. The image of the last time I'd seen Zee came unbidden into my head. The coldness in his eyes as he told me, “I'll be glad to see the back of you.” Then I remembered his email to Leggy. He would still want to see me, surely? Even if he didn't want to be with me? Even if he no longer loved me? My stomach churned.

I looked down at my clothes and realised I was wearing paint-splattered cargo pants

and a t-shirt. I hadn't thought about what to wear when I'd left the squat. I decided to return to Rigaer Strasse. I wanted to be wearing my cashmere sweater when Zee saw me.

When I returned I asked Flo to call the hospital again. This time I had him ask if they had the contact details for Simon Sternberg, brother of Tomas Hartmann. As expected, they refused to give it to us on privacy grounds, but they took Flo's mobile phone number and said that they would pass it on to Zee. I doubted that he'd call, and told Flo I thought as much, given Zee hadn't emailed me. Flo laughed. "He'll make the call to you. You will see."

Later that evening Flo came looking for me. "Take my handy," he said holding out his phone to me. I looked at him not quite sure what he meant, then realised he meant his mobile phone. As soon as I heard the voice on the other end of the line I started crying. I had trouble speaking. Finally I managed to blurt out, "Zee, you bastard. Where the hell are you?"

He laughed as if pleased to hear from me. He recognised my voice! "More to the point, my dear," he said, "where are you?"

I was ready for long explanations but he shushed me and asked if I would meet him at Alexanderplatz the next day at the foot of the TV Tower.

I tried to interrupt him to ask if we could meet that night but he'd already hung up.

I didn't know how to feel. Anger tangled with relief mixed with confusion. My

thoughts whirled. How could he hang up on me? Finding him felt good but did I really want to see him? Did I really want what seeing him meant? There'd be no turning back. My life would be the tawdry headline I was so afraid of. He'd expect us to be together. I would be the manly woman with the womanly man. Did I really want that?

I tossed and turned all night until my sheets were soaked and wound tight around my body.

I got up and showered as the first rays of light entered my smeared and dusty window. I knew what I would do. I slipped on my cashmere sweater and left the building.

## Chapter Eighteen

I arrived early, afraid that if I was late he'd leave without seeing me. I sat on an orange plastic barrier while I waited. I started chewing my thumbnail, feeling like I wanted to throw up. Part of me was worried about how Zee would react to me, while another part was stupidly worried about what he'd be wearing. I still hadn't quite resolved being in love with someone who looked like Zee. I tried to convince myself it's the person you fall in love with that's important, not their appearance. Zee changed so often it made it difficult to get a fix on him. I was continually forced to notice his appearance. Some days I was afraid I wouldn't recognise him. Perhaps that's what I really had a problem with? That he was such a chameleon that what he looked like never came clearly into view; that he somehow kept slipping from my grasp, as though I would never really know him?

I was so consumed with my thoughts that I didn't notice someone sit down beside me. "Boo," a voice whispered in my ear. I turned to see Zee's green eyes sparkling with amusement. I grabbed onto him and held him tight. He smelt as he always did; that strange but pleasant mixture of roses and cucumbers. Once again it made me laugh. "Who the hell puts cucumbers in a perfume?"

He smiled and stroked my face. "Ella, I can't tell you how good it is to see you."

When I finally asked about his brother, Zee confessed that he was yet to visit him.

Twice he had gone as far as the doors of the hospital but did not go inside. It made me smile to think I'd done the same thing.

"I would like to go," he said, "now you're here." I gave his hand a hard squeeze and we began walking towards the hospital.

It was now or never. I had to tell him. "I have a brother too." I couldn't look at Zee. I heard his breath catch a little but he remained silent. All I could hear was the rhythmic sound of our footsteps on the cobblestones. He waited until I could speak. "I haven't seen him in twenty years." I took a deep breath. "Dad got angry. He was going to hurt James." Zee stroked my face and turned my head towards his. I could barely see him through my tears. "He was like you, Zee. He was like you and I didn't speak up."

Zee placed his fingertips on my lips and held me tight. "You were only a child, Ella. There's nothing you could have done," he whispered into my hair. "It's never too late, you know."

"Too late for what?" I asked.

"I'll help you find him."

And just like that Zee and I were back together; as if the fact that I had travelled half way across the world to see him was proof enough of my love for him.

#

"Why is there a guard outside his door?" Zee asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Try asking him."

The guard sat to attention as if we might attempt something untoward and shook his

head indicating that he didn't speak English. We tried a nurse who walked by.

"Yes, I do speak a little, but not very well," she said, haltingly but clearly with a slight American accent. "What is it that you need help?"

"Can you please tell me why there is a guard on Mr Hartmann's door?"

"Ah, Herr Hartmann." She shook her head, and looked at us curiously. "Do you mean harm to this man?"

Zee looked at her with alarm. "The opposite. He's my brother."

"I see," the nurse said and pressed her clipboard tighter against her chest. "Then, I do not know if I should tell you. Perhaps, Herr Hartmann should tell you himself?"

"Bitte," Zee asked. "He's my brother but I've never met him." He looked her hard in the eye. "My kidneys are a match."

The nurse nodded. "I understand. To make a donation is a heavy decision, and one must know all the information. At five on the clock we can meet and talk. There is the lobby room downstairs. I see you there."

At the appointed time we met the nurse. She poured us each a glass of water, then sat down, massaging her left hand and then her right hand in turn, as if they ached.

Zee reached out for my hand under the table.

"Your brother, Herr Hartmann, he is a very angry man." The nurse sipped at her water. "Four months ago, he went to the Mittelnacht Club, where they make parties for Schwule."

Zee furrowed his brow.

"Homosexual men," the nurse translated. She took a sip of water then continued

“Your brother waited until a Turkish man came alone outside.” The nurse paused. “First your brother spat at this man and said terrible things to him. Then he followed when this man tried to run. Then he punched and kicked him, many times. Your brother broke the cheekbone and the wrist of this man.” The nurse sipped some more at her water. Our water remained untouched on the table. Zee’s fingers gripped mine tightly.

“After some time, the relatives of this man made a visit to your brother.” The nurse turned to me as if she could read my thoughts. “They had the identity card that had fallen from his pocket.” She looked back at Zee. “They kicked him and kicked him until his kidneys were no good. Your brother has been here since that day.”

Zee’s hand shook in mine under the table.

“And you,” he asked the nurse, “do you think he deserves a new kidney?”

I could not read the nurse’s face as she spoke. “Herr Sternberg, your brother will die without a kidney. Whether he will have that kidney or not, is not for me to decide.”

We left the hospital and found a café. Zee looked pale and tired. Stubble was beginning to show on his face.

“What will you do?” I asked, not caring that my voice trembled.

Zee rubbed his eyes wearily. I clenched my jaw not wanting to hear his answer, but there was none. I spoke again. “You know that prick back there would’ve done the same to you.”

“I know,” Zee sighed.

“So it’s decided then?”

Zee shook his head.

I ordered for the both of us when the waiter came. Zee gave me a thin smile when I ordered his coffee; strong black with two sugars.

“You remember how I like it.”

I nodded, then started crying. Great seas of feeling were flooding through me, like waves crashing down, but strangely with Zee here I didn't think I would drown. Instead I thought I might stay afloat for once.

Zee moved his chair alongside mine then put his arms around me. He'd never seen me cry before. His breathing sounded unsteady and his chest heaved as he held me.

“Come on,” he said gently. “Let's go back to my hotel.”

As he opened his door, I felt my knees buckle. I looked over my shoulder at the empty hallway and the blinking lights of the lift. I took a deep breath, and then went inside.

“Would you like a drink?” Zee asked, opening the door to the mini bar.

I came up behind him and looked over his shoulder. I wanted to put my arms around him but my hands trembled. Tentatively, I reached out and touched his shoulder.

Zee turned around to face me and slipped his arms around my waist.

“I...” I faltered, not knowing the right words, “I was pregnant.”

He instantly understood what I meant. “Oh, Ella,” he murmured over and over, holding me tight until I had stopped shaking.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded.

“When?”

“A few weeks ago now.” It surprised me to realise I had been in Berlin that long.

“My poor sweet Ella.” He led me over to the bed and held my hand.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

“Me too,” he answered. It was true. He was trembling. “We can just sleep...”

I shook my head and then reached up to stroke his cheek. As his lips grazed kiss after kiss against mine I felt like he’d taken me underwater to some warm place that I never wanted to leave.

His skin was soft and hot to my touch. I whispered, “This time I don’t need a blindfold.”

He smiled and stroked my neck before lifting my cashmere sweater and my t-shirt up and over my head. I wasn’t wearing a bra.

I looked down to watch him stroking my breasts and instantly stiffened. He was absentmindedly playing with the fine dark hairs that sprouted there.

His eyes clouded over with concern. “Something wrong?”

I fought my instincts to run. I wasn’t going to run anymore. I shook my head. I’d had enough of hating my body; I wanted to enjoy the way it felt.

I sat up and shakily removed the rest of my clothes, while he too removed his.

His smile was almost enough to make me forget myself.

“I’ve missed the hell out of you, Zee.”

He laughed and then ran kisses down the length of my body; from my finger-tips, all the way down my arm, down along my side, and then back again. I gasped a little when he parted my knees. I could feel his tongue and lips and then his fingers as he gently slid one inside of me. Slowly and gently like that, he kept going until it felt so

good I had to hold my breath, until the release came in waves to wash all my thoughts away.

Sleepily, he came back up alongside me to nuzzle my cheek. "I love the way you taste."

My eyes popped open. "Really?" I asked.

"Mmm," he said drowsily. "Like the most beautifully delicious fruit ever to have existed."

I fell asleep smiling.

## Chapter Nineteen

I woke in his arms feeling sick and anxious. I was nervous about receiving the translation of Sara's letter. Zee looked grey with worry too.

"Whatever decision you make will be the right one," I said softly. He pulled me tight to him; his cheek was wet against mine.

I knew the news was bad when I saw Eva's red eyes. She shook her head and handed me the pages without saying a word. I thanked her. Zee and I then headed for the Gorkitzer Park.

We found a quiet bench away from the cherubic Turkish children who were tumbling on the grass. The smell of barbequing food turned my stomach. I shook my head. "I can't read it, Zee."

He offered to read it for me, but I asked for a moment and shut my eyes and leant on his shoulder.

I realised how fond I'd become of Sara, of how protective I'd become of this old woman and of all she had done for me. My eyes were now open. I asked Zee to read.

*Dearest Ella, meine Frau,*

Zee looked amused. "You never told me that she called you her wife."

"I look like the woman Sara once married." I paused, feeling unsure of what to say, of how to say what I needed to say. I began slowly, "There are so many things I haven't told you."

He reached out and held my hand in his, "I'm sorry I wasn't more patient."

It was my turn to laugh. I shook my head. "I'm just a stubborn fool." I reached out and touched Zee's cheek, "I am so sorry for all the shit I've put you through."

He gave me a grim smile and shook his head, "You're just lucky I can see you for who you really are".

I nodded.

Zee continued:

*I must first begin my letter with the most heartfelt thank you. You have brought gladness and light to the heart of an old woman at the end of her years. You took me into your home in my hour of need. Yet I must confess myself undeserving of the good you brought to me. I have done many a wrong and shameful thing in my life. I am very sad and ashamed to say that my greatest wrongdoing was done to my dearest Ute. My hand shakes now as I write and confess these things to you. Perhaps you will find it difficult to understand how I could do such a thing? A loyal and goodhearted person such as yourself will surely not comprehend the things I have done in my life. They were different times. We all were different people. My crime? I reported on my darling Ute to save myself. My dearest Ute did not even know that it was I who had betrayed her. How my heart has ached and weighed*

*heavy on me over the years to have done such a thing.*

*Unlike so many friends, we managed to survive the terrible years of the 30s and 40s. Our marriage was most likely the thing that saved us; the thing that saved me. Some days I managed to convince myself that I had no choice; that it was the only thing that I could have done, but there have been many more days where I knew no such thing.*

*You may be surprised to know that the day you bruised my arm was a gift to me.*

*Finally Ute was punishing me for the pain I had caused!*

*I returned here to Berlin hoping against hope to find her, but I was told she died without a mark to her name some 10 years earlier.*

*I am afraid to admit, my dearest Ute is not the only one I have hurt. I have done the most terrible thing to you and to Zee for my own gain. You may recall a woman by the name of Lucinda Markham. Lucinda is a freelance journalist. Through sheer vanity, I allowed her to interview me via a translator. I desperately wanted to tell my story at last, as it is not one I can bear to write myself. The interview took place in your home on a day when you were out. I thought the article that she was to write would be about me alone. I was sadly mistaken. For this I apologise profusely. Before we left for Berlin, I managed to obtain some of her papers. I've included them with this letter so that you might know the things that she has written. Do not hate her too much, meine leibling. Lucinda has a good heart, though her intentions are misdirected.*

*Ella, I am a vain, selfish and foolish old woman who has come to the end of her time. Yet I do not trust in Death to come when she should. I have remained on this earth longer than was my right. My last undeserving wish is to die on German soil*

*and for my ashes to be scattered on my Lola Lola's grave. By the time you read this letter, part of my wish will be fulfilled.*

The letter then told us where we could collect her ashes.

Zee read on:

*In spite of everything, if you can be so kind as to grant the wish of this selfish fool, please promise me that you will not let the wind blow me onto the grave of Herr Newton. Although I am deserving of such a fate, I do not want the loud Americans to wake me.*

*Sara Schmidt*

*Berlin 2004*

Tears stung my eyes. The letter didn't sound like the obstinate old man that I knew. This person was completely foreign to me; too polite, too sensitive, too self-aware.

It was then that I understood – the letter was from Sara, the person Klaus had kept hidden for so long. For the first time I really understood. I understood that I too, with the way I reacted to Sara, my annoyance at her clothing, my calling her Klaus for so long, was responsible for hiding her away. I was just like my father.

Zee took my hand. It was as if he could read my mind. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Ella. We can't change the past, but the future is where you can set things right."

I nodded and gave him a wry smile. I knew what I had to do.

The next day we visited Otto at the Museum to collect Sara's ashes. The room seemed different now that Sara was not there with me, as if the papers on Otto's desk had faded like autumn leaves ready to drift to the ground and slowly turn to dust. The only thing that anchored them all was the heavy weight of the urn.

I swallowed hard and found myself embracing Otto, something I would never have done previously.

Otto coughed hesitantly and then began to speak.

"Before Sara passed on, she came to me to make a story for the museum. She had wanted to tell this story for the longest time but it was a difficult story for her." He paused and straightened his cravat. Today it was pale blue. "Perhaps you know of a woman by the name of Lucinda?"

I nodded. "I have a file." I trailed off. I wasn't sure what to say.

"It was unfortunate, but Lucinda did not want the story that Sara needed to tell, so she wrote a different story, a story that is easier to hear."

Otto rested his elbows on the table and interlaced his fingers.

"*This* is Sara's story. It is not easy to hear."

Zee squeezed my hand tight as Otto paused and sipped at a glass of water. He looked at the urn as he spoke, as if addressing Sara herself.

"Sara was a shy girl who was locked in the body of a man. This was the way we understood things to be back then."

I nodded for him to continue.

“She was a happy girl living with her parents and two older sisters in Neukölln. Her father was an artist working in pen and ink; her mother an actress in the theatre.

“Sara grew to be a young woman in love, as young women often are. Her love was a handsome young gentleman, by the name of Fritz Wohl. He was the great love of her life. Like Sara’s father, Fritz too was an artist.”

Otto passed me a photocopy of a tattered photograph. In it a young man with dark eyes sat beneath a fir tree; a sketchbook was in his hands.

“Sara lived together with Fritz and one other, a woman by the name of Ute. The three lived in a small apartment in Kreuzberg, near the Kottbusser Tor. Klaus and Ute as man and wife, and Fritz, as her brother.

“For a time, it appeared that the three might survive the war. In a strange twist, Fritz worked as a graphic artist for the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in the very building that was once the El Dorado. His work kept them safe for a while. The three kept to themselves and lived a quiet life.”

Otto stood and walked to the window, looking out over the courtyard. His voice took on a flat tone, as if giving a news report.

“In 1939, a neighbour spied through a window Sara wearing a pink dress. The neighbour, who was trying to gain favour with a Gestapo officer, reported the trio as living a degenerate lifestyle. Their home was raided and the dress was found in a box under the floor along with photographs of Sara, dressed in women’s clothing, seated on Fritz’ lap. Sara and Fritz were arrested under Paragraph 175 and were sent by train to the Mauthausen concentration camp. Ute was considered a candidate for re-education and was sent to another camp.”

Otto paused and removed his glasses. He cleaned them slowly and deliberately,

then began again.

“In the camp, Sara and Fritz were separated and each given the pink triangle to wear. It was months before Sara was to see Fritz again. On the day that she saw him, by chance she happened to look out the window of the hut she was in. Fritz no longer had the body of the man she once knew and the intense flash that had always been in his dark eyes was no longer there, but there was no mistaking him. It was Fritz. A guard led him into an open area, placed a tin bucket over his head, and then let an Alsatian dog loose. The dog, half starved and mad, tore through his legs. He fell to the ground, great pools of blood soaking the thin striped fabric of his outfit.”

My tears made the room swim. I imagined sharp smell of blood in the air. Zee's fingers curled tighter around mine. I wasn't sure if I could hear any more, but I had to, for Sara's sake.

“Later, the guard came for Sara. She was given a choice, accept medical treatment in Auschwitz for her degeneracy or face a similar fate to Fritz. She chose to be ‘treated’.”

Otto returned to his seat and fell silent.

Zee asked what I could not. “What did they do to her?”

I could see Otto's fingers stretch and curl against the desk, as if he wanted to reach out and stroke the urn, but was prevented from doing so by some sense of decorum. Instead he shut his eyes and swallowed hard as if the words had stuck in his throat.

“They performed a procedure called an orchidectomy, otherwise known as

castration. They removed her testicles. Sara bled terribly but survived. They performed other tortures upon her, but as you know she lived.”

The room spun before my eyes as if it had tilted on its axis. Zee stood to pour me a glass of water. I couldn't drink it. I could barely breathe. I leant back in the chair and shut my eyes.

Otto coughed politely. “Shall I continue?”

I nodded.

“After the war Sara found Ute again. Ute had been working as a nurse in Friedrichshain. This was fortunate as Sara's wounds required constant attention. For a time they were simply busy with living each day.

“What about Kl...Sara's family?” I asked. “Do you know what happened to them?”

Otto sighed. “Her family had very strong leftist leanings. They too were interred in a camp as socially undesirable. Sara never saw them again.”

“And Ute? What did Sara do that was so terrible?”

“You must first understand that Sara was terrified. She was arrested many times by the Stasi. Until no more. They would leave her alone if she informed on Ute. Finally Ute was arrested for crimes against the State.”

“What crimes?” Zee asked.

“Ute had been making artwork that ridiculed the regime. Sculptures. Even at the end Sara never forgave herself.” Otto gave me an unfathomable look, then turned his head and spoke softly. “She...we...none of us had a choice.”

#

Once more I took the U-bahn towards Krumme Lanke. I was no closer to understanding. But perhaps it wasn't for me to understand. Who was I to make judgements on Sara's life and the decisions she made? Why do any of us make the choices that we do? All I knew was that she'd left a hole in my life that I hadn't even realised was there.

I looked across at Zee staring silently out the train window and felt a rush of love so sudden and fierce that I felt faint. He looked pale and drawn. It was obvious what was on his mind.

"He's no different is he?"

"Your brother?"

Zee was fighting tears. "He's no different to the bastards that destroyed Sara's life." He clasped his head in his hands. "I don't know what to do, Ella."

He looked up at me. "Someone with so much hatred for people different to him. Yet he's still my brother."

"You don't have to decide now, Zee," I told him. "We don't need to go home yet."

I woke in the night to find the sheets drenched. Zee was soaking wet as if he had a fever. He sat upright when I placed a damp face-washer on his forehead.

"I've got to do it, Ella," he said. His eyes had dark circles beneath them. "I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do it."

I nodded and hugged him close. It was the answer I'd expected of him but hadn't

wanted to hear.

We went to the hospital the next day. Despite previously passing all tests in the three stages of kidney donor cross-matching, the German medical team wanted to re-run the final cross-match test. They were concerned that Zee's fleeting fever was in fact due to a virus. Depending on what it was, it could mean that his antibodies were no longer compatible with his brother's; in other words, a transplant would fail. The operation was scheduled for a week's time pending the results of the test.

Zee asked if he could give this news to his brother himself.

Tomas was staring out the window when we opened the door. Zee's grasp of my hand tightened as Tomas slowly turned his head towards us. He looked us up and down, and then began laughing. The sound was harsh and unnatural, like a hyena barking. Zee dropped my hand and took a step towards the bed. Tomas shot upright. "Fucking Tunte," he spat at Zee. Tomas reached for the emergency buzzer on his bed and jabbed it repeatedly. The nurse we'd met a few days earlier came running in. She looked from Tomas to Zee and back again. "Oh, I see," she said quietly. She held a clipboard to her chest and stared down at Tomas. He began yelling at her in German. She listened impassively then held up her hand. She'd heard enough.

"Herr Sternberg," she said, looking at Zee, "I am sorry to tell you that your brother refuses the operation."

Tomas began yelling again. The nurse silenced him once more.

“He has requested that you leave.”

Zee shook his head and moved closer to the foot of the bed. “Tomas,” he said. His brother would not meet his eyes, but instead growled at him, “I would rather die than live with the kidney of a fucking Tunte.” Tomas spat on the floor and turned back to the window.

The nurse exhaled audibly, and then held the door open. The clipboard was still in her other hand clasped to her chest.

When we'd left the room, she told us that the results of the cross-matching test had come through. “Would you like the result?” she asked Zee.

I tried reading her face, but could not.

Zee bit his lip, then looked at me. He shook his head. “I'd rather not know.”

I put my arm around him. Berlin had changed us both. “Let's go home.”

## Chapter Twenty

Not long after we arrived back in Melbourne Zee dropped by and handed me a slip of paper. The word Kuroneko was written on it, along with a phone number.

“What’s this?” I asked.

Zee smiled. “Your brother James is now the Black Cat.”

I threw a cushion at him. “Why do you have to be so cryptic?”

“Because you love it, my dear.”

I shook my head.

“It’s Japanese,” Zee explained. “Your brother is in an industrial band over there. They’ve got quite a large following too.”

“But how?” I asked. I’d spent long hours combing the internet myself to no avail.

“No questions,” said Zee. “Just call.” He handed me the phone.

I punched the numbers into the phone. “Hello?” asked a voice in a faint British accent.

I couldn’t find the words. My tongue had stuck to the roof of my mouth. I caught sight of my black dress slung over a chair. A rose once the colour of apricots, now withered and brown, sat on top of it.

“Is anyone there?”

Then the words tumbled out. “Is that you, James? It’s me. Ella. Your sister.”

The line crackled. I thought I'd lost the connection. Then his voice came through. "Little Ella," James laughed. "Oh, little Ella."

"Ha," I said, "I'm not so little now." Zee smiled at me.

"It's so good to hear from you. I always hoped you'd contact me one day."

I picked up the rose. I could still smell its faint scent. I pressed a fingertip against a thorn. It was still sharp. I had to ask him. "Why didn't you call me, James?"

"Oh." I could hear him suck in his breath. "Every birthday I sent you a card with a number to call reverse charges." He went silent. "When I didn't hear from you, I thought you must've been angry with me. I gave up once you turned eighteen." He paused again, "I knew mum was pissed off about me leaving and then for not coming back for the funeral, but I didn't think..."

Every single teenage birthday came back to me in a flash. Each year mum had told me the same thing: we'd received nothing but junk mail. I interrupted him, "It doesn't matter. I'm so sorry."

"What on earth for?" he asked.

"I saw everything that night. I saw what Dad did to you and I did nothing."

"Ella, you were just a kid. What happened then helped me leave. I saw what was important. I had to be my own person. I wanted to forget it all to remember who I was. Who I am." The line was quiet again. Then he laughed. "You can never escape the past."

He was right about that.

Zee and I arrived at Lucinda's house in the late afternoon. We hadn't planned what we would say. We didn't even know whether she would be home. I had the folder of her twisted notes clenched tight under my arm as I rang the doorbell. Zee squeezed my hand and gave me a grim smile. I could hear the bell echo inside the house. We waited. I hit the bell hard again. It was obvious that Lucinda wasn't home.

We returned to Zee's car to wait. Iggy Pop was singing *Wild America* on the radio.

Zee shot me a sideways look and bit at his lips. I laughed and pulled a face at him.

"I guess I'm your butchy girlfriend."

"You damn well better be," he retorted with a grin.

"Zee," I said somewhat sheepishly, "I've never asked you which pronoun you prefer."

"You're lucky I'm the forgiving type," Zee smiled. "I'm neither he nor she, I'm ze."

"Look," he said, I mean ze said, as a car pulled up. "Here comes the wicked witch of West Preston."

We got out of the car and ran over to where Lucinda had parked. I took the papers out of the folder and waved them at her. "What the fuck is this?"

She ignored me and opened the rear door of her car. I could see the small frame of a child sitting in the rear of her car. The child was staring vacantly into space and was hooked up to some kind of a machine. Lucinda set up a wheelchair and manoeuvred the child into it. I was at a loss as to what to do. Zee gave my hand a squeeze. Lucinda wheeled the child up her driveway and then turned back to us with a sigh, "Well, are you coming in or not?" We followed her mutely and sat down when she gestured at the couch.

She was still wearing the same mis-buttoned coat I'd first seen her wear but today it was rumpled and gave her a look of resignation, as though she hadn't bothered to dress properly. "This is my son Samuel."

I now understood. Samuel was mentioned in the papers Sara gave me. I began to feel a little uneasy. This wasn't going to plan.

"Has there been any improvement?" Zee asked with genuine concern.

"No. There's still fluid on his brain." Lucinda wiped at the corner of her child's mouth with a wash cloth. "Some children said he walked like a girl. They pushed him, as kids do. He hit his head on a section of concrete curbing."

She sat down on the couch and stared at her hands. "He was only seven."

Zee looked at her as if to prompt her to say more.

"He's nine now."

Zee reached out and took Lucinda's hands. To my horror she started crying and collapsed onto Zee's shoulder. The child still gazed at a spot on the wall; a thin string of drool fell from his lip. The washcloth was folded on a bag by his chair. The spiked plastic ball that I once thought was a sculpture was in his lap. I looked at Samuel, then at Zee. He was rocking Lucinda in his arms as though she were the child in need of attention. I looked at the kid again – his dark hair plastered to his head, his grey unseeing eyes – then picked up the cloth and carefully dabbed at his lips. His arms flailed out in a spasm and for a second his hand brushed against mine. The warmth of Samuel's skin was surprising.

This wasn't turning out the way I'd imagined.

Lucinda raised her head slowly, as if it weighed heavily on her shoulders; her skin was a patchwork of red and pink blotches. She spoke haltingly, choosing her words carefully. "I'll...I'll print a retraction."

I didn't answer straight away. My thoughts were whirling. I wanted to hate Lucinda for what she'd done – to see her pay for her ignorance. But how could I? Not when I wasn't without blame myself. *No*. I'd had enough of hatred, of ruined lives. I shut my eyes only to have a blur of images pass before me. *A broken mother with a broken child. My miscarriage. The airport bathroom. Stockings and eyeliner and my father raising his hand to James. Sara and Fritz. Ute. Zee's brother. A Turkish family's retribution. Berlin.* All of us, Zee and I included, desperately trying to keep it together in a world that wanted to divide everything neatly in two.

"No," I finally said.

Zee nodded, knowing what I was about to say.

"Write the piece you should have in the first place. Write about Sara."

END



**Volume Two**

**Gender Diversity in Contemporary Fiction: An Exegesis**

## PREAMBLE

In writing about and attempting to theorise gender to illumine the writing of my novel, I researched the topic thoroughly, reading numerous varying accounts from different theoretical perspectives on the nature of gender. I expected to be convinced by one particular argument, that one particular thread or threads would resonate most strongly with me and that I would be able to weave them together to summate my own understanding of gender. I was after a coherent and intelligible argument to offer readers of this thesis. In other words, I wanted to be able to say: “Gender is this, *not* that”, in other words I still thought of gender in binary terms – what it is / what it is not. I fooled myself into thinking that my theorisations had advanced when I began thinking of gender as a multiplicity, but still my thinking was simplistic and binary. I thought in terms of the multiple things that gender is, compared with the multiple things that it was not. I came to realise that the only way beyond the binary of gender is to embrace the contradiction of holding two seemingly opposing thoughts as being true at the same time. In this sense, gender might also be considered a heterotopic space as “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986). I now believe gender is not only complex but it is contradictory and not easily apprehensible. Given the complex interplay of gender identity, gender role, gender attribution and gender assignment, gender is both artificial and natural; it is both essential and socially constructed; it is both material and incorporeal; it is both a binary and multiplicity; it is both static and fluid; it is both embodied and disembodied; it is both individualised and generalised. I argue it is the complex and contradictory amalgam of these factors that

constitutes gender. It is a recipe that uses the same ingredients in varying amounts to different effects, which while different, are still recognisable to us as gender, but may be understood by different people to be different things. Thus the language needed to talk about gender is at the outer reaches of our discursive limits. We instead reach back for more familiar shorthand modes of describing gender by using binaries or by plotting out lengthy complex arguments to discuss how it is otherwise. One thing that is certain is that the struggle to articulate gender is an ongoing theoretical project. However, abstract definitions of gender are problematic in that they efface individualised identities and render them invisible, particularly in a heteronormative society that heavily reinforces binary genders. Therefore, it is more important to expose the impact of living in a binary gender based system on individuals than to debate the usefulness of the term.

The thesis is constructed in two volumes: Volume One is the creative work: *Is That What You're Wearing?*, while Volume Two is the exegesis: *Gender Diversity in Contemporary Fiction* in which I work through the theoretical tensions inherent in the literary production. In three chapters, this exegesis will develop in more detail some of the research which has informed the novel. Each chapter critically interrogates the same four issues from three different perspectives. The four issues covered, with differing degrees of emphasis, are:

- the social reinforcement of gender;
- signification of gender and gender attribution;
- gender diverse identities and subjectivities; and
- cultural and material access to literary works featuring gender diverse protagonists.

In Volume Two, Chapter One: *Gender Diversity Theorised* outlines the terms of reference of the exegesis and sketches the politics and theory inherent in the contested ground of gender identity. Chiefly, the chapter seeks to answer two related sets of questions: *What are the comparative differences in the theorising of gender diverse identities? How can these differences be described and accounted for?* The answers to these questions were crucial to the production of the novel as this material shaped the gestation and development of the three primary characters. *In what ways is a binary gender system socially reinforced and how does this impact on gender diverse individuals? And in what ways has this changed over the last 100 years?* It is important to interrogate these areas because they not only inform the milieu in which the novel is set, but they also provide an in-depth understanding of the subtle differences in differential discrimination and passing privilege afforded to those of differing gender subjectivities. In addition, although none of the characters transitions or undergoes gender confirmation surgery, an understanding of the medicalisation of gender was an important part of contextualising the kinds of discrimination and marginalisation faced by individuals whose gender does not conform to society's norms.

Chapter Two: *Gender Diversity Represented* briefly contextualises the contemporary representation of gender diverse identity in contemporary media before giving more detailed attention to three contemporary novels. It asks: *What are the comparative differences in cultural representations of gender diverse identities and how can these differences be theorised and accounted for?* The literature survey asks: *How accessible to mainstream readers are novels about (or containing) gender diverse individuals in terms of material and cultural access? How are gender diverse individuals depicted in twentieth century and contemporary non-genre novel-length*

*fiction?* These two strands of research are relevant to the thesis novel because the manner in which both the popular media and mainstream literature depict and represent individuals informs public opinion, shapes their biases and translates into treatment of people. “Mainstream” is used here to refer to fiction which is published by large publishing houses and is easily obtainable either through local Australian libraries, or non-specialist bookstores

Chapter Three: *Representing Gender Diverse Identities* is a self-reflexive chapter covering the following questions: *In what ways does my thesis novel differ from existing portrayals of gender diverse individuals? In what ways does it illuminate more varied portrayals of gender identity? In what ways does it illuminate the experience of those whom society perceives to be outside the binary gender system, but who would like to be recognised for themselves without necessarily any revolutionary intention?* I have chosen not to explore the ways that people are explicitly and overtly individually or collectively challenging the binary gender system, as previous accounts have focussed on this (see for example Wilchins (1997) and Bornstein (1995)).

The overall aim of the project was to create a literary work that would not only represent gender diverse people (the term used inclusively of any individuals who do not accept the gender they were assigned at birth) as regular, ordinary, normal people, but to write a novel for a largely mainstream audience who may not have actively engaged with issues of gender identity previously. While I initially intended to illustrate in novel form the idea of non-essentialised genders, I expanded my plans to include other notions of gender. In particular, I have also chosen to explore the idea that essentialised notions of gender are key to some individuals’ self-identity, even where non-normative genders are concerned. Furthermore, I wanted to explore issues of

representation and misreading of identity and the impact that this has on individuals, even those who may not be aware that they too participate in their own misreadings. This idea will be further developed in the character of Ella. Finally, the creative propulsion of the work continues to relate to a larger trans-feminist goal (following Julia Serano (2007), trans-activist, theorist and academic, in particular) of a just society in which all people are treated equitably irrespective of gender.

Therefore, it is the intention of my novel, *Is that what you're wearing? (ITWYW)*, through my portrayal of the three primary characters, Ella, Zee and Klaus/Sara, to illustrate and illuminate the tensions within contemporary understandings of gender, and to reflect the queering and transfiguration of the gender binary in different ways. The strength of the novel form is that fiction allows some play that theory doesn't. In a fictional form opposing theories can interact through their representation as characters and within the same characters. I argue that no theory as it stands encompasses all of the genders of the characters. The tension then in writing characters based in part on theory is to avoid mere didactic representations, and for them instead to appear "realistic" within the realm of their fictional world. I'm aware of the problematics attached the use of the term "realistic" and do not use it uncritically. However, in the context of this thesis, I intend it to mean a sense of plausibility within the bounds of everyday life. Specifically, I use it to refer to gender portrayals that are not effected through magical, fantastical or other implausible means.

The formation of Ella, the narrator, with her struggles towards comfortable embodiment in a rigidly binary system might be understood from a trans-theoretical point of view, while Zee's playful denaturalisation of gender is an attempt to express a gender as idealised by queer theory. In contrast, Klaus/Sara's occasional gender play

and struggles with embodiment is intended to explore a hypothetical mid-point between queer theory and trans theory; a mid-point which is as equally problematic as either of the paradigms posited by both queer theory and trans theory. Overall, it is hoped that these fictional representations may assist readers to derive a deeper understanding, not so much of gendered lives, but of the impact that a binary gendered system, and other forms of gender reinforcement, can have on individual lives.

## CHAPTER ONE: Gender Diversity Theorised

### Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical context for the thesis. I define the key terms used throughout the thesis and provide critical commentary concerning their historical and socio-political origins. I consider theoretical and political aspects of the social reinforcement of gender; and of gender diverse identities and subjectivities, inclusive of transsexual, transgender and intersex identities. I also discuss the theory of signification as applicable to gender. These aspects help to contextualise the thesis novel in the current political climate and demonstrate its contribution to knowledge.

Some key terms are:

- Gender diverse, transgender, transsexual and intersex identities
- Social construction, essentialism
- Subjectivity
- Embodiment
- Lived experience
- Performativity
- Passing privilege

However, as the definitions of these are fluid (Serano, 2007), I will define them in context rather than give a glossary.

In terms of methodology, I look at all these areas from an interdisciplinary perspective and make use of bricolage as a research technique. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) bricolage is “the process of employing...[multiple] methodological strategies as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation” (p. 316).

The reason I have chosen this method is “bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and complications of power. The task of the bricoleur is to attack this complexity, uncovering the invisible artifacts of power and culture” (Kincheloe & McLaren 2005, p. 317). Here, the invisible artifacts of power and culture surround representations of gender diverse individuals.

As mentioned above I use the term “gender diverse individuals” in a broad sense, inclusive of transsexual, transgender and intersex identities, while bearing in mind that individual subjectivities differ. My definition of this term follows and expands upon Whittle’s (2006) definition of “trans identities” which he states is applicable to:

anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels ‘man’ or ‘woman’ credited to them by the formal authorities. The identity can cover a variety of experiences. It can encompass discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross gender living, through to accessing major health interventions such as hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment procedures. (p. xi)

### **Sex / Gender / Body Debates**

Gender is a relatively recent construct; 100 years ago it did not exist in the same way as it does today (Cealey Harrison & Hood-Williams, 2002). In the last 50 years in particular, multiple theoretical perspectives have flourished. Since terminology can convey power and privilege different groups have different political investments in defining gender (Butler, 2004). This subsection traces the historical and socio-political

origins of the term “gender”. In doing so I acknowledge that the ground is not an easy one to trace since there are a number of complex and contradictory ways of understanding the concept. I call into question totalising theories of gender and work with the inherent paradoxical complexities. This groundwork is a necessary precursor to contextualising research relating to gender diverse individuals and their cultural, particularly their fictional, representations.

A central problem is the continued blurring of lines between “sex” and “gender”. Valentine (2007) traces the historical distinctions between the terms, beginning with distinctions made between biological sex and social gender in the 1950s, to distinctions between the “separate, if related phenomena” of gender and sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s (p. 58). He points out that while “many contemporary feminists [understand] gender as connected to, but not the same as, sexuality” not all fields of research are in accord with these understandings (Valentine, 2007, p. 59). Before I continue it is pertinent to acknowledge that female masculinity and male femininity are often conflated with homosexuality, and that some representations of gay and lesbian gender identities may also be situated beyond the binary. However, it is outside the purview of this thesis to examine them in depth. That is, while I acknowledge the interlinked nature of gender and sexuality, this thesis is specifically concerned with gender presentation, and performance, as well as social identification rather than with sexuality.

The sociologist Michael Kimmel (2004) defines the difference between sex and gender as follows:

Sex refers to the biological apparatus, the male and female – our chromosomal, chemical and anatomical organization. Gender refers to the meanings that are

attached to those differences within a culture. Sex is male and female; gender is masculinity and femininity – what it means to be a man or a woman. (p. 3)

While on the surface this definition appears unproblematic, as Butler (2004) states:

“To conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression of gender is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender” (p. 42). It could be then said that to define gender in simple binary terms of masculinity and femininity is an exclusionary practice because binaries function in our society in an oppositional and hierarchical manner. I will talk more about the implications of this in the section on the social reinforcement of gender (see pp. 25-31).

Arguing for a natural basis to gender had political advantages, particularly for some strands of radical feminism. This emphasis on the demarcation between two genders, as determined by an essentialised body, defined who was a woman and was then used to illuminate systematic gender-based discrimination of women (Cealey Harrison & Hood-Williams, 2002). Thus, in the 1970s and 80s the gender category of “woman” as defined by women was a politically motivated identity. However, one of the disadvantages of this, as corporeal feminist writers like Gatens (1996) have pointed out, is that it relies on a normative female body which is rendered invisible. A similar critique of the “whiteness” of this foundational body has been increasingly raised (Breines, 2002).

While this political position made numerous gains for gender based equality, I and others (e.g. Linstead & Pullen, 2006) argue that it has served to reinforce a binary gender system via its affirmation of gender difference. According to Cealey Harrison, drawing on Connell, there is still a prevalent “doctrine of natural difference” and a “biological foundationalism for gender as a limit beyond which thought cannot go” (Cealey Harrison, 2006, p. 36).

As with any strictly delineated group, particularly in a binary system, there will always be individuals who do not fit the normative codes imposed by these regimes. By normative regimes I mean the societal expectations of individual behaviour, in other words, that men and women behave and look a certain way. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) note: “In attempting to promote the self, we cannot fail to denigrate the other, even where the other is traditionally dominant and hegemonic” (p. 29). I argue that radical feminism has denigrated transgendered identities in this manner (see p. 23).

The 1960s saw the development of theories of gender as social construction, notably in the work of Dr John Money and theorist Robert Stoller. While Stoller was highly influential in social theory, the behavioural psychologist, Dr John Money, was instrumental in popularising the idea that gender was a social construction. As he saw it, the origins of gender identity were “social-interactional”. In other words, the product of the interaction between upbringing and genetics (Money, 1970, p. 464). He argued that prior to the age of two, gender was malleable and could be changed. Most prominently, he used the case of David Reimer (known in the literature as John/Joan) as proof of his theories.

David was a biologically male infant whose penis was irreparably damaged during a failed circumcision operation. In 1966, Dr Money convinced the child’s parents that David would fare better in life if socialised as a girl, as Brenda. David subsequently received an orchidectomy in which his testes were removed. His parents then attempted to raise him as a girl (Colapinto, 2001).

Dr Money reported of the success of this case in the medical literature (e.g. Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). His research was subsequently discredited in 1997 by the sexologist Milton Diamond following discussions with David Reimer who stated that he never

identified as a girl (Diamond & Sigmundson, 1997). The John/Joan case has had long-lasting implications in the theoretical understanding of gender identity, particularly as it has been used in the intervening years as proof that gender is no more than a social construction. I will also discuss this further in relation to the medical reinforcement of gender later in this chapter.

A succinct summary of the theoretical position relating to the social construction of identity categories, including gender, is given by the queer theorist Sullivan (2003):

Poststructural theorists such as Foucault argue that there are no objective and universal truths, but that particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalised,’ in culturally and historically specific ways....[Identity is] constructed in and through its relations with others, and with systems of power/knowledge....We embody the discourses that exist in our culture, our very being is constituted by them. (pp. 39, 41)

Thus, from a post-structural position, gender is not viewed as a truth which can be viewed objectively, but instead as a cultural and historical artefact. Judith Butler, a third wave feminist and poststructuralist, takes this anti-essentialist position further and views gender as performative, stating that there is no original or true gender inscribed on a pre-existing foundational body (Butler, 1999). She instead views gender as an iterative act which one performs. According to Benwell and Stokoe (2006) “Each new performance [of gender] may entail the introduction of new elements: intertextual borrowings, resignification, reflexivity and disruptive tropes such as irony” (p. 33). These ideas will be explored in Chapter Three in relation to the literary performance of gender diversity in my own work.

An example, that clearly demonstrates the slipperiness of gender conceptualisation is illustrated by the radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys' (2008) critique of the UK Gender Recognition Act. Jeffreys, who views gender as a social construction linked to the body, argues in relation to the Act, that only women should decide who are defined as women. However, this begs the question of what "woman" is when that definition varies within different cultural contexts. Elsewhere, Jeffreys (2004) is attributed with a suggestion that "(f)eminists like myself envisage a time beyond gender when there is no correct way to behave according to body shape. In such a world, it would not be possible to conceive of a gender identity clinic" (p. 9).

In support of her anti-essentialist stance, Jeffreys (2002) points out that socially constructed gender markers are routinely selected by transsexuals and used by medical assessors, however she views this as a form of social control (this will be discussed further at p. 24). Although coming from a very different perspective, Butler also points out the artifice of gender markers. Butler and other researchers such as Newton (1979) cite drag, with its parody and exaggeration of gender, as the ultimate example of gender as artifice. Gender diversity in performance is viewed by some as both transgressive of gender norms and liberatory. Butler (2001) herself states:

...there is also a serious and increasingly popular critique of idealized gender dimorphism in the transsexual movement itself. One can see it in the work of Riki Anne Wilchins, whose gender theory makes room for transsexuality as a transformative exercise, but one can see it perhaps most dramatically in the work of Kate Bornstein, who argues that to go from female to male, or from male to female, is not necessarily to stay within the binary frame of gender but to engage transformation itself as the meaning of gender. (p. 627)

However, according to Braidotti (2002):

It would indeed be naive to believe that the mere rejection or destabilization of gender dualism is exclusively or necessarily a subversive position. I think that a great deal of contemporary conservative or neo-liberal discourse takes the form of a spurious celebration of ‘differences’ ...the praise of pluralistic differences is neither a sufficient nor a necessary pre-condition for the subversion of identity predicated on the sovereignty of the One and the political economy of the same. (p. 37)

Braidotti is arguing that individual displays of difference do not necessarily impact on the underlying hierarchies and power regimes.

Butler (1994) herself acknowledges that her theory of performativity does not leave space for transgender identity – a fact that I and other theorists have found troublesome. Viviane Namaste (2000) critiques theories of gender performativity as ignoring the lived experience and embodiment of many transgendered individuals, for example much of trans discrimination is related to what is perceived by others as a mismatch between bodies and expected gender identity and roles. The term embodiment is understood to mean “a way of living or inhabiting the world through one’s acculturated body” (Weiss & Haber, 1999, p. xiii).

Stephen Whittle (1998), transman and noted trans theorist, elaborates in the footnotes to his guest editorial for the first transgender issue of the *Journal of Gender Studies*: “Performance is a theory which dictates people and who they are as much as biological essentialism does. It removes any sense of personal choice and freedom” (p. 272). Lack of recognition of transgender embodiment not only sustains a binary gender system, it has implications for transgender visibility. It then follows that those who are

not on the political radar are more likely to face marginalisation, particularly in terms of governmental policies.

A particularly pertinent Australian example of the impact and inconsistent application of recent governmental policies with regard to sex and gender diverse people was illustrated by a married transsexual woman from Queensland who participated in a forum held by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Previous to 2009, the legal criteria for a gender recognition certificate in all Australian states required that the candidate was both unmarried and had “undergone a medical or surgical procedure to ‘alter genitals or other sexual characteristics’” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2009, p. 16). The forum participant stated that prior to 2008 she did not qualify for an Australian female gender recognition certificate because she refused to divorce her wife, however at that time both Medicare and Centrelink recognised her as a female (and therefore in a same-sex relationship) and disqualified her from the benefits afforded to married couples (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2009).

In 2011, the High Court of Australia, the highest court of appeal, made the landmark decision to overturn the requirement of proof of genital surgery in Western Australia as one of the criteria in granting a change in gender on a person’s birth certificate. According to the High Court (2011):

...for the purposes of the Act, the physical characteristics by which a person is identified as male or female are confined to external physical characteristics that are socially recognisable. Social recognition of a person’s gender does not require knowledge of a person’s remnant sexual organs. (p. 1)

This revision to Australian law demonstrates, that even at the time of finalising this doctoral thesis the discourse around gender diversity is in flux.

Beyond feminist theories of gender, queer theory might appear to be the most liberatory and useful place to explore multiple gender possibilities. However, the criticisms of queer theory by trans theorists are numerous. Jay Prosser (1995) attacks queer theory outright for its "...failure to read transsexual stories as narratives with plots centred on embodied becoming" (p. 488). Namaste (2000) also takes queer theory to task for its failure to recognise the day-to-day lived experience of transgendered people. In other words, contrary to its emancipatory goals, queer theory is complicit in reinforcing the erasure of transgendered people. Serano (2007) argues that both queer and trans theory are problematic because they establish another hierarchical binary in which "subversive" and "transgressive" genders are privileged, particularly within queer communities, and genders which are seen to reinforce the gender binary are denigrated. Like Serano, I argue that a particular gender identity cannot and should not be valued over another, as this creates new modes of gender reinforcement. Thus while I agree with Jeffreys that gender hierarchies are problematic, I disagree with other aspects of her theory where they rest on a foundationalist notion of "woman".

Theories of gender essentialism and of gender as social construction both have deep flaws and neither suffices as a complete theory of gender. Indeed I refute the idea that there can be a total theory of gender, given the myriad ways in which gender can be expressed, experienced and understood. In summary, gender as social construction has been critiqued for being too abstract and failing to reference bodies in a material way, while essentialism is unable to reference many discrete groups of people. These theories

can be further criticised for reinforcing the binary gender system. As Sellberg (2009) argues:

...one of the major problems in the relation between transgender and feminist discourses is in the fact that all factions reiterate binary power dynamics. They argue their positions in terms of authenticity vs falsity, reality vs fiction, and ultimately, liberation vs constriction. (p. 82)

Further to the theories of essentialism and social construction, I ask: *Could a blending of the two theories then make up for the deficiencies of each?* Connell (2005) herself a sociologist who is transgendered disagrees: “If biological determinism is wrong, and social determinism is wrong, then it is unlikely that a combination of the two will be right” (p. 52). However, some years later she revised her opinion and made the determination that they *were* interrelated: “Gender is the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive area, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes” (Connell, 2010, p. 11).

A different approach to theorisations of gender has been used by recent researchers such as Linstead and Pullen (2006). Beyond viewing gender as essential or as constructed, they suggest we use Deleuzian theories to view gender in a rhizomatic manner, as a multiplicity. This suggests that gender has no single origin but rather, as Grosz (1994) argues: “There is no body as such: there are only bodies—male or female, black, brown, white, large or small—and all the gradations in between” (p. 19). Some trans theorists (e.g. Bornstein, 1998) also incorporate ideas of multiplicity into their theorisations of gender. However, there has been some criticism of these theories for their apparent detachment from lived experience. Davis (2009) insists: “[A] theoretical

emphasis on multiplicity and fluidity often overlooks or insufficiently recognizes the embodied experiences and implications of compulsory gender performance” (p. 99).

Sellberg (2009) proposes an answer to the seemingly irreconcilable differences in theories, drawing on the work of Braidotti: “If embodied subjectivity were to be reconsidered neither as a stable essential entity nor as a de-essentialised vacuum in a fetishised shell, but rather as an uncharged series of inputs that develop in processes of ‘becoming’, then gendered, transgendered, and queer subjectivities could be expressed within a shared discursive space, intermittently and coextensively” (p. 82).

Perhaps the most useful and clear summary is offered by Whittle (2000), who suggests: “Gender identity is the result of a complex interaction amongst three factors: a genetic predisposition, physiological factors, [and] the socialization process” (p. 9).

Hence gender identity, as with identity in general, has changed from “a self-fashioning, agentive, internal *project of the self*, through to more recent understandings of *social and collective identity*, to postmodern accounts which treat identity as fluid, fragmentary, contingent and *crucially, constituted in discourse*” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 17). These changes in the theorisation of gender allow us to see that the manner in which gender is understood is a product of historical discourses which have changed over time, and as the recent High Court of Australia (2011) decision illustrates, are still changing. This also indicates that the availability of circulating discourses then shapes the genders that are available to individuals to enact (Ekins & King, 2010). Thus gender is a product of forces both internal and external to the individual.

It appears too there is no escaping the materiality of the body, except perhaps in cyberspace. The body itself in all its fleshy specificity refuses easy binary classification. It disrupts and problematises the categories we seek to impose on it. At the same time

the manner in which we read, identify, attribute and perform genders is constituted by the discourse in which we are enmeshed. This leads into a discussion of the social reinforcement of gender.

### **The Discursive Formation of Gender and Related Terms**

A number of different terms, with different origins, have been and are currently used to describe gender diverse individuals. The terms used in this field are constantly in flux. According to the trans academic and activist Julia Serano (2007): “Many of the terms used these days to describe transgender people did not exist a decade ago” (p. 23). (See also page 37 of this exegesis for terms used to describe gender diverse individuals).

To reiterate, in referring to gender diverse people, I mean individuals whose self-identified gender does not accord with narrow societal expectations of their birth sex. In western culture there is a general expectation that individuals born with what is considered female biology will have a feminine gender and identify as girls or women, and that individuals born with what is considered male biology will have a masculine gender and identify as boys or men. When there is discordance between the two the medical profession currently perceives this as a diagnosable psychological condition, which is labelled “gender identity disorder” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR), the handbook used by medical professionals to diagnose mental illnesses (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, lobby groups such as the United States based National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce (2010) call for “the removal of all diagnoses related to gender nonconformity in the DSM” and

state that “Gender-variance is not a psychiatric problem; it’s a natural human variation that in some cases requires medical attention and support”.

The term “gender identity disorder” was first included in the DSM-III in 1980 (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). However, I and many researchers along with civil rights activists refute the idea of a “disordered” gender identity primarily on the grounds that gender is a social construction. Further to this, I also argue that the terminology used in relation to gender diverse individuals is problematic. Each term is underpinned by different understandings of gender and gender identity. In this section I will discuss the most prominent terms used in relation to gender diversity.

The term “transvestite” was coined in 1910 by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (Hirschfeld, 1910/1991). It was a term initially used to describe individuals who dressed in clothing considered socially appropriate to the opposite gender, for erotic purposes.

Harry Benjamin, an endocrinologist, continued Hirschfeld’s pioneering work into gender diversity. He recognised a sub-set of individuals who desired a medical method to bring their bodies into concordance with their self-identified genders. Benjamin’s (1966) work paved the way for an understanding of a distinction between those who were considered transvestites, and those who desired a surgical remedy, in other words transsexual individuals.

The term “transvestite” is now used primarily in a medical sense, most prominently in the DSM, to describe those who gain what is considered fetishistic pleasure from cross-dressing (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In contrast, the term “transsexual” was first used in the medical literature in 1954 by Harry Benjamin (Whittle, 2000). The term has been used both to describe individuals whose gender

identity does not concur with the gender they were assigned at birth, and to describe individuals who have undergone Gender Confirmation Surgery. This type of surgery is more widely known by the medical terms “Sex Reassignment Surgery” or “Gender Reassignment Surgery”, or in popular terms – a “Sex Change Operation”. “Gender Confirmation Surgery” is the preferred term for many transsexual people because the surgery is viewed as affirming or bringing into concordance the gender experienced by an individual in a physical manner (Whittle, 2000).

The term “transgender” emerged at a grassroots community level as a self-descriptor of individuals who felt their cross-dressing had a gender-based origin rather than a sexual origin. According to the ethnographer David Valentine (2007) the community activist and trans woman, Virginia Price was one of the first individuals to use this term. Thus the use of “transgender” at a community level as a self-identifier could be viewed as an attempt to reclaim political power lost in the medical gendering of identities. According to the sociologists Ekins and King (2010):

The end of the 1980s and beginnings of the 1990s ushered in a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation and theorisation of transgender phenomena. In the first place there was the move to a ‘beyond the binary’ view of gender, which we consider in terms of ‘transcending’. (p. 27)

This is the period in which trans theory developed.

As in any form of identity politics, essentialism is crucial to trans-identity politics. Individuals may choose to affiliate with a particular identity, in this case a particular trans identity, to increase their visibility and to ensure inclusion, particularly with regard to affirmative law-making (Spivak & Harasym, 1990; Woodward, 2002). One particular example of this is in the different access to subsidised medical care for individuals with

intersex conditions compared with those with transsexual conditions. Thus, aligning oneself with a particular identity, or being allowed to align oneself, has both costs and benefits. I discuss this more at page 20 where I discuss the inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.

Some radical feminists, most notably Janice Raymond, attack transsexual subjectivities. Raymond (1979) describes the male to female (M2F) transsexual body as being “a rape” of the female body, through a misappropriation of a feminine gender identity. I do not believe that femininity or masculinity is the exclusive domain of either sex, nor located in a foundational body, but that anyone should be able to access and perform those genders.

While I understood that this strand of feminism fears that transsexual women will covertly enter feminist discourse to speak as “men”, I consider this less likely and less significant than the continuing prejudices and marginalisation faced by gender diverse individuals. Raymond, for example, views transsexual women as irrevocably tainted by masculine gender expectations which are carried on into their later lives, particularly as they were once afforded all the power and privilege offered to those who are socially identified as males. I would instead argue that transsexual women – and transsexual men, whom Raymond neglects to mention – have not experienced, nor go on to experience, power and privilege in society, but rather consistently experience marginalisation and discrimination by expressing their chosen gender identity (see Devor, 1989, 1997; Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007; Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Wilchins, 1997). Raymond’s extreme radical feminist viewpoint may have been important to feminism during the period in which she was writing; however it is a stance that needs

to be much more nuanced and sophisticated given the refining of identity politics over time.

Different arguments have been made about transsexual men: that is individuals who were assigned as females at birth but who choose to live as men and who want to have gender confirmation surgery of some form. While there is not the same concern about transsexual men invading domains considered the province of men, radical feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys, are concerned that the desire for sex change in these individuals is related to homophobia; that is, they see these individuals as being forced by society to make their lesbian sexuality match their gender identity; transsexual men are seen as wanting to become men because heterosexuality is more acceptable than lesbianism (Jeffreys, 2002). Therefore, radical feminists such as Jeffreys see transsexual men as gender traitors.

Serano (2007) disagrees stating:

Not only is sex reassignment just about the most stigmatized medical procedure that exists in our society, but transsexuals themselves are rarely accepted culturally and legally as legitimate men or women. It is safe to say that lesbians and gay men are far more accepted and respected by the straight mainstream than transsexuals are. (p. 154)

Furthermore Jeffreys ignores the evidence of different individual experiences: individual transmen differ in their sexual identification, some identify as lesbian, some as gay, some as bisexual and some as asexual. In addition, the American Psychological Association (2011) in its report *Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity*, as well as individualised accounts of transsexual

individuals (see for example Boylan, 2003; Cromwell, 1999), indicates that for many individuals gender discordance is the primary reason behind the desire to transition.

The end of the first decade of the new millennium saw a further shift in preferred terminology, particularly in Australia. The Australian government has recently adopted the term “gender diverse” as an umbrella descriptor which is inclusive of the genders of all individuals who do not accept the sex assigned to them at birth; this includes transgender, transsexual, and intersex individuals (e.g. see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2009). It is the primary term that I use throughout this exegesis, given the limitations of the terms “transgender” and “trans” to encompass all of the genders under discussion.

### **Social Reinforcement: Cultural, Medical, Legal, Structural**

Despite recent theoretical claims about the constructedness and multiplicity of gender, at the level of lived experience it is undeniable that gender is still treated as an essential, natural and dichotomous characteristic by the majority of western society (Cealey Harrison 2006). Social structures and institutions provide ample evidence of the reinforcement and persistence of this binary, through objects as seemingly innocuous as male and female toilets, official forms that overtly imply gender is an either or proposition, and criteria for gender confirmation surgery. In this section, I go on to discuss the reinforcement of the western binary gender system with particular reference to gender diverse people.

The notion of social reinforcement of gender relates crucially to the development of the thesis novel as it provides the structural context for the characters’ gendered lives.

One of the dominant institutions in binary gender reinforcement is the medical profession, inclusive of doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and other medical professionals such as researchers. Both Jeffrey (2002) and Butler (2004) view the medicalisation of gender differences by the medical profession as a method of maintaining the socio-political status quo.

In talking about medicine as being a reinforcer of binary gender, I take the postmodern stance that medicine, rather than being an objective “truth”, constructs and is constructed by regulatory discourses, including those of religion, culture, media, society and law, which are in turn subject to the influence of medical discourse. When armed with the understanding that each of these bodies of knowledge does not possess the ultimate truth of the nature of gender, we can then critically examine the impact of an arbitrary system on individual lives. The understandings gained in this manner were then used to enrich and illuminate the character development in the novel. For further discussion of this aspect see Chapter Three.

Gender assignment by the medical profession is one of the primary means of the reinforcement of binary gender. Whittle (2000) defines gender assignment as the imposition of a gender, either male or female, by authorities on an individual at birth; in other words, prior to the individual’s formation of their own gender identity or their gendered sense of self. In many Western cultures the decision about gender is made by a doctor based on the appearance of a child’s genitals and is recorded in a permanent and official manner. It must be noted however, that a small number of countries allow individuals to change this designation (E.g. Great Britain via the *Gender Recognition Act* 2004, see also my earlier comments on the changes in Australian legislation at p. 16 of this exegesis).

Closely related to the societal act of gender attribution is the medical treatment of transsexualism. Transsexualism is of relevance to this thesis as it provides specific examples of the medicalisation of gender diverse identities. Transsexualism is currently viewed in medical discourse as a mental illness, known as gender dysphoria, where dysphoria means dissatisfaction with one's gender. It is listed under the name Gender Identity Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR), the manual that psychologists and psychiatrists use to diagnose psychiatric illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). One prominent criticism against the inclusion of gender dysphoria in the DSM is that it is viewed as a disciplinary response, particularly with regard to children and young people, intended to curb cross-gender identifications (Whittle, 2000)

The inclusion of GID in the DSM is also highly contentious in terms of what it states about the origins of transsexuality. Many transsexual individuals do not want their condition to be seen as a disorder of mental health, but would instead prefer it to be viewed as a physical problem which would then enable them to access subsidised medical care, in much the same way as intersex conditions (Whittle, 2000). The determination of the origins of transsexuality has implications for whether or not gender reassignment surgery (or GRS for short) is permitted to be paid for out of public health care funds. In Australia, transsexuality is considered a psychiatric, not biological, illness, and so transsexual individuals must pay for the large expenses of gender reassignment surgery (GRS) themselves. Thus, while GRS is considered to be part of the treatment for gender dysphoria, many transsexual individuals will not have access to this option due to its prohibitive cost. Therefore, it can be seen that there is a power differential in the way the medical profession labels a condition.

However, should an individual have the funds to access GRS, the option is still not easily available. In 1979, a group of medical professionals formed the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) and first published a set of guidelines or “Standards of Care” to assist other medical professionals to determine who was a transsexual and whether they should be allowed to have surgery or not (Meyerowitz, 2002). These standards, revised in 1980, 1981, 1990, 1998, and 2001 consisted of a 2-year “life test” during which a person must regularly attend sessions with a psychiatrist or psychologist, live in their chosen gender role, and take hormones considered appropriate to their chosen gender in order to qualify for GRS (Meyer III et al., 2002). It is via this “life test” that we can particularly see the way in which the medical profession reinforces ideas of gender as an either/or proposition. Hence, it is more likely that an individual will rely on stereotyped ideas of “maleness” and “femaleness” or of male and female gender roles to ensure that they have the greatest chance of being granted surgery by their medical gatekeepers.

Recently, The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), (previously HBIGDA), published Version 7 of the *Standards of Care* (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2011). In this revision the criterion of passing a “life test” was removed. Eli Coleman, Chairman of WPATH states, with reference to his own research, that:

*Standards of Care (SOC), Version 7* represents a significant departure from previous versions. Changes in this version are based upon significant cultural shifts, advances in clinical knowledge, and appreciation of the many health care issues that can arise for transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people

beyond hormone therapy and surgery. (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2011, p. 1)

These changes in the *Standards of Care* therefore show that the medical discourse is neither fixed nor objective. Furthermore, the *Standards of Care* and all its revisions, offer a prime example of the medical profession shaping transsexual gender identity in different ways over time.

Frank Lewins (1995), a sociologist who worked at the Monash Medical Centre Gender Dysphoria Clinic in Australia, similarly exposed medical biases about gender typical during the mid-1990s via comments that medical professionals noted in their case files about their gender dysphoric clients. These comments included:

‘she has not mastered the art of being a very feminine woman in spite of a very pleasing appearance.’

‘from appearance [X] came across as a woman. However [X’s] general manner was not very feminine.’

‘it was difficult to relate to *him* as a female as *his* mannerisms and behaviour were more typically masculine than feminine.’

‘[Y] came in today dressed as a woman but clearly came across as a man in a dress and I felt very uncomfortable.’ (p. 116)

It is apparent from these examples, that the medical professionals’ comments are imbued with their own biases about the nature of gender and how it should be performed.

While attitudes are slowly changing, as demonstrated by WPATH’s (2011) revised Standards of Care, the medical profession, many of whom demand material intelligibility from their clients, still act as gatekeepers to surgery and thus contribute to

the reinforcement of binary gender. I chose to express the medical bias towards binary gender in the novel by creating a scene in which Ella is confronted by a doctor who too harbours prejudicial notions about the nature of gender (see *ITWYW*, pp. 65 – 66).

In addition, for example, for someone who was assigned male at birth to be considered gender dysphoric he must wish to have both top and bottom surgery. That is he must want to have breast implants and vagina fashioned surgically. The medical profession in Australia does not allow a transsexual woman to have bottom surgery without also having top surgery, thus reinforcing the idea that to be a woman you must have both breasts and a vagina. The same requirement is not imposed on transsexual men wanting to have mastectomies. The reason for this is that phalloplasty, otherwise known as the surgery to construct a penis, is not as successful as vaginoplasty. The High Court of Australia (2011) reported: “that a penis construction (phalloplasty) is not performed in Australia, because of the high risks associated with it and its low rate of success” (p. 5).

As I have demonstrated, several of these terms have served to medicalise gender, by this I mean that gender that varies from medically accepted and socially constructed norm is pathologised as psychologically abnormal. Serano (2009) argues that the issue is more than simply pathologisation, that the medicalisation of gender *invalidates* the identities of gender diverse individuals and renders it as mere delusion, particularly in the instance of the DSM classification of GID.

The existence of transsexual individuals, intersex individuals, along with a multiplicity of other diverse gender identities in society raises several important questions. It should give us pause to think about and reflect on the nature of gender and of gender identities and the forces that shape them. It should also make us think about

the societal structures that reduce our gender identities to an either/or proposition. Finally, it should make us reflect on whether we want to be limited by gender in such a way and whether others should also be similarly limited, and if so, who should have the right to limit them? Examples of my exploration of the manner in which societal structures limit gender identities are given in Chapter Three, p. 73.

These are the issues that I wanted to explore in a fictional format.

### **Signifying Gender Diversity / Gender Attribution and Fiction**

One of the first assumptions we tend to make about someone upon first meeting them is about their gender. This (often) split-second attribution is based on a number of cues, or shorthands for establishing gender, some of which we view as weighted more heavily as feminine, others as masculine. This determination is related to our cultural biases of what are and are not considered signifiers of masculinity and femininity. According to Kessler and McKenna (1985) within Western societies it generally takes the presence of four feminine cues to outweigh the presence of one masculine cue. These cues can also be described as signifiers of gender and as such form part of a discursive practice.

According to Copley (2010):

Poststructuralism...stresses not only how signs are related to other signs but also how the human subject always apprehends signs in the plural, in chains, as discourse. ...signification is not embodied in the 'meaning' of one sign but in a sign as it is related to other signs; signification also has to be related to the human or humans who use the signs at a given moment; and, crucially, the sign user is not

outside the discourse, using it in a perfectly controlled way, but is instead caught up in it, to the extent where s/he is actually a product of that discourse. (p. 295)

Therefore, signifiers of gender are not stable, they are historically and culturally dependant, and they are also context and situation dependent. Both the reader of the signs and the producers of those signs are caught up in the discursive practice of gender.

Several researchers have theorised the composition of the signs involved in gender identity and attribution. According to Kate Bornstein (1995) the types of cues used in attribution are:

- “Physical cues include body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, and movement.”
- “Behavioral cues include manners, decorum, protocol, and deportment. Like physical cues, behavioural cues change with time and culture.”
- “Textual cues include histories, documents, names, associates, relationships – true or false – which support a desired gendered attribution.”
- “Mythic cues include cultural and sub-cultural myths which support membership in a given gender. This culture’s myths include archetypes like: weaker sex, dumb blonde, strong silent type, and better half.”
- “Power dynamics as cue include modes of communication, communication techniques, and degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, persistence and ambition.”
- “Sexual orientation as cue highlights, in the dominant culture, the heterosexual imperative (or in the lesbian and gay culture, the homosexual imperative).”
- “Biological gender which classifies a person through any combination of body, type, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, reproductive organs, or some other corporal or chemical essence.” (pp. 26-30)

According to the APA (American Psychological Association, 2011) these cues are constitutive of “gender expression”; in other words “the way a person communicates gender identity to others” (para. 1). Similarly Crisp (2000) states: “...gender is itself in a sense a role composed of clothes, gestures, and a way of walking and talking”. However she elaborates further and states that it is a role “which anyone can play regardless of their sexed body” (p. 47).

In relation to gender diversity in particular, Ekins and King (2006) as a result of extensive research with several thousands of transgendered people recognise several “modes and processes of transgendering the body” that each make use of gender cues. The four modes include:

- “Migrating body stories” involve a crossing of the binary divide to the other gender;
- “Oscillating body stories” are similar to migrating body stories but involve multiple crossings back and forth of the gender binary;
- “Negating body stories” involve a negation of gender, binary or otherwise;
- “Transcending body stories” involve transcending cultural binary gender norms and involve a greater amount of fluidity than in the other three modes.

Ekins and King (2006) consider each of these to involve four sub-modes:

- “Substituting” which involves the substitution of gendered physical attributes with those considered to belong to the other gender, for example via Gender Confirmation Surgery, by removing or growing body hair, and so on;
- “Erasing” which involves erasing gendered markers, for example by wearing gender neutral clothes;

- “Concealing” which involves concealing the physical attributes that are considered to belong to the other gender, for example via binding down of breasts; tucking under the penis;
- “Implying” which involves implying the physical attributes of the other gender, for example via packing something in underwear to suggest a penis; wearing of prosthetic breast forms in a bra to imply breasts;
- “Redefining” which involves a gendered redefinition of physical attributes considered to belong to the other gender, for example by calling a beard facial hair.

This collective research on the cues which signify gender, and the modes and processes of transgendering can inform creative writing practice to enable more nuanced portrayals of gender diverse individuals than are currently available in mainstream literature. Furthermore, careful research of the theory of creative writing practice has identified a significant lack of critical exploration of how these particular cues are used to signify gender diversity, nor has the research discussed the manner in which gender cues are implicated in sustaining dominant discourses.

Fletcher’s recent (2008) discussion of female-male cross dressing in historical romance shows the romance trajectory reinforcing heterosexuality *despite* the inevitable homoerotic subtext. My novel, however, which in some ways can be considered a romance, goes against the grain by refusing any revelation of ‘true gender’ in the declaration of love.

It is one of the central concerns of the exegesis to discuss and give consideration to the impact of signifiers of gender on the writing of my novel. Thus, both novel and exegesis as a thesis make a significant contribution to knowledge.

The use of tropes in fiction to depict gender diverse individuals also requires critical examination; they require critical reflection when employed in fiction writing to avoid perpetuating dominant discourses that promote one particular mode of gender presentation as superior to another. According to the Oxford English Dictionary a trope is "a significant or recurrent theme; a motif". In other words, tropes are commonly used literary devices which, in relation to gender diversity, are composed of gendered cues. Tropes require critical attention because "creations of particular narrative forms, certain fiction formulas, mobilize meanings that often sustain domination" (Kincheloe, 1997, p. 61). Chapter Two provides a critique of tropes employed in fiction depicting gender diverse individuals, and Chapter Three gives a rationale for the use or avoidance of common tropes. Appendix One lists the novels used to ascertain these common tropes.

To imagine a fictional fluidity of gender within a contemporary realist setting entails careful consideration of gender cues and tropes. Such a fiction requires occupation of a space between, a lack which lacks definitions. As Gherovici (2010) suggests:

Among the questions we spend the most time talking about in our own analyses, are, What are men? What are women? What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? We are well aware that there is a difference, but the difference carries with it no specific signification. A good deal of time is spent in sessions puzzling over the missing signification here. The signifier in this context creates an opposition that is ever ready to take on meaning but that brings with it no particular meaning of its own. We might view it as a signifier without a signified. The missing signified or signification here suggests that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is problematic, even non-existent. (p. 240)

Gherovici points out that while in theory gender beyond the binary may be recognised, in mainstream society living openly beyond two-sexes/two-genders is still not socially viable. The experiences of some transsexual and transgender people demonstrate this point. Of particular significance in this regard are the accounts of people who are unable to sufficiently resemble stereotypical women or men, and transsexual and transgender people who identify beyond the binary genders (Hill and Willoughby 2005; Valentine 2007; Whittle et al. 2007). Thus my own fiction writing necessitated exploration of these recorded experiences.

### **Gender Diverse Identities and Subjectivities**

The feminist post-structuralist Chris Weedon (1987) defines subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (p. 32). Thus according to the noted trans theorist Stephen Whittle (2000) gender identity dichotomously is "(a) person's internal sense of being male or female" (p. 63). However, such definitions neglect to acknowledge genders situated beyond the normative binary. Transsexual genders in this schema are considered by some to fit into the binary, if not quite completely. However, as mentioned previously, current theorisations of gender point to its multiplicitous nature with a number of differing subjectivities. I use the term "subjectivity" interchangeably with self identification, in other words, an individual's sense of self. Interestingly, the psychoanalyst Gherovici (2010, p. 240) asks: "Is subjectivity just an effect of signification?" If the subject is understood in this way, that

which is produced as an effect of the meaning of certain signs, then this has significance for creative writing practice. I return to this point in Chapter Two.

Some of the gender diverse identities common in the twenty-first century include: transsexuals including various permutations such as female transsexuals, transwomen, women of transsexual background MTF and M2F (abbreviated forms of Male to Female Transsexual); and male transsexuals, transmen, men of transsexual background, FTM and F2M (abbreviated forms of Female to Male Transsexual); cross-dressers; transvestites; drag queens and drag kings; intersex individuals; transgenderists; masculine females including bois, trannybois, butches; feminine men including sissies; androgynous individuals; and gender queer individuals including gender outlaws, and gender fucks. In Australia, the terms *sistergirl* and *brotherboy* are used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe gender diverse people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2009). The construction of this list illustrates the ways discourse necessarily reproduces binaries and their inherent power bases: while I paired “male and female transsexuals”, for example, I did not intend this to reproduce dichotomies and hierarchies.

Intersex is the preferred term for “a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (Intersex Society of North America, 2008); in other words, people with intersex conditions were previously (and problematically) called “hermaphrodites”. The majority of intersex people do not identify as transsexual or transgender, and hence the subjectivities of the intersex and the transperson differ (Intersex Society of North America, 2008).

Further to the identities I mention above, recent work by Ekins and King (2010) also points to the “emergence” of new gender diverse identities which have arisen in conjunction with social media and the rise of the internet. It is expected that this trend would continue over time.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated that regardless of the lenses used by varying theoretical paradigms, or the types of identification particular to certain individuals or groups, western society heavily enforces a binary gender system (through law, medicine and other social structures as Foucault demonstrates). Thus anyone whose actual or perceived gender exists outside the binary system is likely to experience marginalisation and discrimination which impact negatively on their lives (Clements-Nolle, 2006). I argue that it is more important to focus attention *not* on inflexible gender definitions and categorisations or attempts towards grand theory, but instead on ways of combating the marginalisation of *all* individuals whose gender identification does not accord with the “norms” of western society’s binary gender codes. The thesis novel is therefore an exploration of three distinctly different characters who each differ in their gender expressions and whose performativity does not neatly fit binary and essentialised societal expectations.

I also examine one specific aspect of marginalisation: the lack of cultural representation of gender diverse subjectivities. I call critical attention to the cultural and material access of varied gender identities in mainstream literature. I subsequently argue, in agreement with the novelist Kate Grenville (2009), that as literature is one

means of effecting attitudinal change, a necessary precondition for social change, a work of fiction can contribute in some small way to a broader project of anti-discrimination.

## CHAPTER TWO: Gender Diversity Represented

### Contemporary Print-Text Representations

This chapter examines, in some detail, issues of the representation of gender diversity in three contemporary “mainstream” novels. First, a context is given through a brief summary of cultural representation of gender diverse people in print texts in the last sixty years.

There has been an increasing interest in issues relating to gender diversity in the media since Christine Jorgensen’s highly-publicised sex reassignment surgery story first received Australian and world-wide press coverage (*The Canberra Times*, 1952; Feinberg, 1996). Diverse gender identities such as those experienced by transsexual people, transgenderists and intersex people have become increasingly represented in non-fictional texts. The scope of this exegesis is restricted to print texts but of course there is an equivalent development in visual media and radio. Stephen Whittle (2006), a prominent trans researcher has even claimed in the introduction to the *The Transgender Studies Reader*: “Trans identities were one of the most written about subjects of the late twentieth century” (Whittle in Whittle, 2006, p. xi).

In the Australian context, to give a few examples, the gender-illusionist Courtney Act starred on *Australian Idol*, the renowned Australian transsexual woman Carlotta was honoured on *This is Your Life*,<sup>1</sup> multiple advertisements featuring cross-dressing men were broadcast, as were documentaries on various aspects of the transgender identity (these included *Becoming Julia*; *Miss Vera’s Finishing School for Boys*; and

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<sup>1</sup> Carlotta was one of the first people in Australia to have a surgical sex change. She was also a member of the drag-queen troupe Les Girls from the 1960s to the 1990s.

multiple episodes of the television documentary series *Australian Story*<sup>2</sup>). Radio National and ABC Local Radio also broadcast shows on this topic.<sup>3</sup> Melbourne's largest circulation newspapers, *The Age* and *Herald Sun* contained articles about discrimination against transsexuals in the workforce, transsexual prison inmates, and legal changes with regard to changing gender on birth certificates. Australian women's magazines, such as *New Idea* and *Woman's Day*, contained numerous articles about individuals who had begun living life in a new gender identity. A survey I conducted of these magazines in the period 2000 to 2006 found 26 articles featuring gender diverse individuals, predominantly individuals of a transsexual background (a chronological list of these items is provided in Appendix Two).

Since 2000, a plethora of non-fiction books about various aspects of gender diversity has been published internationally, including: *Normal: Transsexual CEOs, Cross-Dressing Cops, Hermaphrodites with Attitude* (2002); *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (2002); *Gender Trouble Down Under: Australian Masculinities* (2002); *Beyond Sex and Gender* (2002); *The Phallus Palace: Female to Male Transsexuals* (2002); *The Man Who Would be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism* (2003); *She's Not There: A life in two genders* (2003); *Transgenderism and Intersexuality in Childhood and Adolescence* (2003); *Finding the Real Me* (2003); *The New Girl* (2003); *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-dressing and Culture* (2004); *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005); *The Transgender Phenomenon* (2006); *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006); *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007);

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<sup>2</sup> *Boy Interrupted* was broadcast on 01/09/03 and *Marriage Matters* was broadcast on 31/03/03.

<sup>3</sup> *Transsexual Prisoners* was broadcast on 05/07/03 and *Victorian police force unsettled over transgender recruit* on 09/07/03.

*Her Husband Was a Woman!: Women's Gender-crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (2007); and *Trans People in Love* (2008) amongst many others. During the same time period, this non-fiction and documentary interest has been to some extent echoed in cinema (see for example: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001); *Transamerica* (2005); *Rage* (2009)) and television, particularly more arthouse or specialist genres (for example *Tipping the Velvet* (2002)).

While there is an increase in representation this is not necessarily accompanied by diversity and inclusiveness. Moreover, representation, for example of trans people, often falls into stereotypes with seemingly little reference to lived experience. Serano (2007) identifies two problematic and commonly used representations of transwomen; they are portrayed as either “deceptive” or as “pathetic”.

Furthermore, while diverse gender identities and transgenderism are concerns circulating in contemporary popular culture, this is less the case in mainstream literary fiction. As I have stated earlier, “mainstream” is used here to refer to fiction which is published by large publishing houses and is easily obtainable either through local Australian libraries, or non-specialist bookstores. Works that are widely available are of particular interest because literature, as with other ways of perceiving the world, is “reflective of dominant ideologies and ways of seeing at work in the larger society” (Kincheloe, 1997, p. 57).

### **Cultural and Material Access**

Cultural and material access to a variety of representations of lived gender diverse experience is important because fiction plays an important role in changing societal

attitudes towards marginalised groups. A body of research is developing on the social and ethical uses of literature from a psychological perspective (Currie, 2010; Keen, 2007; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Mar and Oatley (2008) suggest that: “Engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference” (p. 99). Furthermore, they also state: “Literary stories...enable the understanding of minds that would otherwise be opaque, and they aid the comprehension of social complexes” (p. 175). In contrast, it can be argued that the common portrayals that Serano mentions (i.e. the pathetic transsexual and the deceptive transsexual) are detrimental because they do not show alternative ways of being or living in either genders beyond the binary, or in a gender other than the one assigned at birth. Therefore, I argue that availability and ease of access to a wide range of gender diverse lives in fiction is a social justice issue.

Independent publishers too have commented on the lack of gender diversity currently available in fiction. Cris DiMarco, senior editor at Windstorm Creative, an independent press in Port Orchard, Washington in an interview in the US magazine *Writer* says: “I’d like to see more *transgender* work, especially fiction, where a [*transgender*] character is ‘mainstreamed’ into the story” (Hart, 2005, p. 51). This chapter will go on to examine some of the ways in which three novels “mainstream” gender diverse characters.

Despite the increased availability of trans literature within queer domains, an additional issue concerning cataloguing hampers research. It is a problem relating to the conflation of gender diversity with homosexuality. Library searches using a combination and variations of the terms “transgender”, “transvestite”, “transsexual”, or

“cross-dressing” and “literature” or “fiction” yield few results. Misleading cataloguing information, known in Australia as the “National Library of Australia Catalogue-in-Publication entry” (CiP), is partially to blame. These CiPs are subject headings provided by publishers to the National Library of Australia which then uses United States Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and the Australian extension to those subject headings, to standardise the publishers’ entries for publication in their books’ copyright pages (National Library of Australia, n.d.). While most libraries in Australia adhere to the LCSH, subject heading systems can vary between libraries, and indeed between other Western countries. Bosman, Bradford et al. (2008) concur on this point:

Accessing GLBT literature has been complicated by inaccurate and misleading subject headings, inadequate cataloguing, and broad classification schema in libraries and elsewhere; as well as by a lack of readily available, reliable reviews. These factors make it difficult for both readers and collection development librarians and readers’ advisors to find the material they seek. (p. 33)

The primary issue with cataloguing is that transgender literature is frequently subsumed by the category of homosexuality. For example, the Catalogue-in-Publication entry listed on the copyright page for the Australian edition of *The Danish Girl* (Ebershoff, 2001) reads “Homosexuality – Fiction”. The novel is about the first male-bodied person to undergo a sex change and the relationship he/she has with his/her wife throughout this period of transition, therefore the emphasis of the book is also on a transsexual gender identity. However readers looking for fiction which explores this topic would be unlikely to find this book without prior knowledge of the title. It can be said then that the subject matter of *The Danish Girl* and other books featuring transsexual and indeed all gender diverse identities disrupt conventional definitions of

both the terms homosexual and heterosexual, rendering them meaningless. As Serano (2007) affirms: “These terms lose their cut-and-dried meaning when a person’s assigned sex and lived sex are not the same” (p. 36). The same applies to gender. It is obvious that those who develop cataloguing systems are still grappling with these disrupted definitions.

Folksonomies, to some degree, mitigate these cataloguing problems. Folksonomies are the tags internet users apply to cataloguing content, for example on LibraryThing.com. These tags are more likely to point to material with a greater relevance to other like-minded individuals who are seeking information on similar topics (Ornelas, 2011).

While cataloguing creates problems of access, it is pertinent to note that historically many book titles with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender content, regardless of genre, were banned due to subject matter viewed at the time as controversial or offensive (Bosman, et al., 2008). In this context, it is little wonder that science fiction has been the most prominent genre for exploring the possibilities of gender, as the fantastical is often a site which receives less policing by censoring forces (Bosman, et al., 2008).

The loosening of publishing restrictions in the last 40 years, particularly with regard to broader cultural representations of gender and sexuality, has made it timely and important now to examine dominant discourses in works set in the contemporary period that attempt a closer approximation of the lived experiences of “realistic” characters.

There are other cultural institutions which are of significance in terms of the mainstreaming of gender diverse identities in fiction. Mainstream book awards have the effect of bringing the awardees to the attention of a much broader audience than they

might have otherwise garnered. Winners of widely recognised awards include, *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides (2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction) which features a character with an intersex condition, and *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters (2005 American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults) which features a transgender teen. In the Australian context, *Dark Palace* by Frank Moorhouse (2001 Miles Franklin Literary Award) features a minor character who is a cross-dresser.

In relation to queer publishing, the Lambda literary awards (<http://www.lambdaliterary.org>) are renowned for their acknowledgement and support of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex literature. However, it was only in 1996 that prizes were awarded under a transgender category. Notably, fiction has only received awards in this category since 1999. Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* which is considered a canonical transgender text taught in numerous university courses, appears in the Lesbian Fiction category for 1993. Again, the relative newness of this inclusion demonstrates the sites of contention that gender diverse fiction operate within.

As mentioned earlier, in undertaking an analysis of gender diverse characters in fiction, it is first important to note the difficulty for readers in obtaining novels that depict these protagonists, positive or otherwise, as these novels are most frequently published by independent or queer publishers whose publications are stocked mostly in alternative or queer bookstores, or are shelved under gay and lesbian fiction in the larger mainstream bookstores. Examples of works which are difficult to obtain outside queer bookstores in Australia include *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993); *Cool for You* (Myles, 2000); or are out of print (e.g. *Mama Black Widow* (Slim, 1998). While I acknowledge that trans literature is available for purchase online and in queer bookstores, such as Melbourne's "Hares and Hyenas", I reiterate that the intended

emphasis of this chapter concerns the broader mainstream availability of these works: in other words, books published by large mainstream publishers that a reader located in Australia may find by browsing the shelves at a large bookstore or their local public library.

In terms of work by Australian authors, set in Australia and published in the last ten years, the only mainstream work to feature a gender diverse protagonist was Steve Holden's (2010) *Somebody to Love*, a novel about a transsexual mortician. However its relatively recent publication precluded it from inclusion in this study as it did not meet my criteria of multiple print editions. In this same time period, Rosalie Ham's (2000) *The Dressmaker*, which is set in the 1950s, featured a minor character who cross-dresses.

In summary, it is apparent that there are significant gaps in the Western cultural representation of gender diverse people in more socially-realist fictional works set contemporaneously and published since the year 2000. In addition to their relative paucity, accessing those existing works which depict gender diversity is no mean feat. For this and other reasons, methods of production of gender diverse characters within mainstream literary texts are an under-researched area from a creative writing standpoint. Some important research questions are: *How is gender diversity produced? What signifiers and tropes are employed? What are their effects and impacts?*

### **Three Novels**

To address this lack of research, the remainder of this chapter therefore compares and contrasts three contemporary novels to critically interrogate the manner in which they

produce gender diverse characters. The novels under examination are: Chris Bohjalian's (2000) *Trans-Sister Radio*; Jeffrey Eugenides' (2002b) *Middlesex*; and Ali Smith's (2007) *Girl Meets Boy: The Myth of Iphis*.

I examine these three novels with respect to three aspects that have arisen out of my theoretical research, namely:

- signifying gender and gender attribution;
- gender diverse identities and subjectivities; and
- the social reinforcement of gender.

In the course of this critical examination I problematise dominant tropes and conventional representations. I examine the role of conventional representations in the broader problem of discrimination: that is how far they are a cause and/or effect of discrimination.

The required length of this exegesis imposes limitations on the breadth of theoretical and literary material that can reasonably be covered. Thus as stated above only three novels were chosen for close critical review. These three novels were chosen because they were published within a ten year period of each other, and therefore should be informed by a shared contemporary discourse around gender diversity. The novels each engage with different theoretical ideas relating to gender, and each depicts a differing gender diverse identity, namely: an intersex character, albeit one with a rare form of intersex condition; a male to female transsexual person; and a gender fluid character, along with other characters whose genders cannot be read easily or with certainty.

Each of these novels is a mainstream publication, is available (at least on order) at large mainstream bookstores, is still in print, has had a minimum of multiple print

editions published, and is easily available for purchase or borrowing in Australia. While my study is necessarily selective, there is clearly scope for further investigation in non-Western literature.

The reasons for further limiting the scope of my study to non-genre fiction are several. First, diverse gender identities in science and fantasy fiction, and detective and crime fiction have been the subject of several recent in-depth academic analyses, for example Garber (1992) and Markowitz (2004) for detective fiction and Melzer (2006, 2008) for science fiction. Secondly, it is the convention of these genres to privilege the conventions of their genres, sequestering issues within an unusual specific milieu rather than seeking to represent the experiences of most ordinary people. This is relevant to the points I make at page 80 that concern the importance of portraying gender diverse people as “extraordinary people with ordinary lives” in a plausible context. In particular, I considered it crucial to this project to select only novels that offered a plausible setting, context, and characterisation. While I hesitate to use the word “realistic” given its fraught meaning within the context of literary studies, my novel choice was informed by works that could be considered somewhat “real-to-life”; in other words gender changing is not effected through fantastic or magical means (e.g. Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*), nor is the gender of the protagonist completely effaced or obscured via textual means (e.g. Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*).

Furthermore, I would like to reiterate that the focus of this doctoral thesis is specifically on written works of novel length fiction in order to inform novel writing practice and that examining screenplays and movies is beyond the scope of this work.

To begin, I offer summaries of the novels under consideration. *Trans-Sister Radio* is the story of Dana, a man transitioning to become a woman, and the relationship

he/she has with Allison, the woman who fell in love with him before his transition, and her daughter, Carly. The story is told by multiple first person narrators in alternating chapters and is intercut with second person fictional radio transcripts which serve to dispense psycho-medical facts about transsexuality, and gender dysphoria. Each chapter heading has a number encircled by either a male or female symbol related to the gender of the character narrating that chapter. When Dana finishes her SRS operation, her chapter symbol changes to signify the gender change.

*Middlesex* is a novel of Cal/lie Stephanides' self-discovery of his intersex condition and journey from girlhood into manhood. The majority of the novel is narrated in first person by Cal/lie, with sections about earlier generations of his family narrated in third person.

*Girl Meets Boy: The Myth of Iphis*, according to book's blurb, "reinterprets the Myth of Iphis, the girl who became a boy" (A. Smith, 2007). The myth tells of a family who could not afford to keep a girl child and so the girl was secretly raised as a boy. As a teen the girl falls in love with another woman and via a prayer to the gods is changed into a man. The myth retold is the story of the burgeoning relationship between Anthea Gunn and Robin Goodman, a character with a fluid gender identity. Like *Trans-Sister Radio*, the novel is told by multiple first person narrators, alternating between Anthea and her younger sister Imogen (Midge). While the story echoes these mythic aspects of a girl-boy (the term Smith has Anthea use, p. 95) who falls in love with a girl, no mythic transformation occurs at the end of the tale.

Like my novel *ITWYW*, the three novels employ the use of a first person narrator. However, both *Girl Meets Boy* and *Trans-Sister Radio* are written in the less-used multiple first-person; *Trans-Sister Radio* also adds an extra-narrative layer via fictional

radio transcripts in second-person that intercut the first-person scenes. *Middlesex* and *ITWYW* are written in first person singular. While the first person voice is a popular narrative choice in the early twenty-first century, it is likely that this voice was chosen for its ability to explore subjectivity, and allow the reader access to the interior dialogue of the protagonists. Eugenides, in an interview posted on the Powells Book Blog, comments that he chose the first person voice to avoid pronoun problems and to narrate Cal/lie's perspective from the interior.

These three novels allow for the critical exploration of contemporary representations of gender diverse subjectivities, and the literary devices used particularly in first-person portrayals.

## **Signifying Practices**

Writing gender in a fictional text is a complex act dependent on the discourses that the writer is embedded within and as such concerns the interplay of social norms, stereotypes and tropes of the performative discourse of gender familiar to the writer. To produce gender in a reader's mind in order that a gender attribution is made, the writer makes skilful use of various signifiers of gender. Thus the writer uses concrete signs which are culturally understood to mean certain things that collectively produce the abstract concept that is gender. These concrete cues, as described in Chapter One, are physical, behavioural, textual, mythic, power dynamics, sexual orientation and biological gender (Bornstein, 1995). I am going to focus on three aspects: physical cues such as dress, but also including physicality (appearance of the body), embodiment (a way of being in the body) and biological gender; textual cues, in particular pronominal usage and adjective pairs; and gender roles which cover both behavioural characteristics and power dynamics. In particular, I look at these in the production of gender diverse characters. Following from this, I will examine the three novels to determine the modes and processes of transgending as per Ekins and King's (2006) schema.

Eugenides (2002b) makes use of the performative discourse of embodiment to signify gender. In particular he contrasts the act of looking at something on the sole of the shoe. In Western society, looking over the shoulder to look at the foot is considered a feminine act, whereas the same act would be considered masculine if the foot was brought up in front of the body instead of behind (see Eugenides, 2002b, p. 449). The difference between these two moves is interesting; much of feminine embodiment requires the adoption of poses that do not open up the crotch to inspection. Hence acts

like sitting with knees together, even while wearing jeans, and similarly, looking over the shoulder at the foot allows for the knees to be kept together.

Related to the physicality and embodiment of gender diverse characters is the reveal trope. This trope is most often seen in novels where the character's "true" gender identity is not established at the outset of the story (e.g. *The Tent Peg*, *Middlesex*, *The Wasp Factory*). The "reveal" is therefore the point of revelation for the reader that the character's gender is not as they initially assumed. In many instances, the reveal is effected none too subtly through the removal of clothes, so that not only is the apparent "truth" of bodily gender subsequently revealed, it is done so in an exploitative manner. For the "reveal" to work as such, all points of the story prior to the reveal are constructed to deliberately mislead the reader in a teasing fashion (this is done to dramatic yet exploitative effect in the film *The Crying Game*). This trope, of all those at work in transgender literature, is the one most commonly employed. It is also a trope that exploits gender diversity in the service of drama and plotting. Thus, a character's gender is amplified to the realm of the fetishistic instead of downplayed and normalised (see also my points at p. 80).

The reveal trope invokes Serano's (2007) deceptive transsexual. According to Garber (1992)

The scene of discovery – the particular locus in which the 'crime' of impersonation is revealed...[is] highly suggestive for the cultural anxieties surrounding cross-dressing. In films, plays and biographies the discovery space is very often the bed, the place of sexual unmasking; in psychoanalysis it is the mirror". (p. 202)

Indeed, Cal/lie's first inkling of her gender difference is portrayed in a sex scene. However, the first revelation of Cal/lie's gender for the reader is explicated in the very

first sentence of the novel, thus downplaying any potential for the use of this trope to exploitative ends.

In some ways, the reveal is impossible to avoid. The idea of binary genders is so engrained in the English language and in a Western collective consciousness, along with the idea of a uniform continuity of sex, gender and sexuality that readers tend to initially read a character as being *only* either male or female. I argue here that many of the same cues that signify gender in “real life” function in a similar way in text, for example hearing a deep voice would instead be described as such. However, the main difference is that in real-life gender attributions are often made at a lightning speed as we rely on simultaneous multiple sense impressions, for example the timbre of someone’s voice, their dress and physical appearance, perhaps also the scent they are wearing (see also my earlier comments about gender attribution on p. 31). On the page, these sensory impressions are delivered at a slower pace, thus allowing the reader more time to weigh up the meanings of those gendered cues. The writer also filters out incidental context and selects for particular effects.

*Trans-Sister Radio* makes a feature of Carly’s initial inability to read Dana’s gender as transgendered in the early part of the novel and thus invokes the trope of the “deceptive” transsexual. The novel acknowledges that some cissexual men, that is men who accept the gender they were assigned at birth, do have fine, hairless, feminine but not “effeminate” features, while at the same time dropping gendered clues as to Dana’s identity through the use of physical signifiers that are commonly held to be feminine, or that are popularly used to describe women, e.g. “delicate looking”, “smaller boned”, “fine – perhaps even beautiful – features”, “no hair or stubble”, and “nice cheekbones” (Bohjalian, 2000, p. 10). In this instance, the reader discovers on page 7 that Dana is a

transsexual woman, and so the knowing reader is contrasted with the naive narrator with the effect that the reader is likely to feel clever that they have not been “deceived” by Dana’s gender. Again I echo Serano’s concerns (2007) and view this tropological convention as problematic as it posits that *all* gender diversity is performed for subversive reasons.

Like Carly, Anthea in *Girl Meets Boy* initially has difficulty reading Robin’s gender. At first she perceives Robin as a boy, but then she changes her attribution; however the reader is left unsure as to which gender cues cause Anthea to make that decision. In Anthea’s initial description of Robin, she is wearing traditional Scots clothing: a kilt, sporran, a waistcoat and frilly cuffs. Her hair is described as: “long, dark [and] winged with ringlets like Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, but cleaner” (A. Smith, 2007, p. 43). Again Smith appeals both to contradictory and culturally dependent signifiers of gender – the skirts worn by men, the long hair as worn by an actor performing a pirate (and a camp portrayal in a mainstream Disney production at that) – thus underscoring the idea that signifiers should never be read as stable producers of gender. In addition, the name Robin Goodman references the shape-shifting hobgoblin of early English and Scottish mythology, Robin Goodfellow, thus alluding to Robin’s fluid gender identity. This identity also fits within Ekins and King’s (2006) transcending category.

Like Eugenides, both Bohjalian (2000) and Smith (2007) downplay the reveal in their novels and each foreshadows from the very first paragraph themes of gender diversity. *Trans-Sister Radio* does this via a fictional radio transcript: “This afternoon we continue that series [on the Nature of Love] with the first in a five-part story that begins with gender dysphoria – the clinical term for individuals who believe their sex at

birth to be in error...” (Bohjalian, 2000, p. 3). *Girl Meets Boy* commences with the line: “Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says” (A. Smith, 2007, p. 3). While *Middlesex* starts with: “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974” (Eugenides, 2002b, p. 3).

The manner in which the initial scenes of *Girl Meets Boy* are told downplays both grandparents’ gender identities. Although the story about Anthea’s grandfather involves gender switching as disguise, hence “deception”, the present moment in which the story is told neutralises any idea of the characters deceiving anyone. The grandfather is presented simply as someone telling a funny story about the past which is only half-heeded by his granddaughters, who in particular do not react as though they’ve been deceived. In addition, neither are the readers deceived as the deception is not kept secret from them. Furthermore, the grandfather’s gender deception is not done to fool his granddaughters, nor for that matter the readers, but rather to keep him safe from the authorities who would have him imprisoned for acts of arson. Thus the deceptive trope is turned completely on its head and the grandfather’s gender-switching is left largely uncommented on by the granddaughters.

The reveal of Robin’s gender is also achieved in a manner that downplays it. The first time Anthea sees Robin she thinks: “He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life. But he looked really like a girl. She was the most beautiful boy I had seen in my life.” (A. Smith, 2007, p. 45). While the word “really” appeals to a sense of a “real” essentialised gender, the idea of a binary gender is troubled by the possibility of a girl being “the most beautiful boy”. Again Smith skilfully transcends gender through inter-sentence pronoun shifts.

The reveal trope in many instances also serves to reinforce and reinscribe the idea of a bodily truth, thus perpetuating one particular idea about gender as always uniform and discrete, that gender is knowable if “revealed”, that to cross-dress is to deceive and lie. This is the “deceptive transsexual” that Serano (2007) argues against. The overemphasis on a bodily truth serves to reinscribe gender diversity as deviant, abnormal and abject, in other words monstrous (the shock of being duped is expressed as abjection). The monstrosity of the abject (the indeterminate) can be seen as itself a product of binary normalisation. The project of revisiting, rewriting the abject is therefore central to the recognition of gender diversity.

While Eugenides (2002b) downplays the initial reveal, he does little to go against the grain of the trope of monstrosity and effectively fetishises Cal/lie’s sex organs by describing them in detail. I discuss this further at page 62.

The choice then as a writer writing about gender diverse characters is whether to use the initial revelatory moment of gender in an exploitative manner or not. Will the writer exploit the transgender body as a plot device or will they write gender in a manner that diffuses any potential sensationalism, exoticism or otherwise in the gender revelation? In Chapter Three I discuss how I dealt with the dilemma of the reveal in my own novel.

Therefore, until there is widespread acknowledgment of the existence of other gendered ways of being there will always be a point in the story in which readers come to a realisation of the character’s “difference”, and thus writers need to be especially careful in their handling of the reveal.

## **The Social Reinforcement of Gender**

As stated in Chapter One, gender assignment refers to the determination of an individual's gender identity by others. I go on to discuss external reinforcers of gender as depicted in the three novels' fictional worlds.

One such reinforcer of gender relates to the notion of panopticon surveillance. The panopticon is a prison designed to induce compliant behaviour in prisoners via the feeling that one is being continually watched by unseen wardens (Bentham, 1797 (1995)). The concept has also been appropriated by Foucault (1977) as a metaphor for contemporary surveillance, particularly with regard to the societal policing of normative behaviour, and thus can apply metaphorically to gender identity in the sense that individuals will often modify their gender performance in response to the presumed judgements of others. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2001) have observed this phenomenon with regard to the gender identity of teenagers. They state that in their analysis of gender performativity they treat "masculinities and femininities as an ensemble of self-fashioning practices that are linked to normalizing judgements and culturally specific techniques of the body and modes of thinking" (p. 88). Thus, the gender expression mentioned by the APA (American Psychological Association, 2011) is not created in a vacuum but instead is shaped by social reinforcement.

Eugenides (2002b) also shows this self-fashioning process taking place in the section in which Cal/lie is in the process of transitioning: "Despite my suit, my haircut, and my height, every time I went into a men's room a shout rang out in my head: 'You're in the men's!'" (p. 452). This scene illustrates that despite physically passing, an internalised sense of society's prohibitions around gender, in other words a sense of

panopticon surveillance relating to normalising judgements in the reinforcement of gender, is still in operation.

Therefore, in a society which values binary gender and punishes gendered expressions that do not accord with those officially assigned at birth, or at the bare minimum only allows for certain limited expressions of gender that exceed this, attempts to pass as fitting within the dominant system are common. Thus, as in broader society, the trope of passing or not passing, being read or misread, is common in fiction featuring gender diversity. This theme is also one which is often found in conjunction with the *reveal trope*. Each of the three books examined make use of this trope in some form.

In the example of Bohjalian (2000) the reader understands that the novel is about gender dysphoria, and so when the character Dana is introduced as: “...the fellow Allison met who she was sure, at first, would be the man of her dreams” (p. 3), we have a subtle signal that the would-be man of Allison’s dreams will not be a man in the conventional sense. The actual reveal does not happen until four pages later when Allison’s daughter Carly gives a lengthy medicalised explanation:

Dana had been in pre-surgical therapy for two years by then [by the time Dana met Allison] and had probably endured close to fifty hours of electrolysis. He’d been on hormone therapy for a good four or five months....Unlike a lot of pre-op M2Fs, he wasn’t trying to pass as a woman yet, he hadn’t begun his transition. (Bohjalian, 2000, p. 7)

Several things are happening in these sentences, terms specific to transsexuality are introduced; the pain of extensive and presumably feminising hair removal is noted.

There is also recognised a discourse of performativity associated with being a pre-op

M2F which involves psychotherapy related to SRS, physical changes via hair removal and hormones, and the attempts to pass as a woman in public. These processes of substitution fit within Ekins and King's (2006) migrating mode of transgendering.

The paragraphs that follow address the notion of the “deceitful” transsexual, and show that in this instance the revelation of the desire to transition would be considered socially inappropriate for the context:

What was he supposed to do, say to the class, ‘Hi, I’m Dana, and I’ve spent a good part of the last year with my upper lip deadened by Novacaine.’? Or, ‘Good evening, I’m your professor. I’m about to start developing breasts!’ Or, if he wanted, for some reason to be completely candid, ‘You folks ever met a lesbian with a penis? Have now!’ (Bohjalian, 2000, p. 7)

In these few sentences, Bohjalian dismantles the “deception” trope by pointing out the inherent Catch-22 associated with it – that is to come out as transsexual is considered as equally socially inappropriate in many contexts as it is to not come out, and again is illustrative of another example of hetero-normative and gender normative self-fashioning.

As I mention in Chapter One, medical terms are not value-free, in particular I problematise the use of the clinical term “gender identity disorder” with regard to gender identity (see p. 20). *Middlesex* also implies the medical assignment of biological gender, both at birth and then again in an emergency room. It also suggests that biological gender is an either/or proposition, and again that anything else, including migrating across the binary, is aberrant. The first page of *Middlesex* states with reference to Cal/lie:

Specialized readers may have come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study, "Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites," published in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology* in 1975. Or maybe you've seen my photograph in chapter sixteen of the now sadly outdated *Genetics and Heredity*. That's me on page 578, standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes.

(Eugenides, 2002b, p. 3)

The blanking out of the eyes has a particular resonance. If the eyes are the window to the soul, then to blank out someone's eyes is to render them soulless and inhuman.

Furthermore, this statement is embedded within an otherwise unremarkable introduction to the character, presumably in an attempt to normalise the character's life via their employment, and their previous participation in animal activism, and sporting and religious life. However, it could also be argued that the text book example and the drawing of parallels to the myth of Tiresias who was turned temporarily into a woman as punishment by the gods reassert freakishness. In contrast, Smith (2007) too makes use of Greek mythology, but instead references Iphis who was rewarded with a sex change, rather than punished.

Graham (2009) persuasively argues that Eugenides is complicit in reasserting intersexuality as monstrosity because Cal/lie's intersex condition is produced as result of a socially deviant, hence monstrous, act of incest, and is exhibited as a freak in both medical text books and in a sex show. Indeed, Eugenides himself attributes feelings of monstrosity to Cal/lie: "Running away didn't make me feel any less of a monster" (p. 449).

Parallels can be seen between Eugenides' dehumanisation of Cal/lie and Foucault's writings about Herculine Barbin. In particular, Serano (2007) criticises Foucault's

introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the recently discovered memoirs of a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite* (Barbin & Foucault, 1980). She argues: “Foucault...dehumanises Herculine by publishing her/his memoir alongside a dossier that includes medical and legal records, including graphic depictions of Herculine’s body and intersex condition” (p. 206). These same criticisms could be levelled at Eugenides (2002b) in his graphic descriptions of Cal/lie’s sex organs which are euphemistically described as the “crocus”:

At its most demonstrative it was now about two inches long. Most of this length, however, was concealed by the flaps of skin from which it issued...When I touched the crocus it expanded, swelling until with a kind of pop it slid free of the pouch it was in. (pp. 387-388)

While this scene of self-exploration serves to show that Cal/lie had no inkling of their intersex condition, could be considered to exploit the intersex body to prurient ends. Conversely, it may work as scene that shows the erotic beauty of a body that is popularly seen as monstrous, namely the intersex body, and thus contribute to its normalisation. The fine-line between exploitation and celebration is a difficult one to walk and may ultimately depend on the reader’s interpretation.

Despite my cautions against the conflation of gender and sexuality, I want to note here that sexuality is also used to connote gender. Eugenides’ (2002b) references to clothing are particularly interesting in this regard as they make reference not only to the gendering process but rely on assumptions about heterosexuality to imply gender. In the chapter in which Callie transitions, the emergent Cal says: “I didn’t feel what a boy would feel. It wasn’t like putting on your father’s jacket and becoming a man. It was like being cold and having your date give you his jacket to wear” (p. 444). In these

sentences, multiple things occur. Eugenides shows that an item of clothing can have different connotations depending on the situation: what is signified by the jacket is context dependent. Eugenides shows us that the act of a father giving a son his jacket to wear is a performative discourse taught by fathers to sons, which enables the son to “become a man” or enact male masculinity. In contrast, the wearing of a male heterosexual date’s jacket connotes femininity; the weaker feminine woman is implied as needing protection from the elements, while the act of giving the jacket emphasises the male’s strength and masculinity through his braving the elements. In this instance, Eugenides is showing us that despite the jacket representing masculinity, that it is not always a consistent signifier of gender (see also my points about other signifiers of gender at p. 32).

This scene is contrasted with Smith and Bohjahnlin’s use of clothing. Some of the crucial differences between the three works concern perspective. For example, Smith’s (2007) kilt and Bohjahnlin’s (2000) elastic band hair-tie operate as cues of gender which inform the narrating characters’ (and the reader’s) gender attribution process. In contrast, Cal’s self-reflexive contemplation of the jacket (Eugenides, 2002b) reveals the character’s unstated anxiety about it acting as an unintended reinforcer of femininity, and hence relates to issues of passing and panopticon surveillance.

The primary difference between the three novels is that Smith (2007) relies most heavily on literary methods to signify gender rather than heavily referencing either the body, or gender roles. Significantly, she also avoids medical jargon and technicalities thus refusing to participate in a discourse which pathologises gender diversity. While Smith (2007) also references clothing to imply gender, gender diversity is primarily

expressed through non-normative pronoun and adjective switches. According to Livia (2001) this is a common device in works featuring gender diverse characters:

the description of an intersexed or alternately sexed body disturbs the usual rules of pronominal reference. Authors of such texts typically use a variety of means to refer to the transsexual character, including alternating masculine and feminine pronouns, the first person plural, and the third person indefinite 'one'. (pp. 21-22)

Each of these gendering techniques can be problematic. The use of "we" might inadvertently suggest a multiple personality disorder, while "one" can appear pretentious. The increased use of recently created gender neutral pronouns such as "sie" (pronounced 'zee') and "ze" in place of s/he, and "per" and "hir" as substitutes for his/her may solve the pronoun problem. However, while these terms have gained some popularity, particularly with queer readerships, their mainstream use, particularly in Australia is unfortunately still sporadic and as such these unfamiliar terms may disrupt the narrative flow for a mainstream readership. Conversely, it can also be argued that more writers need to take the creative risk that using gender neutral pronouns entails to help propagate their broader mainstream acceptance. However, it must be noted that none of the three novels under investigation made use of these pronouns. I go on to discuss these issues further and with reference to my own writing at page 81.

Smith's (2007) *Girl Meets Boy* does not make use of gender neutral pronouns, but instead employs non-heteronormative or culturally unexpected pronoun and adjective pairs as an innovative way of troubling gender and keeping gender as fluid as possible, offering excellent examples of writing gender diversity as gender in flux. In the very first line of the book, Anthea the narrator recounts a tale told by her grandfather: "Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says" (p. 3). The line serves to alert

the reader from the very start that here is a book in which gender is not configured in a hetero-normative manner. The story as told by the grandfather is a reprise of the Myth Of Iphis – the grandfather himself was once a girl who at the age of 19 needed to dress like a boy to save her own life. In describing a photo of her grandparents Anthea also uses feminine adjectives for her grandfather: “He looked smooth, sweet-faced, almost girlish,” and masculine for her grandmother: “She looked strong, clear-boned, like a smiling young man...” (A. Smith, 2007, p. 21). These initial scenes set up a theme of gender fluidity that runs throughout the book. Whether their grandfather’s story is a fiction as the girls suspect, or not, does not matter. The grandparents’ genders cannot be pinned down as “truths” nor as “fictions”; there is no ultimate reveal, no appeal to bodily truths, the reader must make peace with the postmodern idea of unknowability.

Rather than using scientific, fantastic or magical means to suggest gender transformation or fluidity, Smith achieves the fluidity in *Girl Meets Boy* through language, primarily through shifting pronoun usage, so that it is integral to the text and thus more plausible and “realistic”. Smith playfully draws attention to our gendering of attributes, including the possibility of holding seemingly contradictory notions to be true at the same time, this is particularly so in her description of Robyn:

She had the swagger of a girl. She blushed like a boy. She had a girl’s toughness. She had a boy’s gentleness. She was as meaty as a girl. She was as graceful as a boy. She was as brave and handsome and rough as a girl. She was as pretty and dainty and delicate as a boy. She turned boys’ heads like a girl. She turned girl’s heads like a boy. She made love like a boy. She made love like a girl. She was so boyish it was girly, so

girly it was boyish, she made me want to rove the world writing our names in every tree. (A. Smith, 2007, p. 84)

This one paragraph embodies all the contradictions inherent in gender, and in particular it highlights the artifice of binary gender. Smith (2007) takes hold of the abstract theoretical idea of two or more contradictory notions coexisting at the same time and then develops a concrete character from this; in doing so she also satisfies the reader's potential demand for a character with a singular, recognised gender.

While Smith relies mostly on textual, writerly methods, the other two writers rely more heavily on description and references to normalising gender roles. However, it must be noted that when Bohjalian (2000) makes reference to gender roles in order to gender his characters he does so in a relatively subtle manner. For example at one point he contrasts the feminine physicality of Dana's "long and slender" fingers with those of men employed as loggers who have missing fingers. In this instance he plays on our gendered assumptions and implies that gender roles also produce gendered bodies. Logging, as a stereotypically masculine occupation connotes dirty, rough and mangled hands. In contrast, a stereotypical feminine role such as teaching – Dana is a teacher – along with Dana's unstated feminine attention to a manicure routine instead results in "short, square nails [that] seemed to gleam" and "fingers...largely without hair" (p. 12). Thus gender can also be implied by what is not said via a reliance on cultural assumptions about gender role in western society, and in the process, gendered bodies are also produced. While Ekins and King (Ekins & King, 2006) do not discuss the manner in which gender roles produce gendered bodies, this process fits within their substitution schema.

In general, Bohjalian represents gender in a more embodied binary manner than Smith. He appeals to both binary physicality and stereotypical gender roles to imply gender. In particular he references physical differences in what are seen to be feminine bodies (and hence female) and masculine bodies (hence male). Furthermore, Bohjalian situates transsexual woman within this binary:

Sometimes...my dad looks a little bit like Dana did two years ago....Same build. Of course they look nothing alike now. After all, you can still see my dad's Adam's apple...

Dana was more delicate looking, and smaller boned [than Carly's father]...I wouldn't have described him as effeminate, but I might have said he had fine – perhaps even beautiful – features. And when a guy has no hair or stubble on his face, you're bound to notice a pair of really nice cheekbones, or a chin that's shaped a bit like the smaller half of a pear – and just as smooth.

I'm sure some people picked up on the fact that he had begun judiciously plucking his eyebrows, but I didn't. I just thought they were shaped like the most remarkable sickle moons.

He wore his hair back in a ponytail then, held together with the sort of thin rubber band a supermarket is likely to wrap around its scallions.

(Bohjalian, 2000, p. 10)

The above description can be viewed as part of the character's migrating body story, and makes use of substitution processes relating to body hair. In addition, Bohjalian's mention of the rubber band as a hair tie has unstated resonances which when examined closely show that it is performative of gender. The use of an otherwise

throwaway item for personal grooming implies that the act of tying the hair back in this manner is a careless one, and can thus be read as a stereotypical masculine behaviour. However, the gesture can also be read in light of the knowledge that Dana is transitioning and interpreted as part of a “naive” or “nascent” femininity. In other words, femininity as performed by someone who is in the process of acculturation into feminine behaviour, but who does not fully have a grasp of the performative discourse. An individual who is acculturated into or “aware” of feminine social norms would not only know that rubber bands damage the hair, hence rendering it ragged and unfeminine, but would instead purchase a hair band to signify feminine aesthetics. A third option is also viable, that Bohjalian wishes to present Dana as a character who does not buy into all aspects of a feminine performative, thus performing a gender that is transgressive, albeit in a very small and socially inconsequential manner. However, additional close readings of the novel show that instead Bohjalian has chosen to present this character’s gender in an emphatically binary way.

Eugenides (2002b) also uses hair to connote gender. Cal’s haircut at the beginning of his transition takes place within a barbershop, and as such is situated in the context of the performative discourse of what is viewed as a space for men within the historical context of the scene. The haircut is apparently transformative: “With the screen of my hair removed, the recent changes in my face were far more evident. My jaw looked squarer, broader, my neck thicker, with a bulge of Adam’s apple in the centre” (p. 445). The scene appeals to the idea that long hair is feminising, and that conversely short hair is masculinising. Cal’s haircut therefore indicates the erasure of the girl. The gendering story of the intersex body is then shown to be different to the transgendering body story;

the difference being that erasure in this instance does not concern the elimination of all traces of gender, but instead only the parts which allow the chosen gender to emerge.

While Eugenides professes in an interview with Jonathan Safran Foer: “Gender is a continuum and everyone falls in a different spot.” (Eugenides, 2002a, p. 80), the resolutely binary nature of Cal/lie’s gender indicates that Eugenides has either failed to find the language which would allow him to position Cal/lie on that continuum, *or* that the binary nature of the English language has failed Eugenides. In writing *ITWYW* I also came up against the very limits of the English language. I discuss these issues self-reflexively at page 81.

To conclude, the cues that signify gender can either be used by writers to work with or against the grain of common stereotypes or tropes. Thus, I would go further than both Ekin and King’s (2006) schema and Bornstein’s list of cues and argue that in fiction the skilful writer often works on very subtle imagery; it is often what is not stated that can be used to gendered effect. When portraying gender diverse characters, writers can make use of subtle cues that can be left open to the biases of the reader. Thus, the writer must remain aware that cues such as gender role produce gender both explicitly and implicitly.

The writer’s use of signifiers of gender has implications for the manner in which their characters’ gender identities are then read and understood by readers. The differences between the three novels in the overall handling of gender identity and the authors’ particular theoretical leanings are demonstrative of this point.

## Readers and Resistance

The central premise of my study is that fiction can open up possibilities of diverse gendered modes of being even within the constraints of a cultural and social order that expects individuals to take up memberships of their assigned gender. It draws on the research that links empathy and imagination to the reading of fiction (Currie, 2010; Keen, 2007; Mar & Oatley, 2008). The reading of the three novels illustrates the tensions between formal and conventional tropes, gender cues and the desire of a writer to open up different possibilities. These tensions will necessarily impact on the readers' responses.

*Middlesex* requires some suspension of disbelief about the gender of the protagonist. While Cal/lie has a real intersex condition (5-Alpha-Reductase Syndrome), it is so rare to almost be implausible in the reader's mind, as the condition occurs almost solely in children who are the offspring of incestuous unions (Dreger, 1998) and thus, in popular imagination, "monstrous". In other words, the origin of this particular intersex condition may lead the reader to believe that the condition could not happen to anyone they know or might meet. It may also encourage the incorrect belief that all intersex conditions are similarly aberrant.

In contrast, the gender identity of Dana in *Trans-Sister Radio* is more bounded and appears to more closely approximate lived experience in that the fact of her transsexuality does not verge on the improbable. Thus Dana, in comparison to Cal/lie and Robin, might be considered as the most representative of a "real" person of the three characters for the "mainstream" reader, regardless of whether the experience described in the novel accords closely with the experiences of real-life transsexual women.

Most successful in establishing a fluid gender is Smith. The only potentially negative aspect to Smith's (2007) more literary approach is that the gender changes may still feel magical or whimsical to many mainstream readers, particularly if gender is left in flux and left unnamed. For example, Kessler & McKenna's (1985) research into the psychology of gender found that transitioning transsexuals reported that many people were initially uncomfortable around them. These researchers found this discomfort persisted until a determination of some sort was made about their gender identity, usually via the question, "What are you?" It appears that the unknowability of someone's gender identity, or the inability to instantly make a gender attribution, leaves many people feeling uncomfortable.

Could it then be inferred that readers might feel a similar discomfort when encountering unfamiliar gender diversity? No research has apparently been done into this specific issue, however Mar and colleagues (i.e. Mar, DeYoung, Higgins, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009) researched empathy in readers of fiction and found that they were more empathic in general than readers of non-fiction. This has been endorsed but qualified by Keen's (2007) *Empathy in the Novel*. Hence, it may be that readers are more open to empathising with the social worlds of the individuals they read about, including those with unfamiliar gender identities.

While the intention of exposing readers to new concepts and identities and removing them from their comfort zones is a worthwhile project, if we extrapolate Kessler and McKenna's (1985) social research to the reader's experience of fiction, we might infer that readers may well prefer contained, singular gender identities. The central problem then for a writer concerned with opening up new possibilities is that they are trying to go beyond what Connell has called "the doctrine of natural difference"

and to take readers further than “a limit beyond which thought cannot go” (Connell, 1987, p. 66) In the next chapter I discuss my own writing and some of the challenges I faced.

## CHAPTER THREE: Writing Gender Diversity in *Is That What You're Wearing?*

### Subjectivity and Self Reflexivity

There is a wealth of theoretical work on forms of gender diversity in fiction mainly from a literary critical perspective (see for example: Attebery, 2002; Hargreaves, 2004; Livia, 2001; McMahon, 1994; Schwab, 1996) with a smaller amount from an identity politics perspective (see for example: Noble, 2004; Prosser, 1995, 2001; Serano, 2007). From a creative writing perspective, the *Writer's Guide to Character Traits* offers psychological characteristics of "Varieties of Sexual Identification" including "Traits of a Transgendered Person" and "Traits of a Transvestite", in addition to listing "Genetic Sexual Disorders" (Edelstein, 2006, pp. 169-170). Edelstein, a clinical psychologist, does not go into detail of the signifying practices used by writers to represent gender diversity; instead she only provides a lay version of the same information that a writer could obtain from medical textbooks. As I discuss further at page 74, Professor Hazel Smith's (2005) text on creative writing practice offers a chapter called "The invert, the cross-dresser, the fictocritic" but does not discuss the production of gender diverse identities from that standpoint. Thus, extensive research has not discovered academic discussion of the actual practice, from a creative writing standpoint, of writing and producing gender diversity in fiction. To fill this important gap in the knowledge, this chapter will discuss the particular challenges faced in writing my novel and how I attempted to resolve them. As in the previous chapters I address these challenges through the four lenses of cultural and material access, signifiers of gender, gender identities, and social reinforcement of gender.

To begin, I discuss my own privileged cissexual subject position as a female writer and its relationship to, and impact upon my novel. This is of ethical importance as I am writing about a marginalised group within society whose identities have been exploited, particularly in recent times in their different ways, by cissexual writers (such as Jeffrey Eugenides) and academics (such as Richard Green, Robert Stoller, and John Money) to reinforce claims about the social constructedness of gender (Serano, 2007). Serano terms this process “ungendering” and defines it as “an exploitative process, involving both the appropriation of gender-variant bodies and experiences while erasing intersexual voices and perspectives” (p. 196).

Serano also takes issue with the manner in which some fictional works use the transsexual and intersex experience as a metaphor, instead of portraying it as “a marginalized identity or a gruelling issue that real human beings struggle with” (p. 197). She cites Jeffrey Eugenides’ interview for Powell’s Books as offering evidence of this. Eugenides professed admirable intentions in choosing the subject matter for *Middlesex* but also admitted: “I used a hermaphrodite [sic] not to tell the story of a freak or someone unlike the rest of us but as correlative for the sexual confusion and confusion of identity that everyone goes through in adolescence” (Weich, 2006).

In my research of the literature of creative writing practice, I also discovered the problematic use of gender diversity as metaphor in this realm. The Australian creative writing academic, Professor Hazel Smith’s (2005) book *The writing experiment: Strategies for innovative creative writing* includes a chapter titled “The invert, the cross-dresser, the fictocritic” (pp. 192 – 211). In reading the chapter I had hoped to find Smith’s “strategies for innovative creative writing” about gender diverse individuals; instead I discovered that for Smith: “The title of the chapter alludes metaphorically to

transformed and transgressive sexual identities.” (2005, p. 192). She continues by saying: “The analogy is appropriate because much postmodern writing subverts generic identities” (p. 192). In other words, it appears that Smith’s argument is that it is “appropriate” to exploit gender diverse identities to postmodern subversive ends.

Given the common practice of using the gender diverse body in a metaphorical fashion, it is no wonder that Serano goes as far as to call for a stop to the cultural appropriation of gender-variant identities by cissexual fiction writers. The difficult ethical question I have asked myself as a cissexual writer is whether I am doing more harm than good in writing this novel? As my thesis project comes to an end, I am now unsure whether it is completely possible for a cissexual writer to write gender diversity without in some way using transgender, transsexual and intersex bodies and identities at a symbolic level, much in a similar way to Eugenides. By this I mean that the gender diverse body and identity in fiction not only stands as a literal figure of personhood, as does any other body and identity in fiction, but that the fiction writer is equally likely to tap into the tropes available for all gendered bodies.

In coming to some resolution of this, and in argument with Serano, I maintain that all fiction writers necessarily engage at both the literal and figurative level. Further, the available tropes for gendered bodies are produced largely through dominant binary perspectives which have produced shared meanings and readings. Therefore it is difficult for any writer to avoid some reinforcement of cultural prejudices and limitations while retaining the understanding of the reader. The choice is between a total silence, which itself reproduces social invisibility, or a conscious attempt to change perspectives while retaining the reader’s desire to go on reading. I have chosen the second. This has entailed an obligation to research thoroughly the perspectives of those

who inhabit diverse gender identities and to be conscious of how dominant tropes operate and find ways to offset or adapt them.

The point at which the idea for the novel became the idea for the thesis relates to the intersection of two deep and abiding personal interests: discrimination of marginalised individuals and groups of people within society, and all aspects of gender identity. It was at this stage I then decided to focus the story on the character of Ella. As a child I recall being mistaken for a boy. I was greatly annoyed by this mistake but at the time was unsure why. Years later I realised that my gender was so core to my identity that to mistake it was to mistake me; in other words in a very small way I experienced the ungendering process referred to by Serano (2007). My novel explores the crux of this issue – the misreading of a preferred gender identity – through the first person narrative of Ella.

At this point, following Serano's (2007) criticisms of the gender diverse body used as metaphor, it could be asked why I explore ungendering using gender diverse characters instead of cissexual characters? I argue that exploring the ungendering of gender diverse characters exposes these processes and the effects they may have on some individuals enabling some empathy in cissexual readers. Furthermore, the representation of multiple gender identities and characters who engage in various ways with gender identity as a concept thus contributes to the political intention of normalising gender diversity.

I also wanted to show in my novel that "gender trouble" can be situated in sites other than transgender, for example in cissexual masculine women, and hence to disrupt the process which prominent trans academic Susan Stryker (2004) argues "[is] helping

secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood” (p. 214).

My novel then explores issues of gender in society more broadly, particularly genders that do not fit easily within a bi-gender system, nor potentially under the label transgender, but which perhaps are best situated under the term gender diversity. However, as I have argued in Chapter One, trans theory is currently the most useful theoretical framework for this project. In this regard, this chapter follows the schema of the first two chapters. Namely, I give consideration to issues of cultural and material access; the social reinforcement of gender; gender identities; and signifiers of gender, all as applicable to the creation of my novel *ITWYW*

Before I go on to discuss these aspects of my work, the next question may well be: *Why a thesis novel, not say a psychology thesis on gender?* Like Edmund White (Vida, 2005) the influential writer on homosexual issues, I believe that “(f)iction is the best – virtually the only! – public place for exploring questions of ethics, identity and destiny” (p. 343). It then follows to ask: *Why a thesis novel, not a novel for publication?* The difference lies within the way the research is conducted and utilised to fill a gap in the knowledge, both in contemporary understandings of gender identity and creative writing scholarship. The novel for publication may use research to render details more accurately or vividly, whereas the thesis novel does this *in addition* to deeper and more critical engagement with the theoretical issues that relate to the creative work. *ITWYW* is not simply an individual example of a novel on a relatively rare topic, it makes a significant contribution to knowledge via the following: a critical engagement with the tropological concerns circulating within contemporary trans fiction; the application of critical knowledge of gender cues, and modes and processes of transgenering to

creative writing practice; and the illumination of points of systematic oppression and the subversion of those tropes in order to generate new understandings both of gender identity and of the creative writing scholarship necessary to produce such a work.

## Cultural and Material Access

In Chapter One, I talk about how systems work in ways that may limit the cultural and material access to works which include gender diverse characters. In Chapter Two, I talk about the lack of mainstream accessibility to works about gender diverse individuals and characters. Here, I discuss the writing challenges posed by writing about gender diverse characters in a novel designed for general “mainstream” readership.

As described earlier, I chose to steer away from writing genre fiction in an attempt to fill a gap I locate in the mainstream representation of gender diverse individuals. The main difference that I perceive between works which feature gender diverse characters marketed specifically to a queer audience, and works marketed more broadly to a mainstream audience, is in terms of the focus on what are considered to be homosexual relationships. While I contest the meanings of the terms “homosexual”, “heterosexual” and “bisexual” in relation to writings about gender diverse characters (see p. 45), I acknowledge that the terms are not only used as descriptors of sex acts with an implied continuity and stability of the genders of the participants, but they are also identity categories used by individuals for self-identification. Thus, for example Feinberg’s (1993) *Stone Butch Blues* features a character with an explicitly defined stone butch lesbian identity and is predominantly niche marketed to queer audiences. It is interesting to contrast this with Ebershoff’s (2001) *The Danish Girl* which is available more broadly and is notable in its exclusion from Bosman, Bradford, and Ridinger’s (2008) genre guide to GLBT literature. My thorough reading of this genre guide and my familiarity with both mainstream and queer novels with gender diverse characters suggests that the exclusion is quite possibly because the character is read by the authors of the genre guide as heterosexual. Transgender in the *Genre Guide* seems to apply only

to works where the protagonist's sexuality can be read as queer; in other words, where male to female trans-people have sex with cissexual males and female to male trans-people have sex with cissexual females. This categorisation seems also to largely apply in the marketing of mainstream books.

I should note here, that as I'm trying to steer away from the hierarchies related to sexual binaries, my work cannot strictly be categorised as either heterosexual or homosexual. However, despite my intentions readers may in fact infer that the relationship between Ella and Zee is heterosexual because I write her as perceiving herself to be heterosexual to fit with her characterisation, and due to the popular conception reflected in mainstream publications that embodiment defines gender, and as a consequence, sexuality. I then refute this notion in the novel via the following conversation between Ella and Leggy:

I once asked him if he thought I had lesbian tendencies. He replied, "You love the person; boy, girl, what's it matter? What is this?" He grabbed at his crotch. "People make too much of this. Love is from here and here." He tapped his stomach and his heart. (*ITWYW*, p. 171)

The writing of a mainstream story which features gender diverse characters poses its own particular challenges. One difficulty was to write the characters in a non-sensationalistic manner while still maintaining drama and forward momentum in the narrative. To paraphrase Vek Lewis (2009), a researcher who has completed analyses of transgender representation in the popular media, how is it possible for me to humanise my characters and conceive of them as "ordinary in all their extraordinariness"? I attempted to do this in part by downplaying the way the gender identity of my characters is revealed. I discuss this further later in this chapter (see pp. 91-92).

## Gendered Pronouns and Naming

A central issue for accessibility in mainstream fiction is the use of pronouns. Writing a novel about three variously gendered characters presented a number of challenges, particularly with regard to the limitations of the English language. As an example of the problems of usage it is interesting to examine the term “Epicene”. This is the linguistic term for gender neutral pronoun. “Epicene” in general usage is also a synonym for effeminate and therefore is not as gender neutral as it appears, hence I use the term gender neutral pronoun in place of epicene pronoun.

Further to this I acknowledge that gender neutral pronouns themselves are rarely used in a gender neutral manner; that is they are almost invariably used to describe gender diverse individuals only, and not all individuals. When writers use a mix of gendered and gender neutral pronouns, they simply replace binary gender with a three-fold of genders. Like binaries, ternaries are also problematic for their hierarchical nature. However, on a positive note the use of ternary gender allows for an opening up of gender beyond the binary.

As I mention at page 64, conventional English language does not have any adequate gender neutral pronouns, and so writing the character Zee, a gender queer individual who does not strongly identify with either gender, posed a pronoun problem. In the 1970s several feminist fiction writers chose to use invented gender neutral pronouns in their work. Three books: *A Cook and the Carpenter: A novel by the carpenter* (Arnold, 1973), *The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You* (Bryant, 1976) and *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy, 1976) have been republished multiple times and are testament to the fact that readers are able to cope with unfamiliar pronouns (Livia, 2001), despite the contrary assertions of the Editors of *The American Heritage Dictionaries* (1996).

In the 1990s, trans theorists such as Bornstein (1998) reignited the call to use gender neutral pronouns such as ze (in place of he or she), and hir (a hybrid of her and his) to describe transgender individuals. I made an initial choice not to use any of these pronouns due to their lack of widespread familiarity to cisgendered readers, and lack of widespread acceptance in general. However, in the later stages of my doctoral study I began to feel as though I were taking the easy way out, and that to not use gender neutral pronouns would be disrespectful to the gender diverse individuals who are battling for mainstream acceptance of these terms. I do not use gender neutral pronouns extensively, as they do not fit with my characterisation of Ella. In particular my characterisation of her allows me to explore her biases, and changing awareness of the impact of her language. Ella refers to Zee as “he” for most of the novel because for Ella gender springs from what she believes to be a bodily truth. In her mind, a person with a penis is a “he”. As the novel progresses, Ella identifies less with essentialised notions of gender and finally approaches a different understanding of gender identity. It is this growth that also allows her to become more accepting of herself as a woman whose physicality does not conform to traditional notions of femininity. My use of pronouns, also allows me to explore the prejudices of other characters who “read” Zee, Ella, and Klaus/Sara’s genders in various contradictory ways.

The two scenes in *ITWYW* in which I use gender neutral pronouns are the scene in which Leggy and Ella talk about Zee (pp. 109-112) and a scene at the end of the novel where Ella asks Zee about hir preferred pronoun (p. 203). In the first scene, Leggy refers to Zee as hir. However, Ella hears “hir” as “her” and does not pass comment on the term, other than saying that the strange use of pronouns made her head spin (p. 109). Further misunderstandings could occur if these segments of the novel are read aloud to

an audience, or otherwise discussed. However, the difference is that a text is generally a closed object and needs to impart meaning on its own merits, whereas in a situation where content is verbalised there is often room for explanation of the segments that may cause confusion, such as spelling out the word that might be misheard, or offering a discussion of the terms.

Later in the novel, at the end of *ITWYW* when Zee tells Ella: “I’m neither he nor she, I’m ze” (p. 203), she then understands that Zee is using ze as a pronoun as well as a play on words. Zee’s revelation then impacts on the manner in which I’ve written Ella’s first person narration. As a writer, from this point in the narrative I needed to choose between Ella using the new pronoun or not. This choice would also ultimately affect Ella’s characterisation, as it was also a choice between having her acknowledge and respect Zee’s gender identification by making the pronoun switch, or not respecting it and not making the switch. Given that I intend Ella’s character arc to move from a disregard of the importance of others’ gender identification to a more respectful view, the only way to show that is via the pronoun shift. However, my fear is that the shift feels too clumsy for the reader, and so I found myself butting up against the very limits of the English language. My solution was to call attention to the pronoun shift via Ella slipping-up and using the incorrect pronoun and then correcting herself (see *ITWYW*, p. 203). This method highlights Ella’s attitudinal change, without the shift causing a disruption to the narrative flow through lack of comment. I’ve also recast the remaining sections of the final scene to avoid further pronominal references to Zee as I realised the use of the hir name plus the pronoun ze would make for clumsy writing. While not an entirely satisfactory solution, the remainder of the scene is short enough to allow me to avoid the further use of gender neutral pronouns. This has then enabled me to call

attention to Ella's attitudinal change, without the use of potentially unfamiliar pronouns disrupting the crucial narrative flow of the novel's conclusion.

As a further aside on naming, the German pronoun Sie (you) is pronounced "zee" and is the origin of Zee's name. Ella's name also springs from gendered pronouns borrowed from other languages. The word Ella, while pronounced differently is "she" in Spanish. The character Ella is also often called Elle for short, which is pronounced El, in other words "he" in Spanish, whereas in French the name means "she". The name Elle also allows for it to be misheard as "Al" which is considered a masculine name in English. The written format allows for the reader to see who mistakes Ella's name, with the implication that Ella herself is not always aware of this mistake. I've also played upon the fact that attribution of masculinity or femininity of a name is culturally dependent. One of the minor characters in Berlin is named Florian, a masculine name whose contraction Flo is considered to be feminine in English.

### **Gender Attributions and Signifiers of Gender**

In Chapter One I talk about theories of signification, in Chapter Two I talk about how other writers signify gender. Here, I describe my use of devices that signify gender to the reader. In Chapter One I discuss both Kessler and McKenna (1985) and Bornstein's (1995) work on gender attribution, and Ekins and King's (2006) modes and processes of transgendering. Their collective work is valuable for consideration in writing gender diverse characters. Many of the cues they describe are the same cues (or the same with some modification: for example describing a character's deep voice equates with hearing a deep voice) that operate at the level of the text and are interpreted by the

reader and used to form gender attributions relating to the characters. The writer then must control these cues carefully to elicit the intended gender attribution.

As I discuss in Chapter One (see p. 32), Bornstein (1995) states that signifiers of gender come under seven categories. These cues include: physical, behavioural, textural, mythic cues, power dynamics, sexual orientation, and biology (Bornstein, 1995). In writing these three characters, I've made use of several of these signifiers both directly and indirectly to subvert reader expectations of particular genders belonging to particular bodies, but at the same time use them to convey a coherent (in terms of legibility to the reader) gender in each of the characters. For example, Ella's ambiguous abbreviated name (Elle/Al), her masculinised body with its solid shape which is further masculinised by her propensity to hide her body beneath dark shapeless clothes, her use of a wallet not a purse, her short haircut, heavy eyebrows, and facial hair lead others to frequently read her as male all of which contrast both with her sense of self as a woman, and with the feminine functioning of her body, particularly her miscarriage. In addition, Zee's self identification as gender queer via hir preferred pronoun, combined with hir androgynous body type, and a scarce Adam's apple coupled with hir propensity to perform genders at whim by dressing in varying combinations of what is considered feminine or masculine clothing and wigs, then counteracts the idea that a person with facial hair, or in some instances chest hair, should also always be read as a man. Other examples of my use of cues are below.

As I state at page 32, signifiers of gender are historically, culturally and situation dependant, and so too our appearance forms a non-verbal language, a context dependent code, both simultaneously in and out of our control.

I also reference the effort needed to perform femininity in *ITWYW*, for example, when Ella meets Zee in Berlin she refers to him as appearing “pale and tired. Stubble was beginning to show on his face” (p. 186). In light of the stressful issues relating to his brother, I imply that Zee no longer regards performing femininity a priority and neglects to do so. Similarly, Ella refers to the possible pain, inconvenience and expense required to perform femininity with respect to her unsuccessful attempts at facial hair removal (see *ITWYW*, p. 125).

I have also used typical Western gendered assumptions about Christian names to convey gender. In *ITWYW* Al is commonly a male’s name, Elle is female, Klaus is male, Sara female, and Zee as an unfamiliar name is gender neutral. Hence, in the novel a character hears the name Elle and mistakes it for Al to allow for a gender congruency between the name and the Ella’s masculine appearance. This example is consistent with Speer’s (2005) research into gender attribution. She found that “...when faced with ambiguously gendered cases, [the research participants] quickly re-establish the normative order of things and their belief in, and commitment to, dichotomous gender as an objective fact” (p. 83).

As I have stated at page 25, gendered bathrooms are one societal method of reinforcing binary gender. They can also be a source of anxiety for gender diverse individuals given that it is culturally accepted that males and females use the bathroom respective to their gender. In instances such as these, the misreading of gender can prove very problematic for an individual whose gender does not conform to societal expectations appropriate to the bathroom they choose to use. Scenes in *ITWYW* featuring Ella at pages 27, 121-125 and 129 exemplify this. Further to the idea of the bathroom as a cue to gender identity, in a restaurant scene at page 88, Ella instead of

asking Zee about his preferred gender identity, attempts to interpret it by watching him to see which toilet he will choose. I have deliberately left this answer unresolved.

A common trope in both fictional and non-fictional transsexual narratives is the use of a back story which “explains” the character’s transsexuality, or shows it as being present in early childhood. This trope is also applicable to other instances of gender diversity where authors and autobiographers alike aim to show that that gender is an essential characteristic of the individuals being written about. The trope is seen in autobiographies (e.g. (Ashley, 2006; Boylan, 2003). Buhrich & McConaghy (1976) speculated that there may be a false heterogeneity in transsexual narratives, given that a particular kind of self narrative was made necessary by the medical profession. This may then flow into fictional accounts. Given the current revisions to the Standards of Care, these changes may also impact on fictional worlds.

In *ITWYW* I made a conscious attempt to *not* include a back story that could lead readers to believe I am explaining the origins of Klaus/Sara’s gender identity. In one instance in particular, I make a deliberate attempt to subvert such expectations in the scene where Klaus/Sara tells of seeing cross-dressed individuals going to a ball as a child. The incident is not the impetus for Klaus’s cross-dressing, but instead for his love of roses (see *ITWYW*, pp. 154-155).

Zee’s background in this regard is left deliberately vague. But we can see support for Zee’s cross-dressing in the graduation picture with hir parents, and hence hir comfort with hir embodiment.

Ella’s masculinity has a medical origin. She has poly-cystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). This condition is a metabolic syndrome which can cause masculinisation through elevated levels of androgens, and can cause the excessive growth of body hair

as well as infertility (Norman, Wu, & Stankiewicz, 2004). In Western society gender attribution is overwhelmingly based on the physicality of an individual. However, unlike Bohjalian and Eugenides I try to avoid expository medical passages that disrupt narrative and overdetermine the characters. The emphasis is less on medical detail and more on Ella's inability to pass easily as a woman and its impact on her social interactions and her self esteem. As I explain in my discussion of writing the novel my focus is on social reinforcement rather than psychological introspection (see p. 11). The novel aims to explore the spectrum of gender rather than one individual psyche.

The novel *ITWYW* also passes what I hope is subtle comment on the attribution versus self-identification process. Given that children are assigned their genders for them, I do not refer to any child mentioned in this novel by one gender or the other.

As was shown in the previous chapter, each of the three novels discussed differed in their approaches to signifying gender on the page. Smith (2007) chose textual methods of pronoun switching and cross-gender references to keep gender fluid, albeit slightly abstract, while (Bohjalian, 2000) and (Eugenides, 2002b) relied much more on descriptions of clothing and embodiment which spoke to binary divisions of gender. In *ITWYW*, I wanted to show a number of ways of being gendered. I wanted to do this through material description rather than by foregrounding stylistic devices like Smith (2007). I show each of the three characters living in their chosen genders, and the varying degrees of comfort they each have with their genders and the gender identities of others. I show Ella's changing ideas and acceptance about her own physicality. Her facial/body hair is perceived differently by her acquaintances in Berlin compared with reactions by strangers to her in Melbourne, thus giving her pause to realise that gender attributions can be culturally dependent. I also make use of indirect signifiers or implied

gender via the gender attributions of strangers, for example, all the instances that she is mistaken for a male. These include being called “sir” at the airport, and mistakenly being called “Al”. I show Ella’s changing relationship with clothes and what they signify to her.

Unlike Bohjalian (2000) and Eugenides (2002b), but similar to Smith (2007), I attempt to avoid using gender role to signify gender. I did this because I did not want to rely on gendered ideas about occupations to shore up preconceived ideas about the work done by gender diverse individuals. Neither main characters’ occupations, namely bookseller and graphic designer, has particularly gendered connotations. Although Zee’s graphic design job is not an occupation that would masculinise hir hands, and as such may be considered to some extent a feminine occupation, it is still gender neutral in terms of gender role.

I also queer Zee’s gender performance. The physical signifiers that relate to Zee’s gender are mostly kept in flux, sometimes ze has a smooth face, sometimes ze has stubble, ze frequently wears wigs of multiple different styles, sometimes ze dresses with chest hair visible, and hir body is slim and androgynous. On occasion Zee subtly displays chest hair while dressing in an ultra-feminine manner. Zee’s chest hair is the only cue that stops hir being read completely as a woman, unless ze speaks. However, it should be noted that on occasion Zee’s voice is read as a husky woman’s voice dependent on the other cues visible to the person that Zee is interacting with. Again this is in line with Speer’s (2005) research into gender attribution. Zee’s graceful mannerisms and impeccable grooming also are suggestive of femininity. While Butler makes clear that her theory of gender specifically relates to it being performative, not as performance, I also have Zee “performing” his gender in the theatrical sense.

To reiterate an earlier point where I quote Butler (2004), one of the difficulties I've had in writing this novel is attempting to avoid using essentialised understandings of gender to explain gender diversity (see p. 11). The identity discourse theorists, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) in particular caution against this form of theorisation. As I have reiterated throughout my thesis my use of "masculine" and "feminine" signifiers is not uncritical, but instead I make use of the signifiers commonly perceived in western society as masculine and feminine and go against the grain of stereotypical representation to produce different understandings and to enlarge the meaning that those signifiers commonly have. Again, I refer here to the Berlin moustache scene as an example. The signifier of facial hair, in particular the amount, is culturally different dependent on the subcultural discourse that the viewer is enmeshed within. This context dependent attribution is also consistent with Speer's (2005) research findings and also ties back to Bornstein's (1995) cues of attribution (see p. 32).

## **Passing**

The act of passing or not passing appears to me to be the state of anxious expectation of discovery, of being found "out". In writing this thesis my own fears around passing relate to the worry of not passing as an academic, of not passing as someone sufficiently qualified or interested in issues relating to gender diversity. I was concerned that my credentials as an activist were suspect - was I or was I not adequately doing the things that one should do to pass as an activist in this field – or indeed, the things I thought that one should do?

Passing in *ITWYW* is demonstrated to be both context and situation dependent. Passing is related to signification and signifiers of gender. Cues are weighed up for the perceived gendered message and a gender attribution is made. If there is no dissonance between the expected gender and the gender cues stereotypical for the expected gender, then the person is successful in passing. If there is dissonance, then the person either does not pass, or their gender is read as being in flux.

In addition, I wanted to show that reading and passing can be dependent on cultural, subcultural, and class expectations. Hence different individuals and groups read each of the three characters in different ways dependent on their background and situational context. Gender attribution is an often subconscious act that we all undertake, often multiple times a day whenever we encounter someone new (Kessler & McKenna, 1985; Speer, 2005). Reading and passing is a major theme throughout my work and hence characters are read and misread throughout the entirety of the novel. Some examples from my own work follow in this section.

The concept of passing is regarded by some sections of the populace as deceptive, as demonstrated via the trope of the deceptive transsexual (Serano, 2007). This is reflected in the term “going stealth” which is used to describe a person who attempts to pass as cisgendered without being “out” about their status as a gender diverse person. With regard to this trope, none of the characters in *ITWYW* hide their gender identities from other characters and importantly do not hide them from the reader. Hence, an important part of the characterisation involves downplaying the reveal so that it’s almost anti-climactic, perfunctory; the issue is deflated.

The first scene of the novel is constructed specifically to disrupt the reader’s normative process of gender attribution. I do this through an immediate introduction to

both Klaus/Sara's and Ella's gender identities in the very first section of *ITWYW* (see pp. 3-5).

The first instance that readers realise that Ella is differently gendered is on pages 4-5 of *ITWYW*. Her gender appearance is signified by the manner in which she is read by Klaus' neighbours. They find themselves unable to read her according to their expectations of gender.

Scenes in *ITWYW* where others in the story such as Yanni (see p. 91) and the woman at the airport (see p. 121-124) read Ella as male also reinforce an idea of her as having other possibly unstated masculine attributes. Given that one of the primary goals of fiction is to "show, not tell", showing others' reactions to Ella is an effective method of signalling her gender, rather than simply listing what popular culture would consider her gender variant attributes. I use this same method of signalling Zee's gender.

Klaus/Sara is also revealed as differently gendered on page 4 of *ITWYW*, and her chosen identity as Sara is revealed on page 14. However, it is not until later in the story that Ella begins to respect Sara's gender identity and refers to her by feminine pronouns.

Zee's gender is revealed on page 22 of *ITWYW* when we first meet the character. However unlike Klaus/Sara and Ella we are not privy to Zee's gender identification until the very end of the novel.

An important aspect of writing a novel as part of a doctoral study is the self-editing work that is done as a result of increased theoretical understanding. In a graphic scene in an earlier draft, Ella accidentally catches sight of Klaus/Sara's mutilated genitals. Initially, I felt that the shocking aspects of the scene functioned to demonstrate the historical persecution of gender diverse people, in this instance that some homosexual individuals were subjected to horrific tortures such as castration via orchidectomy in

German concentration camps during World War Two (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). However, after critically engaging with Serano's (2007) theories, I realised that such an explicit scene did little to expose injustices against gender diverse individuals, and further still that it went against my intention of not exploiting gender diverse bodies for my own theoretical and political agenda. I don't believe that the story loses anything in the omission of that scene. The reader still finds out that Klaus/Sara has involuntarily received an orchidectomy, however this information is told rather than shown and is hence less visceral (see *ITWYW*, p. 196).

Ella is mistaken less often for a man in Berlin by a particular subgroup of people whose discourse around gender differs from mainstream discourse. This group has had more exposure to a variety of genders and hence read gender through the lens of their individual experience. Ella's acquaintances in Berlin are young, urbane, educated, and have a political awareness around gender and sexuality. This group has had previous experience with transpeople and homosexual people. This is reflective of the group of people in their early 20s to early 30s that I met in Berlin. I write the characters reading Ella as either a masculine lesbian or as a transman because of her masculine features and their prior experience in which gender diversity is seen as something "cool" because of its supposedly transgressive nature. This group views gender variance as a politically aware stance – fucking with the gender binary is to be applauded according to this group. None of Ella's Berlin acquaintances read her as a man. I've highlighted this in the Berlin "moustache party" scene where Eva inspects the hair on Ella's upper lip and deems it unworthy of being called a moustache (*ITWYW*, p. 144). Ella feels relieved as she knows that in a different context the hair would be viewed as excessive, aberrant and unfeminine – in other words the hair would be labelled pejoratively as a

moustache. Thus the scene acts to expose cultural and sub-cultural differences in gender cues and gender attribution.

The Berlin moustache scene deliberately contrasts with other scenes in *ITWYW* such as the “post-fire” scene (pp. 4-5) and the “airport bathroom” scene (pp. 121-121) where her physical masculinity is implied and viewed as an abjection, as monstrous. In the continuation of the airport scene, the primacy and importance of official identification documents in making gender attributions is demonstrated as the security guards do not believe her gender claims until they see her passport documentation.

Klaus/Sara was a difficult character to write. I wanted to produce a character whose embodiment does not allow them to pass as woman, as not everyone has the fortune of passing as their chosen gender, but at the same time I wanted to avoid the trope of the pathetic transsexual. In showing the strength of Sara’s character and the historical events she endured to live in her chosen identity, I believe I have produced a nuanced character who does not shore up the problematic trope.

Of the three characters, Klaus/Sara was the most heavily researched as she is the character most removed in age, past experience and cultural background from my own. Concepts like “passing” for her character have a different meaning as her identity was constructed within a different discourse. She is based in part and very loosely on Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (von Mahlsdorf, 1995) who was popularly known as Berlin’s most famous transvestite (see also <http://www.tectonictheaterproject.org/IAMOW.html>). I have also attributed to Klaus/Sara a heavily fictionalised account of the murder of Pierre Seel’s gay lover in a German concentration camp during World War II (Seel, 1995). I included this brief depiction of the persecution of homosexual people by the German National Socialist

Party due to the small number of such depictions in Western literature (Seifert, 2003). As I have repeatedly emphasized, I want to avoid reinforcement of the dominant conflation of gender and sexuality. However, this central concern then came into conflict with the importance of some accuracy in the historical background of Klaus/Sara. Her identity would have been formed within the popular (binary) understandings of homosexual individuals during the first half of the twentieth century: the idea of genders being “inverted” as per the widely read work of the psychologist Havelock Ellis (1927).

Zee in contrast, is of the present and views gender as a social construction. Zee’s views on gender identity align with post-structuralists such as Judith Butler (he owns a copy of *Gender Trouble*). This view is alluded to in the line: “Ella dearest, you can’t take life too seriously – all of it is simply a performance with but one difference.” It should be noted here that while Zee accepts post-structural understanding of gender, the overriding point I make with *ITWYW* is that no gender identity and particularly not Zee’s, is more “correct” than another.

Ella has an uneasy relationship with gender. Zee uses the word “handsome” at one point to refer to Ella. While the word can equally refer to a male or a female, Ella takes umbrage at the term because of her sensitivity about the way in which others read her gender identity. She frequently feels that she either looks like a drag queen or man, but wants to be recognised as a woman. She uses the term “drag queen” in a self-denigrating sense as she, like some theorists (e.g. see Frye (1983) Jeffreys (2005)), initially views drag queens as a grotesque parody of femininity and this is how she perceives herself. I acknowledge that it is risky appealing to negative and derogatory stereotypes of a minority group in a work of fiction about marginalised identities.

However I wanted to show Ella's state of mind about her own gender identity and her low opinion of gender diversity in general. The use of this negative trope highlights Ella's feelings of monstrosity given broader community hostility towards gender diversity. She does not feel physically attractive because her physical appearance does not conform to traditional Western notions of what is considered feminine. For Ella her physical attractiveness is bound up with her self-esteem and self-worth. In much of Western society the feminine woman is commonly held up to be the ideal model of womanhood, yet Ella far from approaches this ideal.

It is Ella's own uneasy relationship with gender that leads to her being insensitive about the gender identity of others, including Zee and Klaus/Sara. Ella persists in calling Sara "Klaus" even while she is *en femme*, that is dressed as Sara. Finally, Sara's behaviour challenges Ella to change. Sara does this by refusing to speak to Ella until she uses the correct name and pronouns. In contrast, Eva uses the name Sara due to her self-perception as a cosmopolitan, political and cool individual, rather than it being a respectful acknowledgement of Sara's gender identity.

Ella attempts to determine Zee's gender self-identification by watching to see which bathroom he will choose. Still she is disconcerted by Zee's gender identity once she discovers he has a penis, and wonders what her feelings about him say about her own sexuality. She eventually comes to realise that her upbringing has influenced her thoughts about gender identity, and that in the end it's the person she loves not their chosen gender identity. In writing Ella from this subject position, I'm using the character to reflect some of the attitudes held towards gender diverse people by radical feminists such as Sheila Jeffreys, who refuse to recognise the self-identifications of gender diverse people (see for example Jeffreys, 2002). The critique of this stance is

important as according to Adams (2010): “refusing to respect the subject’s self-naming is part of every act of oppression” (p. 139). In the character of Ella I contrast this refusal with her own indignation at being misread to ironic effect.

There are other situations in *ITWYW* where I leave an ambiguity as to the reading done by another character. These are situations where we do not know enough about the background of these characters to determine the sense in which they are making their gender attributions. For example, each of the Melbourne taxi drivers might possibly perceive Ella as a transman, a woman, or a man (see pp. 3, 88, 119-120). I’ve chosen to deliberately leave this unclear. By virtue of their profession taxi drivers come into contact with a large cross-section of society, and have exposure to differently gendered individuals. The man in the second-hand store, Savers, may perceive Zee as either a woman or a transwoman (p. 82). The drunk man at the La Bite gig could also be reading Zee as either a woman, a cross-dresser who is *en femme* or a transwoman (p. 28). His alcohol impairment could be considered a factor in the attribution he makes or he may indeed understand that the majority of cross-dressers prefer the feminine pronoun when *en femme*. Therefore, I demonstrate that writing gender diversity within a text is an act of writing multiple layers. Thus, in these instances, there are multiple layers of reading taking place: between the character reading the gender of another character, and the actual reader of the text who then makes their own inferences and gender attributions based on the signifiers within the text, which may also include the manner in which other characters read gender.

## **Writing Gender Diversity: Ethical Dilemmas**

In Chapter One I compare and contrast feminist theories of gender identity with queer and trans theory, in Chapter Two I discuss the range of gender identities available in the written medium. Here I describe the ways in which I write gendered identities.

In writing a novel which explores gender diversity, I felt an acute and competing tension throughout the project. A number of theorists (e.g. Bornstein, 1995; Hale, 1997; Serano, 2007) have concerns about the colonisation of the trans voice by cissexual individuals. I will outline their critiques here and attempt to address them.

As a third wave feminist, I am deeply concerned with questions of identity particularly as applicable to a bi-gender culture. What does such a system mean for the lives of individuals who do not fit within this binary, or indeed other modes of gender reinforcement, whether those individuals identify as transgendered or otherwise? The ability to reflect on my own gender identity and the manner in which it has been shaped as a product of a bi-gender culture allows me to think more broadly about the impact of such a system on others.

My primary concern in writing this novel from my privileged position as a white cissexual academic was a wish to neither exploit nor objectify the transgender body for my own feminist aims, but at the same time I wanted to research and write about society's systems of gender reinforcement. In addition, given that a character is "a simulation that allows us to know what another might be wanting, thinking, and feeling" (Mar & Oatley, 2008, p. 175), fiction seemed like a good place to explore these concerns.

I am acutely aware of the criticisms of the noted trans theorist Sandy Stone (2006) who uses the term "ventriloquize" in a negative sense, much in the same way as Serano

uses the term “ungendering” (see p. 74 of this exegesis), to describe the act of using the transgender body as a vehicle for speaking from other discourses. I did not want to be considered exploitative in this fashion. In writing this thesis there was a three-way tension between

1. The creative work: in other words, the demands of writing a piece of fiction;
2. The academic research work: in other words, that the fiction is embedded in a piece of Doctoral research with its own demands;
3. The real: by this I refer to the complications inherent in writing fiction that has a vital and crucial connection with the identities that belong to real people.

In the initial phase of my study I was strongly discouraged from a sociological interviewing approach. My then-supervisor felt that the extensive process it would entail was incommensurate with a central focus on fiction. However, I’ve now come to feel the absence of voices acutely, and indeed Serano (2007) rightly criticises cissexual academics who don’t include in their studies the voices of the gender diverse individuals they research. My novel and exegesis draws only on the disembodied voices of those gender diverse individuals that I’ve read in autobiographies, academic work and online via forums and blogs, those I’ve seen on film, along with very informal discussions with gender diverse friends, in addition to my own self-reflections. *Is this enough? Would interviewing people be of any additional ethical benefit in terms of authenticity?* I argue that the subset of experiences and opinions obtained via interviews would be vital for a sociological thesis but would not have added materially to the novel which has different criteria for “authenticity”. However, the responses of a readers’ group, or similar, which is comprised of individuals who self-identify as having various gender diverse subjectivities, to various literary works would be invaluable to a broader

project of positive gender diverse representation and would be a fruitful area for further research.

One danger of writing a fiction with explicit purpose, a thesis novel, is that the narrative pleasures may become submerged in a kind of agitprop. Bristow and Broughton (1997) in discussing representations of gender, refer to “Butlerification”, by which they mean characters formed merely to act as a postmodern vehicle for a particular performative theory of gender, as espoused by Judith Butler. I have consciously attempted to allay those concerns by portraying characters in multiple ways, so that I cannot be presumed to speak from one particular theoretical position, instead I attempt to let the contradictions co-exist.

The writing of my novel is guided by my necessarily limited knowledge of gender diverse subjectivities: I cannot claim to inhabit any of the gender identities that feature heavily in my novel. Cautious in my approach, I follow C. Jacob Hale’s (1997) *Rules For Non Trans Writing About Trans*, and do not attempt to inform transgendered individuals about trans-subjectivity, but instead I intend the work to illuminate the pressures and constraints on each and every individual living within a bi-gender culture, including other modes of gender reinforcement, such as within queer communities. Thus my aim is to describe, not prescribe.

The novel has picked up on the discursive threads found in texts, both fictional and theoretical, that intentionally or otherwise work to destabilise the gender binary, that empower the individual by recognising and accepting diversity, and do not seek to impose limitations through classification. It continues and extends those threads, thus creating a dialogue with what has come before it. In addition, multi-stranded background research has allowed me to fictionally reflect contemporary culture in a way

that resembles lived experience. In writing the novel, my intention was to avoid portraying gender diversity as a problem to be solved. Hence the primary focus of the novel does not fall on the characters' gender diversity, but instead on generally shared, or human, aspects of lived emotional experience (again I refer here to Mar and Oatley's (2008) definition of character, as a simulation that can increase understanding in the reader). This technique aims to allow a mainstream audience to recognise themselves in what might be foreign to them, and will also allow for the possibility of greater acceptance and understanding of transgendered people and others with diverse gender identities.

I also argue that showing other possibilities to common tropes relating to gender diversity expands society's repertoire of available identities. I'm doing this by representing a masculine character who identifies as a woman but who doesn't identify as a lesbian; a cross-dressing 81 year-old with an enormous strength of character; and a gender-queer character who is happy just to be himself. Each of these three characters refutes and refuses the tropes of the pathetic and/or deceptive transsexual. I've also attempted to counter other common stereotypes around gender diversity—that gender diversity is only performed by the young, that it is only performed by male bodied people, that it is only homosexual, that it is only fabulous and flamboyant, that it is deceptive, pathetic or criminal.

I counter the pathetic transsexual trope in the following manner. I introduce the reader to Klaus/Sara via a tragic event and make use of that event to expose the neighbours' reactions as callous given the circumstances (see *ITWYW*, p. 4). Thus the meaning of Klaus/Sara not passing is transformed and the focus is shifted onto the callousness of the neighbours. In contrast, both Ella and the fireman show empathy for

Klaus/Sara as a person who has lost their home. Furthermore, should that initial scene evoke an idea of Klaus/Sara as pathetic I quickly reverse that notion by revealing his/her strength of character and robust personality throughout the course of the novel.

A further criticism of the representation of gender diversity by cissexual writers is that they ungender those who are at their most vulnerable, that is those who are transitioning (Serano, 2007). The contrast between Zee, Ella and Klaus's subjectivities allowed me to explore the complexity of attitudes towards and prejudices against gender diverse individuals. At the same time I am aware as Foucault (2002) argues that an individual can never speak from a position outside of the discourse that they are enmeshed. Thus as stated earlier, I am aware of the limitations of my own subject position. I attempted to tackle these concerns by largely limiting the content of my novel to what I had experienced, namely the impact of a social system that reinforces gender. It is for this reason that I chose not to represent experiences of transition, nor of coming out. In addition as I mention earlier, I do not presume that the characters I have created represent the experiences of a broad cross-section of gender diverse individuals.

In writing the thesis novel I attempted to steer clear of reinforcing binary power dynamics, an accusation levelled against both transgender and feminist discourses (Sellberg, 2009), while simultaneously avoiding disparaging individuals who desire to live in a gender situated in, or passing as situated within the binary. In this novel, there is no one bodily truth, there is no authentic body, no false body, only bodies and minds of multiple configurations; liberation and constriction are not pitted against each other but co-exist.

## The Social Reinforcement of Gender

In Chapter One I talk about theories of gender reinforcement, in Chapter Two I talk about how gender is socially reinforced in the written medium. Here I describe the manner in which I subvert the reification of the bi-gender system.

I do this by drawing attention to societal structures that support binary gender and attempt to show their arbitrariness. For example, in the airport bathroom scene I attempt to elicit empathy in the reader for Ella's misidentification by also using it as the scene of her miscarriage (see *ITWYW*, pp. 121-124). By doing so I contrast a biological signifier of gender (a miscarriage), with a physical marker (her appearance). I then make visible the social hierarchy commonly held to be "true" in Western cultures between these "proofs" of gender as follows: Ella's appearance (gender signifier) is considered by others as a confirmation of her gender (gender attribution) which outweighs her personal declaration of her identity (gender identity). Her miscarriage is a private matter so it signals gender to the reader but it is not knowledge available to the others in the airport scene. In this particular context official documentation in the form of Ella's passport is considered the only acceptable marker of gender and the "true" marker of gender, which outweighs the other proofs. It is hoped that this scene exposes and satirises the ridiculousness of gender attributions outweighing gender self-identification.

I have also placed emphasis on multiple bathroom scenes (see *ITWYW*, pages 27, 88, 121-124, 129) to reinforce the idea that the use of this supposedly private space is scrutinised by the general public and so acts as a reinforcer of the gender binary, and therefore restricts the types of genders available for individuals to enact. In other words,

individuals who are read as not adequately performing the gender category required by a specific societal structure may be denied access to that structure via social policing (see also Ella's polemic against the social policing of bathrooms *ITWYW*, p. 125). The implied threat of social policing may also lead individuals to change their behaviour (see also my earlier comments on panopticon surveillance p. 58). One example of this is Klaus/Sara wearing shorts on the way to the airport but changing once sie boards the plane. My intention was to show that the threat of authority figures misreading an individual's gender identity may lead to them modifying the way they enact their gender identity.

In addition, Ella tearing up the doctor's prescription is also a symbolic rejection of the medical model of gender identity (see *ITWYW*, p. 66).

In drawing attention to and making visible these multiple sites of social and regulatory policing and restriction of gender identities and emphasising their somewhat arbitrary nature I hope that readers will re-evaluate the existence of these societal structures.

## Further Research

Given the brevity of the exegetical form, it is impossible to include all aspects pertinent to one's thesis. In this section, I wish to draw attention to areas that might bear fruit in terms of further research.

One of my central concerns as a writer was to make some of the issues accessible through an enjoyable, readable 'mainstream' novel. This presented a dilemma in terms of the constraints and impetuses inherent in literary tropes and narrative trajectories. As extensive literary critical analyses identify (see for example Attebery, 2002; Markowitz, 2004; Melzer, 2006, 2008) the role of narrative plot and genre play and important role in the production and maintenance of gender identities. For example, the prevalence of the romance plot in fiction imposes its own tropes and narrative development. Similarly, the vast literary critical discussion of issues of realism, and its definitions, in the context of writing *ITWYW* could have provided a complete exegesis in itself. However, as emphasised throughout this thesis, some compromises and specific choice of focus both in the fiction writing and the exegesis have been made.

I mention earlier my regret at not incorporating interviews with individuals who self-identify as gender diverse prior to my writing of the novel (see p. 100). Therefore a possible area of important research would be to explore and analyse the responses of gender diverse individuals to literary works which purport to depict the subjectivities those individuals inhabit.

Another rich field for future research would be the critical comparison of film and visual modes to literary modes, particularly with regard to their roles as heterotopic spaces which either transgress or normalise diverse gender identities.

## CONCLUSION

In this feminist creative writing practice, I agree with Whittle (2006) who states: “Feminism is about a better set of values in which gender loses some of its power of oppression, in which separate and distinct voices are not only heard but listened to, and in which a better set of values is followed” (p. 202). The “better set of values” in this instance is to portray a diversity of gendered individuals as normal people, not as somehow deviant as has been the norm in a large proportion of mainstream fiction. I carry out this project in a fictional work by critically interrogating a number of issues relating to the representation of gender diverse identities, and write the novel in line with these critical theorisations.

In Volume Two, the exegesis, I wish to draw attention to the difficulties of situating my work within any one theoretical framework. Gender diversity is most commonly theorised in queer theory and trans theory, and yet I hesitate to strictly label my characters, Ella and Zee in particular, as either trans or queer. Halberstam’s (1998) description of “queer” has some appeal:

A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence. (p. 13)

However, Halberstam does not devote any of her book *Female Masculinity* to heterosexual masculine women.

A third term, “queer heterosexuality”, appears to be gaining popularity with some academics (Fantina, 2006; Schlichter, 2004, 2007; Thomas, 2009; Thomas, Aimone, & MacGillivray, 2000). However, while the term holds promise as a descriptor of heterosexuality that performs genders in diverse ways, particularly beyond the binary, it too is a term I find problematic because it suggests the hegemonic colonisation of a minority space. Again, I find I’ve come up against the discursive limits of language.

The exegesis theorises the cultural invisibility of a variety of gender diverse subjectivities, and of gender diverse people who do not want to have sexual reassignment surgery in a binary gender system. It also theorises the heteronormative privileging of those individuals who present as having intelligible and congruent gender identities, by this I mean men, or those who present as men, who are masculine and women, or those who present as women, who are feminine (Jackson, 2005). The privilege afforded to individuals who are seen to have congruent gender identities is understood in the theoretical literature as “passing privilege” (Squires & Brouwer, 2002).

These aspects of gender diverse experience have not been critically explored or theorised to any extent, either from a cultural or a medical/psychological perspective (Rosario II, 1996). Many social discourses – medical, legal, feminist – still work in ways that reinforce the gender binary and hence require critical examination. However, while Halberstam (2005) and Butler (2001; 2004) attempt to address the lived experience of trans people queer theory has largely been silent on the matter. . Namaste states that “these discussions [within queer theory]...rarely consider the implications of an enforced sex/gender system for people who live outside it” (1996, p. 183). Therefore, the thesis project as a whole challenges commonly held assumptions about gender by

depicting gender diversity via trans notions of gender (following the works of (Bornstein, 1995, 1998; Ekins and King, 2006, Serano, 2007 and others) as opposed to homosexual notions of gender, in the form of a literary novel and an exegesis.

Thus we have seen gender is both socially constructed and experienced in an embodied manner, it is multiplicitous in nature but depending on individual performativities it may appear to fit into a binary. At the representational level, the challenge is not to automatically reference the socially constructed gender binary which privileges intelligible genders, nor necessarily present gender transgression as superior to binary modes of gender, but instead to reflexively question the impact that any chosen mode of representation has on the group it purports to represent.

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## APPENDIX ONE: A Select Bibliography of Novels Featuring Gender Diverse Characters

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## **APPENDIX TWO: Articles in the *Woman's Day* and the *New Idea* Featuring Gender Diverse Individuals (2000-2006)**

Carlotta. (2000, 22 January). Sometimes, it's hard to be a woman. *New Idea*. pp. 26-27.

Marinos, S. (2000, 7 February). True life: This nun became a man! *New Idea*.

Davies, K. (2000, 15 July). New Idea Exclusive "I always felt like a woman". *New Idea*. pp. 22-23

New Idea. (2001, 29 September). Good Read: Trapped by my own body. *New Idea*.

Marquardt, B. (2001, 8 December). From Joshua to Jaclyn. *New Idea*. pp. 26-27.

Olszewski, P. (2003, 17 February). Cross-dressing saved my marriage! Madeline's husband Dennis is also her best girlfriend Denise. *Woman's Day*. pp. 20-21.

Lloyd, R. (2003, 22 March). Exclusive: My dad became my mum. *New Idea*. pp. 16-17.

James, C. (2003, 19 May). Dame Edna Average. *Woman's Day*. pp. 26-27.

Eveleigh, R. & Rhodes, K. [Closer/Planet Syndication]. (2003, 8 September). Shocking Discovery! I found out I was a woman at 55! *Woman's Day*. pp. 20-21.

Fidgeon, P. (2003, 18 October). My husband became my wife. *New Idea*.

McWhirter, E. (2003, 18 October). Touch of Evil: Hadden Clark led a depraved life of murder as a cross-dresser. *New Idea*. pp. 64-65.

Dearsley, L. [Now/IPC Syndication]. (2003, 20 October). Amazing sex change: I paid \$75,000 to become a woman. *Woman's Day*. pp. 22-23.

McWhirter, E. (2004, 27 March). More than a woman. *New Idea*. pp. 20-21.

Stansfield, G. (2004, 26 April). Real life read: Our sex swap marriage. *Woman's Day*. p. 32.

New Idea. (2004, 1 May). Real life read: My sex change hell. *New Idea*. pp. 22-23.

Goff, A. (2004, 10 July). The gender trap. *New Idea*. pp. 27-28.

Lang, J. (2004, 18 October). Real life reads: From biker to babe. *Woman's Day*. pp. 53-54.

Goff, A. (2004, 27 November). She was my man. *New Idea*. p. 43.

Fuhrman, N. (2004, 11 December). News Exclusive: I'm a Woman to a Tee! *New Idea*.

Witty F. (2005, 17 January). Our mum became our dad. *Woman's Day*. pp. 38-39.

Wilson C. (2005, 24 January). Real life read: Doctors got my sex wrong. *Woman's Day*. pp. 36-37.

Rudd, A. & Hoyle, A. (2005, 19 February). My two mums used to be men...and one of them was my dad! *New Idea*. pp. 30-31.

Barnes, J. (2005, 25 July). I'm a sex-change soccer star. *Woman's Day*. p. 40.

Carey, J. (2005, 21 November). At my first wedding I was the groom. For my second marriage...I changed sex and became the bride. *Woman's Day*. p. 42.

Brown, J. (2006, 8 May). True life: My son is now my daughter. *Woman's Day*. pp. 48-49.

Gregory, J. (2006, 29 May). Special: Whacky Weddings Guess what happened next:

Turn the page to see what went on when the weddings were over. *Woman's Day*.

pp. 33-34.