

Off the Wall

stories about being
young and gay/lesbian

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OFF THE WALL

Out of bed, into the shower, munch through a slice of sourdough toast, all on automatic. Then back to the bathroom and a face staring out from the wiped-bright circle on the foggy mirror. Soft underlip, scrunched-together cheeks, sulky eyelids coming down like a screen.

That wakes her up. She peers into the brown eyes and wags her jaw from side to side, to make sure the reflection really belongs to her. (It does.) While a part of her stays there to guide the toothbrush, another part goes sliding off through a handy warp in the space-time continuum.

I look really young today. About ten years old. Damn. Hate the way my face keeps changing. Yesterday I reckon I looked more like twenty. Preferred that. Gives me more confidence. Y'know, it's funny how Mum and Dad always look the same age. Goes with getting older, probably. You start with a face made out of playdough and gradually replace it with genuine people-cells ... Then again, maybe Mum and Dad see different faces

whenever they look into the mirror, too. That's always a possibility. Must ask them some day.

Thinking about her folks brings her back to earth again. She runs the tip of her tongue across super-clean teeth and concentrates on practical questions like: has she packed the right books? does she want an apple or an orange with her lunch? will she hate school as much as usual?

Or more?

Practical questions carry her as far as the tram stop and, yeah, she's out of luck, because three other kids from Kingston Hall are there ahead of her. On a good day they catch the tram before or the tram after, so on a good day she can spend a few more minutes in her privacy capsule, gazing out at cloud-shapes or leaf patterns or the toddler in the front yard opposite the tram stop. But now the privacy capsule cracks wide open. Welcome to the real world.

She can never predict whether the others are going to be friendly or ignore her. Today they say a brief 'Hi' and go on chatting. She edges into the background, head bent, arms tucked close to her sides, taking up as little space as possible. Watches with envy while they sprawl across the seat, elbow each other, strum a riff of laughter, jump up to change positions. Then, remembering she isn't invisible, she hastily turns her head away, in case they think she's staring.

Chelsea Fenner hangs over the back of the seat and snaps her fingers.

'Hey, guys, she blinked! Sorry about that - you looked like you'd been hypnotised. Figured I'd better bring you round before the tram came along.'

'... I was just thinking.'

'*Thinking?* Oh yeah, of course, should've known.'

Another set of laughter chords. She searches for a witty reply but can't find one anywhere on the surface of her mind. So she goes deeper and deeper in, following a glitter-lode of ideas.

Thinking really bugs people, for some reason. Ms Sinclair in her end of year report: 'An active brain, almost too active. How about a bit more discipline?' - and that's from a teacher at a so-called alternative school. Even Mum has a go at me from time to time. 'You're rambling again, angelface, and you know it always drives me up the wall. Get to the point, okay?' Sorry, Mum, I wasn't fitted with the same internal compass as everyone else. Other people seem to know where they're headed, without even thinking about it. I just go round in circles. Ask me to get

to the point and all I can say is, 'What is the point?' So it's lucky I enjoy my mind-circles, right?

Wrong, she reminds herself. Didn't she decide last week that she was going to reform? No more drifting off into cloudland at the slightest opportunity. Time to do as she's told and start paying attention to what's going on in front of her.

Like the tram, for instance, which is flapping its folding doors a few metres away.

So she hurls herself up the steps, shoves frantically at a wall of backs. Pops out on the other side, nose to nose with Harry Kimball.

'Listen, tell me something about Shakespeare, so I can sound intelligent for Mr Levy,' says Harry. (His breath smells of warm spearmint.)

She spills out her opinions, chucking in a few jokes, turning pink when Harry laughs. Chris Nguyen sticks his head over Harry's shoulder and disagrees with her. Tina Kovacs disagrees with him. Harry disagrees with the lot of them.

Wow. This is a conversation.

Then somehow Harry and Chris and Tina are all raving on about this new magazine she's never read. They have to duck round her in order to see each other properly, so, to make things easier for them, she lets a lurch of the tram carry her on to the next strap. Hangs there half-listening, half-remembering the pleasure of being at the centre of the group. She likes Harry's mob and often wishes she had more in common with them.

All the same, when they swarm off the tram with the other Kingston Hallers, she doesn't try to keep up. Instead, she practises a special trick she's invented - pretending that each foot sticks to the ground for a second before she pulls it loose. That way, she drops behind the other kids. That way, she gets a chance to test out the magic again.

The wall around the school is three metres high and made from old red bricks, flecked with chips of stone and brushed with blue shadows. As she looks up, she sees (she really sees it: this is more than just a memory) Tina Kovacs walking along the top of the wall, arms wide for balance

and suddenly the sun found a loophole in the leaves and a long shaft of light hit Tina's shoulder and broke into a four-pointed star. You see that sort of thing on TV all the time, especially in commercials, but I always thought it was just trick photography, I thought it never happened in real life. Except it happened right there in front of me that day - one ray shooting up towards the sky, two rays spinning sideways off Tina's shoulder as she walked

along the wall, one ray splitting off and flying straight at me. A top moment. Perfect.

She isn't sure why Tina-on-the-wall means so much to her. Still, she's never forgotten that day; and every now and then she flukes her way into a magic feeling that it's actually happening all over again; and whenever the magic works, she takes it as a good omen.

What's more, the omen comes true. First Chelsea appears at her locker and asks for the loan of a pen. Later on Tina herself bumps into her in the corridor, apologises and keeps talking all the way to the next class. And on it goes. For a couple of hours she's miraculously free from that oppressive sense of hanging round on the edges, wondering what the hell she's doing there.

Even at lunchtime she's gathered up into Chelsea's group, not left around for Dashiell Cartwright to find. It's hard to escape from Dashiell, once he corners you. He has a hundred different grudges against the teachers and the other kids and he lists them off, one by one, whenever he gets the chance. Sometimes she's afraid of his intensity. Sometimes she's afraid that they're alike.

But today she's protected from Dashiell. As long as she isn't feeling irritable or out of place, Chelsea's group can be quite restful. While they talk about guys, she curls up and scans the bushy garden of the old house that's now a school. There are kids doing tai chi on the lawn. Kids climbing trees. Kids reading and talking and lying in the sun.

There's a kid staring back at her from a nearby bench.

Sorry, she tells him via telepathy. Didn't mean to break the rules by looking at you for too long. She shifts around, hitching up her shoulder as a barrier, then glances across it to make sure that he's turned away too. He hasn't. He's still staring.

All right, she thinks, you're on. So she stares just as hard. The guy has a long crumpled face that'll probably look much the same when he's forty; he has a long skinny body that could only belong to a teenage guy; he has a way of sitting forward on the seat that reminds her of an untrained puppy straining at the leash. As their eyes meet for a second, she gets this weird feeling that she's been bounced on and licked and left to decide whether she'll laugh or yell, 'Down, boy!'

'Listen,' she bursts out, 'who's that guy over there?'

Liz Fabian is ace at examining people without being caught at it. She knows all about everyone too. 'His name's Joel,' she reports almost immediately. 'He's new. They reckon he was kicked out of his last school.'

'Just catching up on the gossip?' asks Chelsea. 'Or are you interested in him? Hey, this is a special occasion. You aren't usually interested in guys.'

That's true enough, which means it shouldn't hurt, but the knifeblade sharpness of Chelsea's voice is painful in itself. On reflex she turns her face into a mask and hides behind it, to avoid any more wounds. When she peers out cautiously from the mask's eyeholes, Liz Fabian is stretching her arms up to the clouds and arching backwards.

'Oh, wow,' Liz sighs. 'I feel wild today. Wish it was the weekend, so I could just cut loose. Y'know - don't dream it, do it.'

Dreams. Dreams. Do I have dreams? Not really, can't even work out what to dream about. Don't wanna be a rock star. Don't wanna be rich. Don't wanna fall in love and live happily ever after. Sure, people are always telling me to stop dreaming but daydreams are different. I just enjoy letting my mind wander. It's not supposed to lead anywhere. Like my daydream about Tina-on-the-wall, for instance. Where could that possibly lead? She jumps down and takes me in her arms. *No. No, I didn't think that.* Right. So there you are. I don't have the kind of dreams Liz was talking about. Don't even know what it'd be like.

Stop it, she tells herself. You're thinking those thoughts that go round in circles. Better watch out or Chelsea'll catch you at it and make fun of you again.

When she checks, however, Chelsea's busy laughing at something Liz just said. The two of them are less than half a metre away and yet they seem to be separated off by a vast distance. In fact, the whole garden seems suddenly distant, a dozen shades of green smudged together, the kids' faces blurred into blobs of colour, like a wide landscape done in thick swift brushstrokes of oilpaint and then framed.

Only Joel's face remains alive and alert. He lifts his long skinny hand to brush the sunlight out of his eyes and for a moment she thinks (she hopes) that he's waving.

'Time to get back,' announces Liz. 'Unless you want to go over and say hello to your new boyfriend.'

'Ah, lay off. I asked what his name was, that's all. No need to turn it into a big production.'

She means it. Seriously. But now that she's noticed Joel, she keeps seeing him everywhere. He moves like an ugly-beautiful French clown, always about to trip and stumble, always saving himself with a graceful swoop. He chats to anyone within reach, although he's so tall that the conversations

never really seem to mesh. She can't work him out. And why on earth should she want to?

All the same, when the school siren gives its last dying gargle, she doesn't race for the gate, the way she usually would. Instead, she prowls round the garden, feeling restless. Wild, like Liz. She wants some of those dreams, the ones she's always missed out on.

So, of course, she finds herself drifting towards the wall.

Funny, she's never asked herself how Tina climbed up there in the first place. The wall's out of bounds, which was part of the original magic, but that particular rule hardly ever gets challenged, because there's no obvious way up. She has to scout around for ages before she discovers the bush with unexpectedly tough branches, the narrow toehold between two bricks, the cast-iron squiggle that gives her hands something to latch onto.

A final heave, a heartstopping moment where she struggles to get her balance and then she starts to shunt herself along by the seat of her pants. Eventually she bumps into the gatepost. Mission accomplished. She lolls against rough warm brick and looks across into the second-storey windows of the old house. Their mirror surfaces wink blandly back at her. She looks down at the kids, milling along the path like ants. Joel's easy to spot, because he's so much taller than the rest.

Help. What am I doing here? This isn't like me, I'm not the adventurous type. How am I going to get down again? It's quite a drop. Wish I'd never dreamed up this mad idea. Wish I was home in my nice cosy room, with my crystal mobile making rainbow shadows, the luminous stars on the ceiling, two bookcases jam-packed with books and my sf posters on the wall - a map of Middle Earth, a spacewoman in a moon crater, a flyer for *The Many-Coloured Land* that I conned out of the local book shop ages ago, a -

'Here, give us a hand,' says Joel.

She gulps. Anchoring herself, she reaches down. He scrabbles at the wall like a manic spider, levitates, plops onto the bricks beside her and starts talking straight away.

'Good one. Didn't know how I was going to find you in that crowd. Don't get me wrong - you stand out from the rest of the mob, all right, even without climbing a wall. The wall made it easier, though. Couldn't possibly miss you this way. So, thanks.'

He sounds as if he thinks she organised it on purpose, to catch his attention. Did she? Hard to say and no time to find out, because Joel's still chatting on.

'Okay, now we're here, what'll we talk about? I know, tell me what you're doing in this joint. Genius? Problem child? Parents who couldn't decide between state schools and private schools? Parents who're small-I liberals? Hmm. If I had to guess, I'd tick the last box, right?'

She almost growls, 'None of your business' but just in time, she remembers she's always wanted to cut the preliminary noises and launch straight into proper conversation. So instead she grins and says, 'How can you tell if your parents are the small-I liberal type?'

'Sex,' says Joel. 'That's pretty infallible. If they try like mad to sound cool about sex, they generally qualify. *My* parents reckon nobody ought to be allowed to have sex without a government license ... but then I'm here as a problem child myself.'

'Yeah? Well, Mum told me all that garbage years ago, except that she twitched the entire time, which wasn't exactly cool. And Dad - he teases me whenever I say hi to a Kingston Hall guy in the street, just like he was one of the gang. It's kind of cute, in a way. At least, it would be, if ...'

'If you were going to end up with a guy.'

'Dead right. But since I never will, it's just a great big hassle.'

Did I say that? Watch it, Joel might think you're telling him you're a lesbian. Well, that's what he's supposed to think. I am a lesbian ... Oh, help, this is totally off the wall. I've never even thought it through before, not properly, and yet here I am, saying it out loud to some guy I've only just met. And I'm not even freaking - okay, maybe twitching a bit, like Mum, but I don't want to take it back or anything. Actually, I'd kind of like to say it again. Lesbian, lesbian, lesbian. Ow. My head hurts. Too many ideas all at once. They'll have to wait in line. I can think later. Right now, I'd rather keep on talking.

'How did you guess?' she asks in a rush. 'About me, I mean?'

He hoists a comical eyebrow. 'What does anyone do in a new place? I looked around for other people like me. Only way to get by, especially at school. I mean, there you are, herded in with these bods that you'd never even nod to, if you had any choice. Not that I object to being tolerant, in principle at any rate, but some people find it hard to be tolerant back at you.'

He's going too fast for her. Doggedly, she sticks to her point. 'But how could you tell I was like you? I mean, I didn't really know about myself.' (Not until two minutes ago.) 'So how did *you* know?'

'Instinct,' he says, his face suddenly reverent. 'Dowsers can find water with a bent twig and the power in their hands. I can find other gay people, anywhere, anyhow. Don't quite know how to explain it but ... like, even though you were stuck in the middle of the mini-skirt brigade, to me you looked like you were having afternoon tea with Vita Sackville-West and Gertrude Stein. Know what I mean?'

'Huh? Who are they?'

'Oh, fabulous. We've got a lot of great gossip ahead of us, haven't we?'

'Yes,' she agrees. 'Yes.'

So he talks, straddling the wall like a cowboy, waving his long arms about to emphasise the most important points. History. ('That's what Stein and Sackville-West are. There's nothing new about being gay.') Jokes. ('My mother made me a lesbian.' 'If I give her the wool, will she make me one too?') The story of his life. (I've known about myself since I was three. And I've been certain since I was ten.) Joel mixes all of this together, like a tour guide leading her round an unknown city at breakneck speed and she follows breathlessly behind him, content for the moment to catch one sentence in every four, because he's talking a language she understands, a language in which everything makes sense, for a change.

Feels good. Feels great. Although every now and then she remembers where she is and sneaks a nervous glance at the kids streaming past. Joel studies them too but with a more exploratory gleam in his eyes.

'That's the other reason I found you. I knew you had to be here. After all, two in every twenty people are gay - well, they usually say "one in ten" but that sounds a bit lonely. Anyway, there's heaps more than twenty kids in this school, so I figured the odds were in my favour.'

'Two in twenty?' She's rapt to hear it. 'Hey, that's awesome. Let's count 'em off.'

And they count for a while ('seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, gay'), until she's falling about at the unlikely answers they've come up with. Except that ... 'Hold it,' Joel interrupts. 'There's no law that says the captain of the footy team or the spunkiest girl in the school can't turn out to be gay, y'know. You should've seen this guy at my last school who - but I'll save that story for later.'

She mulls this over. She takes a deep breath. She makes a quantum leap. Somewhere back in the past she got the distinct impression that gay men are more like women and gay women are sort of like men. If that's not true - and it certainly doesn't fit with her or Joel - then there's something she

wants to know. Urgently. She links with Joel's spaniel-brown eyes and directs their combined eyebeam outwards.

'What about her?' she gasps. 'What does your famous instinct say about her?'

'Sorry,' Joel says, after a quick survey of Tina. 'If my famous instinct's still working, she isn't a leso. The one behind her could be, but.'

'*Chelsea?* Oh, terrific. She hassles me all the time.'

'In that case, make her a definite!'

She can't help laughing at Joel's evil grin, even though at the same time she can't help frowning over what he's just said. Does he mean that Chelsea might be trying too hard to fit in? That Chelsea might hassle her in order to make herself look more normal by comparison? There's a certain logic to it but, since she's not crazy about Chelsea, she basically hopes Chelsea *isn't* gay.

On the other hand, if gay people come in all sorts and varieties, she can hardly expect to like every last one of them, just because she's been lucky enough to like Joel. Complicated, she moans inwardly. A lot to catch up on.

She's planning her next question when she becomes aware of the swirl of movement down in the street. An assortment of shadows on the footpath, lanky, gawky, chunky. Whispers. Louder comments. Elbows nudging, arms reaching up.

And Joel goes tumbling off the wall.

She looks down. His knees are drawn up like a grasshopper and his long face tilts towards the five guys. They don't say, 'We know we can pick on you and get away with it, because you're just a poofter,' but then again, they don't need to. It's there in the way they stand, legs astride, hands resting comfortably on belts, mouths smug. Even the air around them smells different, like the bushfire winds that burned down from the hills last summer. She knows exactly what's happening here, though (like a bushfire) it's something she's never actually witnessed, only read about or watched on telly.

Violence.

At this point she could go either way but (especially after she spots Dashiell Cartwright hovering at the back of the gang) she chooses to jump down into the street and stand beside Joel.

'Wicked,' she says, tossing an admiring overtone into her voice. 'I mean, you guys've got real style. They ought to give you your own prime time comedy show for that effort. Mind you, you'll need an audition tape. How about I grab a video camera from the media room and we run through it again? Maybe with you lot on the wall next time.'

'Ah, shut up,' rumbles Peter Dawson from year 11. 'You talk too much.'

'I talk a lot,' she concedes, 'but why not? Someone has to talk, we can't all be Action Men. Besides, if you're not interested in talking to us, what the hell are you hanging around for?'

The guys look at each other, which doesn't produce any easy answers. The guys look at her and Joel. And because there are two of them and because they seem interested, instead of terrified, the guys decide to move on. (This time, at any rate.)

'Hold on,' Dashiell sings out, a few seconds too late. 'Thought we were going to show the new kid where he gets off.'

But if he wanted to focus all his grudges against the world onto Joel, he's missed his moment. Stranded in the middle of the footpath, he fidgets briefly and then scuttles away.

She watches his retreating back. Not so long ago, she and Dashiell seemed like outsiders together but now she's beginning to suspect that there are lots of different kinds of outsiders. She feels angry with Dashiell and sorry for Dashiell and proud of herself by turns, until the mixture of feelings curdles in her stomach, like lemon juice mixed with milk.

To cheer herself up, she turns back to Joel. He's still sitting on the ground.

'Are you okay?' she asks. 'You didn't hurt yourself, did you?'

'No way,' he reassures her. 'I've done self-defence, learnt how to fall.'

'Self-defence?' she snaps, angry all over again. (It's the flip side of relief.) 'They must've taught you how to fight, as well as fall. Why didn't you pulverise those maniacs?'

'Come on like Rambo, huh? Only one problem - Rambo doesn't have to turn round next day and head back into the same school as the guys he's been pulverising. Fact is, you know the kids here way better than I do. I figured it made sense to leave things up to you this time.'

'But you couldn't be sure I'd stick up for you.'

'Yes, I could.'

She'd like to argue but she has to admit he was right. There's one point that still needs to be cleared up, though.

'If those guys didn't hurt you, why are you still sitting there?'

Joel sighs. 'I suppose it's time you knew the worst about me. I'm vain. I wear my trousers too tight and they split when I fell. So I'm not standing up till I've swapped my jumper for that nice long windcheater of yours.'

As she kneels down beside him, she's shaking with laughter. (Beats shaking with fear, any day of the week.) The jumper is soft from the warmth of his body. She pulls it over her head and during the temporary blackout, she streaks away like a comet into the future.

This is how it'll go. We'll be a team. We'll support each other, inside and outside Kingston Hall. I can start to say what I want to say and do what I want to do, because I've got someone who wants to know all about it, which ought to make me braver. Come to think of it, I'm braver already. Never could've called the shots on those guys before. Never even called Chelsea. Unreal. Imagine what I'll be like, once I get used to this. I tell you, the sky's the limit.

There you go again, she warns herself. Wasting time daydreaming about things that may never happen. Thought you were going to reform.

No, hang on, she tells herself a heartbeat later. Even if things don't work out with Joel, I'm headed in the right direction at last. Truth is, I could never take much for granted before, because people don't take me for granted. Well, some people do. Joel does and hopefully there'll be others like him. (And others different from him.) Although I'll still need to think things through, more than most. But I won't be going round in circles any more. I'll be inventing the world for myself, starting from scratch.

Learning how to dream.

All of this has only taken a few seconds, during which she has rolled up the cuffs of the jumper, scrambled to her feet and held a hand out to Joel. He dusts himself down and glances over his shoulder at the wall.

'Let's go,' he says.

CROSSED WIRES

Damien kissed me the other night. I'd imagined it so often that I need to stop and sort out the reality from the fantasies. But this is how it happened. We were working on our writing folios together, side by side at my desk which is really an old kitchen table, and I reached past Damien to get my thesaurus at the same time as he reached across to nick one of my bios. Our faces were only a couple of millimetres apart. We pulled back, just a fraction, and our eyes met. Then Damien moved the extra few millimetres and pressed his mouth against mine.

I suppose that sounds like a fairly ordinary experience, unless I somehow manage to work in the fact that my name's John.

Damien's lips were dry and smooth but after that his tongue was wet and lively. We were crammed together on the same chair by then, leg hooked over leg, arms gripping tight. I breathed in Damien's unique personal smell, like a theme tune weaving its way through a movie, while we grappled and strained and stroked the backs of each other's necks and kissed deeper.

Then all of a sudden he jumped up, muttered something about having a lot to sort out and almost ran for the door. Fair enough, I thought tolerantly as his feet rattled down the stairs. Me, I didn't have anything to sort out. I'd been in love with Damien for a year and a half - six months longer than we'd been friends - and I knew exactly what I wanted. Still, I could see that Damien might need a bit of time to catch up.

After I'd stared into a blank computer screen for a while, I went downstairs for a snack. Our house is enormous: Mum and Dad and I wander around in it like jetlagged travellers in an airport. The place only fills up around Christmas, when my brothers and sisters and their families come home and Mum does her slightly frayed imitation of the ideal hostess, while Dad opens bottles on the sidelines.

I looked in the fridge and made my selection from a smorgasbord of cheeses and cold meats. (The housekeeper takes care of all that.) While I was creating the perfect sandwich, Mum materialised on the far side of the breakfast bar. She was wearing her old grey cardigan, the one she's had ever since she was at university, with frayed elbows and biro stains and a pocket dangling loose like a flap of elephant skin. Not a good sign.

'Do you think I ought to have a facelift, Johnny?' she asked.

I checked to see whether she'd aged dramatically in the past few hours. Mum's skin is smoother than velvet and her eyes are mahogany brown with clear blue-shadowed whites, as though she'd never seen a moment's trouble in her life.

'Hey, why would you want to do that?' I said in a sensible, bracing voice. Everyone talks to Mum that way.

'Oh, I don't know. I just thought it might help. But maybe I ought to enrol in a course instead. Pottery might be nice, or something to do with economics.'

'A course or a facelift? What a choice!'

'I've got plenty of others,' she said with dignity. 'Choices, choices, choices. Too many of them, really. It makes me feel very tired. Do you think I ought to go and lie down?'

'Mm. That's probably a good idea.'

Hitching up the sleeves of her cardigan, she drifted away. At the doorway she looked back and said, 'Johnny? Are you falling in love?'

Every time I decide that Mum's right off the planet, she comes out with something unexpected like that. I wasn't sure whether she'd guessed what was happening between me and Damien or whether she was just chucking out questions at random.

'No, Mum,' I said. 'I'm not falling in love.'

It was true, after all - I don't lie to Mum, even when it would be convenient. I *wasn't* falling in love with Damien. But only because I'd finished falling ages ago.

'Good,' my mother nodded. 'Falling in love is a mistake. Don't do it.'

I spent the rest of the evening wondering how Damien was going to act next day at school. Whenever any of the Year 12 guys and girls get together, you always know about it. Not because they hang all over each other - that generally comes later - but because they keep sending these meaningful glances and giggling (if they're girls) or posing and throwing their heads back (if they're guys). Also because their friends keep nudging and pointing and posing and giggling and carrying messages between them.

Well, that wasn't likely to happen with Damien and me. As far as I knew, there was only one other gay kid in the school - a guy called Philip Brodie - and with my typical bad luck, Phil and I were total opposites in everything except for fancying guys. (And we probably went for totally opposite types of guys too but I wouldn't know about that, because we'd never managed more than a two minute conversation.)

So nobody would be cheerleading for me and Damien - but hell, I knew that already. The reason I was tucked away in my window seat, staring out at the darkness, was that I wanted to work out, realistically, what I was going to face next day.

Worst case scenario: Damien would stride up to me, clench his jaw and his fist and knock me down, growling, 'Die, faggot scum!' Fortunately for me, if he did that, he'd need to explain to the assembled crowd why he was so sure that I was faggot scum ... which meant that I could safely forget about the worst case scenario.

Okay then, the best case. The one where Damien walks up to me in front of the entire school, flings his arms around me and says, 'I love you, John, and I don't care who knows it.' Oh, please. Forget that, as well. What's the point of wasting time thinking about something that'll never, never happen?

That left me with the middle ground: a Damien who was nervous, worried, frightened, unsure, desperately needing to talk to someone. It would be boring but hey, I'd listen. Fact is, I went through all of that myself, not so long ago, and it would've been nice if someone had been around to listen to me.

I headed off to school next day, feeling fairly pleased with myself. Worst case, best case, something in between - I thought I had it all sorted out. It never occurred to me that Damien would simply decide to pretend that our kiss had never happened.

Dinner that night was chicken cacciatore. (The housekeeper again.) When I passed a plateful to Mum, she looked at it and winced.

‘Oh dear. All those little arms and legs, chopped into pieces. Do I really eat that kind of thing?’

‘Of course you do,’ Dad said. ‘It’s one of your favourite meals. Maria made it for you specially.’

Mum’s mouth quivered. ‘What a horrible person I must be. Don’t you realise what happens to those poor chickens? People lock them up in crowded dirty cages, with no sunlight and no fresh food and no room to move. They’re prisoners, just like me.’

Dad and I glanced at each other and then looked away. It’s always a worry when Mum starts to talk about being a prisoner.

‘For heaven’s sake,’ Dad said, trying to sound cheerful. ‘Maria would never buy battery chickens. She says they don’t have the proper flavour to them, remember. She always insists on free range.’

Even after all these years Dad can’t seem to work out the best way to handle Mum. She sat bolt upright and said in a trembling voice, ‘Oh well, that makes it all right then. We can kill as many defenceless animals as we like, as long as they have the proper flavour.’

The three of us stared down at our plates in silence, swallowing hard. Somebody had to make a move, so I gripped my knife tightly and forced myself to slice a strip of meat off a chicken leg.

‘Better eat up, Mum,’ I said, chewing determinedly. ‘Otherwise Maria’s feelings’ll be hurt. You know how upset she gets when we don’t appreciate the meals she cooks.’

Straight away Mum scooped up a forkful of chicken and rice. ‘This *is* tasty,’ she said in her best social manner, as though she’d never started raving on about dismembered arms and legs. ‘I must remember to thank Maria tomorrow. Chicken cacciatore is one of my favourite meals, isn’t it, Johnny?’

When I got around to thinking about Damien again, I realised I should’ve guessed. People never want to talk about the big things. At Christmas dinner everyone does their best to pretend that Uncle Fred isn’t socking back the booze until he passes out quietly in a corner. And nobody ever mentions nuclear war or the destruction of the ozone layer in polite conversation. You have to join special groups like AA or Greenpeace if you want to discuss that sort of stuff, which shows just how touchy it is.

Dad never talked about Mum either, not openly. He just told me from time to time that Mum was ‘going away again’ and then he’d tell me a month later that Mum was ‘coming back again’. Still as mad as a meataxe, even after

a stay in her posh private rest home, but much less likely to hurl knives across the kitchen or set the garage on fire. For a while, at least.

Once Dad cornered me in the bathroom, after Mum had gone on a really major rampage. He coughed and spluttered, as if he was trying to get rid of a big gob of phlegm, and then he said, 'Johnno, you do a really good job with your mother. You know I appreciate that, don't you?'

Note that he didn't actually say, 'I appreciate you,' straight out. Instead he asked me whether I was prepared to believe it without ever being told. That's as close as Dad can get to a frank man-to-man talk. He copes with Mum by pretending that everything's fine and he can't acknowledge that it's a fantasy, even to me.

Because I've had to come to terms with the way Dad's mind works, I understood what was going on with Damien. He felt the same as Dad - he was hoping that if he didn't talk about the hard stuff, then maybe it'd just go away. I'm not like that, though. I don't actually despise their approach to things but somehow I can't manage to make it work for myself.

I suspect I've got too much of Mum in me.

While I was brooding about Damien, Mum sidled into my room. She potted about, picking up books and putting them down again, and then suddenly she whispered, 'Is The Jailer watching us, Johnny?'

'No, Mum,' I said patiently. 'No jailers in this room.' I know all about The Jailer. He's one of Mum's most regular delusions, from way back.

'The Jailer doesn't need to be in here with us,' Mum pointed out. 'He's got all the latest surveillance techniques at his disposal, after all. Electronic eyes, infrared scanners, bugs.'

'Like Bugs Bunny, you mean?'

For a moment I wondered whether my joke had been a mistake but then Mum clapped her hands and started to giggle like a five year old. I felt relieved. Sometimes she gets deeply paranoid about The Jailer but there are other times when she talks about him with a knowing twinkle in her eye, as if the whole business is just an off-beat sort of game.

She talks the same way about Dad too.

Next day Damien kept trying to dodge past me and when he couldn't, he talked to me politely, without looking me in the eye. Luckily we'd never spent much time together at school. (I'm into languages and he wants to be a physicist.) But I could see that if things went on like that, we could move from

being friends to acquaintances to nothing at all, in the space of a few weeks. And I didn't want that to happen.

So that night I rang to ask him some irrelevant question about the next topic for our writing folio. At first he sounded pretty remote but I kept chatting on and within five minutes his voice started to come alive again. (And why not? He was safe enough, for Christ's sake. You can't find yourself accidentally kissing someone over the phone.)

Once he'd relaxed, he launched into a long story about an old mate of his who'd been hooked on drugs, got off them and then started using again. This was exactly the sort of situation we used to spend hours discussing - like, why do bad things happen and what can you do to stop them?

'Listen,' I told him, 'in a better world, your mate wouldn't be in the same bind, would he? I mean, he wouldn't be constantly surrounded by images promising him that everything'll be cool if he just drinks the right soft drink or slaps on the right cologne. Or, by extension, if he hits on the right drug.'

'Nice idea. So what would they put on the billboards in this perfect world of yours?'

'Paintings. The kind of paintings that get shut away in private galleries, where only rich people can see them. And poems, maybe, and -'

'Typical,' Damien interrupted. 'All art and no science, as usual. How about a few promos for the mind-altering discoveries that get shunted to one side, because people only want to hear about the latest medical breakthrough that'll help them live forever?'

'Hey, no problem. We can make room for them as well.'

We talked for a bit longer, working on a definition of the ideal billboard. Good, I thought as I put the phone down. I've hooked him.

I was right. Before long Damien and I were back on our old footing. We still didn't spend much time together at school and he didn't come to my house any more but we talked on the phone just about every night, catching up and discussing school stuff and, most of all, adding new details to our blueprint for a better world.

What sort of system of government would we have? How could we change the design of houses, so that people would have more choices about the way they wanted to live? Would we still huddle together in cities in a better world or would we spread ourselves more evenly across the country? Did we want to go on having twenty different soft drinks to choose from or were there other things that our factories could be making?

After a week or so of this, we agreed that our ideas were too good to waste and we started to write them down. We gave our better world a name -

Newtopia - and we swapped computer disks at lunchtime, taking them home to add to each other's files. It was like one of those computer games where you build an entire civilisation from scratch, except that we were doing it for ourselves and so, somehow, it wasn't a game for us.

We even started to develop characters for some of the Newtopians. The leader of the opposition was based on Ms Wolfgang, our fussy bureaucratic principal, and the Minister for Sensible Projects was based on my father. Damien was the president of Newtopia and I was his chief adviser, because I prefer to operate from behind the scenes. I'm oversimplifying a bit here - I mean, we weren't like little kids, playing, 'I'll be Batman and you can be Robin.' But when we talked about the roles of the president and his adviser, it was fairly obvious who we were both identifying with.

Things were going well - better, in a way, than they'd ever been. Just as long as we stayed within our limits and didn't try to take it any further than talking on the phone.

One night I finished the latest instalment of Newtopian news and stood up, smiling, to find Mum behind me.

'Damien doesn't come here any more,' she said, tugging at a loose thread on her cardigan. 'Is it because of me?'

'Of course not, Mum. We're busy, that's all. Final year of school, y'know. Too much work and too much stress.'

I was telling the truth, up to a point, but Mum wasn't convinced. 'Is it because of The Jailer?' she asked.

For some reason, that was a lot harder to answer. 'I hope not,' I said in the end. 'I really hope not.'

Mum rested her hand on my arm: very lightly, she doesn't like touching people or being touched. 'There are ways around The Jailer,' she said earnestly. 'If you look hard, you might be able to find them.'

She pulled her hand back and started to skitter away but I wouldn't let her go. I moved closer to her and looked straight into her eyes, which is something that I generally avoid because it can be a pathway to believing in her crazy fantasies.

'Mum,' I said, 'why don't you try to get sane? Then you could leave Dad and have a proper life of your own.'

Right from the bottom of her eyes rushed terror, as fiercely cold as dry ice. I could actually feel it: it almost scorched my skin. She whimpered once, like a night animal struck by a car.

'Okay,' I told her in a hurry, 'that was stupid. Forget I ever said it. I've probably been brainwashed by The Jailer or something.'

Her eyes clouded over again and she relaxed. 'He's like that,' she breathed. 'The Jailer's everywhere. Even in your thoughts.'

I patted her arm and muttered a few words of reassurance. I'm pretty sure I shouldn't buy into Mum's fantasies but the fact is, it works. So every now and then I use them to get her back under control.

It's only afterwards that I feel guilty.

I sat at my desk for the rest of that evening without writing a single word. Next night I was supposed to be finishing one of my assignments but I dredged up an excuse to ring Damien instead. We talked about school for a while and then, as usual, we went back to Newtopia. Damien had been working on an agenda for schools in a better world and he wanted to know what I thought of it.

'Sounds good,' I told him after we'd tested all the implications. 'Y'know, we must've covered just about every possible aspect of Newtopia by now. Except for one thing.'

'What's that?'

'Well,' I said, my voice level and my hands shaking, 'what about love?'

Damien paused. 'It'd be there, of course. But perfect.'

'Yeah, but not perfect in a dreary Prince-Charming-meets-Ms-Right sort of way. Perfect in a surprising way.'

I could tell he liked that idea. 'So the Minister for Sensible Projects might move in with the leader of the opposition, instead of marrying some ideal hostess type? I can see that, for sure. Lots and lots of practical, organised children.'

'Dead right,' I agreed. 'And the president?'

He laughed. 'Oh, the president would probably move in with his adviser, instead of bothering to get married at all.'

I was shaking all over by now. 'Good one,' I said. 'But you don't need to be in Newtopia for that. It could happen here.'

Silence. The longest silence I've ever had to listen to but I was determined not to break it. I would've only got angry with him or defensive or - worst and most likely of the lot - I would've found myself whimpering, 'Jesus, Damien, I've almost forgotten what that kiss was like. I've got to kiss you again. *Got to.*'

And none of that would've done me any good at all.

Still, he kept quiet for such a long time that I had to keep reminding myself that if he'd hung up, I'd be hearing the dial tone instead of silence. Eventually he cleared his throat and said, 'John, we've got to talk. I'll be over in about fifteen minutes.'

And so there I was, back in my window seat, staring at the darkness and waiting for Damien to turn up. I felt scared, not shaking-scared this time but cold-in-the-bones scared. It was all my own fault. I'd started that conversation about Newtopia, I'd pushed Damien into admitting the truth behind the game and now he was going to tell me that the game had got to stop. That had to be why he insisted on coming around. Otherwise we would've gone on talking over the phone.

I should've kept my mouth shut.

Then I could've stayed in Newtopia forever.

I glanced at my watch: five more minutes before Damien was due to arrive. Big mistake, I thought. This was a really big mistake. I can't handle the idea of being rejected twice in a row. Maybe I'll just hide in the darkness till he goes away again.

But then it occurred to me that he might've had a different reason for coming to my house, instead of talking on the phone. For example, if you're talking on the phone, you can't see the other person. You can't check out the expressions on their face. You can't touch them. Can't hold them.

So, when the doorbell rang, I went downstairs - fast, to make sure that Dad didn't get there first. I unhooked the chain, I fiddled with the keys of the deadlocks.

And opened the door.

A DATE FOR DILLON

We were all crowded into Vaia's bedroom, as usual. Sharan was examining her face in the mirror.

'I look like a man,' she said.

'No, you don't,' said Dillon. 'Trust me. I know.'

He got up, stepping carefully over my legs, and went to stand behind her. I leaned sideways and studied them both in the mirror.

Sharan's skinny, not a curve in sight. Her face is long and angular, her eyes are the colour of melted toffee. She's taller than me but she didn't seem tall just then, because Dillon is so big that the mirror cuts him off just above the eyebrows.

Dillon's got shoulders like a gridiron football player, except that in his case the padding is all muscle. He's got hands the size of baseball mitts. The hair on his chest is as thick and woolly as the lining of a sheepskin coat. Compared to him, Sharan didn't look anywhere near like a man. Although she didn't look like the women in the magazine that Vaia was flicking through, either.

Or like Vaia herself, I thought, checking out her sleek long legs, her full mouth, her tangled mass of spiralling curls. Vaia wears the reddest lipstick and the shortest skirts and the tightest tops and a look that says, 'This is for me, mate. Don't get the idea that you're entitled to perve on it.'

And me? Well, I don't have Sharan's eyes or Vaia's hair but I look all right, I suppose, in a neat and tidy sort of way. So, when the four of us are

together, people tend to nudge each other and make jokes about Dillon's harem.

No one seems to have noticed that we're all gay.

When I told my mum that I thought I might be a lesbian, she went through all the standard reactions and then she frowned and said, 'Listen, Janey, it'll probably be tough for you while you're still at school. Just remember that once you're out in the world, you'll be able to look around and find friends who think the same way as you - and that'll make things much easier.'

But then Vaia came up to congratulate me after I gave a talk in Humanities about Tasmania's anti-gay laws. And Sharan arrived at our school six months later, which meant that by the time I was in year 11 I actually had two friends who thought like me. (Mum was right, by the way. It does make life a lot easier.)

Vaia was the one who spotted Dillon. She's a bit more up front than Sharan or me - she's been to one of the gay and lesbian balls with her cousin (who's straight but reckons that gays have the best dances) and she's always going on about how we should make some big dramatic gesture to show the kids at school that we're gay. She came racing up to Sharan and me at the lockers one afternoon, her curls bobbing and quivering with excitement.

'You know how I've been compiling a dossier on Dillon Fry, that guy in year 12?' she hissed. 'Well, listen to this. One: he wore a red ribbon for AIDS Awareness Week. Two: he never calls anyone a poof, even though the rest of the guys on the footy team talk like that all the time. And three: today I heard him tell someone that he likes the Pet Shop Boys. What do you reckon? He's got to be gay, right?'

Sharan nodded. But I'm the logical one in our group (someone has to be), so I held up my hand and said, 'Wait a minute, Vaia. You can't go round deciding people are gay, just because of their opinions or their taste in music. You need a bit more to go on than that.'

'Okay,' said Vaia. 'I'll ask him.'

So she did and now the four of us go round together all the time. We watch videos. (Dillon's favourite is *The Sum of Us*, Vaia keeps making us hire *Basic Instinct* and Sharan and I love watching Drew Barrymore kiss Sara Gilbert in *Poison Ivy*.) We drink coffee in Brunswick Street. (Where there's a great gay and lesbian bookshop.) And sometimes we just lounge around in Vaia's bedroom, talking about anything and everything.

'Hey, did you notice my new Melissa Etheridge poster?' Vaia asked. 'Mum thinks it's sweet, the way I've got all these nice pictures of girls on my walls, instead of heavy metal bands like my brother. She doesn't realise the nice girls are all gay - or bisexual - or at least played a lesbian in a movie somewhere along the line.'

Sharan scowled at the glossy posters. 'Big deal,' she told Vaia. 'It's cool to say you're into girls these days, just as long as you still look like a really girly girl. If I had a neat little heart-shaped face and a gorgeous figure, all my problems would be over.'

'That's what you think,' Dillon grumbled. 'Me, I look like a really blokey bloke and it's nothing but a hassle. Everybody takes one look at me and assumes I'm straight. At least you three have got each other. I'm never going to get a guy.'

Vaia blew him a kiss. 'Relax, Dillon. We're in exactly the same position as you. None of us has the hots for each other, remember.'

I winced (even though I'd never admit it to anyone, I've secretly fancied Sharan for ages) and Dillon hung his head, like a puppy that's just been told he has to sleep outside forever. Vaia patted him.

'Okay,' she said, 'how about we find somebody for you, then?'

'You've said that before,' Dillon muttered. 'Hasn't helped much, has it?'

'That's because we never set ourselves a deadline before,' Vaia said promptly. 'But I can fix that. The school dance is at the start of next month. If you give me the money, I'll get six tickets tomorrow, which means we need to find two extra partners. And one of them'll be a date for you, Dillon.'

She looked around, waiting for the applause. 'Sounds good,' I said cautiously. 'But where do we start?'

Sharan was still examining her face in the mirror. She glanced over her shoulder and said, 'No problem. I know what to do.'

Sharan crosses roads like the roadrunner outsmarting Wile E. Coyote. I hung onto her belt till we were safe on the opposite footpath and then I opened my eyes and said, 'Huh? We're going to find a boyfriend for Dillon in the gay bookshop?'

'Wait and see,' said Sharan. She walked into the shop and started to scoop up some of the free newspapers near the door. I was heading towards the bookshelves when she made a grab for my jacket and said, 'No, Janey. Vaia and Dillon are waiting for us. We haven't got time.'

I stopped. But the bookshelves kept pulling at me like a magnet, until I was leaning over sideways. 'Oh, all right,' Sharan sighed. 'Go on. I want to look at the postcards anyway.'

She let go of my jacket and I went speeding down to the fiction section. Most of the novels are imported from America, which means they cost a fair bit, so I always check carefully before I buy anything. I read the first two pages of a book about this planet that was inhabited totally by women. A few more pages of a book about two women falling in love on a tropical island. And then

the entire first chapter of a novel about a lesbian detective who lived in a big loft with a Siamese cat and her cello and - anyway, after five minutes I knew I had to read the rest of it.

I checked my wallet and went sidling up to Sharan. 'You wouldn't happen to have five dollars, would you?' I asked.

'That's right,' she agreed. I held out my hand and she said, 'I mean: that's right, I *don't* have five dollars. After paying Vaia for those stupid tickets, I've only got enough for a cup of coffee. Can't even afford to buy a postcard.'

'Which one did you want, Sha?' She blushed and stepped back from the rack but I reached past her and picked out a photo of a woman with lean, muscular arms, standing in a karate pose. 'Here, I'll get it for you,' I said. 'I'm rich, now that I'm not buying that detective story.'

The guy behind the counter was so cool that he sent shivers down my spine. Four earrings, ripped black t-shirt and bleach-blond hair with streaks of deep orange, like pale spiky flames. He smiled at me and said, 'If you really want the book, I can put it aside for you.'

At first I couldn't believe he was being friendly. But once it sank in, it took me three seconds to get down to the bookshelves and back again.

'Would you?' I gasped, handing the book over. 'That'd be fantastic. I'll collect it next week, I promise. And my friend wants this postcard now.'

He looked down at the karate woman's arms. 'I can see why,' he said to Sharan. 'She looks a lot like you.'

Sharan blushed for the second time. 'Like me?' she asked. 'Do you think so?'

We might've settled in for a long chat, except that a shadow spread across the window and I glanced over to see Dillon hovering outside. 'Vaia's saving a table for us in the cafe next door,' he said when we joined him. 'Did you find what you were looking for, Sha?'

I thought he was talking about the postcard but just in time I remembered we were supposed to be on a quest to find a guy for Dillon. Sharan refused to tell us anything until we'd sat down with Vaia and ordered four lattes. Then she opened the newspapers from the gay bookshop and spread them out on the table.

'There,' she said, pointing triumphantly. 'The classifieds. Pages and pages of guys wanting to meet other guys. Go for it!'

Dillon swallowed hard. 'Oh,' he said. 'Right. I've seen those ads, for sure. It's just that I never thought about answering one of them.'

'One?' said Vaia with a sweeping gesture. 'You can answer twenty, if you like. This is a brilliant idea, Sha. Come on, let's draw up a shortlist.'

We took a section each and started to run our fingers down the columns of tiny print. Sharan and Vaia kept marking ads and reading them out

loud but Dillon just stared moodily at the page, his shoulders hunched and his big hands locked together.

'You reckon it's going to work?' he mumbled. 'I mean, listen to this. "Tall, muscley, good-looking hunk seeks similar for friendship, fun and more." You can't tell me a guy like that's expecting to be invited to a school dance.'

'Maybe not,' Vaia admitted. 'How about this one, though? "Caring, honest, warm at heart." That sounds much more like your type.'

'Does it?' Dillon said sadly. 'I wouldn't know. I'm not sure I've even got a type yet. I always thought that I'd just, y'know, meet somebody one day and things'd sort of develop from there.' He took a deep breath and added, 'Sha, I'm sorry. You've been great and everything but I can't go through with it. At least let me pay for the coffees.'

He heaved himself out of his chair and shambled over to the counter. Vaia leaned across the table. 'It's up to us now,' she hissed. 'If Dillon wants to meet somebody, we'll just have to find somebody for him to meet. Let's talk about it tomorrow, okay?'

Sharan came over to my place straight after school. (Mum and I live in a flat and the rooms are too small to fit Dillon and more than one other person, so it was the best way for us to get together without him.) While we were waiting for Vaia, we tried to make a list of all the guys we knew who could possibly be gay but we didn't get very far.

'We can't really expect to find another gay kid at school,' Sharan pointed out. 'After all, there's four of us already. That's better than average.'

'It shouldn't be. I read somewhere that one in ten people are gay ... and there's hundreds of kids in our school.'

'Oh yeah? In that case, there must be some other school that all the gay kids go to.'

I laughed. 'Pity we don't know where it is.'

We were still fantasising about the idea of a totally gay school when Vaia turned up. She struck a pose in the doorway, fluffed out her hair and said, 'Well?'

'Well what?' Sharan snapped.

'Well, you haven't thought of anyone for Dillon yet, have you? But don't worry. I've got it under control.'

'You have?' I said. 'How?'

'I read through my diary last night,' Vaia said smugly, 'and I remembered this guy from the Kingston Hall debating team. One: he was amazingly well-dressed. Two: he'd just seen *The Sum of Us* and he loved it.'

Three: he hung around afterwards and chatted to the girls, instead of ignoring us like most guys do. What does that tell you?’

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘You’re doing it again, Vaia. Making up whole theories on the basis of three tiny little facts.’

She shrugged. ‘Hey, I was right about Dillon, wasn’t I? And I’m right about this guy too. I bet he’ll be dead keen to come to the dance, once I explain.’

‘You’re going to ring him up?’ Sharan said in alarm. ‘Vaia! You can’t do that.’

‘Can’t I? Just watch me.’

She started to riffle through the phone book. I took a step backwards and grabbed Sharan’s arm. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘There’s an extension in the other room - it’s part of Mum’s campaign to force me into answering the phone while she’s working. No point watching when we can listen.’

The second phone was on Mum’s desk, under a pile of papers. As I picked up the receiver, Sharan moved closer, pressing against me so we could both hear. Her breath was warm on the back of my neck. Her hair tickled my cheek.

Then a guy’s voice said, ‘Hello?’ and Vaia’s voice gushed, ‘Oh, hi. You probably don’t remember me but I met you at the interschool debate last year and I was wondering: would you like to come to our school dance?’

A brief pause, as though the guy was trying to sort all of this out. ‘You want me to come to a dance?’ he said in the end. ‘With you?’

‘No, no,’ Vaia said impatiently. ‘Not with me. Well, it’d look as if you were with me, of course, but I really wanted to know whether you’d be interested in being a partner for my friend Dillon.’

The guy’s voice had seemed fairly flat and cautious before but now I was sure I could hear a tremor of laughter. ‘Uh-huh,’ he said. ‘I suppose this is the point where I ought to tell you that I’ve been going out with the same girl for the past three years.’

Another pause and then Vaia said, ‘Hey, too bad. Oh well, never mind. Good luck with your next debate, okay?’

‘Same to you,’ the guy said politely.

He hung up and Sharan moved away from me. (Worse luck.) We went back to the lounge room where Vaia was sprawled on the couch, polishing her nails on her sleeve. If I was her, I would’ve been terminally embarrassed but she just grinned and said, ‘Lucky I talked to him on the phone. Even if we run into each other somewhere, he’ll never guess I was the mystery caller. Now, have either of you got any other suggestions? We’ve got to get moving. The dance is this weekend.’

‘Not possible,’ I said. ‘It’s September, Vaia. The dance isn’t till October.’

‘So? In case you hadn’t noticed, next Friday’s the first of October.’

Sharan darted across to check the calendar by the phone. 'Jesus, you're right! What the hell am I going to do? I haven't even started thinking about what to wear.'

'Just don't think about that old blue potato sack,' said Vaia. 'You've worn it a hundred times and it never gets any better.'

'But I can't get dressed up in frills and stuff,' Sharan protested. 'It doesn't suit me. I look even more like a man than ever.'

Vaia yawned and stretched. 'Ah, come off it. I'm sick of hearing you say that. Listen, just leave it to me. I'll lend you a dress, pick the right make up. I can fix everything, I swear.'

I wasn't totally convinced (I mean, Vaia had promised to fix everything for Dillon too) but Sharan looked a lot happier.

'All right, that's one problem solved,' I said. 'And I've got an idea about Dillon. What if we forget about finding the right guy for him first off? We could just pick two guys who are sort of vaguely possible and see how things go from there.'

Vaia shook her head. 'Sorry, I've invited a friend of my cousin's already. We only need one guy - and frankly, at this stage I reckon we'll have to take anyone we can get.' She bit her lip, looking as regretful as Vaia ever looks, and added, 'Maybe this wasn't such a great idea, after all.'

Sharan had suggested the classifieds and Vaia had come up with the guy from the debating team, so it was obviously my turn to do something next. I tried, I really did. I thought about it for the next twenty four hours, including a dream where I invited the school footy captain to be Dillon's date and the entire team kicked mud at me. I even asked Mum and the woman in the next flat for advice, not that I really expected them to know any nice unattached young guys. (Gay or otherwise.)

By the middle of the week I was so worried that I found myself telling the orange-haired guy in the bookshop all about it when I went back to collect my detective story. 'Well,' he said, 'you could always ask me.'

I laughed. 'Yeah, right. I bet you're just dying to spend Friday night at some boring school dance.'

To my surprise he actually looked hurt. 'All right,' he said. 'Forget I mentioned it,' and he turned away and started straightening the notes in the cash register. I went on standing there and after a minute or so he mumbled, 'I was at school myself this time last year, y'know. And my life isn't full of endless parties, just because I'm a year older.'

'So you mean it?' I asked. 'You really will come? Oh wow, this is amazing! I can't wait to see my friends' faces when - hang on, I'd better

explain who they all are. There's Sharan, the girl who looks like the postcard. Vaia's the one with all the hair and Dillon -'

'Yeah, I've seen Dillon,' he interrupted. 'He's the human mountain who was lurking on the footpath the other day. He comes in here with you sometimes and knocks the postcard stand over.'

I sighed. 'Right,' I said. 'That's Dillon.'

After I'd organised everything with the guy, I went racing off to tell the others. When I arrived at Vaia's place, Sharan was sitting on a chair in the middle of the bedroom and Vaia was circling around her with a blusher brush, practising make up techniques.

'My face feels stiff,' Sharan complained. 'And I look really off.'

'That's because you're still in your old windcheater and jeans,' Vaia told her. 'You'll look fine once I do your hair and get you into a dress.'

Sharan's shoulders twitched and I cut in quickly. 'Guess what? I've found a guy at last!'

I told them about my conversation with the guy in the bookshop. Sharan was rapt, Vaia seemed quite impressed and Dillon admitted that he remembered him. Then Vaia pushed us out of the room. 'You can fill me in on the details later, Janey,' she said. 'Right now I'm on a roll, so I want to finish Sha's makeover.'

We went out to the kitchen, where Mrs Mitrakas fed us little plaited biscuits with sesame seeds on top. When she bustled off to bring in the washing, Dillon said, 'So what's this guy's name then?'

I opened my mouth to answer but it just stayed open. 'Um,' I said finally. 'I forgot to ask.'

'Oh, that's great,' Dillon grumbled. 'A million promises - and I end up with this anonymous guy you collected when you went shopping. Even if I wanted to get excited about some skinny dude with weird hair and too many earrings, how could I possibly fantasise about someone called Mr X?'

I was a bit disappointed by his reaction. But I didn't have time to say anything, because just then Vaia called out, 'She's ready. Come and have a look.' Sharan was standing in front of the mirror. Her make up was great, her dress was great, her shoes were great, her hair was great.

'Well?' Vaia said proudly. 'What do you reckon?'

Dillon looked her up and down. His forehead wrinkled and he took a deep breath. 'Don't say it,' Sharan growled but it's impossible to stop Dillon when he's got something on his mind.

'You look like a drag act,' he said and Sharan burst into tears.

After that I wasn't exactly looking forward to the dance. Rod picked me up (I rang the bookshop and found out his name) and we drove to the hall where the dance was being held. I watched him and Dillon closely while I was introducing them but Rod just said, 'Yo, Dillon' and Dillon just said, 'G'day, Rod.' No surprises there.

The first surprise came when Sharan turned up, dressed in black satin trousers and a waistcoat with gold buttons. She looked a thousand times better than the way Vaia had wanted her to look. I was stunned.

'You're beautiful,' I blurted out but she shook her head.

'Wrong word, Janey. You say "beautiful" to someone who looks like a girl. It's "handsome" when they look like a man.'

I glared at her. 'You look like yourself, Sha. And you're not a man, so this is what some women look like, okay?'

I'd been meaning to say that to her for ages. (After all, somebody has to be logical about these things.) Sharan thought it through, step by step. She straightened her shoulders and grew a few centimetres taller, which brought the top of her head just about level with Dillon's pecs.

'Fair enough,' she told me. 'Say it a few more times and I might even believe you.'

We hung around at the edge of the dance floor for a while, waiting for Vaia. Rod and I talked about books; Sharan propped herself against Dillon and watched the band. It felt as if we were in disguise, pretending to be like all the other kids when really we were something different. I couldn't work out what we were doing there.

Then Vaia came sweeping over to us and I got my second surprise for the night. Vaia was wearing a tight short dress that blazed like a stop sign. Her partner was wearing a long full dress that fluffed out like a dandelion.

'Hi, everybody,' she said with a hint of challenge in her eyes. 'This is my cousin's friend Toula.'

The clocks stopped. (Or at least that's what it felt like.) Oh no, I thought. Bloody Vaia. She's brought a *girl* to the school dance, without even warning us. I bet she's been planning this all along.

We seemed to stand there staring at each other for hours and then - well, afterwards I could never remember which of us moved first but suddenly we were all changing partners. Sharan held out her hand to me. Rod and Dillon edged closer together. Vaia grinned triumphantly and put her arm around Toula. And next minute the six of us were out on the dance floor in pairs, although not exactly the same pairs as we'd started out with.

I'd always thought that if I did something like that, the other kids would look disgusted or call me names or whatever. But actually, I don't even know how they reacted. I was too busy exchanging thumbs up signs with Vaia and

Toula. Or watching Dillon, who was holding Rod very gently and carefully as he danced him with solemn concentration past the football captain.

‘Just look at those two,’ I said to Sharan. ‘I was sure I’d made a major mistake there - but luckily Rod seems to like human mountains and Dillon obviously goes for guys with weird hair.’

‘What about you?’ Sharan asked, her hand tightening on mine.

I looked into her toffee-coloured eyes. ‘Me?’ I said, feeling braver than I’d ever felt before. ‘I reckon I go for girls who look like themselves.’

THE SIZE OF THE SKY

‘You’ll get on okay at Central Secondary,’ says Marco’s cousin. ‘There’s good things and bad things, same as all schools. Like, for example, our school uniform is so gay.’

Marco’s cousin is seriously tall. Marco can’t see his face, unless he leans backwards, so he stares at his cousin’s stomach, which is the size of a small TV set. On its screen, Marco replays the best bit from last year’s Gay Mardi Gras - twenty Blue Fairies with wings and wands and glitter and sequins, plus a little Pinocchio, only it wasn’t Pinocchio’s nose that kept growing. Marco watched it with his parents. They all laughed together.

Is his cousin telling him he’ll have to dress like a Blue Fairy, when he goes to Central?

And is that one of the good things or one of the bad things?

Marco can’t work it out and he doesn’t want to ask, in case his cousin thinks he’s just a stupid little kid. Normally, he’d check with his parents: but not any more, not after that truck went out of control on the freeway. Marco lives with Nonna and Nonno now. Grandparents don’t watch the Gay Mardi Gras on telly, the way parents do, and they don’t know what twenty first century kids are supposed to wear. He’ll have to sort all that stuff out for himself, from here on.

So Marco waits till his aunt takes him and his cousin to the uniform shop, where they try on grey pants and grey shirts and grey blazers. That settles it. "Gay", in his cousin's language, doesn't mean wings and wands and glitter and sequins. "Gay" is definitely one of the bad things.

It's not the last problem Marco will have to solve on his own, without any help from his parents. But it's a start.

Six years later Marco is taller than his cousin. He's in his final year at Central and he knows all about what's good and what's bad.

Having a plan for the future is good: Marco's going to study Info Tech, because there's lots of jobs in that area. Having a girlfriend is good: he has one. (Her name's Gina and he found her at his cousin's twenty first. She lives next door to some of the girl-cousins, who asked her along, so they could matchmake her with a boy-cousin.) Living with your grandparents is good too. Marco's mates are always whinging about how their parents won't let them do stuff but Marco can con Nonna and Nonno into almost anything.

All in all, it's a pretty good life.

Coming home from school on the first Friday of first term, Marco has one of those magic moments. The sky is so blue - not a cloud in sight - that it takes over. Most days, it's just background, something you check to see whether it's going to rain, but right now Marco's walking up the street with his head tipped backwards, steering by radar, while he tries to wrap his eyes round the sky.

The size of the sky makes his street look different. The curve of the hill seems exactly right. The sun polishes the houses till they shine like clean shoes. Marco's radar picks up a dark blur on the corner - Gina, coming to meet him - and a patch of blue, next door to his place, like a piece of sky fallen down into the street.

He blinks, which switches off the magic, and focuses on the patch of blue. It's a shirt. Inside the shirt, there's a guy - tall, skinny, spiky bleach-blond hair. He's sitting on a couch that somebody's dumped on the front porch, with his left foot propped on the picket fence.

Painting his toenails blue.

Oh, hell. Marco's trapped. He can't make a dash for his front door, because Gina will go, 'Why didn't you wait for me?' He has to stand there at the gate, two metres away from a maniac who thinks it's okay for guys to paint their toenails in public places. Next minute, the maniac's waving the nail polish brush like a fairy wand and pointing it at Marco.

'Hi, neighbour,' he says. 'My name's Liam. What's yours?'

Liam has a deep, deep voice, which means he could come across as normal, if he wanted. He doesn't *have* to look so gay.

'I'm Marco,' Marco says out loud, dropping his voice down, to match Liam's voice. Hurry up, Gina, he says under his breath. Hurry *up*.

He's in luck. Gina breaks into a silly, skipping run and races over to throw her arms around him. That'd usually piss Marco off but this time it's a good thing. He hugs her back and tries to shunt her into the house but wouldn't you know, she stops and looks at the five blue dots balanced on top of the fence.

'Cool colour,' she says. 'I've got a dress in that exact shade of blue. Where'd you find the nail polish?'

For the next ten minutes, Gina and Liam talk shopping, while Marco shuffles his feet. In the end he figures out that they won't even notice if he sneaks off into the house. Ten more minutes later, Gina comes in and they settle down to their usual routine. Gina does Marco's English homework, Marco finds websites for Gina and then they have lasagne for dinner, as if they were already married and living with Nonna and Nonno.

So everything's back to normal, except for one small detail. Liam gave the nail polish to Gina and after dinner she sits at their study-table, painting her fingernails blue.

The sweet, chemical smell makes Marco feel sick.

On Monday Marco hangs with the guys after school before heading for home. This turns out to be a tactical error. Gina's supposed to get there first and go inside to start their homework routine. But she isn't inside. She's out on the porch, sharing the couch with Liam, which means that Marco can't dodge him, after all.

'Come and sit down,' he calls, fluttering his blue fingertips. 'We can squeeze up and make room for you.'

He bumps Gina, who giggles and shifts, leaving a space in the middle. Marco stomps over to them, thuds down on the arm of the couch and plants his hand on Gina's shoulder, to show Liam the score.

'You've got a sweet life,' he says, borderline aggro. 'Sitting round in the sun all day. Nice for some. The rest of us have got work to do.'

'Hey, I'm working, I'm working,' Liam says. 'I'm an art student, right? It's my job to look at things. As a matter of fact, we're doing portraits at present. Can you talk Gina into sitting for me?'

'Gina?' Marco says, laughing. 'She's no oil painting, mate.' Actually, that's why he picked her. Pretty girls, like the girl-cousins, scare him stiff. Still,

he likes the way Liam asked for his permission, so he punches Gina's arm and adds, 'Go on, Gee. Give it a try.'

Gina blushes right up into her messy black curls. 'Maybe,' she mumbles and then, to change the subject, 'Who's your favourite artist, Liam?'

It's a dumb question but Liam takes it seriously. He rushes into his house and comes back with a huge book. When he flips it open, Marco finds himself staring at a picture of sky and light and a perfect curve of hill, just like his magic moment. By the time he's got over the shock, Liam's talking about the artist: then about the other pictures in the book: then about the weirdos at art school: then about the other weirdos he met while he was hitchhiking right round Australia.

He's got something to say about everything, so it's hard to get away from him. Nonna and Nonno don't make it any easier. Marco wants them to disapprove of Liam but when he finally drags Gina into the house, they just smile and say, 'It's nice to see young peoples having fun.'

And next day, when he leaves Gina on the porch, posing for Liam, and goes in to do his homework, Nonna chases him outside again.

'Go,' she says. 'Go, go, go! Talk to your friend. Plenty of time to work later on.'

After that, Liam becomes part of the routine. Marco and Gina watch him painting and listen to him talking for an hour after school, every day. It's not all bad. Liam's full of stories, which saves Marco from thinking of things to say to Gina. On the other hand, he worries that the Central crowd will catch him talking to a guy with blue nail polish, so the first chance he gets, he consults his cousin.

'Like, the guy's a total fag, so he's not after Gina,' he explains. 'But - oh, I dunno. It still seems a bit dodgy to me.'

'A gay neighbour, same as that new sitcom?' his cousin says, as if that's a good thing. 'You ought to get him to take you to one of those gay warehouse parties. Everyone reckons they're cool as.'

Marco frowns. It sounds like the meaning of "gay" has changed, without him noticing - although it hasn't changed totally, because next minute his cousin's digging an elbow into Marco's ribs.

'Just don't let this guy get you alone, okay?' he says and Marco blushes, as badly as Gina.

Well, duh. As if he would.

Now Marco knows what to say to the Central crowd ('a gay neighbour, same as that new sitcom'), he can relax around Liam. After a while, he starts thinking of Liam as Gina's best girlfriend. Fact is, the two of them act like girlfriends - swapping shirts, painting each other's nails, fixing each other's hair.

The new routine works just fine, till the day Marco comes home and sees a whole bunch of people on the next door porch - Liam, Gina, a tall, skinny blonde woman and an even taller man with a black beard.

'Marco!' Liam yells. 'Meet my new niece! She's three days old. My sister and her husband brought her over for a visit.'

He sticks his hand out. Liam's hand is so big and the baby's so small that she can lie on his palm, with her legs dangling down and her head lolling back against Liam's wrist. Marco's stomach turns over.

'Want to hold her?' Liam asks and Marco gags at the wet-nappy smell.

'No, thanks,' he says. 'Babies aren't my thing' and he goes hurrying into his house.

When Gina turns up an hour later, Marco has his English homework ready and waiting but she pushes it away, so hard that it falls on the floor.

'What's your problem?' she says. 'You were really rude to Liam.'

'Chill, Gee,' Marco says. 'I was just telling the truth. I don't like babies.'

Gina narrows her eyes. 'Oh, yeah? That's the first I've heard of it. I thought we were planning to get married.'

'So?' he says. 'We'll have to work on our careers, for starters, and save enough money to buy a decent house. We don't need to think about babies for a long time yet.'

Gina's eyes squeeze into little, squinty slits. 'Don't you read the papers?' she says. 'They reckon it gets harder to get pregnant, the longer you put it off. Is this about your parents, Marco? Are you scared to have kids, in case you die and leave them, like your olds left you? Or is it about me? Are you saying you don't even care what I want?'

'Sure, sure,' Marco says, to calm her down. 'We'll talk about it, okay? Later. Now, let's do our homework.'

Gina pushes the rest of his books onto the floor and goes storming out. Nonna bustles in straight away, all excited about the drama.

'Poor Gina, she's crying,' she says. 'You run after her, Marco' but Marco just kneels down on the floor and picks the books up, one at a time.

He's not into drama. Gina can go and get it out of her system by bitching to her best friend Liam, who lets babies lie around on his big hand.

By an excellent coincidence, the school holidays start two days later. Gina's going to Bali, on one of her mum's tours. (Her mum works as a tour guide, which is why Gina spends so much time at Marco's place.) She tells Marco to think about the baby thing while she's away, so he does - for four seconds, which is the time it takes to say, 'She'll get over it.'

Then he forgets the whole deal. He's not interested in stressing about Gina or babies or his parents, so it's a relief that she's not around. And it's not like he'll be lonely or anything. After all, Liam will still be there on the next door porch.

But it turns out that Liam's gone off on holiday too. Marco misses him more than he misses Gina. He notices that when he gets back from studying in the library to find a card from Gina in the letter box and Liam coming down the curve of the hill with a pack on his back. No question about it, Marco would rather talk to Liam than open the card.

'G'day, mate,' he calls out. 'Good to see you. Where've you been?'

'Away,' Liam says. 'Listen, I have to make a phone call now but we need to catch up. Let's make a date. How does tea at seven sound to you?'

'Fine,' Marco says. 'See you then.'

He walks into his house, rips a strip off the envelope and tugs the card out. Inside, there's a whole page of Gina's curly handwriting. It starts, "Dear Marco, you haven't written, so I guess your ideas haven't changed. We're more different than I thought. This is hard to say but - all right, I reckon it's over."

The letter slips out of his hand and goes floating down to the floor. Marco feels as though he just had a hit of the best drug in the world. He's walking on air, with a head full of sunshine. It seems like a weird reaction to getting a "Dear Marco" letter. Then he realises he's been feeling that way ever since Liam said the word "date".

Jesus, Marco thinks. Oh, Jesus. I've got the hots for Liam.

So that's why he never asked Liam to take them to a warehouse party - because he would've wanted to dance with Liam, not Gina. And that's why he pretended the guy was Gina's girlfriend - because he's supposed to fancy girls but he actually fancies Liam. No way is Liam really like a girl. When Marco thinks about that big hand touching him, it's the biggest thrill he's ever had.

Amazing. One minute, Gina's out of the picture. Next minute, Liam's making a date. It's almost too fast but that's fine by Marco, because it doesn't give him time to panic. He only has time to shower, brush his teeth three times, change his clothes four times and - what else?

Marco's never been on a date before, apart from Gina. The girl-cousins told him to take flowers the first time. So, okay, he races up to the shop on the corner, buys a bunch of blue flowers (Liam likes blue) and knocks on Liam's

door at one minute past seven, holding the flowers behind his back for a surprise.

Liam looks different today. At first Marco thinks he's just seeing the guy differently, after his big discovery. But when Liam hustles him down to the lounge room, Marco realises he's paler and twitchier than usual.

'I saw the letter you were holding,' Liam says straight away. 'So Gina's told you we got together in Bali. She said it was all over between you two - but if she's wrong, I swear I'll back off.'

Marco stares and stares. 'But,' he says. 'But you're gay.'

'"Gay" and "straight" are just words,' Liam says, sounding annoyed. 'They can't tell you what to do. Sure, I've had relationships with guys - Gina knows that - but what I want most in the world is a kid of my own. That's what Gina wants too, so I reckon we're made for each other. If.'

Marco's still holding those bloody flowers behind him. He backs towards an armchair and sits down on them, feeling the stems scrunch against his legs.

'Hey,' he says. 'It's cool by me. Go right ahead, mate.'

Liam looks as if he wants to hug Marco but luckily, he doesn't. 'Marco, you're a prince,' he says. 'I'll never forget this.'

Then he starts telling stories about the weird people he met in Bali. Marco sits there and listens, same as usual, until Liam suggests phoning for a pizza.

'Nah, I'm not all that hungry,' he says. 'I better go now. See you round.'

He can't go home, because he told Nonna and Nonno he'd be out all evening. So he heads up to the corner and across the road into the park. It's still light. When he sits down under a tree and leans back, he can see a patch of blue sky, very small and far away.

He wishes he was dead.

He wishes he'd read the rest of Gina's letter.

He wishes he'd got mad and bashed Liam up.

He wishes he was back on the couch, holding Liam's big hand.

He wishes someone would come along, right this minute, and tell him whether that last part's one of the good things or one of the bad things.

A wind shuffles the leaves around, making the patch of blue look like a bunch of squashed blue flowers. Marco freaks. The flowers! He left them there, in the armchair. Liam will find them, for sure. He might even guess why Marco brought them, which would be the worst thing ever.

Help, Marco thinks. Oh, help.

The wind pushes the leaves back, changing the size of the sky. Now the patch of blue looks like a Blue Fairy, flying down to wave a magic wand. For the first time in six years, Marco remembers his parents sitting on either side of him, watching TV. For the first time in six years, he knows how they'd tell him to deal with his problems.

Marco starts to laugh.

ABOUT ZAN

My old mate Leon Antoniadis is always going on about how important his family is to him. Then he turns around and starts dumping on his little brother or his uncle or his mum or whatever. I told him once that this struck me as a bit inconsistent and he said, 'So? You can hate your little brother and still love your family.'

That got me thinking. I realised that basically I like all the members of my family. I like my sister Zan, even though she can be fairly exhausting at times. I like Mum, from a distance. I like Dad, even though I can't quite get a handle on him. Separately, they're all fine. It's when they get together - when I have to think of them as 'my family' - that the trouble starts.

I live in a flat near the university but I generally come home every second weekend. On this particular Sunday I was trudging up the hill from the bus stop, thinking about my biochemistry lectures and my chat with Leon and my girlfriend Karen. When I opened the front door, I nearly sideswiped Zan, who was standing uncharacteristically still in the middle of the hall.

I started to say, 'What are you doing?' but I only got as far as 'W-?' before Zan flung up her hands in a stop sign. I held my breath and heard voices.

Mum's best friend Felicia Conti, saying, 'So Adam's doing well at uni - that's good. Now tell me about Zan. With her looks, I bet the boys are lining up outside the house every Friday night.'

Mum, saying, 'For heaven's sake, Felicia. Suzanne's not at all interested in that sort of thing.'

Oh wow, I'm eavesdropping, I thought. I started to shuffle on the spot - one foot embarrassed, trying to get away; one foot inquisitive, trying to stay.

Then Zan grabbed my elbow and jerked me down the hall to the kitchen. 'I knew it,' she hissed. 'I knew she wouldn't tell Felicia. She's hopeless, Adam. She can't say it, not even to her best friend.'

'What?' I said, twisting away from her. 'Slow down, Zan. Fill in the blanks. Mum wouldn't tell Felicia what?'

Zan shook back her springy black hair and looked up at me, like a swimmer emerging from forty laps of the pool. 'That I'm a lesbian, of course,' she said. 'What else?'

She spread her arms wide and started to swing them in ever-increasing circles. My kid sister exercises any time, anywhere, and even then she still seems to have more leftover energy than most people.

'Oh, Zan,' I said. 'Be patient.'

Zan snorted. 'That's what you always say. Listen, mate, I've spent the last seven years waiting for the right time to tell Mum. Well, now she knows and I reckon it's her turn to keep it cool around me for a change.'

'But she *is* keeping it cool. She could've wept buckets and kept saying she'd failed. She could've told you that you were sick or tried to send you to a shrink or kicked you out of the house or -'

'Yeah, sure. And she could've asked me some questions - about what Judy's parents do and whether we're serious and when I'm going to ask Judy to dinner so she can get to know her better.'

I laughed. 'Zan, Zan, Zan. This is Fantasyland.'

'Why? That's what Mum said when you told her about you and Karen.'

I looked at her for a moment and then I went to get myself some mineral water. 'Yes, and remember what that was like,' I said into the fridge. 'Mum cross-examined me for days. Then she rang all her friends and told them the entire story. It was like my private life had been turned into a three-ring circus. Is that the sort of thing you want?'

When I turned around, Zan was perched on the kitchen bench, swinging her legs and watching me through narrowed eyes.

'Yep,' she said. 'That's what I want. I want you and Mum and Dad to tell anyone who'll listen. I want to feel gossiped about and embarrassed and irritated and ordinary. I don't want to have to do this whole thing on my own, okay?'

I sat down and stared at my glass. Small bright bubbles sped up through the water and burst: ping. I'd only been home for ten minutes and I was exhausted already.

I was still counting bubbles when Mum glided into the kitchen. 'Oh, Adam, hello,' she said with one of her calm, serene smiles. 'I didn't hear you come in. How long have you two been chatting together?'

'A while,' Zan said. 'We were wondering whether you'd told Felicia that I'm gay.'

Twelve more bubbles went ping, one after the other, and then Mum said, 'Stop kicking that cupboard, Suzanne. You'll dent the paint.'

I tried to catch Zan's eye and flash her an understanding grin but she jumped down from the bench and walked straight out of the room.

'Be patient,' I said and Mum let her eyebrows rise a fraction higher.

'Your sister just tried to lay down the law about my private conversations and I didn't say a thing. How much more patient am I supposed to get?'

All through dinner Zan leaned back in her chair and watched Mum and Dad and me act out a cheerful conversation in front of her. As soon as we finished eating, she said, 'I'm going to ring Judy now, okay?' and headed for the door. Dad leapt up to clear the plates away and Mum shifted her chair closer to mine, resting her hand on my arm.

'I'm glad you're here, Adam,' she murmured. 'Suzanne's impossible at the moment. She's so intense.'

I checked to make sure that the doorway was empty. 'Yes, she is,' I agreed, almost in a whisper.

For most of that night I had these weird dreams where I kept wandering through empty buildings, trying to find the exit. (Although I often do have weird dreams when I go back home and stay in my old room, with all my old posters and clothes and books and toys around me. It's a bit like being haunted, in reverse.)

Next morning I got out of the house as fast as I could and went to organise a lift back to the university with Leon, who still lives down the road with his family. We'd never actually discussed Zan but I was pretty sure he knew, so I thought it might be good to hear his ideas.

No such luck. The minute I mentioned that Zan was gay, he turned all serious and started telling me how his little brother had just been caught shoplifting. It was as though we were swapping guilty secrets or something, which was the exact opposite to what Zan wanted.

Leon bounced off to his lectures looking about ten kilos lighter. But the things that Zan had said were still wedged in my mind, so I tried again in the cafeteria at lunchtime with my biochemistry prac partner, Toby Blair.

As a matter of fact, I hadn't got around to telling Toby about Zan either. Since he was a relatively new friend of mine, I had to begin at the beginning and describe Mum and Dad and Zan and everything, which was a pretty useful exercise. He listened so intently and asked so many questions that by the time I'd finished, I was sure he was going to say something really profound.

He said, 'Okay, Adam, what's the deal? Do you want me to, like, show her a good time or something? I wouldn't mind, mate. She sounds like a babe.'

I blinked at him. Then I said, 'You're sick, you know that. Really sick,' and I picked up my tray and walked out of the caff.

I sat under a tree near the sports oval, eating a salad sandwich and thinking about my sister. I'd known Zan was gay since she was ten, a week after she'd figured it out for herself. We'd been through a hundred discussions about whether she should tell our parents and when she should tell them and what she should tell them. It wasn't an issue for me any more. It was just a fact.

In which case, why did everything feel so different, now that a perfectly ordinary fact was finally out in the open? I'd been sure the whole business was going to work out fine. But if Zan was an issue to Leon and Toby, it seemed safe to assume she'd be an issue for Mum and Dad.

I decided I'd better go home again and sort it all out.

So the following weekend I made up an excuse (some books I needed) to drop in when I knew Zan wouldn't be around. Mum and Dad were in the sunroom together, working their way through the Saturday crossword. I helped with some of the science clues and then I cleared my throat and said, 'About Zan.'

Dad stood up straight away, in a relaxed, unhurried movement. 'Oh, Zan,' he said with a smile and whisked through the open door into the garden.

To be fair, I knew that was how he'd react. In some ways Dad and Mum have a fairly traditional marriage. Mum works as hard at being a solicitor as Dad works at being a barrister: Dad cooks meals and picks up his own socks. But Mum's definitely in charge of the emotional side of family life, just like Dad's in charge of the business side. If I wanted to sort out the Zan hassles, it made sense to get Dad out of the way first.

'About Zan,' I repeated and Mum's face became even more calm and serene than usual.

'Oh, Adam,' she sighed. 'I hope you're not going to start pushing me too.'

'Is that what you think Zan's doing, then?'

She shrugged. 'Honestly, Suzanne seems to have a one-track mind at present. Every time we turn on the television, we have to hear about another gay sports player or film star. First she wanted me to tell all my friends about her sexual preference and now she's on at me to join some group called Parents of Gays. I tried to explain that I wasn't really interested in that sort of thing and she looked at me as though I'd told her I was anti-gay. But she's wrong. I'm simply not a joiner.'

That was true enough. Even when she used to help out at the school canteen, Mum always had this invisible aura around her, separating her off from the other mums. She's not unfriendly or anything, she's just got a very strong sense of boundaries. I can understand it. I'm a bit that way myself.

While I sat there, understanding Mum, she folded the newspaper into a tidy square and tucked it into the magazine rack.

'Well, you didn't come here to talk about Suzanne,' she said briskly. 'Let's go and find those books.'

I lugged the books out to Karen's car and drove back to our flat. The rooms smelt of red wine and rosemary and Karen was singing in the kitchen. When she turned towards me, she had flour in her eyebrows and tomato pips down the front of her windcheater. Mum would've wanted to reach for a facewasher and scrub her clean. I wanted to kiss her floury eyebrows.

'So how did it go, Adam?' she asked some time later. 'Did you talk your folks into seeing Zan's point of view?'

'Well,' I said. 'Not quite. The thing is, I can see Mum's point of view as well and -'

Karen took a step backwards. 'You're shuffling your feet again,' she told me. 'You always do that when you're feeling indecisive - although, frankly, I don't know what you need to decide about this time. Zan's the one I feel sorry for. Just remember, she can always come here and live with us.'

'Oh, I don't think things are that bad. They could be a lot worse, you know.'

Karen scowled. 'Well, I haven't ever been attracted to another woman, not the way Zan is. But if I had, I bet my folks would've wanted to know about it. I think it's sad that Zan wants to tell everyone and no one wants to listen.'

'Yeah, but Mum's -'

'I know, I know. Your mum's really reasonable and logical about the whole thing. So she ought to be, because she's been practising for about forty years. Zan hasn't - and that's why she needs people to back her up.'

'Thanks a lot,' I said. 'That's all I need right now - another new idea to consider.'

'Don't consider it, then. Seriously, Adam, I don't want you to start feeling torn between me and everyone else as well.'

'Okay,' I told her as she moved back into my arms. 'I won't.'

But just the same, once I thought back over the conversation, I had to admit that Karen had a point. Whichever way you looked at it, Zan was only seventeen and Mum and Dad had a whole lot more experience of life. That had to count for something, after all.

And me? Well, I suppose I was somewhere in between an adult and a kid.

Somewhere in between Mum and Zan.

After that I spent a couple of months trying to understand Mum and Zan simultaneously. It wasn't as easy as it might sound. Sometimes I understood Mum's need for boundaries, which made me feel angry with Zan. Sometimes I understood Zan's need for support and then I felt angry with Mum. And sometimes I felt angry with both of them, for tying me up in knots.

Still, one way or another, I kept on going home pretty regularly. At first I invented all sorts of excuses for dropping in but before long I realised it wasn't necessary. No one ever asked me what I was doing there. They just looked thoroughly relieved to see me.

One weekend Zan dragged me off to her room to tell me that Mum wanted her to go to some family wedding with Tim McNeill, this cousin of ours.

'It's unreal, Adam. After everything I've said, she's still trying to make me pretend to be heterosexual. I don't believe it!'

'Hey, relax, kiddo. Mum doesn't expect you to marry Tim. She just wants you to go to a wedding with him.'

Zan slid off the bed and into a headstand. 'Yeah,' she said, upside down, 'and all the other cousins'll be there with their regular boyfriends and girlfriends. They'll be making their statements to the rest of the family. Why shouldn't I make a statement of my own and take Judy along with me?'

'Hmm. When you put it that way, it makes a certain sort of sense, I suppose.'

'Then tell that to Mum. She won't take any notice of me. She just goes, "Suzanne's on her soapbox again" - and that means she doesn't need to listen to a thing I say.'

She drew her knees down to her chest and rolled into a somersault, landing with her back towards me.

‘Come on, Zan,’ I said uncomfortably. ‘Mum’s basically on your side. I mean, she cares, right?’

‘Does she?’ Zan asked, her back still turned. ‘How am I supposed to know? As far as I can see, she only cares about what people are going to think. She doesn’t care about me at all. Why should I spend my time trying to make things easier for her?’

So the following week I cornered Mum and tried to talk to her about the wedding. I didn’t get very far, because Mum was more interested in telling me how Zan had been leaving gay books and magazines scattered around the house.

‘It’s very disturbing, Adam. Suzanne clearly expects me to read these things, in order to educate myself about her situation or something. But I’ve never poked and pried into your belongings, never. I’ve always thought it was important to respect my children’s privacy.’

‘Hmm. Maybe Zan doesn’t want you to respect her privacy, right at this moment.’

‘In that case, she doesn’t want me to be the kind of person I am. She can’t ask me for that, Adam. It’s hardly reasonable.’

I took a deep breath and asked, ‘Do people always have to be reasonable?’

‘It’s better if they try, don’t you think?’ Mum said and turned to gaze out of the window, her profile calm and serene. ‘Suzanne’s not the only one who feels rejected, you know. She’s my daughter, Adam. She’s made the decision to lead a life that’s very different from mine. I’d prefer to try and be reasonable about that ... even though Suzanne doesn’t make it easy for me.’

Zan didn’t go to the wedding. Mum didn’t read Zan’s books. Instead they sat and watched each other with alert, critical eyes, saying nothing but thinking heaps. Dad took to describing his latest cases in detail at mealtimes, just to fill up the silences. I started to make shorter and shorter visits, dashing in, having a quick chat and dashing out again.

‘I used to think I had a reasonably happy family,’ I told Karen. ‘But maybe I was wrong all along.’

She smiled at me sidelong and said, ‘Hey, Adam. Be patient.’

As soon as the end of year exams were over, Karen invited Zan to come and stay at our flat for a week. The first time I saw Zan and Judy kissing, I was a bit more startled than I’d expected to be but within a few hours I was used to it

and after a few more hours Karen and I were cornering each other in the kitchen and whispering together like proud parents.

‘Hey, don’t they look great together?’

‘You don’t think Judy’s too quiet for Zan?’

‘She’s not really quiet. She just thinks before she speaks.’

‘A bit of a contrast to my sister, then.’

‘Well, that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?’

We went to movies. We took off for the beach. We prowled through street markets. And we sat around having long discussions, late into the night. Zan and Karen argued about everything from computers to Buddhism, while Judy and I tossed in occasional comments from the sidelines or retreated to the kitchen to make pots of tea and piles of toast.

By the end of the week I felt as though I knew Judy well enough to ask how her family had reacted when she told them she was gay. She laughed and said, ‘Listen, Adam, my uncle’s gay too. Fact is, he did most of the work for me.’

‘Oh, right. I suppose it’s different for everyone.’

She must’ve noticed I was feeling disappointed, because she reached up and patted me on the shoulder. ‘Has to be, because everyone’s different,’ she said and we went back to the lounge room to see what Karen and Zan were arguing about now.

Next morning Karen and I dragged ourselves out of bed just in time to drive Zan home for Sunday lunch. We were almost there when I realised that Zan hadn’t said a word since we left the flat. I checked the rear vision mirror and saw her huddled in the back seat, head bent, hands laced tightly together.

‘Feeling tired after last night?’ I asked and she looked up at me.

‘I try hard,’ she said, answering a different question. ‘I know I’m too full on, as far as Mum’s concerned, but honestly, Adam, I do try.’

I started to tell her that everything would be fine and then, suddenly and rapidly and unexpectedly, the past six months rearranged themselves inside my mind.

I thought: this is all wrong. Zan’s hurting. Somebody should do something about it.

I thought: but who? Mum’s hurting just as badly and I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that, underneath his pretend-it -isn’t-happening act, Dad’s hurting too.

I thought: so that leaves me. I’ve kept hoping that I could come in from the outside and turn the situation around for them but actually I’m hurting as much as they are. I’m part of it myself. I can’t change anything.

The speed of my thoughts was making me dizzy. I wanted to shout, 'Stop, we're taking Zan back to the flat,' but Karen was already pulling up outside the house.

And Mum was already hurrying out to meet us, her eyes wide, two bright pink marks on her cheeks.

'Such a surprise,' she said straight away. 'You'll never guess who I met at the shops yesterday. Judy's mother - and, Suzanne, why didn't you tell me that she used to be Mary Pascoe, before she married? Mary Pascoe, who had the room next to mine in college! It was so nice to catch up with her again. We had an interesting chat about that program on gays in the defence forces and we've arranged to meet for lunch next week, so we can -'

She stopped short, as though she'd heard Zan's sarcastic voice say, 'So you can have another interesting chat about gays in the family?' I clutched Karen's wrist and hoped Zan wouldn't say, 'Hey, I could've told you all sorts of things about Judy's family, if you'd ever bothered to ask.'

But for once Zan said nothing. She just scrambled out of the back seat and moved towards Mum. Zan paler than usual, Mum more pink-cheeked than usual. Mum excited, Zan deliberately holding herself back. I'd never noticed before how alike they looked.

Then Zan put her arm around Mum's shoulders and they walked up the front path together. I don't believe this, I thought, still feeling dizzy. One minute I'm finally admitting to myself that I can't change anything and next minute things seem to start changing of their own accord. Maybe Mum and Zan just needed some time apart.

Maybe it's as simple as that.

But things are never as simple as you might hope. Once we got inside the house, no one could work out what to do next. We manoeuvred our way through lunch, choosing our words carefully and then checking straight away to see how everyone else was reacting. There were times when Dad slipped back into describing his cases to fill up the silence. There were times when Mum and Zan stared at each other with alert, critical eyes. Still, they smiled at each other as well and they talked about the clothes Zan had bought at the street market and the seedlings Mum had planted while Zan was away.

'It's an improvement, isn't it?' I asked hopefully, on the way home.

'It's a truce, I think,' Karen told me.

And then it was Christmas, the season of family peace and goodwill. Karen and I spent Christmas lunch with her folks, all talking at once and yet somehow managing to keep track of each other. After that we went on to have supper with my family, who chatted politely together and looked worn out by

eight o'clock. We stayed overnight in my old room (no weird dreams for me this time) and on Boxing Day the relatives visited non-stop. The last of them to arrive were Aunt Ellen and Uncle Ted.

Uncle Ted has very strong views about family values. The year before he'd given Karen and me a lecture on marriage and this year he decided to explain his theories about AIDS and homosexuality. I could see Zan getting paler and smaller in one corner of the room, Karen getting rounder and redder in the other. It was obviously time for me to interrupt and change the subject, except that I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Just as I was about to start juggling mince pies, out of sheer desperation, Mum fixed Uncle Ted with a calm, serene gaze.

'That's very interesting, Ted,' she observed. 'According to your logic, I ought to be particularly proud that Suzanne's a lesbian - after all, lesbians have a much lower incidence of AIDS than heterosexuals do. But frankly, as a parent, I'd have to say that those kinds of arguments don't influence me much. I'm far more concerned to know whether my daughter's happy.'

For the next thirty seconds I just stared blankly at the plate of mince pies. I don't think I'd ever heard Mum say the word 'lesbian' before and I'd certainly never heard her say 'Suzanne is a lesbian'. For some reason it sounded quite different, coming from her.

In the end I managed to turn my head and glance across at Zan. I was expecting her to look pleased, now that Mum had finally done what she wanted, but instead she groaned.

'Oh Mum,' she said. 'You're always so reasonable.'

Mum swung her calm, serene gaze onto Zan. 'Exactly,' she agreed. 'We can only be what we are, to the best of our ability.'

There was a brief silence, while the rest of us thought about this. Then we all reacted, in our different ways.

Karen smiled at Mum and said, 'Spot on.'

I looked cautiously from Mum to Zan.

Zan looked at Mum and nodded.

Dad looked at everyone and smiled.

And as our looks and smiles linked us, one to the other, suddenly it was like we were all holding hands in a circle - together and separate, individual but connected. Uncle Ted coughed and frowned and clinked his cup in its saucer. He didn't understand what he was seeing. He couldn't understand it at all.

My family, I thought, as though that somehow summed it all up.

My family.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

I must've seen him around Central High before but that was the first time I remember noticing him. Out at the back of the school between two of the prefabs, grey metal shacks on wooden legs. A year or two later they pulled everything down and built a whole new school out of concrete slabs and bright-coloured railings. But back then Central High was an old redbrick mansion, plus half a dozen prefabs to take the overflow of kids.

He was standing there with his schoolbag at his feet and his hands in his pockets. He was thin but - how can I explain? - somehow he was thin like an adult, not thin like a skinny kid who hasn't finished growing yet. Believe me, there was nothing unfinished about him. Even before he made a move, I could tell that his body would do exactly what he wanted it to do. He was neat and compact and elegant. Not gangling or awkward or jerky, like most of the other guys at Central High.

His hair had been clipped into a crewcut, a cap of black fur fitted close to his skull. Generally the crewcut kids were football heroes or Army Reserve types but he looked like a young Roman emperor. His profile could've come from some old coin in a museum: broad forehead, straight nose, high cheekbones with smooth, deep hollows beneath them. And his eyes. Dark. Wide. Restless. Always flicking from side to side, as active as his body was still.

I suppose he'd been planning to take the shortcut down to the back gate, same as Tom and me. But he was standing there between the prefabs

because four other boys were standing in front of him. Three of them were nudging each other and sniggering and shuffling their feet. The fourth was Peter Doyle.

I used to be terrified of Big Pete when we were in primary school. You name it, he did it. Water bombs, Chinese burns, chasing the girls and pulling up their dresses, chasing the boys and knocking them down and sitting on them. And if he really took against you, he got you behind the shelter sheds or in the park on the way home and – well, luckily, I never found out what happened then but the kids he picked on usually went pretty quiet for the next few weeks. They stayed close to the teachers and kept looking over their shoulders.

Big Pete was king of Central Primary School but when we shifted over to the secondary school, his power kind of dwindled. Maybe he got more civilised. Maybe we learned to stand up to him. Or maybe it was just that we'd sorted ourselves into groups by then and it's harder to pick on an entire group. At any rate I hadn't been terrified of Pete for years.

But I was terrified all over again, that day down by the prefabs. The minute we saw him, Tom and I stopped short. I wanted to do something but I couldn't think of anything to do. I wanted to help and yet I just stood and watched, with the sort of concentrated calmness that you have when you see a car go into a skid: before it crashes.

Big Pete reached across without looking and propped his hand against the wall of the prefab, like a giant getting ready to knock the building over in one shove. 'You a poof, then?' he said to the new boy.

The boy's eyelids slid down and hid his remarkable eyes. He stared at his hands for a moment and then he said, 'Uh, you want to know whether I'm homosexual?' There was a tremor in his voice. I could feel my fingernails cutting into my palms.

Pete sighed happily, heaved himself away from the wall and moved closer. 'Dead right I do,' he agreed. 'Come on. Are you or aren't you?'

The boy's eyelids flickered. 'So you're interested?' he said, as if he was stalling for time. Pete frowned.

'Stop pissing around. I told you already, didn't I? What's the matter - you scared or something?'

'No,' said the boy, sounding surprised. 'No, I'm flattered. But - well, this is all a bit public, isn't it? I mean, if I was interested in *you*, I'd try to get you on your own. I wouldn't tell you in front of an audience.'

He lifted his head and reached up to give Big Pete a sympathetic pat. Before his hand could settle, Pete jumped backwards, out of reach, crashing into the kid behind him.

'Jesus,' he said. 'What a weirdo. Let's get out of here.'

I felt Tom's arm brush against me as he unclenched his fists. The gang turned and jostled off across the oval. When I saw the other boys leaving a careful space between themselves and Pete, I laughed and called out, 'Good one.'

The boy looked straight through me, as if he hadn't even heard. He picked up his bag and walked off in the same direction as Pete. Tom and I glanced at each other and shrugged and followed more slowly.

That was twenty years ago but I remember it better than I remember yesterday.

After that I watched him whenever I had the chance. His name was Ray Maloney. His family had just moved down from Sydney, which explained why he'd arrived at Central in his final year of school. He hung around with all sorts of different people. One day he'd play a few games with the chess kids but next day he'd sit with a bunch of girls from his form or spend the whole lunchtime talking to Danny Adamson, a fourth form boy with a face like a cherub who was always called Baby Adamson. He didn't seem to know that you weren't supposed to talk to girls or younger kids. Either that or else he didn't care.

I suppose it might sound strange that I spent so much time watching Ray when I already had a steady boyfriend. Tom was about as opposite to Ray as you could get. He was tall. He was skinny. He had thick blond hair all down his forearms and on the backs of his hands. There was nothing worth mentioning about his profile. His eyes were the palest shade of blue. And none of that was important - it doesn't really describe him at all.

When Tom and I were together, which was most of the time at school and a lot of time outside school, I used to talk and talk and he used to listen. Except that every so often he'd tilt his head up and back and peer down at me, as if he was looking at me from behind his eyes. Then he'd say something that would stop me in my tracks, something that I could go on thinking about for ages afterwards. He was the only person I'd ever met who was able to do that to me. That's why I liked him so much.

Tom was smart but he knew how to be ordinary as well, which was something I'd never managed. He looked after me at Central and I lent him books and shared the big desk in my parents' study with him. We were a team. We'd been each other's best friend for years. We loved each other: not like love in the movies but better, I thought. So it was hard for me to admit, even to myself, that I wanted something else as well.

The folk singing scene had just started up around then and I kept dragging Tom along to dark downstairs clubs and then - go on, admit it, Janey - trying out the songs that I'd heard, crouched over a guitar in my bedroom. Ballads about ghosts and murders, ravens picking dead men's bones and

Thomas the Rhymer who met a lady dressed in grass green under the Eildon Tree and was carried away into fairyland. 'Not like those dreadful Enid Blyton fairies that live in the daffodils,' I said to a long-haired woman at the club and she grinned and sent me off to Space Age, a new science fiction bookshop where I found shelves and shelves of fantasy novels about quests and women warriors and remote, beautiful elves.

And that's what Ray was like, as far as I was concerned. Beautiful and remote. Different from anyone I had ever known.

So I kept on watching him and Tom must've been watching too. At any rate, when we were taking the shortcut again a few weeks later, he was the one who suddenly veered off and went running across to the trees at the side of the oval. I raced after him but it took a while before I spotted Big Pete and a while longer before I noticed his bunched up fist, a few inches away from Ray's profile.

Another frozen moment of time. Another of those memories that last for twenty years. Big Pete with the strangest look on his face, half angry, half pleading. Ray studying the fist thoughtfully, as though Pete was holding it up for his inspection. Tom pushing between the two of them and slamming his own fist into Pete's stomach. If I close my eyes, I can still see every detail: the frayed edge of Pete's school jumper, Tom's nostrils flared wide, the pattern of brown gum leaves under Ray's feet.

Then Pete grunted and fell back against the tree. Tom grabbed Ray and started to haul him across to where I was standing but Ray wrenched his arm away.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' he said.

Tom looked at him from behind his eyes. 'I would've thought it was fairly obvious,' he said and Ray sighed.

'Listen, I can handle this, if you'll just leave me alone. You're not rescuing me, y'know. You're only making Pete feel worse about himself.'

'Oh yeah? And I suppose you made him feel great, that time you tricked him into looking like he was flirting with you?'

A grin twitched the corners of Ray's mouth but he pushed it back. 'It was four against one then,' he pointed out. 'I couldn't afford to be too picky about my tactics. But at least I'm trying to make up for it now.'

He turned and walked away. When he was close enough for Pete to hear, he swung back and called out, 'Go on, rack off!'

Although he was still close enough for us to see his eyelid drooping in a wink.

I stopped watching him for a while after that. Somehow it would've seemed disloyal to Tom. All the same, I couldn't help noticing that Ray had started to spend some of his lunchtimes helping Big Pete with his homework,

in between playing chess or sitting with the girls or talking to Baby Adamson. I was impressed - and, all right, maybe I was a bit jealous too. But I tried not to think about that.

On the last day of first term Tom and I were lolling together under the trees, reading through one of the scenes from *Hamlet*, which was the set play for that year. A shadow went sliding across the page and next minute Ray was sitting beside us. The sunlight silvered his eyes and turned his face into a mask.

Tom tilted his head back. 'Well, look who's here,' he said. 'I thought you didn't want to know us.'

Ray shrugged. 'I had to teach you a lesson, after that business with Pete. But you're the most interesting people in this school. I knew I wouldn't be able to hold out for long.'

He leaned forward. I could see his eyes again, skimming over us like a masseur's hands, trying to gauge our reaction. I burst out laughing and within seconds Tom was laughing too.

'Good,' said Ray. 'Now can we be friends?'

From that moment on we spent most of our spare time together. Generally at my place, because my parents were at the university all day; less often at Ray's place, where his mum fussed over us and his little sister listened at the door; hardly ever at Tom's place, with his four brothers rampaging in and out.

When you're getting to know someone new, there's usually a stage where you kind of circle around each other. But we fitted together right from the start. Three isn't always an easy number and yet none of us ever seemed like the odd one out. Tom and I had a lot in common, Ray and I had a lot in common and Tom and Ray - well, I'll get around to that in a minute.

Sometimes we all talked at once; sometimes two of us would talk and the other one would listen. Tom and I had developed a shorthand way of communicating that drove other people mad but Ray never had any trouble with it. He and I loved gossip, so we used to sit and analyse people's characters for hours, while Tom watched benevolently. And Ray brought out a side of Tom I'd never seen before.

Every time Ray teased another bully or argued with another teacher or broke another of the unwritten rules at Central, Tom got really worked up about it. He would lecture Ray on the dangers of standing out from the crowd, until his cheeks burned and he started to sputter. He lost his cool. He came out from behind his eyes. I have to admit that I enjoyed watching it, almost as much as I enjoyed it when Ray widened his eyes a fraction and proceeded to provoke Tom even more.

It was a perfect time, one of the best ever. Then somewhere near the beginning of spring the three of us went to a folk concert at the music bowl,

out under the stars. We found a space on the grassy hill behind the bowl, away from the glare of the lights. Tom in the middle this time, Ray and I on either side of him.

As soon as we'd settled ourselves, Tom cleared his throat and turned to Ray. 'I hear you went to the Sex Education film night after all,' he said.

'That was quick,' Ray observed. 'I knew the Central grapevine was good but I didn't realise it was that good. Who told you about it?'

'Shelley Harris, when I was down at the shops this morning. According to her, you wrecked the entire evening single-handed.'

'No, he didn't,' I protested. 'He just tried to make that moth-eaten old GP tell us a bit about homosexuality, to balance the boy/girl stuff he'd told us already. It was fantastic, Tom! Most of the boys'd been snickering and digging each other in the ribs but all of a sudden they froze. You could've heard a pin drop.'

A hum of laughter from Ray. 'Well, the doctor asked whether we had any questions and that's what I wanted to know. Mind you, I'm not sure his information would've been all that reliable, even if he'd managed to stop choking and spit it out. I got the impression he doesn't actually know what poofs do.'

Neither did I but I wasn't going to risk one of Ray's knifeblade comments by asking. By that time I suppose I more or less took it for granted that Ray was queer. Not that he'd ever made any big announcements about it. He just talked as if everyone knew already - although, oddly enough, it was one of the few things that the three of us had never discussed. So I was startled when Tom shifted slightly and said, 'Ray ... how come you're so open about all that stuff? If I was a poof, I'd make bloody sure that no one at Central knew about it.'

Ray took a while to answer and when he did, his voice sounded as if it was coming from a distance, a much greater distance than a few feet away.

He said, 'Seven years ago my dad fell in love with someone else. He's Catholic and Catholics don't believe in divorce. So he had to choose between a religion that meant everything to him and a woman who meant everything to him. It took him six years but he made up his mind in the end. And now he's lost half the meaning in his life; he can't see his kids any more; most of his family won't speak to him and - anyway, after sitting through all of that, I decided that I wasn't ever going to give a flying fuck about what anyone else thought of my private life.'

There was silence. Some kinds of silence are just that: silence. But other silences are loud, rushing, thunderous. They hammer in your head, they hammer at your heart. They seem to go on forever.

I listened to the silence in the space between us. I peered into the darkness but Ray and Tom were just shadows, no way of reading their faces.

Then Tom's shadow shape lifted its head up and back and looked down at the shadow shape of Ray. I waited for him to say something that would break the silence, something that I could go on thinking about for ages afterwards.

But he didn't speak. The silence went rushing on.

It was a small incident and yet it really rocked me. Suddenly I felt as though I didn't know Ray at all. I'd thought of him as different, special, remote: the way I wanted to be. I'd admired him because he never seemed to care about other people's opinions. But it wasn't like that, after all. He was only able to sail past the ordinary, everyday problems because he cared even more about something else.

I felt disillusioned. Disappointed. Something along those lines. Although I didn't back away from Ray or anything. It was pure coincidence that, a week or so later, the long-haired woman at the folk club asked me whether I knew the words to 'Three Drunken Maidens' and I said yes and next minute I was up on the stage, singing with her and another woman. Naturally I spent a lot more time at the club after that. Inevitably I saw a lot less of Tom and Ray.

I suppose we might've drifted on to the point where we didn't see each other at all, if it hadn't been for the school play. Up until then the play had always been a cutdown version of something by Shakespeare, with half the school milling around in the crowd scenes and the choir making a big production out of the songs. But that year we had a new English teacher, Mr Jenkins - the only teacher who actually encouraged Ray to argue with him - and he decided that we ought to stage a revue instead.

'It's time this school tried something a bit more experimental,' he announced. 'A bare stage - we'll get our effects with lighting and a few eye-catching props. And the stagehands can carry the props on in front of the audience. We won't need to use any of those ridiculous painted sets, left over from last year.'

The art teacher glared at him in passing but he didn't seem to notice. I could see why Mr Jenkins liked Ray and I wasn't surprised when he made Ray the compere of the show, introducing each item and linking the whole thing together. Tom was appointed assistant director and he doxed me in as one of the main singers. So the three of us were a team again. Not quite as close as before but not entirely separate either.

One of the big advantages of a revue was that Tom and Mr Jenkins could rehearse the different items separately, which made it much easier to fit the rehearsals in around lessons and the end of year exams. Another advantage was that you didn't get to see all the other items beforehand, which meant that there was actually something to look forward to on the night. When I rocked up with my guitar case for the performance, the air was fizzy with excitement and the corridors backstage were clogged with kids, all boasting,

panicking, showing off, muttering their lines and crowding round the clothes racks to get a look at each other's costumes.

The show started with the whole cast in an assortment of terrible school uniforms, singing a parody of a school song. Then we broke ranks and rioted off the stage, leaving Ray in the spotlight with his back to the audience. He swung around, raised one eyebrow and started to announce the first item, at the same time beckoning to the stagehand.

Big Pete lumbered on with a tall stool tucked under one arm. He set it down at the centre of the stage but Ray shook his head, so Pete scowled and shifted it to the right. Ray sighed: he shifted it to the left. Ray frowned: he shifted it back to the centre again. Finally they settled on a place for the stool and Big Pete stomped up to the back of the stage with Ray at his heels, mimicking him perfectly.

The first item was me. (I can't resist saying that Mr Jenkins had picked me because I was - quote - 'the only real professional in the cast.') I sang a folk song called 'Bedlam Boys', while Ray and Pete jostled together in the background and after that they clowned their way from one item to the next - encouraging shy tapdancing first formers, prompting loudly when Baby Adamson forgot his lines in a scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, juggling with the props when a pair of violin players missed their entrance. At least a dozen things must've gone wrong that night but nobody in the audience noticed, because the comedy team of Ray and Pete covered for every mistake.

The first act was pretty zany but after interval the mood gradually got more serious. By the time I came back for my second solo, the audience had settled down and even the smartarse third formers listened attentively while I plucked my guitar and sang:

'The trees they grow so high and the leaves they grow so green.
The day is past and gone, my love, that you and I have seen.
It's a cold winter's night, my love, when I must bide alone,
For my bonny lad is young but a-growing.'

Tom met me in the wings, whispering, 'Well done, Janey.' I hugged him briefly and then turned back to see what sort of witty comments Ray was making about me. But instead I saw Big Pete, clutching the mike and fixing the audience with a determined glare as he muttered, 'We reckoned the master of ceremonies ought to lay himself on the line, just like the rest of us. So now Ray's gunna do a speech from, um, *Hamlet*.'

With a huge sigh of relief he let go of the mike stand and bolted. Ray appeared at the back of the stage. He strolled down to the footlights,

examined his fingernails with a frown and said, 'To be or not to be. That's the question.'

I must've read Hamlet's speech at least twenty times during the year. As a matter of fact I even wrote an essay on it. But until I heard it from Ray, I never quite realised that it was about a bloke deciding whether or not to kill himself. Ray didn't put on that special voice that people use when they're reciting poetry. He just sounded as though he was chatting to the audience - or chatting to himself in front of an audience. And yet, from the moment when he started to speak, the silence was so intense that it seemed as though everybody in the theatre must've been holding their breath.

I stood in the wings next to Tom, talking to Ray inside my head. I'm sorry, I said. I didn't understand. I thought you were some kind of remote, beautiful elf, so I got angry when I found out you had feelings, same as me. My mistake, Ray. You're not above it all, the way I thought. But you're still special, because you know how to save your feelings for the things that really matter.

The last words of the speech went shuddering through the silence and then, just before the burst of applause, Ray swung round and almost stumbled off the stage. I gazed at the circle of light where he'd been standing, clapping as wildly as everyone else. The entire cast started to file on for the finale but I'd forgotten that I was supposed to be there with them. I was looking around for Tom, wanting to catch his eye and share the moment. But he'd disappeared, so I went searching for Ray instead.

Past a pile of props, past a rack of costumes, past Mr Jenkins puffing furiously on a cigarette and then, in the corridor between the dressing rooms, I caught sight of two shadowy outlines that met and reached out and merged into one. I'd never seen two men embracing before and I didn't see it then, because my eyes blurred and a rushing silence filled my head. I went plunging back into the darkness on the hill outside the music bowl and as the silence rushed on, I saw what I hadn't been able to see then.

I saw two hands, one smooth, one rough with blond fur, reach out through the silence, grip each other tightly and rest together on the grass.

So, apparently, I'd known for the past few months that Tom and Ray were lovers, even though I hadn't got around to admitting it to myself.

It was too much. I think I might've gasped out loud and I know I turned and ran. Footsteps echoed behind me and a hand hauled on my sleeve. Tom spun me around and gripped me by the arms.

'Janey,' he said. 'Janey, I wasn't just using you, I promise. You have to believe it.'

I could see what he was thinking but for once he was wrong. 'Come off it,' I said. 'I know I was more than a cover up for you and Ray. Nothing's ever that simple. Hell, *I* could be using *you* as well. Bet that never occurred to you.'

His head lifted up and back and then he laughed and pulled me into a bear hug. A few seconds later Ray inserted himself between us, resting his head on Tom's shoulder, tucking his arm round my waist. He'd never actually touched me before and I was still getting used to it when Mr Jenkins appeared beside us, took us by the shoulders and pushed us onto the stage.

We stood there, dazzled and disoriented. Tom holding Ray's hand, Ray holding mine and Tom and I stretching out and linking hands behind Ray, to complete the circle. Lights blazed down on us, the cast gathered around and Big Pete bellowed, 'On ya, Ray.'

The audience cheered us for so long that we thought they'd never stop.

That was twenty years ago but Tom and Ray are still together. They live in Sydney now. Tom's a TV director and Ray runs a restaurant called Maloney's. I catch up with them a couple of times every year, when I go to Sydney for one of my public service committees.

We don't often talk about the past because there's too many other things to talk about. But once, when Ray and I were out on the balcony looking across at the lights of the harbour, he suddenly fixed me with his dark gaze and said, 'Tell me, Janey, were you in love with Tom, back at good old Central High?'

I thought about it, twirling the stem of my wine glass. 'We were friends,' I said finally. 'That was the most important part. Still, I suppose I was in love with him, in a way - although I was in love with you in the same sort of way as well.'

'Good heavens,' Ray said, looking slightly alarmed, and I grinned.

'Don't worry. It was just a stage I was going through.'

'Oh yes? What stage would that have been?'

'The stage where I knew I was different but I hadn't figured out that I was a lesbian. We're talking twenty years ago, remember. You couldn't read about Martina Navratilova in the *Women's Weekly* then, you couldn't watch two women kissing on prime time TV. I latched onto you and Tom because you were the nearest thing to a role model I'd come across. Can't say I've ever regretted it either.'

Ray doesn't like compliments, even indirect ones. 'Well, we were all young and foolish then,' he said dismissively. 'Although not as foolish as some, mind you. Do you remember Big Pete, Janey?'

'How could I forget?' I said. 'Wonder what he's doing now,' and we probably would've gone on to invent a whole series of alternative futures for Peter Doyle, except that just then Tom arrived home.

He put his big, gold-furred hands on Ray's shoulders and bent down to kiss him. I'm glad we're still friends, I thought. It's nice to know the endings to some of the stories, at least. And I watched them, fascinated and curious as a

seventeen year old girl, while the past superimposed itself on the present and the present superimposed itself on the past.

Note: I'm not usually allowed to know more than my characters do but in this particular case I can say that, although Janey and the guys aren't aware of it, Big Pete's family went back to the UK, where he became a stand up comedian, working under the name of Crude Doyle.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

The TV was always on in the lounge room. The curtains were drawn early and the walls flickered with reflected light. Soaps and game shows and sitcoms. Her father planting himself in the middle of the couch to watch the news. Her sister, runners hooked over the back of a chair like bat's claws, watching *The Simpsons* upside down. Dinner in front of *Australia's Funniest Home Video Show* and then sport or a movie or one of her mother's travel shows - or all of them at once, if her brother got hold of the remote and went channelsurfing. Sometimes, when he didn't have a job interview next day, he watched NBC and rock clips and old cop shows until dawn. So, as far as she was concerned, the TV was always on.

Not that she cared. In fact, she hardly even noticed, because she usually went straight to her room to write the second draft of an essay or draw up her latest countdown-to-the-end-of-the-year study plan. She had to work hard. She wasn't a natural, not like Trudi who could prop her elbow on a pile of books and argue about whether Silicon Fish was a better band than Serial Killers and then get up and walk away, knowing what was in every one of the books. Life was nice and easy for some people, right? but she'd need to spend every spare moment studying, if she wanted to get the kind of marks that would take her off to law school with Trudi. All of which made TV watching a definite waste of time.

Except every now and then, like the night when the words started to melt and run together and drip off the page in front of her. She stood up, rubbed her eyes and went to find a snack. The lounge room was empty but the TV was on: two women chatting together, one with a strong lined face and iron grey hair divided by a lightning flash of white, the other young and rosy with round interested eyes. Something about them snagged her attention and she paused in the middle of the room to listen to them. Went to perch on the arm of the couch. Slid down and slumped against a stack of cushions.

It was an English cop show, more Agatha Christie than gritty realism. The two women - Inspector Fox and Sergeant Fletcher - seemed to be investigating a murder with overtones of witchcraft and for a while she entertained herself by trying to guess the murderer and fill in the scenes that she'd missed. But then strange things started happening - a dead black cat on Fox's doorstep, words scrawled on the wall in a room that no one could've entered. The rosy sergeant stayed sceptical but the inspector's grey eyes became progressively more shadowed until, nerves on edge, suspicious of everyone around her, she bolted from the police commissioner's office, crying out, 'Where's Fletcher? *I want Fletcher.*'

The words flared, bright and dangerous as a lighted match flicked at her from the opposite side of the lounge room. (Hadn't Trudi said that the woman who played Fox made her name acting in Shakespeare?) She found herself sitting bolt upright, watching the screen with aching concentration, waiting for the next meeting between the two women. A few scenes later Fletcher came looking for Fox, Fox looked up from her desk and smiled wryly - and the picture blinked and changed to a row of dancing potato chips. She turned to see her brother on the couch beside her, levelling the remote like a handgun.

'Put that down,' she ordered. 'Can't you see I'm watching this?' and he dropped the remote and backed away, leaving her on her own again.

For the space of two heartbeats she felt guilty. Then she forgot and leaned forward and watched Fox and Fletcher tracking clues, questioning suspects, discovering that the police commissioner was the head of a coven. Finally the logic of the plot brought her to the moment when the two women faced each other and exchanged a look of satisfied understanding. She glanced sideways, to make sure she was still alone in the lounge room, and then she sighed.

When she stood up, her midriff felt bruised and tender, as if the organs that it protected were growing and changing underneath its pad of flesh. She made a sandwich in the kitchen and carried it back to her room but she couldn't eat, because her stomach was churning.

'Where's Fletcher?' she whispered experimentally. Her throat clenched tight before she could practice saying, '*I want Fletcher.*'

I lay awake for hours. My heart thumping so hard that I got high on the oxygen in my bloodstream. I kept seeing those two women's faces. Kept hearing those words. Kept trying to remember more about Fox and Fletcher. I'd watched the first episode and bits of a few others but they hadn't struck me as anything special: not like now.

Next morning I woke out of a deep stunned sleep and remembered something. Raced to school, grabbed Trudi, hissed, 'Listen, you're a Fox and Fletcher fan, aren't you? Any chance that you happened to tape it last night?'

She nodded. 'Yeah, sure. I was at my Tae Kwon Do class, so I set the VCR and watched it when I got home.'

'Good,' I said. 'Because I missed the end of it. Can I swap with you, Trude? A clean tape in return for Fox and Fletcher?'

She nodded again, so I went back to her house that afternoon. Didn't matter how hard I was studying, I could always make time to see Trudi. I'd just go home afterwards and rearrange my study plans all over again.

We raved on for a while, as usual, and then she went to get the tape out of the VCR. Ever noticed how oil refineries have those tall silver pipes with a flame on top that burns off the waste gases and flares up more brightly whenever there's more waste? Well, when Trudi dropped the tape into my hand, it felt as though something released inside me and sent a jet of flame searing up my spine. My brain blazed. Every cell in my body was on fire with excitement.

'Thanks,' I said from a tight throat. 'I'll do the same for you some day.'

She'd always been the reliable one in her family. Her sister was trouble in black leggings, her brother was unemployed and unhappy, so somebody had to take the middle ground. But she started by lying to Trudi – she really hadn't missed the end of *Fox and Fletcher* - and before long she seemed to be sneaking and scheming all the time.

Because suddenly there were a lot of things she needed to do. She had to tape the rest of the *Fox and Fletcher* series. She had to rummage through the pile of old newspapers in the laundry and make a list of the episodes she'd missed. She had to find time to watch the witchcraft episode again (and again and again). And she had to do all of this in secret, without her family noticing. Not easy, considering the amount of time they spent in front of the TV.

She stuck to her study plans but now her life was planned around *Fox and Fletcher* as well. She was desolate when the series ended. Ecstatic when the station started to repeat it. Chair-kicking furious when she sat down to watch the sixth episode and found that it had been shunted aside by a telecast of some footy match. Next week, to her relief, the show was back again but a fortnight later a programmer checked its ratings, drew a line through it and replaced it with *McGyver*.

Instant outrage, followed by a week of feeling bereft and powerless. Still, at least she has her checklist. There are twenty episodes of *Fox and Fletcher* in total and she's taped fifteen of them. Only five to go. She wants them. She's never felt more determined in her life.

She tries all the video shops in her area, phones retail outlets and specialist shops and finally gets the name of a mail order service in Manchester. An exchange of airletters, a bank draft - there go her savings - and then she settles down to wait for a parcel from England. And in the meantime she watches her fifteen tapes again (and again and again).

Over time a pattern of moments starts to develop. There's the episode where Fletcher leans past Fox to click the mouse on the computer and their hands almost touch. The episode where Fox teases Fletcher, as usual, and Fletcher, unusually, shows that she's hurt. And, of course, the episode where Fox gasps, 'I want Fletcher.' Soon she knows all those moments so well that she can replay them in her mind whenever she likes: no need for a VCR. Soon she starts to extend them and turn them into a story of her own.

It's hard to say exactly when the story turns into a romance.

Fox is sulking because Fletcher understands the computer better than she does. She looks so distinguished, lined face and dark grey hair, but she can be quite childish at times. She won't move over and let Fletcher open the relevant files, so Fletcher has to keep reaching across her. Then they both go for the mouse at the same time and Fletcher's hand closes over Fox's hand (yes!) and Fox glances up with that quizzical lift of her eyebrows - Fletcher's staring at her, breathing fast - a hopeful look in her round eyes but it doesn't take her long to realise that Fox isn't feeling the same way. She sighs and -

Wait a minute. Too obvious. Inspector Fox is the brilliant moody one: Sergeant Fletcher's job is to be calm and ordinary and stabilise things. Besides, if Fletcher reacts too much now, it spoils the next part. So, okay, she feels all this stuff but she doesn't let it show. Then later on Fox makes some sarcastic comment like, 'We almost missed a vital clue while we were holding hands in front of the computer.' (Not quite right - need to work on that.) Anyway, this time Fletcher actually ... flinches? mouth quivers? tears in her

eyes? (Nah, she's not that much of a wimp.) Fletcher stares at Fox, steady and confronting, her rosy cheeks slightly redder than usual. Fox shrugs - she never takes much notice of other people's weak spots - and makes another crack. So Fletcher walks out.

Cut to Fox alone in the office, standing by the window. You can tell she's feeling a bit bad about the way she treated Fletcher but she doesn't have time to think it through, because just then the police commissioner knocks on her door. Fast forward through some boring plot business to the point where Fox starts to get really upset. The point where she storms off, going, 'Where's Fletcher? I want Fletcher.'

And - oh Jesus, *of course* - Fletcher's there. (Should've realised that before.) She came back and she's standing at the end of the corridor and she hears Fox and walks towards her and takes her in her arms and - hey, hold on. Way too fast. It wouldn't happen like that, not after so many years where Fox went on falling for all those impossible men and Fletcher kept her feelings under wraps. Still, there's something in it, just the same.

All right. Play it again.

The teachers kept telling us that our final year of school would be the most difficult ever but what can I say? it wasn't like that for me. I worked hard and fast, in order to get back to Fox and Fletcher. Told their story to myself in the shower, on my way to school, during study breaks, at night before I went to sleep. The joy of figuring out a new development. The steady satisfaction of replaying the existing scenes. Words and ideas came spooling out of me, even more freely than I imagined that they would when I became a barrister, making speeches to a crowded courtroom. (Or doing whatever lawyers do. I was already starting to get the feeling that law mightn't be quite as glamorous as it looked on TV.)

It changed me. I hadn't realised how much I did for my family until I stopped. My brother used to get me to write his job applications. My sister used to lie on my bed and tell me how unfair everything was. My mother and father used to corner me in the kitchen and worry about my brother and sister. But not any more. I wasn't cooperating these days. Didn't have time.

Fox and Fletcher even changed things with Trudi. She was an F&F fan too, remember, so I couldn't help wondering. Dropped a few hints - 'Y'know, if one of those two was a guy, you'd assume they fancied each other' - but she just laughed and I didn't have the nerve to push it. I realised then that although Trudi and I talked serious, we didn't talk personal. The first time I'd ever thought she was less than perfect.

Still, it wasn't a problem. Nothing was, then. I'd never been so happy, my life had never been so intense. Up until that night in front of the TV, I hadn't really been able to understand why people bothered about love but all of a sudden I was going around silently apologising to every kid who'd ever raved on to me about guys or pop stars. I could see through their eyes now. Could see that magic aura, because it glowed around Fox and Fletcher, transforming their slightest change of expression, making their unspectacular faces beautiful.

Funny, though: I wasn't actually in love with Fox, or with Fletcher. I don't know whether this makes sense but I seemed to be in love with both of them at once.

Months pass. Life goes on. Her brother gets a job in a pub for five weeks, her sister is sent home for swearing at the sports teacher, her mother announces that she's going to Tasmania with her Tattsлото syndicate, her father scores a load of free wood from his cousin and pulls a muscle chopping it. And in her stories the two women have taken to sitting side by side, Fletcher's arm stretched out across the back of the couch. Finally Fletcher shifts slightly. Fox turns, into her embrace. They kiss. They -

What?

She's not sure.

For the first half dozen replays she just sends them off into the bedroom, cuts straight to the next morning. But before long her ignorance starts to get irritating. It's her story, after all. She wants to know.

Determination can't help her this time. Her fifteen Fox and Fletcher tapes don't help either. The story is stalled for several weeks until, one morning when she's flicking through the paper, she catches a brief mention of a gay bookshop. She hunts for its address in the phone book. Goes there. Walks up and down the street, up and down. She's terrified - far too terrified to work out what's frightening her. Then she thinks, 'I don't have to do this. I could just go home' and that thought sends her into the shop.

The shelves are the same, the rows of spines are the same as in any other bookshop. Her heart kicks once at the sight of a sign saying LESBIAN FICTION and then she settles down to browse along the shelves. There's a novel about cowgirls on a ranch in America, a novel called *Sappho's Daughter* set in Ancient Greece. And a novel about two women who meet and go to bed together, quarrel and go to bed together, separate and miss going to bed together, make up and go to bed together.

When she finally looks up from the pages, she's surprised to find she's still in the bookshop. Who would've guessed there were so many different

ways of having sex? She tucks the book under her arm but she has to roam around for ten minutes before she can go and pay for it. Impossible to look the woman behind the counter in the eye, while her nipples are standing like beacons and a pulse of nerve endings keeps rippling in her groin.

Back home she hides the book in a suitcase on top of her cupboard, along with the Fox and Fletcher tapes. (Her sister won't find it there.) She reads it late at night, half-hidden behind her second pillow, with another book close at hand so that she can snatch it up if her mother comes in. The book itself isn't all that compelling but when she applies her new information to Fox and Fletcher, it takes her breath away. A whole extra dimension. She's always been in love with Fox and Fletcher but now they're just as urgently in love with each other.

She's lying in bed one night, rehearsing her story, when it occurs to her that Trudi is like the charismatic inspector, she is like the loyal sergeant. Some alarming implications here but she refuses to be alarmed. Instead she treats the idea as if it was one of her assignments. Tests it with logical analysis and concludes that, even though she feels like Fletcher around Trudi, in some ways she's probably more like Fox. (Moody. Defensive. Talking big to hide her feelings. Just like Fox.) So it's more complicated than it looks at first. Although it could explain why she's in love with both Fox and Fletcher.

Weeks pass. She's lying in bed with her book one night when it occurs to her that half of the things the two characters do together are things you could easily do on your own. So she turns out the light. She grips one nipple cautiously between thumb and forefinger, squeezes it, rolls it, pulls it. While her other hand burrows through crisp curls to find some mysterious pleats of flesh which she prods methodically until she feels a responsive twinge. She leans back, hands keeping the rhythm, eyebrows pulled together in a puzzled frown: not half as excited as when she's replaying a scene from her story. And then there's a sound in her ears like a high wind. Shock waves jolt outwards from her fingertips and her hips bounce off the mattress. In that electric instant she tries to push herself into the story that she's been telling.

But she doesn't gasp 'Fox' or Fletcher'.

She gasps, 'Trudi!'

- Prisoner at the bar, you stand accused of wasting your time on B-grade fantasies that promote unhealthy attitudes and pose a serious threat to your chance of a normal life. How do you plead: guilty or not guilty?

- Guilty. No, not guilty. Oh hell, I don't know.

- Very well then, we shall proceed straight to the cross-examination. Do you or do you not spend at least ten hours of every week inventing a

homosexual fantasy in which the main characters are thinly disguised versions of yourself and one of your classmates?

- No way. You've got it all wrong. Fox and Fletcher are *real*.

- Real? Pardon me if I find that a little difficult to accept.

- You don't have to be sarcastic about it. Okay, I know Fox and Fletcher aren't real like my family or the kids at school. But they come from a real series on TV. They're real to me.

- I see. So your defence is that these regrettable fantasies have, as it were, a life of their own. Nonetheless, wouldn't it be true to say that, on the night of July the twenty third, you identified one of the principal characters as being based on Trudi Louise Cartwright, your best friend for the past five years?

- Look, maybe that's part of it. But so what? I mean, I'm not in love with Trudi or anything. I'd know.

- Would you? Can you look me in the eye and solemnly swear that you have never, on any other date, implicated Trudi Louise Cartwright in your pornographic imaginings?

- All right, there was the time when I was, um, touching myself - but that was an accident. And once or twice since then I've accidentally thought about kissing her. Nothing more than that, though. I couldn't. It'd be *embarrassing*.

- Embarrassing, eh? Merely embarrassing, not childish or shameful or wilfully self-destructive? Tell me, prisoner at the bar, would I be right in assuming that you spend more time on your fantasies than you spend with your family and friends?

- ... Yes.

- And are you asking the court to believe that you regard this as a positive development?

- Yes! Fact is, I was miserable before I lucked onto Fox and Fletcher. They changed things for me. They changed everything.

- Indeed? Could you be so kind as to explain that last statement to the court?

- Um. Not really. No. I can't explain. And it worries me too, sometimes.

- Aha! I'm glad to hear that you have some vestiges of proper feeling. So you admit that you're troubled by this unfortunate obsession?

- Yes, but -

- That is the case for the prosecution. Prisoner at the bar, I advise you to enter a plea of guilty, although I warn you I shall recommend that you be sentenced to give up your fantasies forever.

- Sorry, not a chance. I won't do it. I couldn't give up Fox and Fletcher, no matter what you say. They're the only thing that makes me happy.

Three months after I'd posted off the bank draft, my five *Fox and Fletcher* tapes arrived. (Couldn't afford airmail postage and apparently seamail takes forever.) Mum noticed the stamps and asked a few questions but I told her I'd sent away for some special English history books, which seemed to satisfy her. I took the parcel into my room. Tore off the wrapping. Sat on the bed for ages, touching the photos of Fox and Fletcher on the covers and wondering how I was going to manage ten private hours in front of the TV.

Sometimes life is kind. That weekend one of my brother's friends asked him down to his family's beach house. So on Friday night I raced through my assignments and my revision, checked to make sure that my mother and father had gone to bed and crept into the lounge room. It was dark for once, only a red glow from the last of the fire. Shadows shrouded the TV and piled up in the corners, so high they looked as though they might collapse and topple onto me. By the time I found the lamp beside the couch, my heart was beating like a drum.

I was standing next to the TV with one of the new tapes in my hand when my sister walked in. She should've been in bed. I would've been, at her age. But she thought she could do whatever she liked and she was right, too. Mum and Dad never came down on her the way they did on me, because they were scared she'd chuck a whammy. She got away with murder. I hated her.

'Don't look at me like that,' she whinged. 'It isn't fair. You're never around these days and I've been wanting to ask you something.'

'Well, you can't,' I said. 'Not now. You ought to be asleep.'

'Yeah, right. How am I supposed to sleep when my best friend's mad at me and my sister won't even talk to me about it?'

'You could try sorting out your own problems, like everybody else does. Face it, I don't have time for that sort of thing at present. I'm too busy studying, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'You're not studying now.'

'Oh wow, that's so perceptive. No, I'm not studying - I'm taking a break for once and I want to spend it relaxing, not listening to you bitch about Annamaria Borlotti. Now are you going to piss off, so I can watch my video in peace?'

My sister scowled. She said, 'Fuck your video.' Grabbed it from me and threw it onto the fire.

Slow motion, the slowest ever. The tape, cartwheeling through the air. Dropping down. One corner strikes the raft of burning coals and it splits apart, releasing a sail of orange flame. Soft. Tissue-thin. The colour of sunset.

I'd been over near the TV but now, miraculously, I'm kneeling in front of the fireplace. I reach through the flame. Towards the video. I save it. Bubbling plastic, a sick smell and a blister where Fletcher's face used to be but I wrench the cover open and tip out the sleek black unblemished case of the video cassette.

Then I look down at my hand.

'Oh shit,' my sister says in awe, 'you're even crazier than me.'

They're in the bathroom with the door shut. Automatic conspirators: no point letting the parents in on this. Her sister removes the ice pack, smooths white cream across scarlet skin.

'Okay, what's the big deal? It's just a *Fox and Fletcher* tape. Why was it so fucking important?'

'Because.' How do you say something to a member of your own family that you've never said to anybody else? 'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

'Well, because it's special?'

'How come?'

'Because I can see something in it that no one else can see.'

'Like what?'

'The two women. They're ... close.'

'Lesos, you mean?'

'That's what I think.'

'So? What's special about that?'

'Well, I'm a lesbian too.'

It's not just that she's never said it before: she's never even fully thought it. But her sister doesn't seem all that surprised.

'Hey, cool. That ought to shake things up around here. I reckon you should get your hair cut like k. d. lang. You're doing it with Trudi, right?'

'No. I couldn't. Trudi's not - '

'How do you know?'

Silence in the bathroom. Her sister winds gauze tape around her fingers and fastens it at the wrist. 'I learnt this in Health and Human Relations,' she comments. 'About the only useful thing they've ever taught me at school. How does it feel?'

'Better. Still throbbing, though ... Listen, do you want to talk about Annamaria now?'

'Jesus, you *are* a weirdo! You'd have to be joking. I wouldn't dump my stuff on you after - after that. I'm going back to bed, and so should you.'

‘All right. Just one more thing, before you go. What on earth am I supposed to say to Mum in the morning?’

‘Easy. Tell her you spilled boiling water when you were making coffee.’ Her sister pats her on the shoulder and looks at her with friendly contempt. ‘You don’t know the first thing about how to lie properly, do you? Never mind. You’ll learn.’

I went back into the lounge room to switch off the lamp. Fire in my hand but a gentle warmth in my midriff. I’d talked to someone in my family about something that mattered to me. A first. Another thing I owed to Fox and Fletcher.

I reached for the lamp with my right hand but the skin on my fingers stretched so tight that they couldn’t move. So I left the lamp on. Went back to my room and took down the suitcase, one-handed. A brotherless weekend, which meant I could watch videos till dawn if I liked. No one would notice. In our lounge room the TV was always on.

I sat cross-legged on the floor near the TV, arranging my twenty tapes in chronological order. Cradled my hand, smiled at the blistered cover. But picked up one of the old tapes first and went fast forward straight to the right spot.

‘Where’s Fletcher?’ Fox asked urgently.

My hand burned in my lap and my lips moved in time with hers as she cried out, ‘*I want Fletcher.*’

NIEMÖLLER, YEAH!

Day 1

Our first day back at Central Secondary College. Renae and I get there early and park ourselves in the foyer, to see if we can spot any new talent. I notice a neat blond guy - geometric hair; Cool Fools t-shirt with a Cool Fools badge and another badge shaped like a rainbow; friendly eyes.

And Renae can't stop staring at this guy with jet black hair and a black t-shirt with three vampires dribbling blood down the front.

But that's the difference between me and Renae.

When I get home, I race into the kitchen and make a mortadella and cheese sandwich. As I sit down next to the phone, it rings.

Renae says, 'Come on, Enza, what do you think?'

I say, 'What do I think about what?'

Renae sighs so hard that it tickles my ear. I decide it's not fair to tease her.

'The vampire, you mean?' I say. 'Renae, be serious. You only just got over Travis. Why fall for another arrogant, self-centred poser?'

'Who says he's a poser?'

'Well, no one forced him to dress like that. Besides, he's a Serial Killers fan - that's their Vampire Tour t-shirt. Serial Killer fans are major posers.'

'It takes one to know one,' Renae says but she sounds uneasy. 'All right, your turn now. Who did you fancy?'

'Me? No one. Not really.'

I shouldn't have added those last two words. Renae pounces straight away.

'Who did you almost-fancy, then?'

'Well ... there was this Year 12 guy. Blond hair, Cool Fools t-shirt. I didn't fancy him, but. I just noticed him.'

'That's lucky.' Renae sounds as though she's cheered up again. 'Lucky for you, I mean. Honestly, your taste in guys is way worse than mine. You'll never get anywhere with that one.'

'Why? Not that I care, of course. I'd just like to know.'

'Because he's gay, ya geek.'

'Oh, sure. Since when could you recognise a gay guy from twenty metres? Didn't you listen to Ms Vassilikis in Social Science? Gay guys and girls look just the same as anyone else.'

Renae giggles. 'You *are* keen on him, aren't you? Chill, Enza. I'm not jumping to conclusions - I'm arguing from the evidence, the way Ms Vassilikis tells us.'

'What evidence, exactly?'

'The badge, Enza. The rainbow badge.'

'Huh? I don't get it.'

'That's because you're the kind of nerd who does homework, when you could be watching *Mates*. If you'd seen last night's episode, you'd know the gay neighbour was wearing a rainbow badge.'

'So? Nobody ever told me "rainbow" equals "gay". Maybe nobody told the Cool Fools guy either.'

Renae yawns, to show me I'm being boring. 'Listen, we don't have to talk about this guy, if you don't want to. We can talk about the guy in the vampire t-shirt instead. You may think he's a poser but I think he looks sensitive.'

'Sure,' I tell her. 'That's what you said about Travis too.'

Day 2

Renae and I hang out in the foyer again. Renae watches the guy in the vampire t-shirt, looking for proof that he's sensitive. I watch the blond guy.

Someone else is watching him as well. Murray Denton from year 12. He fixes the blond guy with a steady stare: you can't help noticing it. He stares and stares and stares.

Day 3

At lunchtime the blond guy sits near a bunch of year 12 kids, the way you do when you want to give people a chance to start talking. Murray Denton comes and bounces a basketball against the wall, between the blond guy and the other kids. He keeps bouncing the ball closer and closer and he doesn't stop till the blond guy gets up and moves away.

Day 4

Murray Denton keeps on staring at the blond guy. He stands in the foyer with his arms folded and stares at him. He stares at him across the yard. He stares at him while we're waiting for the bus.

When I get home that night, I ring Renae. The first thing she says is, 'I know his name.'

'Whose name? The guy with the rainbow badge?'

'No, you idiot, I'm not interested in him. As a matter of fact, I know his name too - it's Jack. But I was talking about the guy in the vampire t-shirt.'

Jack, I think. 'Okay,' I say, 'tell me all about it.'

'He's Harry Vangelovski,' she says in a hushed voice. 'His friends call him Fang.'

'Awesome, Renae. You mean that maniac actually has friends?'

'One or two. More than your fabulous Jack, anyway.'

Fair enough, I can't remember seeing Jack with anyone in particular. But it's only his fourth day at Central.

'Murray Denton's been staring at Jack for the last three days,' I remember. 'What's going on there?'

'Well, either Murray's got a crush on Jack, same as you, or else it means trouble. And I doubt if he fancies Jack. Not Murray Denton.'

'Give me a break, Ren. I thought you were going to stop inventing stories about Jack.'

'Who says I'm inventing stuff? Cop this, Enza. Rhys Browning went up to Jack at lunchtime and said, "Are you a fag or what?" and Jack said, "Why, do you want to ask me out?" and Rhys went bright red and Jack said, "Well, I am, even if it's none of your business." So there you are.' She pauses and adds, 'Rhys is a mate of Murray's, isn't he?'

After that we're silent for a while. I'm thinking it through and Renae's either thinking or checking her hair for split ends - or maybe both at once.

‘Big deal,’ I say finally. ‘So some guys go for guys, instead of girls. So what?’

‘So it’s different,’ Renae says.

‘But everyone’s different,’ I tell her. ‘For instance, you like Fang and I’m terrified of him.’

I can never guess how Renae’s going to react. Sometimes she reckons I ask too many questions but sometimes she really gets into it.

This time she gets into it. ‘That’s true, if you think about it,’ she says. ‘But most people don’t stop and think. They’ve got their own ideas and they stick to them - including their ideas about gays.’

‘I’m not totally ignorant,’ I say. ‘I know lots of people are anti-gay. I just want to know why.’

‘Typical,’ Renae grumbles. ‘I wish I’d never told you about Jack ... All right, then. Be honest, wouldn’t you freak if some girl made a pass at you?’

‘I’m not sure. It’s never happened.’

‘Me either, but I reckon it’d be really off. Like, if a guy acts interested, I’m sort of flattered, even if I don’t fancy him. But if a girl acted interested, it’d mean she thought I was a lesbian. I wouldn’t be too rapt about that. Would you?’

‘Depends on the person. I wouldn’t feel flattered if Rhys Browning made a pass at me. But if Angelina Jolie made a pass at me, I’d rush off and tell the world.’

‘Dream on, Enza. Dream on.’

‘No, but seriously, what’s the point in making up your mind about things beforehand? I’d rather wait and see how I feel at the time.’

‘You would. Most people wouldn’t.’

Renae starts humming the latest Serial Killers hit. I assume she’s lost interest but suddenly she says, ‘I’m not knocking Jack, y’know. I reckon it’s pretty brave, wearing that badge.’

‘Thanks,’ I say, like she just paid me a compliment. ‘It is, isn’t it?’

We’re silent again. Then Renae says, ‘Fang spoke to me today.’

‘Lucky old you. What did he say?’

Renae giggles. ‘He said, “Where the fuck do you find the art room around here?” But it’s a start.’

Day 8

As Jack hurries across the foyer, Murray sticks his foot out. Jack trips and drops all his art stuff and has to kneel down to scrape it together. He looks up and Murray gives him a steady stare.

I watch the whole thing from the opposite side of the foyer. I don't have a crush on Jack any more. (Not much of a crush, anyhow. Only the way you fancy teachers or your oldest brother's friends or movie stars.) But I started watching him and now I can't stop, even though I don't like what I'm seeing.

Day 9

After school, Murray waits behind Jack in the bus queue. When Jack moves forward, Murray bumps against him. Jack loses his balance and grabs hold of the guy in front.

Murray says, 'Watch out, the fag's falling for you' and everyone laughs.

Day 10

Jack's been reading *The Lord of the Rings*. He takes it with him wherever he goes. He reads it at lunchtime and between classes and at the bus stop, while Murray stares at him.

Today the book goes missing. Jack hunts for it all over the place but he can't find it anywhere.

I think I saw Murray hiding it at the back of his locker but I'm not a hundred per cent sure.

'So, what's new?' Renae says.

'Nothing much,' I say. 'Well, one thing,' and I tell her about Jack and Murray and *The Lord of the Rings*.

'Nasty,' she comments. 'Murray Denton's been acting like a real bully lately.'

'You're not wrong,' I say. 'It doesn't make sense. I don't understand why anyone'd get a kick out of hurting somebody else.'

Renae says, 'Well, you wouldn't, Enza. No one's ever hurt you.'

I can't see the connection. 'What difference does that make?' I go.

'Plenty,' Renae says. 'If somebody hits you, you know it's not the end of the world. You know people can survive being bullied. You know how to do it, too.'

We don't talk about it much but I know Renae's father used to hit her. (Now he lives in Sydney.) And it's true, Renae bosses me more than I boss her. Only in little ways, like telling me what to wear or keeping me guessing about how she's going to react. But it's there.

Then again, Renae's only bossy. She isn't a bully - and come to think of it, I wouldn't have picked Murray Denton for a bully either.

'Murray's never done that sort of thing before,' I say, thinking out loud. 'He only started this year.'

'True,' Renae agrees. 'Okay, what else turns people into bullies?'

'My dad says bullies are cowards.'

'And my mum says bullies are unhappy.'

'That'd fit Murray, for sure. Remember how his older brother got killed in a fight last year. Murray liked Dan a real lot.'

'Whoa! Hold it right there,' Renae says, getting excited. 'Maybe that's why Murray's picking on Jack.'

'What do you mean? Jack doesn't look like Dan or anything.'

'Honestly, Enza, sometimes I think you live on a different planet from the rest of us. Dan got beaten up when he was jogging in the park, by this pack of guys who were out gay-bashing. Everyone knows that. So maybe Murray blames gays for his brother's death.'

'But that's stupid. If those guys bashed gays and they bashed Murray's brother, then Murray ought to be on the same side as the gays.'

Renae sniffs. 'You're being logical again. I bet Murray isn't too logical about it.'

My brain starts working overtime. 'Yes!' I go. 'What if Murray needs to blame someone, the way my dad got mad at the hospital when Nonna died? He can't lash out at the guys who killed his brother, because they're in prison. But he can lash out at Jack, because -'

I run out of ideas and Renae takes over. 'Because if the guys hadn't hated gays, Dan'd still be alive, so Murray sort of hates gays for making those guys hate them.'

That's definitely not logical but it makes a weird kind of sense. I'm so pleased with Renae that I actually ask, 'Has Fang said anything more to you lately?'

'Um, yeah. He asked if I'd like to go to the Serial Killers concert next week.'

'Re-nae! This is getting serious. Come on, I want all the details.'

Day 12

Jack gets into a conversation with Steve Dallesandro, about something that happened in their art class. Murray stands two metres off and stares. Steve gets more and more uncomfortable. Finally he goes away.

Day 15

Murray walks up to Jack at the bus stop and says, 'Get out of my way, ya fag.' Nobody laughs this time. Nobody says anything.

Not Jack, not anyone.

Day 18

Jack sits on his own and eats lunch on his own and walks from one class to another on his own. Nobody dares to go near him, not while Murray's staring at them.

Jack isn't wearing his rainbow badge any more.

Day 21

Renae and I are in the foyer talking to Fang and his mates when Jack rocks up. He takes a roll of butcher's paper out of his bag and pins it onto the noticeboard. We all try to look, without looking as if we're looking.

The sheet of paper is covered with chunky letters, every colour of the rainbow. Just as I'm about to start reading it, Murray strolls over and rips it down. He crumples it and tosses it into the bin.

By the middle of the second class, I have a pain in my gut. I put my hand up and ask to be excused. Out in the foyer, I duck across to the bin and hunt around for Jack's poster. I smooth it out and fold it and stash it at the back of my locker.

'So what's going on?' says Renae. 'Why did I have to hurry home, without even saying a proper goodbye to Fang?'

'Ren, I rescued Jack's poster. It's a quote from this guy who was in one of the Nazi concentration camps, about how he stood back and did nothing when the Nazis came for the Jews and the homosexuals and the trade unionists and -'

'Huh? Why did Jack want to put that up on the noticeboard? What's it supposed to mean?'

'It means: why are we letting Murray bully him?'

'Enza-a-a!' says Renae. 'It's not exactly our fault.'

'Yes, it is. I wanted to tell Jack I saw Murray take his book, remember. But I didn't.'

‘Well, it mightn’t have been true,’ she points out. ‘You don’t want to stir up more trouble, do you?’

‘But Ren, can’t you see? If Murray gets away with this, he’ll think he can get away with anything. It could be our turn next.’

‘Calm down, Enza. You’re exaggerating, as usual. Murray’s got his own twisted reasons for getting stuck into Jack but they don’t apply to us. Trust me, we’re totally safe.’

‘Maybe, but -’ I say and then I say, ‘No! We’re talking again and I’m sick of it. I want to do something.’

Renae sighs. ‘Listen, I don’t need a quote from some dead guy to make me feel sorry for Jack. I’ve been sorry for him all along. I’d like to help him but I don’t see what we can do.’

‘Well ...’ I say and Renae says, ‘Oh no, don’t tell me! You’ve had one of your ideas.’

‘We won’t have to do much,’ I say, talking fast, to make it sound easy. ‘I just need you to charm Mr Henderson into letting us borrow the badge-making machine. And we need someone who’s good at art - maybe Steve Dallesandro.’

‘Fang’s good at art,’ Renae says. ‘I’ll ask him.’

‘Not Fang,’ I say, before I can stop myself. ‘No way could I work with him. He’s a Serial Killers fan.’

‘Oh, right,’ Ren says, in a voice that almost freezes my ear off. ‘So if the Nazis came for Fang, you’d let them take him, because you don’t like his t-shirts.’

That’s one of the reasons why Renae is my best friend. Mostly, I’m the one with the ideas but every now and then she says something that stops me in my tracks.

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘I’m sorry, Ren. Ask Fang, okay?’

Day 22

I get off at the same bus stop as Jack and follow him down the street. This is the hardest part of the whole plan. Not just because I’m scared someone will see us and tell Murray but because I blush all over when I start talking to Jack.

It’s pretty stupid. I mean, no way could he guess I used to have a crush on him.

Day 23

Jack, Renae, Fang, Steve Dallesandro and I meet up at Renae's place and make badges. Then Renae and Fang go off to the pub with the first load of badges and Jack and Steve and I go on working.

Day 26

Renae and I wear our badges to school. Everyone keep coming up and asking where we got them from and what the slogan means. Renae and I look mysterious and hand out more badges.

Day 27

Half the kids at Central are wearing badges that say, 'Niemöller, yeah!', even though they still don't know what it means. But the designs are so radical that nobody cares.

Day 30

Renae and I go into town after school. It's Friday late night shopping. Renae's helping me to choose a dress for my cousin's twenty first. In the mall we spot two total strangers wearing Niemöller badges.

Renae says, 'It's time.'

Day 33

On Monday morning the Niemöller team gets to school so early that my eyes are still gummed together with sleep. We pin a huge sheet of butcher's paper onto the noticeboard. It's like the poster Jack made but even better, because Fang and Steve worked on this one as well. Steve's into computer graphics and fractyls. Fang likes Goth stuff.

One by one, the rest of the kids drift in. They gather round the noticeboard in small groups, then one big group, and they read the words on the poster.

First they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew, so I did nothing. Then they came for the homosexuals, but I was not a

homosexual, so I did nothing. Then they arrested the trade unionists, and I did nothing, because I was not one. And then they came for the Catholics, but I was not a Catholic and I did nothing. At last they came and arrested me, and there was no one left to do anything about it.

Pastor Martin Niemöller.

The kids look at the poster with Steve's swirls of colour and Fang's smiling skulls and Jack's rainbow letters. Then they look at each other and say, 'Niemöller - yeah!'

When Murray comes strolling up, nobody backs off. He has to stand on tiptoe and stare over their heads to read the poster.

Renae rings me the minute she gets home, even though it's not her turn. 'Why did Jack do that?' she says. 'Everyone was giving Murray the silent treatment - but then Jack goes over and stands next to him. Is he a masochist or what?'

'Think about it, Ren,' I say. 'Would Niemöller want us to start picking on Murray next?'

I can practically hear Renae shrugging. 'Well, at least *Jack* could've picked on him a bit,' she says. 'I reckon Murray deserved it.'

'Uh-huh,' I go. 'So that's why you went and asked Murray if he wanted a badge?'

'I felt sorry for him,' she says crossly. 'And he took it, didn't he?'

'Actually, he went on wearing it all day,' I tell her. 'Good one, Ren. Niemöller, yeah!'

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