

# The white feather

Jeffrey Lewis<sup>1</sup>

## 1.

At coffee break, the tall, slender man comes forward from the crowd.

“I liked your talk,” he says. It’s what every delegate wants to hear. Though he is tall, his face is round and he has sparkling, blue eyes. I tighten my hair, Stand a little taller. Breasts forward.

“Thank you. I was a little nervous. Everyone looked so earnest...”

“They were interested. And it’s a challenging talk. I mean: cyborgs and the Frankenstein motif. Heady stuff,” he smiles. “And then you throw in a bit of Lacan. All things in the imaginary? Not sure I really got that...”

No-one ever admits to such a thing at these conferences. You don’t get Lacan? Everyone is a Lacanian nowadays. It’s compulsory. “Oh,” I answer, “it doesn’t mean everything is imagined. It’s more like: we’re born into the pure world of the senses but almost immediately we become subject to language. With all its crippling uncertainty.”

“Oh, you mean like when I walked over here wondering if you’d want to talk to me?” He chortles. Cute, but a little unbecoming.

“Sort of,” I suppose. “Yes. That’s a reasonable interpretation. We begin with sense: that’s the real. And then we go to language or other symbols: that’s the imaginary. Sometimes called the symbolic.” He is looking at me quizzically, as if he’s genuinely interested. Such a wholesome face.

“Sorry,” he says. As I feel the surge of chemistry, I’m beginning to lose interest in Lacan. But I add —

“I think he means we can only exist by the deception of symbols.”

“It’s a precarious existence, then... A paradox?”

“Yes,” I say, but now I reach the point of uncertainty that Lacan predicts. Where else can such a conversation go? Maybe if we were in a private place I could massage his thighs.

Only, he continues nodding. He sips his coffee, then leans away, surveying the room, looking, perhaps, for someone more interesting — or taller — to talk to. Remarkably, however, he leans back in toward me, looking at the name card pinned to my top. ‘Sarah ... You’re from Essex University?’ There is a strange lilt to his diphthongs. A luscious sweep of hair across his forehead.

“Leicester actually,” I say. “They made a mistake with my ID.”

“Mistaken identity... That’s funny. And very Australian,” he laughs. “Near enough is good enough. That’s why we never finished the Opera House. Actually why we never finish anything ...”

“Not even your sentences?” I joke.

“Especially not our gaol sentences,” he picks up, still smiling. “You know the nation began as a penal colony. I think we’re still living out that sentence. Still trying to apologise for ourselves and our past...” I see that he has perfect white teeth. That’s not how I imagine this country. Perfect teeth. But more earnestly, he asks — “Is this your first time here? In Australia, I mean.”

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"First time in Australia. First time in Byron Bay... It's very hot. I guess I should have expected that."

"And it's only December. My sister lives here and says it gets even hotter ... and wetter later in the summer."

**Hotter and wetter**, I smirk to myself. "Well, by then I'll be back fighting the blizzards at Leicester and slaving over a dissertation."

"You're writing up your thesis?"

"No choice," I concede. "My four gravy years are up. Now I have to produce."

"What school are you in? Gender Studies?"

"Yes. And I'm doing a bit with the media people...that's the link I was trying to explain in my talk. The cyborg. Pure essence. The idea that we can project ourselves as technological and communicative beings in a new bio-technological incarnation. We're evolving as media beings... Reconcile the meaning gaps a little. Perfect ourselves by identifying with the imaginary of pure bodies. We can shed all our bad shit and become complete, desiring beings." I kind of sing this last phrase.

"So... We can become better than we are."

"Or better than our past," I extol, as though rehearsing a conference question. "Better than the violence, war and oppression we've inscribed into our history. So, like the war against women. We start again...Liberated by technology..."

"No more uncertainty...?"

"No more rancour, oppression, cruelty, enslavement..." I know I'm smiling. Maybe a little beguiling as I lean closer, a pretext for deflecting the noise of the room. He gets the hint and leans even closer. Speaks directly into my ear. A firm voice, not shouting. Warm breath. Nice.

"Sounds a little utopian," he says. "Good thing, too, I say!"

I assume some levity, so I go one further "More like Dr Frankenstein's ideal cyborg! But he should have made the perfect humanoid a woman and all would have been fine. I think that was the point Mary Shelley was making. But most people missed it...Frankenstein should have made his perfect being a woman..."

"Well," he says, his voice now humming in my ear, "I'm not sure you can improve on perfection... Women, I mean. Maybe the flaws are all in us men."

Precisely! How could any feminist resist this man? I withdraw a little to look at his name. "Where are you from?" I ask. "You're not wearing a dog tag like the rest of us. That either means you're very important or very forgetful."

"Oh, neither. I'm just superstitious." Instead of a name tag, there is a white feather pinned across the buttons of his shirt, a garment that looks at least three sizes too big. I guess because he needs the length to cover his belly.

"My grandfather gave me this feather a few weeks ago. He died last week."

"Oh," I say, mustering some sympathy, "sorry to hear that." Droll, but what else do you say?

"Oh no, that's fine. He was ancient. Ninety-four. He said that he had to live that long to make up for all the lives that were cut short by war."

"That's nice," I say, and mean it. "He was a pacifist, then —?"

"Not really ... or at least not to begin with. He probably died a pacifist. But he fought in the Second World War. He was a gunner on the HMAS Australia. He never talked about it much. Not sure why...But then the last time I saw him he opened up to me and my sister. They were close, and maybe he had a sense of the end coming. I don't know."

He looks away again and I am sure this time he is going to close the conversation and leave. But then he glances again at my name tag. Maybe my breasts. He resumes.

"He said it was for good luck. The feather I mean." He unpins it and shows it to me. I see now that it has been lightly lacquered, but it still feels like a feather. "Apparently, he was working in a foundry when the war broke out, an essential industry. He must have felt guilty that all his friends were enlisting to fight but he was encouraged to stay at the foundry. This is what he told me when he gave me the feather...The labour shortages meant that he had been offered an apprenticeship, quite something for a family of unskilled rural labourers that reached back to the convicts..."

"Your family were convicts?"

“My sister did a genealogy, and, yep, we go all the way back to the stinking hulks on your beloved Thames.”

“That sewage drain is nowhere near Leicester,” I say, thinking about the whole genealogy craze and why people even give a shit. But then, I am not Australian, no forced migration, I muse to myself.

“Well, anyway,” he continues, “Pa is working away at the foundry, aged something around 18. He returns home to find this white feather on the doorstep, the accusation of cowardice. It’s enough. He enlists the next day. Apparently, it was a woman who left the feather, someone who had already lost her son in the war.” Before I can say anything in response, the session bell intervenes. I must be looking uncertain. He puts the feather away into his wallet.

“What’s next?” he asks.

“Oh, there’s something on female infibulation I thought I’d go to. What’s your name?”

“Dominic,” he says thrusting out his hand. I hold it, maybe for too long. Probably it’s the story of the white feather, or maybe his well-formed mouth.

“Where are you from, Dominic?” I ask, gathering myself.

“I’m at the National University in Canberra...And you’re Sarah Mitchell...soon to be Doctor Mitchell.”

“Well hopefully.” It is usually at this point that these minuets falter and the delegates move on to the next incomplete conversation. And as if on cue, he looks around the room again, but instead of moving on, he asks —

“Have you seen much of Byron?”

“Oh,” I answer, “a little. I went out to the lighthouse this morning...to watch the sunrise and calm my nerves...”

“No need for that. You were great. You obviously love what you are doing.” But what the fuck is that? I wonder to myself.

“Oh sure. But I did discover that the lighthouse is the most easterly point on the whole continent. I thought that was great.”

“The lighthouse — there’s a cyborg. Part machine, part human,” he laughs. “That perfectly programmed eye keeping all those traders and warrior ships afloat.” This is a little obtuse, but I sense him moving ever so slightly closer again.

“And yesterday arvo,” I add, trying to savour the moment, “I had a surf lesson. I was pretty goofy. And the sun isn’t so good for someone of my complexion, either. I don’t think I could ever live in Australia with this skin.”

“In Australia, they call people with auburn hair Bluey. Or at least they used to — ”

“And now it’s all ginger minge,” I joke. “The universal language of female red-head subjugation. Thank you Ygritte!”

He laughs politely. “Do they have ginger minge cyborgs,” he wonders. I feel a trickle of perspiration tracking through my cleavage. Maybe Dominic notices too.

“If not,” I say, “perhaps I can speak to the designers at Leicester. Actually, the whole idea of cyborgs was to de-gender the species. Or at least replace the evolutionary line of masculinity with something a little more...convivial. That was the idea in the beginning at least.”

“Yes, I got that from your talk. A trans-humanance, great leap forward. I should be nervous, I guess, being male, but we’re still here. We males, I mean. So something went wrong?”

“Nineties idealism. The cyborg dream was never meant to be realistic. It was utopian, like socialism. A way of extending the feminist argument. The Cyborg Manifesto! Have you read that? But then, well, maybe the warriors must have worked out what we women were up to, and the bastards retaliated!” I am probably sounding too sardonic, so I soften a little, finding a reason to touch his arm — “So what’s your area?” I ask, a little more softly. “Where did you do your PhD?”

“At Johns Hopkins. I did it on the Frankenstein dilemma: you know, the collapse of the human ideal...Just like you and your cyborgs... No, I’m joking. I did five years at Johns Hopkins studying robotics. That’s the truth. Different sort of cyborg theory. More to do with cyber security — ”

“And armaments?” I sneer. Can’t help myself. And what about your grandfather, I am thinking, but not willing to say. But he gets my tone and quickly adds —

"I began in games design and ended up programming robots. The US Army or CIA or somebody decided that we were on to something, so they funded some scholarships. I was designing electronic tarantulas, believe it or not. They thought the idea had "potential". So I was awarded a scholarship, received an award, and now I'm working in the Cyber Lab at ANU."

"Still working on tarantulas?"

"Well, multi-pod robots to be precise," he smiles. "Anyway that's why I came to your talk. We don't discuss ethics or gender or the future of the world. We just design shit and see what happens. The military are interested because they think we can help them defuse IEDs."

"Intra-Uterine Devices? ... Oh, I prefer to do my own." I am so clever. "No, it's ok. I get it. Improvised Explosive Devices. I do read The Guardian."

"Well," he says, trying not to appear apologetic, "it's part of the business. It's not just soldiers who get killed by these things. Villagers, women, kids ... anyone who takes a wrong turn. Just one step in the wrong direction and you have your legs blown off, maybe even killed. That's all it takes. A capricious millimeter — "

Suddenly, the session bell is ringing again, this time more urgent.

"Saved by the bell," I quip, not so funny. Conversations break off and delegates begin looking at their session sheets.

We both pause and look at one another smiling. "Well," Dominic says, holding my hand again, "it's been nice talking to you, Sarah."

"Likewise..." I reply, but I know I'm giving Dominic the gaze of the Dumpy Girl who haunts my body and being. There is a discomforting pathos in Dominic's eyes, as though he has conquered a milking cow.

"And well done, again, on your talk." Way too patronizing, I think, and I'm considering outrage when I remind myself that this stranger is male and studied at Johns Hopkins. Acceptance rate of 11% worldwide. We take anyone at Leicester. Anyone with a few A levels or six thousand pounds to spend on an education that will lead them nowhere. On the other hand, I think, he should be humble — after all, he hails from the Antipodes, a fucking penal colony.

I'm about to dispense with him when he unexpectedly redeems himself — "Maybe we can catch up later? ..." he tests. Circumspect and unpresumptuous; the perfect tone, festooned with those beautiful white teeth. "For a drink maybe. I guess you have a few people — "

"Sure," I say. "I'm an English girl, don't forget. We're all drunks. It's all over TV these days... Aren't you a Reality TV freak too? What's your surname?"

"Waugh," he says. "Good Welsh name. Goes well with Dominic, don't you think?"

"A Roman-Welsh man from the Antipodes who studied at Johns Hopkins and now sounds a little like a Baltimore escapee. I get that..." When he releases my hand, I add — "Conferences are only interesting until you present your paper and the three people in the audience cheer or sneer... I'd love to have a drink with you, Dominic."

## 2.

We separate. I glance surreptitiously, but he isn't looking back at me. Ah well, I ponder, not sure if he's really my type, anyway. Just coz he's male. Probably gay, like most of the other guys at conferences with the feminist tag. Fuck him.

I look at my sheet and find the session called "Clitomonía: the pleasure and pain of female prostheses". Great title, if nothing else. The panel chair is a super-sized African American woman with wild jet hair and an impossible accent. She shows photos of Sudanese women with incised genitals. Then she shows some other photos of teenage American girls who have had elective surgery to modify the size and shape of their labia majora. She is outraged, insisting that these forms of mutilation have a common origin in masculine power and perversity. The photos are generally grotesque, but I find myself gazing a little too long at the American girls" After Photos. They look kind of nice. Fortunately, there are no questions when the talk finishes, so I am able to unburden myself, breaking the silence by making some obvious and inane comment about children and the desire for perfection. The point is well-applauded by the exclusively female and devoted audience.

“Well said,” The African American presenter declares. “It’s men’s gaze that inflicts this violence on children!” Which is not really what I meant at all, but then I accepted the plaudits and my affirmation as an ideologically sound — though misidentified — feminist from Essex.

There are two other speakers who also talk about female body modifications. The first is on breast augmentations which also accords with the ideological primacy of the pornographic male gaze. The final speaker announces herself as a lesbian who regards heterosexuality as a capitulation to male domination. Her talk is about lesbian prosthetics and the use of digitally controlled vaginal stimulators. The speaker is very careful not to refer to these stimulators as phalluses or dildos which define the history of male sexual prurience and the desire to dominate. Her photos are extremely erotic, even though they are presented in a disinterested and clinical method. I’m not sure how many women in the room have had a pleasant encounter prior to this session, but I find myself recalling the conversation with Dominic. I wonder about his fleshly stimulator, his intellect — and a heart which allowed him to speak his grief to a not-so-perfect stranger?

In any case, the lesbian presenter is insisting on a category of female liberation which is not bound to masculinity or male bodies but which — like my cyborg — is free to roam the universe in search of the transcendent sexual experience, the ultimate orgasm or rather orgasms.

There we go, some lovely smut encased for ethical consumption. Her talk is well received and I can only deduce that the other delegates in the room are feeling as warm and lush as I am. They seem to be dutifully excited, asking clinically posed questions about technique, technologies and online lesbian sex stores.

It is all very enjoyable and confirming. The mingling continues until the session bell calls everyone to the assembly room where drinks and dinner will be served in 15 minutes.

As the crowd begins to shuffle out of the room, though, the African American woman and the lesbian are deep in conversation. I can see now that they are a couple. I square my papers and delay my departure, wondering if anyone at the session might want to speak to me, the bright little English girl who asked the question about children. But no, everyone in the room seems to have someone else to talk to, so I check my phone, a dignified little pantomime which at least gives the impression that I am not alone in this dark and treacherous universe. From the corner of my eye, however, I see Dominic trying to navigate his way through the tide of exiting women. Not wanting to appear too relieved or eager, I take my time turning around. I am about to feign surprised recognition when the African American woman calls to me —

“Hey, gal,” she calls. “Hey, don’t go. Come on over.” Are all Americans extroverts? I ask myself looking from Dominic to the black woman’s brilliant smiling face. I oscillate toward Dominic again and wave my hand. He mouths something like “I’ll wait here” and sits down at the back of the room. I nod and walk over to the American and the lesbian. They are both in their mid-40s. The lesbian is Australian and has mousey hair, a finely shaped nose and thin tight lips.

“Great talks,” I say. They look at my name tag.

“Welcome Sarah,” the American says. “Thanks for your comment, sister. I thought I was going to drown in the silence,” she booms.

“It’s an important issue,” I say, suddenly wishing that Dominic would wait outside for me.

The other woman introduces herself: “I’m Cassie,” she says. “Flo and I were wondering if you wanna have a drink with us. They’re serving booze in the auditorium now. I heard your talk earlier. I think we all have a lot in common...”

I dare a glance at Dominic. Cassie’s eyes follow. “Sure, yes,” I say. “That would be terrific. I... er...” But Dominic has heard and is getting out of his chair about to leave. “Just a minute...” I say to the women and follow Dominic to the door.

“I’ll give you my number,” I say and we produce our phones. Log it in. “Maybe we can catch up at dinner?”

He looks embarrassed. I get it. “You didn’t register...” I say.

“I’m just taking a break, visiting my sister after Pa’s funeral... You know.” He is half whispering. “I just walked in off the street,” he says. “I didn’t know anything about the conference.”

I hear the women walking toward us from behind. “I’ll call you,” I say. He glances at the women, bends down, kisses my cheek, very close to my mouth, then leaves.

The women say nothing. Flo takes my arm and I feel her heavy, soft breast against my shoulder. She feels maternal and kind. It is as if I could sink into her body.

### 3.

The night heaves forward. There's lots of drinking and laughter. Most of the delegates are women and the few hetero males attending are partnered or quickly captured. The gay guys huddle together; some are surrounded by women who treat them like celebrities. The lesbians are sniffing each other out. Those of us in the middle flirt with each other a little, female bonding but no real purpose. Cassie, it turns out, was born on a farm in a place called Wagga Wagga. It sounds exotic, but Cassie assures me that it is a mental and moral wasteland, loaded with grass, sheep shit and chicken-fuckers. Life began when she moved to Sydney to study. She and Flo had met in London where Flo was teaching at Westminster College. Flo hates everything about the US and was prepared to settle anywhere, even Australia.

"I'd rather live in the asshole of the world, Flo embellishes, 'than try and exist in a country that thinks Donald Trump is a human being."

At this Cassie nods approvingly: "They are going to reintroduce slavery," she says. "But maybe they already have — " And for a while we speak about the female sex-trade and again the perversity of male fantasies and the pursuit of power.

"Not that I mind a few shackles and sharp objects," Flo Jokes. Then I wonder if she really **is** joking as the couple pass a glance to one another, then simultaneously turn their gaze back toward me.

I tell them I need another drink, which I probably do, but I don't return to their little lair, thinking that probably they are looking for a threesome and this Voluptuous English-Girl might just fit the bill.

I find this interest flattering but unappealing. They are both buoyant, but not sexy. Not for me at least, and I expect that I am doing them a favour by releasing them to find someone more interesting or amenable.

In the meantime, I am drinking to excess and think I am being sniffed out by a younger woman, an honours student who has long luscious eye-lashes and a furtive, almost desperate demeanour. She is English, too, from Nottingham. Her parents migrated from India to England and then on to Australia, where, she tells me, they now live in the Byron Bay hinterland.

As we are talking, I become beguiled by her face and the full brown eyes. I have never had sex with a woman, though I'd thought about it a few times. Like now. But as I am thinking about it, imagining being in bed with this girl, my phone chimes. Dominic. The girl is very pretty, and thinking of her naked is filling my swampy again. I'm already hell drunk which I think this girl likes. On the other hand, I have no idea whether she is thinking of me naked or is just on her own and needs someone to talk to. She could be a Christian or Jain fundamentalist for all I know. Maybe even a homophobe.

We have been talking about nothing of any consequence. Began with my presentation and her Honours project, then floated into some dreary chat about her genealogy. Why does everyone in Australia — even migrant Indian Pommie Aussie girls — wonder about their past. What the fuck does it matter where you've come from? I want to say. But then comes Dominic's little chime and message. What to do? This girl is very gorgeous. I compliment her earrings which gives me an alibi for touching. She seems to like this too. Goodbye Dominic, I think.

But then this well-dressed young guy with a blue shark printed on his t-shirt comes over to us. "This is my friend, Tim," the Indian-eyed girl says. Sadly, I realise the word "friend" is loaded with fornication. Come back Dominic. I find an excuse and slip into a corner, away from the couple and the crowd, to read the text.

I'm at the Great Northern Hotel. Walk along Johnson St toward the beach. I'm employed so can buy the drinks. Smiley Face.

I text back: I can buy my own fucking drinks, Tallboy. My thumb hovers on the SEND command, but then I hit DELETE. I start again. See you in ten! Hope you got plenty of money. Smiley Face or x? Fuck it. It's ice freezing at home right now and my friends deserve a little intrigue — xxx. SEND.

I look through the crowd toward the exit. Flo, the African American lady, is blocking the exit. She appears to be scoring with the threesome, leaning in a tight bundle with Cassie and another middle-aged woman with short spikey

purple hair. I squeeze past unnoticed and step out into the warm evening air. The street is churning with bodies. A cacophony of music and wild, excited chatter.

"Which way to the beach?" I ask someone in the street. A German girl who giggles her answer, hitching up the precarious strip of cloth that covers her bum.

"Follow me," she says and walks me across the road toward the Great Northern Hotel.

"Oh, here," I say. "This is where I'm going."

"Are you meeting someone nice?" she wants to know. She is drunker than I am.

"Yes, well, I don't know ... he seems nice."

"He is Australian? Oh, he will be nice. Maybe a little lazy in bed, but he will be nice..."

**Lazy in bed?** I ponder, as she wobbles away from me. I hesitate, listening to a busker playing a lullaby on her trumpet. Strumpet on a trumpet, I muse, watching a family pod grumbling and laughing their way along the street. They pirouette around the busker and each other, chattering, clutching hamburgers and ice creams. The air is thick with the scent of the sea.

Dominic appears at the door of the hotel. Am I coming in? He's changed his shirt. The buttons are undone, revealing a smooth, fine chest and torso. In the evening light and under the influence of alcohol, he seems more vulnerable than before, more wholesome; more attractive too; his bright round eyes are gleaming. Like mariners drowning in the sparkling gloom of night.

"Is it always this warm?" I ask. He says nothing. "I can't drink any more. I'm full to the nose, and I need to pee."

"Would you like to go for a walk on the beach?" So romantic. He has stepped down from the doorway so that we are now looking eye-to-eye at one another.

"Maybe tomorrow. We can take a swim." I lean toward him and kiss him with my open inebriated mouth. Fuck it, I think to myself again. If he doesn't like it ... but he does. He draws me closer and I feel the fine firmness of his chest and arms. He tastes of red wine and garlic, sweet and faintly anodyne.

For a moment, I think of the Indian-eyed girl and what might have been. But then there is nothing to consider. This boy is nice.

"You can walk me back to my condo," I slur. "It's somewhere over there." Waving my arm, but I really have no idea.

"Google Maps," he says.

But I don't care how we get there. I just wanted to fuck.

#### 4.

Which we did. Smoothly, and without too much expectation. I thought he would be a little clumsy with those long limbs. But it was nice. That word: yes, it was bland but enjoyable, bordering on very enjoyable. He hung off 'til I'd climaxed, which is always a good sign. And when it was his turn, I heard the throaty squeaks in my ear and felt those lovely shudders as his body began to twitch and release. Then we lay heaving together until he suddenly grasped for the shrinking penis and condom.

Yes, it was nice. All easy. So easy, in fact, I let him stay the night and by morning I am ready to go again. Everything works out well.

Except, at sunrise, some time before he wakes, I feel my Dumpy Self returning to annoy me. Your butt and boobs are too big and a bit low-slung, she reminds me. And you need to wash between your legs. You stink, and so does he. Who is he anyway? Why is he in my bed?

Luckily, when Dominic does wake up, he seems not to notice her. He strokes me as the sun is tilting through the curtains. I can hear kids in the adjacent rooms but that just makes me more determined to send Dumpy Girl packing and make the most of this opportunity. I stroke his belly and feel the stirring of his cock, which is also nice. I squeeze it.

"I really need to piss," he shrieks.

“You’ll shoot yourself in the face,” I laugh and he disappears into the bathroom where I hear him struggling with his erection. When he reappears, his cock is still in driver mode. It looks as long as the rest of his limbs. When he catches me staring, he grasps it with both hands. “No looking,” he laughs. “It’s a cyber dick. I have no control...”

Then he dives beside me and starts kissing my neck, gently caressing the inside of my thighs ‘til he finds the mushy welcome he is hoping for. Who stinks? Whose tits are too big? Fuck you, Dumpy!

But then for a moment and for no good reason, I remember the mutilation of the Sudanese women and the American teenagers. I crush the thought. Or rather, Dominic’s hands dissolve it all away, and I feel my pulse begin to quicken.

His weight is on me and I guide his penis home. Now I’m thinking about nothing, just feeling — this is going to be even better than last night. Which it is. No prosthetics, just the gentle force of flesh and the low thunder of our bodies.

I orgasm once and then am beginning the second rise when I feel him suddenly withdraw. He reaches down “I felt the condom shift,” he says. But it’s ok. It’s in tact. I tear it off and we finish each other with our mouths. While I’m still buzzing I taste the heat of his release, and we both roll back, laughing and gasping for air.

## 5.

We shower together and I realize he is not quite as tall as I had first imagined. The lightness of his physique makes him seem taller, particularly when Dumpy Girl only reaches his shoulder. In the shower we soap each other’s chests. He lingers over my breasts, stroking and cupping me, slowly circling my nipples with his thumbs. Now he tells me about the long term relationship which ended during that year, around the same time as his grandfather’s decline. I parry with my list of unsuccessful and rapid-turnover boyfriends. It means nothing to either of us, but when he is towel-drying my back and I feel the light touch of his breath on my shoulders, I permit myself to wonder about long-distance relationships and how he might feel about moving to the UK. How I might feel about living in an Antipodean penal colony.

As I am dressing I notice the bristles around my pudendum. Too short to wax, too long to ignore. Dumpy Girl scoffs. **Leave me alone**, I whisper to her, and turn my bra clips toward Dominic. He submits, delicately clicking the hooks together. A little mascara and I find my hat, a huge thing that I bought in town. I see Dumpy in the mirror and take it off again. Lather myself in moisturizer and sunscreen. The sun is now pouring through the window and I watch Dominic dress, the orange light marking the outline of his torso.

When we go for breakfast, I ask if he is going to the conference today.

“No,” he says. “One of the organizers is on to me, I think. And besides, I’m out of my depth. It’s killing my self-esteem. I mean just being male, heterosexual and into gaming and robotics?... And I don’t really get Lacan ... you know.”

“Well, maybe I did a little for your self-esteem last night?” I play, hoping I guess for a little boost myself.

“Oh, yes. You’re great. I knew you would be when I heard your talk.”

“I think you know more than you’re letting on,” I say.

“Not really...I’ve read a little psychoanalysis. I get the idea that we live in a world constructed of symbols. That’s ok. And that senses break in through pain and pleasure. But something doesn’t add up to me. It all seems to be notwithstanding the clumsy way we live and be happy. And love... that seems stronger than any theory.”

“It’s why we all want to be cyborgs. Eradicate the pain, release the pleasure. Immortal, sensual beings...”

“Then we would lose so much of ourselves, wouldn’t we?” he says, a little mournfully. I know he is thinking of something else. His ex-girlfriend maybe. His grandfather. The white feather. I deflect it.

“Not a bad thing, in my view. We would lose our capacity for hate, for example. How is that a bad thing?”

“Perhaps because we might also lose our capacity for love, for fear too. Isn’t that what happened to Dr Frankenstein’s poor fool of a monster? Isn’t that where he ended up?”

“I think Mary Shelley was telling us that Dr Frankenstein failed because the programming was faulty. And the gender... If we got that right, we could just fuck all day... I’d like that,” I laugh, trying to resuscitate Dominic’s dreamy post-coital mood. But then I feel silly. Maybe after 24 months of long-distance relationship I could have the right to speak like that. We could then afford to risk everything and get on, or get out. Now, it just doesn’t matter.



Now we can pretend. His eyes are pretty in the morning light. I can hear the surging waves in my ears. And I really feel like more sex.

We drink our coffees and nibble at the food. We are both vegan. Hallelujah. Like I say: too easy. The sky is a deep and flawless blue; the verdant beach scrub is screaming with cicada. I am beginning to really enjoy Australia.

"Would you like to spend the day with me?" I ask him. "I've presented and, really, it's all just theory..."

"Definitely," he chirrups. "I can borrow my sister's car, if you like. We can go out to the other side of the Cape. There's a really nice beach there. Not as many people."

"That sounds good. Only, you have to tell me more about your grandfather and your white feather."

"And you have to wear a hat. We have to protect that beautiful Celtic skin."

"Deal," I say. "Come back to the condo in ... an hour, maybe hour and a half?" That will at least give me time to tidy up the pubic hair.

## 6.

Dominic returns to the condo in less than 40 minutes. I'm mid-shave and he is so aroused by this that we fuck again. This time with more purpose and less urgency. We eat apples in bed and kiss post-orgasmic for over an hour. It's nice, really nice, and we both feel our emotions surging.

Eventually, we agree that we should get up and go to the beach, but the Voluptuous Girl wants to stay naked. She puts on the wide-brimmed hat, sitting astride and gazing into Dominic's dilated pupils. It is as though we are really lovers.

We shower together again, dress and set out into the day. His sister's car is an old Volvo. It is almost a cliché, but the car has dents and scratches all along the passenger side. We drive out toward the lighthouse, turn off into a national park, barely speaking. I've let my hand slip into his lap.

I feel as though we should have caught up on sleep or something, but we are sharing a comforting exhaustion. Neither of us wants to part. No need. Not now. I don't even want to think of it. The promise to stay in touch. The airport. The kiss goodbye which both of us know, despite everything we might feel right now, will be our last.

So instead we walk out onto the beach and stroll up toward the cliffs beneath the lighthouse. From the beach I can see the steady stream of walkers and tourist buses which circle the white obelisk. To me, though, it now seems stark and sad, a relic of light which, like a dead star, has outlived its purpose. I turn toward Dominic feeling the need to say something, but he is watching the surfers, their muscular brown bodies tearing patterns across the blue hills of water.

I realize that whatever I might say would be insufficient. That the lighthouse, which had already been superseded by satellites and digital navigation systems, was really part of the fantasy which sustained this nation. It was a deplorable thing, a spike in the peak of a land that was stolen and then populated by Europe's desperate violence. Now it did nothing. Pointed nowhere, except to the hoards of travellers, who, like me, needed somewhere to go for lunch.

I couldn't live in this country, I whisper to myself. But then, I shake my imagination. I am walking along a beach with a man I barely know, but isn't it nice. His face is excited by the surf. I press myself against him. He looks and smiles. An interlude of romance.

We reach the bottom of the cliff and the lighthouse dips out of sight. Dominic lays out a towel with a Sir Walter Raleigh flare, and we plonk ourselves down. We are in the shade so I can dare my skin a little. I strip to my dark blue one-piece. Even though we are surrounded by topless Europeans and G-banger Brazilians, I know I look good. A little modest, but the dark colours and tight polyester keep everything in place. When I lean forward, my boobs threaten, but I can see Dominic stealing glimpses, which is all a woman can ask.

Dominic is really chirpy. God knows what he's thinking. Maybe the long-distance thing. Maybe he's plotting a trip to Europe for the summer. I don't know, but it cheers me too. He chatters about Australian history, his parentage, Maltese mother, Anglo-Australian father. Then he is on about the surf and the shark attacks and culture of the beach. The smugglers and whalers who populated the coastal villages. He talks busily about conservation and water birds. Snakes. All the things that might impress a Pommie girl. It is a funny little bravado, but amusing too. I should be offended, but I'm not. Not at all. And I think of Flo and Cassie from the conference, and the girl with

Indian eyes, sitting dispassionately and dutiful through their sessions, absorbing the knowledge which seems so flaccid right now, so distressingly insignificant. And I wonder, perhaps if Flo and Cassie had been more attractive, younger even, whether I might have played party with them. I don't know.

All I know is that Dominic is beautiful. Angular-bodied, perfect mouth and smile. I remember his naked body as he chatters away, and I feel that same flush of desire. I stop him mid-sentence and kiss him. He's not embarrassed, and I guess we are not as exhausted as I had thought.

We go for a swim where the water is a little calmer.

"I'm not much of a swimmer," I confess. "We used to go down to Brighton for our summer vacations and I learned to swim in the pool there."

"Oh," he says, "here it's more sink or swim. Long summers and the beach."

"We went to the beach, sometimes in the Atlantic coast in France. But the water was never warm and as a teenager I had to wear a bikini which never stayed on." We splash in the water and giggle like kids. A sudden wave lifts me and smashes me against Dominic. He holds me up and then we exit the water clasping hands. Not what I would normally do, but with limited time, what the heck.

When we dry each other and lie back down again, I find myself dozing off. By now it is late afternoon and the sun is bending away behind the bushland that flows like green snow across the cliffs and down to the beach. I feel Dominic's warm body against me and I begin to think about sex again. Then I am falling into a deep sleep.

When I wake, Dominic is sitting up. There is a soft pink sky and the beam from the lighthouse is now visible, rotating through the horizons, momentarily catching the beach as it passes by. Now there are only a few clusters of people on the beach, a few tardy surfers still in the water.

I run my fingernails across Dominic's back. He shivers with delight.

"I'll have one last swim," I say, feeling the air cooling around me.

"I might sit this one out," Dominic answers, but I am sure he just wants to watch me walk down to the water. The long shadows of the cliffs and bush-lands are stretching across the waves, but the water is still bathtub warm. I don't go out very far, but I can still feel the surge of current around my legs. I squat down, piss and jump up. As I'm about to turn back to the shore, I see a large wave rising in front of me. When it strikes, my legs are dislodged and I am sucked beneath the surface. I feel myself dragging along the sandbank, my body and limbs twisting, my lungs suddenly desperate for air. For a moment I am disoriented. As I try to stand, I am dragged down again. I am scrambling, clawing at the sand, trying to regain control of my limbs.

Thankfully, I am rolled up onto the beach where I gasp for air and turn onto my knees as the wave retreats. My bathers are filled with sand and water, and when I try and stand I feel giddy and sick. I feel like I'm going to cry as I look into the fading crimson twilight. The shoulder strap of my bathers has been ripped down and one of my breasts is hanging out of its cup. I am sure everyone left on the beach will be laughing at me as I restore the poor fallen boob to its holder.

At the same time, though, I am aware of some other disturbance. There is a girl shrieking and the vision of bodies moving as though in slow motion, like the darkened staccato of a silent movie.

Still dazed, I follow the throng to the shrieking woman. A man is lying on the sand bleeding. Two other men are holding someone down. The restrained man is groaning and grunting, fighting against the force of his captors.

"Call the cops!" someone else is yelling. "Call the fucking cops! And the ambulance! Get the ambulance!"

People are reaching for their mobiles. Another couple of men throw down their surfboards and help to hold the fighting man down. Now I can see a large knife on the sand next to the bleeding man. I push past to get a closer look. Others are packing the injured man in towels to try and stop the bleeding. The woman is still shrieking, but I can see that it's Dominic who has been cut. I go to him.

"Dominic," I say and stupidly, "Are you OK? What happened?"

But he can't speak. The beam of the lighthouse sweeps over us. I can see the blood is seeping through the towels and forming a large pool in the sand.

## 7.

I tell this story many times. To the ambulance officers, the doctors, the police. My family in Leicester.

Dominic has been in surgery for nearly four hours, but now they have him back in intensive care.

"He might die," the surgeon tells me. "But then," with his mouth tight and his eyes blinking like a metronome, "he might be ok". We have him in an induced coma and on life support. The ward doctors and nurses will keep an eye on him. He's being well monitored. The nurses will keep you up to date." Then nothing. The surgeon fades away without emotion.

There is a nurse behind a large desk covered in papers. She isn't comforting but advises me to go home and sleep. Only there is no point. In something less than 24 hours I will be on a plane, flying back to Leicester, probably still reeling through the disjunction of event and time. So for now there is nothing to do but sit in the unpadded plastic chairs of the waiting room. I had tried contacting Dominic's sister whose number whose number had been listed in Dominic's phone as Big Sis. The phone rang out, though, and I left a message that was as scrambled as my head.

When I see the local police sergeant in the hospital he tells me he has already visited the sister and explained everything. She has a baby, he says, and would probably get down to the hospital later. The sergeant is a huge man with massive hands and a big arse.

He could be a wrestler, I think, but he speaks with a quiet voice: not gentle, but soothing like a church organ. By now it is nearly midnight, and the sergeant wants to go home himself.

"He was just some kind of random arsehole," the police sergeant tells me. "History of drug abuse and mental illness. He was Iced to the eyeballs and just decided he wanted this girl's attention. When she told him to fuck off, he goes bananas and starts dragging her by the hair down to the water. Sadly for your boyfriend, he is the bloke nearest the action. He and a couple of other guys stepped in. The girl runs up the beach, the guy pulls out a knife. Your boyfriend cops it. Could have been anyone of three or four others who were trying to help. But you know. Random acts of nature."

As he walks away, the police sergeant scratches his arse and taps his gun-belt. He draws a long sniff into his lungs as he waits for the lift. Then he is gone too, leaving just me and the nurse to watch the clock face and wonder.

Around 3 am, Dominic's sister comes into the ward.

"I got your message," she says. She is slim and has exceptionally dark eyes and wild hair. Both arms are florid with tattoos. The same mouth as Dominic. The same finely shaped forehead. "My partner drives a truck," she explains. "He only just got back from a trip."

She recognizes the nurse who becomes suddenly animated, walking around the desk and greeting her with an embrace.

"Oh, Kelly," she says. "I didn't realize he was your brother. I'm sure he's going to be ok. The surgeon is quite upbeat," she lies.

I am standing aside, feeling like an intruder.

"Can I see him?" Kelly says. The nurse glances at the wall clock.

"Of course. He's in intensive. I'll call ahead and tell the ward nurse."

Kelly motions toward the corridor, then turns to me. "I have his things," I say. "His wallet and phone."

She ignores my proffered hand and takes me by the arm. I feel her body lightly trembling as we walk in a slow rhythm to the intensive care ward. She smells of milk and tissue.

The ward nurse stands at her desk surrounded by an armada of monitors and mobile machinery. Her eyes are bleary and ringed in dark circles. "Only one minute," she cautions, her voice rasped and fed up.

Dominic is the only patient in the ward. He is lying face-up, with his eyes closed. His body is wormed. by tubes and electrical wiring. A large wad of bandages is wrapped about his torso, and there is a sheet lying across legs, listlessly exposing his genitals which look drained and lifeless.

I realize as I look at his mummified body, though, that I haven't cried, not even at the first moment when I saw him bleeding out into the sand and I heard the rasped groaning deep in his throat. I don't think he'd recognized or even heard me on the beach. But now I still felt numb. I didn't want to rush toward him or hold him, but I just felt deeply sorry and repulsed by the sight of his clinical body. It was not the body I had been naked with, which I had worked into those frenzies of pleasure.

But Kelly, his sister, begins immediately to heave. For her, I feel everything, including my own shame at the cold perspiration that springs into my palms. I hold her and lead her from the room and back down the corridor to the plastic chairs in the waiting room.

For a moment she is keening and it takes all my strength to keep her from collapsing. Then her sobs soften and she clings like a drowning swimmer to my neck.

We sit on the floor together in silence, dozing and stretching now and then. Waiting, as the room demanded. At around sunrise the nurses change shift. Before she goes, the nurse who knows Kelly comes into the room with two glasses of water.

“You both need to go home. There’s nothing to be done here. The surgeon will be in later this morning and they will bring him back. All his vitals are strong. He’s young. He will be fine.”

Now I can’t tell if she’s lying, but Kelly and I are too tired to resist. We walk out to the car park together. The lighthouse is still pulsing, even as the first rays of sunshine appear over the headland. The highway traffic is beginning to hum and I can hear the deep grumble of trucks shifting gear as they turn corners and groan their way over the hillside.

Kelly and I stand looking at one another. When I hand her Dominic’s phone and wallet, the white feather slips out and floats to the ground. Kelly picks it up and holds it out to me. The lighthouse beam sweeps over us, pausing and illuminating the frieze frame of our confusion.