

William's
Whimsy



Susan Beck

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WILLIAM'S WHIMSY

By Susan Beck

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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WILLIAM'S WHIMSY

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Photo Description

Two formerly straight young guys holding hands... the distance between them showing a fledgling relationship with some uncertainty and hesitation in their affection... the clasped hands indicating the desire for connection and their attraction to each other... will love conquer social and family expectations?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I know this is a difficult task, but you may be just the person to take it on. Write a contemporary, HEA, **double** gay-for-you. What makes this a challenge? Well gay-for-you is always a challenge, and a double-gay-for you has been done very well by a select few. But these stories are dynamite.*

See these two guys in the flannel shirts? Well, this isn't insta-love, but they are taken by surprise by the growing attraction, and it causes them to question who they are. The ramifications are different for each one. What will make this story fun and hot is how they get to the HEA. Awkward situations, soul searching and above all, believable based on their characters. The old miscommunication thing is not as interesting as internal conflict. Maybe they've been friends for years? How do they ease into the physical side of the relationship? Or maybe they don't ease into it, who knows. Be explicit, go wild! No Paranormal, Sci Fi or BDSM please.

Sincerely,

Dacia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gamers, sweet/no sex, friends to lovers, gay for you, disabilities, men with pets, HFN, mute

Word Count: 15,204

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Author's Note

This short story is the first part of a novella. An expanded, full version will be made available for purchase in 2015.

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Ohmygod! I'm starting to suspect this woman doesn't need to breathe.

Perhaps she breathes through her ears?

How can anyone talk non-stop like this and not need to breathe?

I wonder if she can tell my brain is spending more time trying to stop my eyes from rolling than actually listening to the verbal barrage of instructions that she, as my Shift Supervisor/Trainer, has been spewing at me in an annoyingly pitched monotone for the last thirty fucking minutes!

I think I'm developing an eye twitch.

Don't roll your eyes. Don't roll your eyes. Don't roll your eyes.

Oh thank fuck. She's stopped telling me how the scanner thingy works and now we are going to explore the stock room. Yippee.

God I hope there isn't a test at the end of this training session. About all that I could tell them I've learned is that their shift supervisor has hellacious halitosis and the power to render me catatonic halfway through her initial sentence.

From my slumped position on the couch, I could see my brother getting out of his car. I called him *Seth the Beautiful*, but I couldn't quite imbue the name with the right amount of derision because, well, he was awesome. Despite the fact he'd had to look after me since our parents died, he'd only ever treated me with kindness and respect. This town was our new start; a chance for Seth to live his dream. So, here we were, the Emo and the Cop. Or should I say, the Check-out Chump and the Cop?

"Hey, Josh," Seth said with one of his cheery, movie-star smiles as he walked past the doorway.

He knew better than to wait for me to respond. He even *respected* my right to be an antisocial emo. God, he made it so fucking hard to be surly and, well, emo-ish.

I pushed myself up from the couch and followed him into the back part of the house where our kitchen and laundry were. I could hear him starting up the washing machine in the adjoining laundry and felt a twinge of guilt that I hadn't done more chores before he got home from work. My job today hadn't been all that taxing unless one counted the energy required in refraining one's self from stabbing one's supervisor in the eye with a Bic pen.

Seth emerged from the laundry and pulled the door closed behind him to block the sound of gushing water. "How was your first day at work, Josh?"

I slouched against the wall and tried to glare at him through my fringe. Unfortunately, his earnest, open, almost hopeful expression made it hard to be honest. I knew he felt guilty for dragging me away from my friends to live in this microtown, and I didn't want to add to that guilt by being honest and saying, *I nearly stabbed my supervisor with a pen and would rather lick cats' arses than work in that place another day*. No. Instead, I mumbled, "Fine, I guess."

Seth beamed at me in pleased relief and swept me up in an exuberant hug before giving me a kiss on the top of my head.

"That's awesome, Josh. I'm so proud of you!"

Gently depositing me back on my feet, Seth scampered away toward the fridge. Jesus Christ on a pogo stick. Living with Seth was like having one of those big, blond, happy dogs. You know the ones they use for the blind? Golden Retrievers. Yeah, Seth the Golden Retriever: earnest, loving, happy and easy-going. I was more... um, shit! Why'd I have to pick an analogy using things I know nothing about? Anyway, if there is a dog that is tall, skinny, morose and snappy, that'd be me.

The sound of the fridge door closing pulled me from my musings.

"Thanks for doing the shopping today, Josh."

"S'okay. I was there anyway," I replied with a shrug.

Seth gave me a quick smile before continuing, "Did you have a meal plan in mind when you picked out the items?"

Poor Seth. Any normal bloke would have ripped me a new one for filling the fridge with chocolate custard and tinned peaches, but not my Seth. I reckon he read a book on positive parenting the day after our parents died and burned it into his psyche. Regardless of how much I appeared to fuck up, he'd always be there with a smile and a positive word. So, instead of telling me about how tired

and hungry he was, how he wanted a decent meal and that the fridge was filled with crap, he waited, ever hopeful his younger brother had thought of someone else aside from himself for once.

With a smile, I opened the freezer to expose the neatly stacked boxes of pre-made dinners. "Ta-da! They were on special, so I bought heaps!"

Seth's face lit up in surprised relief as he grabbed a couple of the boxes and started ripping them open. "You having one, Josh?" Seth paused and glanced up at me.

"Nah, I had something earlier. I'm heading out to the hobby shop I saw today to see if there are any table gamers in town."

Seth gave me a thumbs-up before turning back to the microwave and his pending meal.

The hobby shop I'd noticed a few days ago lurked down a side street and had an old house attached to it. The fly-specked glass of the front window showed a display of remote control planes and boats, but a box, almost obscured by a Simpsons' chess set, gave me hope. A start-up box for the game *Staff and Claw*. I'd had an awesome table set-up back in the city, but we'd been unable to bring it with us. I hoped I could join a local campaign and return to the world of noble ratty knights and their epic battles.

Inside, the store was dusty and cluttered. The geek behind the counter gave me a startled glance before returning to his comic. It surprised me to find a great selection of *Staff and Claw* figurines, cards and weapons in such a hick town. I spent some time lusting after the weapons upgrades on display before I noticed the catalogue. My hands shook as I reached for the glossy book. These things were like gold, and I'd only ever managed to buy one other. In the city, they sold out in seconds and then reached ridiculous prices on eBay hours later. Who knew that this crappy little dive of a shop would have a copy? Clutching the book to my chest, I called Seth on my mobile.

"Ewow?" I'd obviously called him mid-meal.

"Seth? They've got a *Clawpedia*," I whispered into the phone. I don't know why I'd suddenly become all covert and secretive, but until I'd paid for the treasure in my arms, I had the irrational fear that it would be snatched from me by hordes of gamers who were just waiting for me to speak above a murmur.

"What? Josh? Are you there?"

I furtively turned my back on the store guy who was probably too engrossed in the shenanigans of Superman to give a fuck about me anyway, and whispered slightly louder into the phone, "They've got a *Clawpedia!*" I may have squeaked on the last syllable, but I was too excited to care.

"Yeah?" I could clearly hear the "So?" Seth hadn't said.

"CanIbuyit?" I breathed into my phone.

Now before you get all incredulous about me not having my own money, Seth and I only managed to survive by living with a tight budget. When I had my own income, I got to keep some of it to spend on whatever I wanted. Seth was real good about that, but the move to this dinky town had seriously depleted our savings, and I still hadn't been paid at my new job.

I panted into the phone as I waited for Seth's reply.

"How much is it?"

I glanced down at the glossy cover and closed my eyes in despair. Forty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents. A shitload to pay for a catalogue. I whispered the price and held my breath in anticipation.

I could hear Seth's sigh and braced myself for rejection. "Okay, Josh. Get it if you want to, mate."

I blinked in surprise before the rush of relief made my knees weak and my shell of emo disdain crack. "Ohmygodthankyousomuch."

I could hear the smile in Seth's voice as he replied before disconnecting, "S'okay, Joshy. See you soon."

Pocketing the phone, I stared down at the *Clawpedia*. I may have petted it a bit too, but I'll deny it if I'm ever challenged. The cough of the store clerk roused me from my adoring contemplation.

"Um... mate? You gonna buy that? It's just that I need to close up."

I wiped the counter off with my sleeve and gently placed the book on the now dust-free glass. The clerk's eyebrows hitched at my action but I didn't care.

The clerk reached for the book and turned it around so he could see the price. I resisted the nearly overwhelming urge to slap his hands away but it was a near thing.

After he rang up the price, I handed over my card to pay. "We have a table out back if you like to play," he said.

I stared at the clerk as I tried to make sense of his words. I'd been rendered stupid by the overwhelming awesomeness that was the *Clawpedia*. Then I remembered the reason I came into the store in the first place.

Before I could form a coherent reply, the clerk handed me my card and receipt and spoke again, "We'll be starting a new campaign on Friday night if you wanna join?"

I couldn't believe it. *Staff and Claw* was a boutique game not played by many people, and yet I'd lucked out and found a town with an active table. I smiled and we spent the next few minutes negotiating times and the logistics of snacks and drinks. It seemed they had a roster worked out for who brought what and when, and adding a member to the roster without some sort of committee meeting was a huge fucking drama. In the end I offered to pay for pizza to be delivered and said I'd bring my own bevvy's. Getting anal over who bought the Skittles and dip just wasn't on my to-do list.

Seth glanced up as I dashed past the lounge room door on my way to my room, catalogue clutched to my chest.

"Do ya wanna watch telly with me, Josh?" Seth shouted as I stepped into my room.

"Not tonight, Seth!" I replied as I simultaneously slammed the door and kicked my shoes across the room.

I quickly shucked my clothes and dived under the blankets. Shoving a couple of pillows under my chest, I reverently placed the *Clawpedia* on the sheet in front of me. Then, taking a deep breath, I opened the catalogue and became instantly transported to the world of warring rats, magic and chivalry of *Staff and Claw*. The pictures were so evocative that the lack of words wasn't a loss. You could see the story of epic battles and heroic deeds unfolding in the intricate pictures. Once past the vivid imagery, the *Clawpedia* reverted to a standard catalogue listing the various figures, cards and weapons you could buy for gaming. I looked with covetous eyes on the pewter figurines. Although they were no advantage in battle, I still admired their beauty. I owned the basic plastic set and had spent hours painstakingly painting each figurine.

I made a note of any new weapons I wanted to purchase before turning to the community chat at the end of the book. Here, gamers were able to make suggestions and send in pictures of their tables and collections. I'd never sent in

anything because I couldn't buy the '*pedia* regularly but perhaps, if the hobby shop proved to be a consistent source, I'd send in some of my many photos and drawings.

Eventually, I got to the stunning final page. The pièce de résistance of the *Clawpedia*. Every edition featured an original painting by the creator of *Staff and Claw* depicting the crest of one of the gamers featured in the community blog. One day, I promised myself, I'd see my clan crest in the book.

Glancing at the luminous numbers on my clock, I realised I'd spent hours pawing over the '*pedia* and regretfully, I closed the book and rearranged the pillows under my head. Switching off the lamp, I closed my eyes and planned the upcoming campaign in my head. Battle cries and heroic charges with the clash of weapons pervaded my dreams.

The next morning, Seth got me up for my first real shift at the store. I'd set the alarm but it had woken Seth and not me. I couldn't believe I had to start work so frickin' early. Who goes grocery shopping at six in the goddamn morning?

Seth made me a coffee as I showered and got dressed. I say showered but really, it became more of a lean against the wall and get wet. After once forgetting to rinse the soap from my armpits and having to suffer the itch and irritation all day, I didn't make the mistake of thinking I could function pre-dawn. The water woke me up but I'd have a real shower, with soap, later after work.

When I got to the store, I waited outside and watched a young guy sitting on a bench near the doors. Dressed casually in jeans and a blue flannel shirt, I couldn't work out why someone who didn't *obviously* need to be up this early for work would voluntarily choose to do his shopping in the darkness of dawn.

After the doors were unlocked, I dropped my jacket off in the staff lunch room before following the directions to the register nearest the shift supervisor. I could no longer see the guy from outside who'd followed me inside, so I assumed he'd be wandering the aisles somewhere in the bowels of the store. The store appeared still and silent apart from the nauseating Muzak. After another few minutes we started getting a steady stream of customers who, by their clothes, were on their way to work. During a brief lull I noticed the guy from earlier hovering near the service desk. The supervisor chick hadn't noticed him as she talked into the phone so I wandered over to offer my inept help. God

help us both if he wanted to know where items were in the store. I was completely clueless unless he needed chocolate custard, peaches or TV dinners.

“Can I help you?” I asked with, what I hoped, was a pleasant smile. Smiling wasn't usually my forte. Lip-curling sneers were usually more my thing.

The guy looked slightly panicked and started to shuffle his feet. I couldn't work out what his problem was because I may be tall but my stick-thin frame was not what most people would consider threatening.

We stood there in awkward stalemate until Ms Killer-Breath finally finished her call and turned to see the two of us standing behind her.

“Oh. William, I'm so sorry I didn't see you there.” Her tone of voice startled me. She had just talked to this William dude like he was retarded... and maybe deaf.

I tuned back into the one-sided conversation.

“William, let me introduce you to our new Customer Service Officer, Josh,” she said slowly and with exaggerated diction.

I smiled at the William dude again and wondered why, when no other customers were getting personally introduced, this William bloke got special attention.

Turning to me, I got the full effect of the halitosis from hell as Killer-Breath whispered in my ear. “William will need you to check his shopping list to ensure he hasn't forgotten anything.”

Weird but whatever I thought as, with a blush, William handed me the hand-written note. Clearing my throat, I started to read. “Milk, bread, yogurt, peanut butter...” I glanced at the conveyer belt to check each item appeared as I read it off. I could see that William was embarrassed by the whole procedure so I decided to try to lighten the mood as I continued reading the list out loud. “...mayonnaise, tomato paste, pasta, rice and, final item, a rat.” My decision to add a rat as the last item was heavily influenced by my mild obsession with *Staff and Claw* but I waited to see if William would register or react to my addition. William continued to add the last few items to the conveyer before looking up at me and, with a smirk, reached into his jacket and bought forth one of the hugest fucking rats I'd ever seen. He gently placed the rat on the conveyer belt before quirking his eyebrow at me in an obvious challenge. Ball was in my court and I didn't really know how to react. Before I could recover from my shock, a screech came from behind me as Killer-Breath noticed the rat sitting placidly on the conveyer belt alongside the groceries.

“William!” she shrieked. “Put Darktan away right now!” Shaking in outrage, Killer-Breath leant across the conveyer belt and whisper-shouted at the unrepentant William, “If you do that again, I will have to ban Darktan from the store.”

Again, her tone was that of an adult chastising a child, which I could see pissed William off. He retrieved the rat and stood silently while I processed his shopping and Killer-Breath continued to harangue and hiss reproachfully at the silent William. As he paid for the groceries the store phone started to ring, which distracted Killer-Breath long enough for William to make his escape.

The rest of the shift passed uneventfully and after my five hours I gladly donned my jacket in preparation to leave. I'd nearly made it out the door but Killer-Breath saw me and waved me over to the service desk.

“Josh, you did good today. I just wanted to warn you that you'll probably have to deal with William every morning as he can't seem to remember more than a few items and tends to do lots of small shops rather than one large shop a week.”

Slightly taken aback by the *warning* I reassured Killer-Breath that I could cope with the onerous duty of reading a shopping list for the poor dude, and when the phone again distracted her, I left.

The next couple of days dragged by with the same routine at work sans Darktan making an appearance. I could see the lump of his body under William's jacket but the beady eye of Killer stopped me from requesting another look-see.

Despite my attempts to engage William in conversation, he remained silent. After the second day of shy smiles and no talking, I asked Killer about him. Turns out the poor bugger couldn't talk because of some kind of brain injury he'd suffered as a kid. After that, I just chattered away without expecting a response and by the end of the week, William started participating with body language and his expressive face. Turns out I could talk enough for both of us when I switched off the emo long enough to form sentences rather than just grunting.

One Thursday, a few weeks after starting work, I again found myself checking the shopping list for William while telling him all about my new job at the supermarket. I'd already told him all about Seth and our move to his town. I prattled on, happy to provide all the dialogue. It didn't seem one-sided

because he was an attentive listener and could speak volumes with hand gestures and his facial contortions. Chatting to him had become the highlight of my days, which is what probably caused my disappointment when I didn't see him waiting outside the supermarket the next morning.

The day seemed dimmer and the shift longer without the highlight of William's visit. I had just started to consider closing my register when a hand-written shopping list appeared in front of me. My mood improved instantly and with a grin I started to check the items on William's list with the groceries laid out on the conveyer belt. Once I'd served him, I finished closing the register in preparation for leaving. I chattered away to William as I tidied up my station.

"Sleep in this morning, did ya?" I asked.

William shook his head and with a blush mimed that he wanted to walk with me.

I gave him a grin and told him to wait on the bench outside while I clocked off and grabbed my jacket from the staff room.

Exiting the store, I looked around for him and saw him waiting where I'd asked him to.

"Since you've got cold stuff in your bag, how's about we walk back to your place, drop the shopping off and then find something to buy for lunch?"

William gesticulated and mimed as we headed toward the wooded hill that arose behind the shopping centre.

Despite our limited time together, I understood William perfectly, and he seemed to appreciate having a mate who could, or would, bother chatting with him.

William led me through a small break in the fence at the bottom of the hill and we followed a well-worn path through the trees until a house appeared on a small terrace about a third of the way up the hill. A well-maintained weatherboard, its veranda faced the town so that you could see everything laid out like a 3-D map. I could see the ocean as a faint smudge of blue in the hazy distance. The panoramic vista kept me so captivated that I didn't notice the man sitting at the end of the veranda and startled when he started to talk.

"So, you're the one William's been chattering about," he said in a gravelly voice.

I walked toward him until features became clearer in the shadowy gloom. "I didn't think William *could* talk," I replied.

The man turned to contemplate the view and I started to think he wasn't going to answer me when he fixed me with a stern eye. "If you know how to listen to William, you'll understand what he's saying."

At that point, William stuck his head out the door and started gesticulating madly. I could feel the close perusal of the man as I watched William intently. Finally, I figured out the gist and, with a smile, told him I'd love to stay for lunch with him and his father.

I looked at the man, feeling smug. He nodded before turning again to look out over the town spread out below. I walked toward the door where William had disappeared but halted when he started to talk again.

"I'm his grandfather. His parents were killed in the accident that damaged William," he said without looking at me.

I waited to see if any more information would be forthcoming and after being ignored for a minute or two, entered the relative gloom of the house. I followed the sounds I could hear from the rear until I found William making sandwiches in an ancient kitchen. I noticed that the ever-present Darktan lump seemed to be missing and asked William about his absence. He quickly pointed toward a door at the back of the kitchen before continuing with his sandwich preparation.

The door had probably originally led outside the house, but through a window above the kitchen sink, I could see the walls of a new extension where once would have been a lean-to laundry and Hill's Hoist-dominated yard. I itched to explore but William distracted me by walking past with a teetering pile of sandwiches. I followed him into a lounge room near the front of the house and settled myself into a chair, whilst William grabbed a plate and some sandwiches and disappeared out the door to the veranda. I could hear William's grandfather thank him for the food.

Happy that his dour grandfather wouldn't be joining us, I spent the time while we ate, and then tidied up, regaling William with tales of battles won and lost in *Staff and Claw*. Eventually I noticed the increased gloom and told William I'd have to leave so I'd have enough time to get home, shower and change clothes before meeting my fellow gamers at the hobby store. As I prepared to go, I noticed William's bereft look.

"Do you want to come and watch us play?" I asked. "You'll probably get bored but you're welcome to come."

William nodded and raced out to his grandfather. I followed and watched the *conversation* between them. Eventually I clarified my invitation to have William come to town and watch me play. I told William to meet me at the supermarket in an hour and he raced off inside, to get ready I assumed. I turned back to his grandfather, who watched me closely.

“We have pizza at the game. Is that okay?”

Although William was a similar age to myself, I didn't know how much autonomy his grandfather allowed him and I didn't want to jeopardise our fledgling friendship by antagonising this stern man.

“Should be fine. He don't like pineapple on his pizza though,” came his gruff reply. I turned to leave but paused as he started to talk again. “Don't break his heart.”

I spun around and stared at the old man. What the fuck did that mean? “What do you mean?” I asked in confusion.

“Just because he can't talk don't mean he can't feel. People can't be bothered with him after a while. Find *talking* to him too *hard*,” he said with a sneer.

I stepped up close so he could see the sincerity in my eyes in the dusky light. “I'd not do that. William's been a good friend since I moved to town. I wouldn't... I *won't* treat him like that.” After seeing his nod of acknowledgement, I spun around and jumped off the veranda. “We'll drive him home after the game,” I yelled over my shoulder as I jogged toward the track.

Back home, Seth and a mate were ensconced in front of the Friday night footy show on TV. I gave him a brief wave as I dashed to the bathroom. I couldn't muck around if I wanted to be on time to meet William. After my shower, I dressed in my emo garb of black jeans, T-shirt, boots and jacket. Usually I would add some eyeliner and black lipstick but the shocked looks from my fellow gamers on that first Friday meant I now tempered my emo-ish look so as to not frighten the natives. We were in the country after all. Although I missed the city and my friends, the games and the friendship I'd developed with William were going a long way toward making me happy here.

After a last look in the mirror to check my appearance, I grabbed my gaming kit and headed toward the front door. At the lounge room I paused to say goodbye to Seth.

“I'm off to the game,” I said over the football commentator's excited babble.

Seth leant back in his seat so he could see past his mate to me at the door. "Have fun, Joshy."

"Can you pick me up tonight?" I asked.

Seth wasn't typically a big drinker; him being a cop and losing our parents to a drunk driver meant we were extra careful about drinking and driving. Usually he only drove when completely sober, and I could see a couple of beer cans on the coffee table.

Seth grimaced and looked at his watch. "I've already had a couple, Josh."

Seth's mate leaned back and started to scratch his balls. God, some men were Neanderthals. With a burp that rattled the windows, he started to talk. "I'll pick him up."

Seth and I both stiffened. And then I saw the flush of anger cover Seth's face. "You are such a stupid dick, Mick. You've had more to drink than me!" Seth yelled, inches away from Mick's face.

"Dude! Chillax!" Mick said. "Two beers won't put me over the fucking limit!"

I could see Seth trying to calm himself as he carefully modulated his tone. "Josh and I don't get in a car with anyone who's had a drink. Ever."

I hated that I'd caused all this angst between Seth and his mate and rushed to end the argument. "Don't worry about it, Seth. I'll be walking my friend William home after the game so I'll be later than normal." Before I could cause any more problems I dashed out the door.

Approaching the supermarket, I could see William sitting where I'd seen him that first morning all those weeks ago. He had Darktan out and petted the rat as he watched the people entering and leaving the shops. Calling out a hello, I jogged up to him as he greeted me with a beatific smile. I led us toward the hobby shop and continued my tales of epic battles as we walked. Darktan, sitting on William's shoulder, seemed as engrossed in the stories as his owner.

Entering the hobby store I glanced at the magazine display rack on reflex to check for a new *Clawpedia*. I knew one'd be out soon and my fellow gamers and I were eager to pick up the next instalment. Just as I spied the glossy cover of a new catalogue, Shaun, aka Yellow Fang, rushed into the store.

With an excited squeak, he dashed over to his shop counter and started to rummage around. "Dude. You're the new character being released next month!"

"What the fuck, Fang?" I asked in bemusement.

Popping his head up above the glass counter he elaborated. "Remember the gossip about a new mage character being introduced?"

"Yeah?" Everyone'd heard that rumour but it still didn't explain what he'd meant with his earlier comment.

"Welllll," Fang said, "the character is you!"

"Are you calling me a rat?" I said, perplexed. Every character in the game, up until now apparently, had been a rat. I was seriously confused.

Expelling a huff of exasperation, Fang ducked back down and continued to rummage around. With a grunt, he finally slapped the merchant's product guide on the glass of the counter and started flicking through the pages. We'd all drooled over this book's predecessor in weeks previously but hadn't had an opportunity to peruse the newest edition. Although the *Clawpedia* contained the same information, we all felt more comfortable wearing out the less ornate merchant copy while fantasising about the ultimate clan rather than reducing our precious catalogues to a dog-eared condition. We all revered our *Clawpedias* and treated them with virtual kid gloves. Fang drew me from my musings when he slapped his hand on the open page of his catalogue and turned it around so I could see what had caused his excitement.

Holy shit! On the page in front of me was a figurine that bore a striking resemblance to me.

"Far out!" I muttered.

"I know!" Fang squeaked. "You should see the illustrations in the *Clawpedia*, dude. That shit is just freaky."

I handed Fang the money I'd hoarded for this very transaction and picked up the glossy book, the cover of which was dominated by a picture of the new mage character. Manga-esque in appearance, I stared at the stylised image of what I saw every time I looked in a mirror. I sensed movement beside me and glanced up. In the kerfuffle I'd forgotten all about William. He was looking at the picture on the cover of the *Clawpedia* with a small smile on his face.

Giving William a nudge to indicate direction, I herded him toward the back room of the store. This would probably be our final night of this campaign as

Fang had formed an alliance with Stumpy and they were crushing Rex and myself with their overwhelming strength. I had to admire their strategy but had plans for our next campaign that would derail their warrior and weapon combination and hopefully give my clan ultimate victory.

With a final perplexed glance at the *Clawpedia* cover art, I carefully stashed it away in my kit bag and, with a running monologue for William's benefit, started setting up my clan figurines where the toothpick-flag markers indicated I'd finished up last week. Armies finally in place, I ordered pizza, and while we waited for it to be delivered, the delicate process of developing strategy commenced. Using the twelve-faceted dice, we all took turns letting luck determine our strength and weaknesses for the night. I heard Stumpy groan after his throw but quickly became distracted by the colours and numbers I'd thrown. I sat back with William leaning against my shoulder as I whispered my plans for the clan's defence of our fortress.

Darktan used our touching shoulders as a bridge to me and my open-necked shirt, and disappeared down under the fabric. Although I'd gotten used to him over the weeks of speaking with William, this was the closest I'd been to a real rat and I found myself frozen. I didn't know if I'd be bitten if I moved around too much so ended up tensing and breathing shallowly in an attempt to not disturb or annoy him. William laughed at my obvious discomfort and encouraged me to continue talking and I found myself relaxing and forgetting about the warm lump nestled against my belly.

Once the pizza arrived we all grabbed a few slices and migrated toward the table so we could modify our troops, their weapons and placement dependent on our dice results. William gave me another one of his smiles when I handed him pizza sans pineapple and I got a little swoopy feeling in my tummy. I'd never felt that before and decided that I'd try to earn more of William's smiles in the future.

The addition of pizza had another effect: the drowsing Darktan had decided to investigate the smell and had been banished to the couch after he'd tried to steal my food. Although mortified by Darktan's behaviour, William had broken off a piece of his crust and given that to the rat so that we could both eat unmolested.

When we'd all finished eating, we did a quick tidy up and started the game in earnest. I explained the moves and strategy to William as the game progressed and he surprised me with his avid interest. I thought he would be bored, but instead, he seemed fascinated by the game and our interactions with

each other. As predicted I lost and we sat back to watch Rex's inevitable defeat. While we watched the wince-inducing death throes of Clan Rex, Stumpy's girlfriend arrived.

I found Clair irritating but Stumpy seemed oblivious to his girlfriend's annoying traits. Despite the fact that Fang and Stumpy were mid-manoeuvre, she demanded a kiss and seemed to take great delight in delaying the game with her cooing and petting. I noticed a flushed-faced William watching the overt display and resented the fact that Clair had made him uncomfortable. I gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze and reluctantly started to pack up my kit in preparation for leaving. By the time I clipped my kit bag closed, Clan Rex had been eliminated. Clair squealed and clapped before congratulating Stumpy with an over-enthusiastic kiss. Again, William blushed in reaction to the overt PDA and I decided to take him home rather than staying for a post-battle munchy and movie fest. With a wave to Rex and Stumpy, I herded William toward the shopfront and said goodbye to Fang as he locked the door behind us.

As had become our routine when together, I started to prattle away to William as we walked. I explained that Seth couldn't drive us home so I'd walk him home before going home myself. Although the hobby shop was away from the main shopping district, we needed to walk through the busier part of town to get to William's house. Being a Friday night, there were crowds of people outside the restaurants and pubs in the main street. William seemed fascinated by everything and I found myself matching my pace to his so that he could take his time and look his fill. Suddenly William halted and stared at a couple who were propping up the wall outside the pub. The woman had wrapped one of her legs around her guy's hip and they were, to all intents, fucking in public. William's rapt look became contemplative as we continued to walk. I started to suspect that he hadn't been exposed to sex much if his reactions were to be understood.

After a couple of minutes William started to gesticulate and mime. I watched him intently until I thought I understood what he was saying or rather, asking.

"You wanna know what they were doing?" I confirmed.

At William's nod I cleared my throat and tried to determine how much or how little I'd have to explain. I decided to do some reconnaissance first.

"You know about 'the birds and the bees', right?" I asked.

At William's look of confusion I muttered a few choice curse words and slapped at William's hands, which were currently swooping around as he tried

to determine what the fuck I was talking about birds and bees for. Taking a deep breath I started explaining what we had just witnessed.

“You know the basics, right? You know what kissing is?” I looked at William and noticed the blush on his face as we passed through the glow of a street light. William nodded but then made gagging actions and I gathered that he'd found the display put on by Stumpy and Clair as revolting as I had. I continued with my impromptu sex education.

“Yeah well, Claire and Stumpy are not the best examples but when you really like someone... when you *love* someone... you kiss them and do other stuff with them,” I finished lamely. I decided that it was much harder than I thought to talk about sex and discovered some belated sympathy for Seth as I remembered the awkward conversation we'd had years previously.

William seemed to ponder what I'd said and then started humping the air in a parody of the couple we'd seen outside the pub. I quickly interrupted his impromptu lewd street performance and decided on a different strategy.

“You know how Naomi really likes Ryan in Neighbours?” I asked.

William looked at me like I was losing my mind.

“You have watched Neighbours, right?” I asked with a rising sense of the surreal. I couldn't fathom how anyone could call themselves Australian and not watch the flagship soap opera. Unless William's issue prevented him from processing what he saw on a TV as well as what he read?

I suddenly realised that William was trying to tell me something and I shook off my musings and concentrated on him and his actions. Eventually it clicked that he didn't watch TV. I stared at him in horror.

“What? Never? You don't *ever* watch TV?”

William shook his head and continued gesticulating. When his message finally clicked, I let out a sympathetic “Dude!” I had no idea how one could survive with no television at all.

I pondered the concept of never watching TV as we again started walking toward William's home. I then realised that his innocence was more profound than I originally thought if he'd never had the education we all received subliminally from the shows and advertisements available 24/7 on TV. *Help*, I thought to myself as I considered the daunting task of educating William about sex. We continued our trek in silence as I pondered a solution that didn't involve me personally having to explain all the ins and outs of sex, no pun

intended. Then, I remembered *American Pie*. The one movie guaranteed to educate William in the ways of lurve with minimal input from me. I decided to hire the DVD and treat William to sex education... movie style. I gave myself a virtual pat on the back and turned to William to ask him over the following night to watch the movie. The invitation earned me another of William's smiles and vigorous head-nodding.

At the house I checked with William's grandfather about the following night's plans before trudging back into the town and letting myself into the dark and silent house.

The next morning I woke to an empty house. Seth had obviously already left for his early shift and either his mate had gone home the night before or had left when Seth had in the pre-dawn dark. I spent the day cleaning and catching up with the accumulated laundry. Although not favourite activities for a day off, I worked a lot less than Seth and felt my efforts to keep our home neat and tidy made his life easier. When he arrived home later in the afternoon, I followed him around the house as he showered and dressed, chattering away at him about the plans I'd made for the night ahead.

At one point I noticed the bemused smile on Seth's face and halted mid-sentence. "What?" I asked.

Seth pulled me to him and almost smothered me in a hug. "It's good to finally see you happy is all, Josh."

I wriggled until he finally let me go and I stepped back to glare at him. "What do you mean?" I snapped. "I was happy before."

Seth ruffled my hair and laughed. "Yeah but it was so hard to tell under that emo mask of silent suffering."

My reply was eloquent. "Fuck off!"

Seth donned a look of fake outrage and started to stalk me. "Now, Josh..." he said as I backed away from his steady advance. "I might have to arrest you for offensive language."

With a snarky smile, I tossed a "Fuck you!" at Seth before dashing out the door and down the hallway. I heard Seth's heavy tread behind me and felt a pluck at my shirt before I dodged into the lounge room and pulled away from his tenuous grip. Dashing to the far side of the coffee table, I turned to face my brother.

“Getting old, bro,” I taunted.

With a roar, Seth charged around the table toward me and I gave an unmanly scream as I jumped up and over the coffee table and back toward the hallway again. I could feel Seth's presence at my back and knew he would catch me soon unless I could find a barrier big enough to separate us. Dashing into Seth's bedroom I frantically started crawling across his bed in an attempt to put it between us. With a triumphant shout, Seth grabbed my ankle and dragged me back. My grasping hands snagged the sheet and it untucked and dragged with me toward Seth, who was currently spanking my bum in mock outrage. I wriggled and writhed in an attempt to escape but Seth was just too strong. Eventually he stopped and flopped down on the mattress beside me, panting from exertion. In the wrestle all the sheets and blankets had slithered to the floor, leaving the mattress bare and forlorn. I propped up my head and looked at Seth as he regained his breath.

“I'm not making your bed, old man,” I said with a smile.

Seth looked at me out of the corner of his eye and I braced myself for more attacks upon my person.

“How's about you *help* me with the bed and you can tell me all about your awesome plan to educate your friend about the ways of love.” Seth said as he rolled into a sitting position on the edge of the mattress.

With a huff of annoyance I agreed and we started to untangle the mess of linen beside the bed as I told him my plan to watch *American Pie* and leave the explaining to the Hollywood experts.

Seth stopped sorting the blankets and looked at me with incredulity. “*American Pie*? Seriously?”

“What?” It seemed like a reasonable plan to me.

Seth started laughing and I started to get pissed off the longer he continued. “What's wrong with *American Pie*?” I asked with asperity.

Seth tried to stop laughing by breathing deeply. Wiping tears from his eyes he giggled before making an effort to answer me. “I dunno, Josh. It just tickled me that you'd use that movie for Sex Ed.”

Again I failed to see the issue Seth had with the movie. It had cyber-sex, drunk sex, MILF sex, girlfriend sex and it fairly clearly showed what *not* to do with masturbation. I thought I'd covered all the bases fairly well. “What would you suggest then, *oh sex guru*?” I snarled.

“Porn,” Seth said as he continued to chuckle weakly while sorting out the blankets, completely oblivious to my shock and horror. Eventually he noticed that I wasn’t helping him and looked up at me from his position crouched on the floor. “What?” he asked.

“I can’t show him porn!” I whisper-hissed at Seth.

Seth’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Why not?”

I spluttered and waved my hands around as I tried to find a way to articulate my perturbation at his suggestion. Eventually I gave up on a coherent response and just went with, “That would just be icky.”

“Icky?” Seth asked with renewed chuckles.

“Yes,” I said as I slumped back onto the bed. “Icky.”

“Um. Okaaaaay,” Seth said as he got up to loom over my prostrate form. “Have you ever actually watched any porn?” Seth asked with a suspicious twitch to his lips.

I rolled my eyes with pretend disdain as my face flushed hotly. “Of course I’ve watched porn! Ijustdidn’tlikeit,” I mumbled.

Seth’s eyebrows shot toward his hairline as he looked at me speculatively. “Hmmm,” he said with a hard stare. “How’s about I find some soft porn with a plot?” he asked. “I think I’ve got some of that shit left over from when Sonya and I dated. She always wanted a frickin’ storyline.” The eye roll was apparent in his tone.

“You watched porn with Sonya?” I asked in a horrified voice. “But she was so nice!” I moaned from behind my hands. This was all too much.

Seth laughed and pushed me off the mattress. I landed on the floor with an indignant yelp and glared up at him.

“Go and get your mate and I’ll organise the food and entertainment,” Seth said as he gave me a hand up from the floor.

By the time I made it to William’s house, I was puffing from my hurried pace. I spied him sitting on the steps of the veranda with a small bag at his feet and Darktan in his lap. When he saw me emerge from the trees, his face lit up with a smile and I felt that weird swoopy feeling in my tummy again. Grinning back, I walked the remaining distance until I stood over a beaming William. Leaning down to give Darktan a scratch behind the ears, I asked him if he was

ready to go. Looking up as William stood, I spied his grandfather sitting in the gloom of the veranda.

“I’ll walk William home tomorrow?” I called out.

Receiving a nod of acknowledgement from his grandfather, I turned and started walking back toward the track with William in step beside me, Darktan trailing us both as he snuffled and explored the path behind us. When we reached the bottom of the hill William made a weird clicking sound and Darktan bounded toward us and ran up William’s legs and body until he perched on his shoulder. Now that we weren’t setting our pace to suit Darktan we sped up and were soon entering the house.

I led William to my room, pulled the trundle out from under my bed so he could dump his bag, and gave him a quick tour of the house before leading him to the lounge where Seth and his mate were again watching football on the TV. Seth’s mate was sprawled on the couch and with Seth in one armchair, there was only the second armchair left for William and myself.

“This is William,” I said as we squeezed into the only remaining armchair. Seth gave a vague wave with his beer and Seth’s mate belched loudly as he completely ignored us. I knew we’d have to wait for an ad break so I told William I’d be back and I dashed to my room for the latest *Clawpedia* and my scrapbook. Once I’d wriggled and squeezed myself back into the cramped space beside William, I proceeded to flick through the *Clawpedia* while whispering a continuous stream of chatter about my dreams for my clan. I showed him my designs for a new table and my many sketches of flags and emblems I had drawn for my clan. William seemed engrossed and sat beside me as I prattled, patting the drowsing rat in his arms with a small smile on his face.

Eventually the half-time siren sounded on the television and Seth muted the TV as he turned toward William and myself. “Sorry about that,” he said with a self-deprecating grin. “I’m Seth,” he reintroduced himself as he leant forward with a hand extended for William to shake. “And the slob taking up the entire couch is Mick.”

Mick glanced away from the TV at the sound of his name and looked startled to see William and me sitting in the chair beside him.

“Oh. Hi,” he mumbled before leaning forward to get another beer from the cooler on the floor.

The position obviously put a strain on him because he let out a window-rattling, trumpeting fart that made Darktan startle and scramble to William's shoulder.

Instantly, chaos broke out as Darktan's movement drew Seth and Mick's attention and they both reacted like girls and screamed while scrambling as far away from the rat as the room allowed.

"What the fuck is that?" Mick squeaked as his eyes practically popped from their sockets.

Stifling the giggle I could feel bubbling up, I gravely introduced Darktan to the two cowering men across the room. Recovering from his fright, Darktan started bruxing and I couldn't stop my laugh as I watched the two men shudder at the grinding sound.

Eventually, after Seth and Mick had moved the couch and armchair a significant distance from where William and I were sitting, we were all seated and calm.

Seth and Mick started talking about what kind of pizza they were going to order as Mick opened the beer he'd dropped in his flight from Darktan.

"Guys?" Seth and Mick turned to look at me. Mick's shudder as the bruxing became audible in the quiet nearly made me laugh again but I rushed to get my opinion heard before the next half of the footy game started and Seth and Mick, again, became oblivious. "William and I had pizza last night. Can we get Chinese or something?"

Seth looked to Mick who shrugged to indicate his indifference to the change in plans and Seth turned back to me. "Sure, Josh. How's about you two order it so it arrives at the end of the game and we'll eat it with a movie?"

Levering myself out of the cramped space between William and the chair arm, I led him toward the kitchen as Seth un-muted the TV and the game recommenced.

In the kitchen I laughed at my memories of Seth and Mick's dash away from the rat and when William asked me why I was laughing with look and gesture, I reduced him to giggles and tears with my imitation of their flight across the room to cower against the wall.

Recovering somewhat, I grabbed the Chinese takeout menu from under the magnet on the fridge and opened it on the bench so William could help me choose what we'd order. William looked perplexed at the menu items and I

couldn't believe that he'd never had Chinese food before. With his virgin palate in mind, I ordered a range of dishes and entrées as well as the ubiquitous special fried rice so we could share and William would be exposed to the best flavours, in my opinion, that Chinese food could deliver.

Back in the lounge room there were shouts and cursing coming from Seth and his mate as the game continued on the TV. "Do you wanna go to my room until tea arrives?" I asked William.

He gave me a relieved nod and after collecting my *Clawpedia* and scrapbook, we headed to the relative quiet of my bedroom. The next forty minutes were taken up by me showing William all my game figurines and the weapon upgrades I'd managed to collect. We were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell and I reluctantly shepherded William out of my room and toward the lounge again. Telling him to have a seat, I dashed to the kitchen and grabbed the plates, cutlery and drinks I'd prepared earlier and carried the teetering pile back toward the sounds of the victorious team's song.

Seth helped me set everything down on the coffee table and I served up an enormous plate of food for William before serving myself a heaping plate. Because the chair was cramped, I ended up sitting on the floor with my back against William's chair and his legs providing me with something to slouch against.

William had taken a few tentative bites of the food when I first handed it to him and now scarfed it down with obvious enjoyment. The wrap-up commentary still played on the TV but I knew that when we'd finished eating, Seth would let me watch the movie we'd hired for the night.

It didn't take us long to finish everything on our plates and Seth volunteered himself and Mick to clean up and do the dishes so I could put the movie on. Mick grumbled about slave drivers as he desultorily picked up the empty beer cans and carried them toward the kitchen.

While I set up the movie, William went back to my room to get Darktan and as he re-entered the room I directed him toward the couch. Joining him a few moments later, I hit play on the remote and settled back to watch the movie. After the scene where the boys all talked about their pact to lose their virginity before the end of school, William huffed a laugh and turned to me with a questioning look. I grinned un-repentantly and confessed my plan to educate and entertain. He shook his head at me but soon became engrossed in the disastrous tale of pubescent angst that was *American Pie*. He gasped in horror

at all the right places and groaned in commensurable pain as the characters stumbled from one humiliating scene to the next.

Once Seth and Mick had finished tidying up, they joined William and me in front of the television. Instead of watching the movie though, they used each scene unfolding on the screen to regale each other with stories of their sexual prowess or the disastrous things they'd done in the pursuit of pussy. I listened in mortified silence but William seemed to enjoy their banter and spent more time listening to the tall tales from the men than the dialogue from the movie. With an exasperated huff, I got up to make popcorn and left the room with my face flaming. Although not unknowledgeable about the *theory* of sex, I'd yet to practice the real thing and the earthy commentary from Seth and Mick made me feel mildly anxious. The older I got, the anxiety about still being a virgin became more acute.

I stood in front of the microwave as the popcorn bag expanded and jumped on the slowly spinning turnstile inside. This night wasn't quite going to plan but I consoled myself with the knowledge that William would be left with a good idea of what *not* to do if and when he found love.

As I poured the popcorn from the bag into a couple of bowls, Seth came into the kitchen and opened the fridge door. "Not a big talker is he?" he said as he grabbed another six-pack of beers from the fridge. I realised then that William's voice, or lack of one, was something I no longer noticed.

"Um... yeah... sorry, Seth. I forgot to tell you that he's mute," I stuttered in reply.

Seth stood in front of the open fridge, looking at me in confusion while he tilted and wobbled in the glow from the fridge. Eventually his alcohol-addled brain processed what I'd said and he shut the fridge door with a shrug.

Back in the lounge room I noticed with mounting horror that the DVD had been swapped for some kind of porn if the "acting" was anything to go by. A large-breasted blonde lay on a lounge watching an oiled Adonis as he cleaned an immaculate pool.

"Seth!" I screeched as I made a grab for the remote control. With a laugh he tossed it to Mick and fielded my attempts to batter him senseless. I continued to berate him but all he did was put me in a headlock and knuckle my head.

After extricating myself from Seth, I made a valiant effort to wrest the remote from Mick but somehow ended up being used as a seat cushion as he calmly passed the remote back to my conniving brother. With his now free

hands he started to tickle me and I screamed and flailed in an attempt to stop the torture. Suddenly Mick stopped and over my gasping breaths, I could hear groaning from the TV. Men groaning. Canting my head backward from my awkward position, I glanced at the screen to see the big-titted blonde being fucked by the pool Adonis. As the camera panned back, I saw a second guy crouching behind the Adonis and starting to line his condom-covered cock up with the Adonis's arsehole.

"What the fuck is this?" Mick asked as he lifted his weight off me.

Seth sat in stupefied silence with his beer halfway to his mouth and I could see William's wide-eyed face in the flickering light from the movie.

A loud groan issued from the TV and that seemed to be the impetus required for Seth to hit the pause button on the remote.

"That dirty cow!" Seth murmured.

Mick grabbed up the DVD cover and read the title out loud. "Innocent Bystanders!"

"I don't think he's just standing by..." I said pointing to the screen where, heads thrown back in apparent ecstasy, the ménage had been paused mid-coitus.

Whipping his head around to glare at the screen, Mick winced then threw the cover onto the seat beside my head. "Oh." I said as I read *Innocent Bystanders* on the cover in neon-pink bubble writing.

Seth giggled weakly in his seat and William still seemed transfixed by the scene on the screen. What a perfect night I'd managed to create.

Mick picked up his beer and with a sigh, sank down onto the couch beside a wide-eyed William. He contemplated the frozen image for a while with a bemused expression before opening his mouth as if to speak.

We were all mesmerised by the scene glowing in the darkened lounge and I didn't think any of us knew what to say or do. Eventually Mick shuddered and broke the strained silence. "That's gotta hurt."

Seth nodded silently and I could see William's eyes flash in the gloom as he looked from Mick to Seth.

"Although..." Mick started to say. "There was this chick I knew..."

I sprang from the couch and pulled William up from his seat before pushing him toward the door. "Nonononono. We are not sitting here listening to you

talk about butt sex,” I said as I continued to push a laughing William out of the room. As we headed toward my room, I heard the unmistakable sound of football coming from the lounge and I briefly wondered if this had been some subtle ploy by Mick and my brother to retain ownership of the TV for the night. I internally chastised myself for my cynicism as I remembered the look of shock on Seth's face.

Safely behind my closed bedroom door, I started to stutter an apology to William for the movie disaster. “Oh god! I. Am. Sofuckin' sorry! I can't believe Seth put a porno on. Well I can, because he threatened to do it, but I still can't actually believe that he went through with it...” I was babbling but I couldn't seem to stop. “And to put on gay porn too! Which is fine!” I rushed to add when I saw the blush on William's cheeks. “If you're gay, gay porn is just awesome...” I finally stopped babbling and looked at William more closely. “Are you gay?” I almost whispered. I had an awful feeling that I might have inadvertently offended him and my heart clenched with the idea that I'd hurt him. William looked frustrated and I suddenly realised that he was, for the first time in our relationship, finding it hard to communicate.

Sliding off the bed I'd sat on at some point in my ramble, I leant back against the bed and patted the floor beside me. Eventually, a tense William sat down where I'd indicated. As he settled, Darktan emerged from his shirt sleeve and William patted him with his head down and face hidden. I realised that I'd have to try and answer the unasked questions because I didn't like this aloof, distant version of my friend.

“So...” I started, encouraged by the look William gave me out the corner of his eye. “After muddying the waters with the disastrous choices in documentaries,”—I was pleased to see a twitch of a smile appear at the corner of William's lips—“let me try to fill in the gaps.” The next thirty minutes were some of the most excruciatingly embarrassing of my life as I tried to explain the various permutations of relationships available. I came to the conclusion by the end of my bumbling attempt to clarify, that Seth's idea of using porn for educational purposes had merit because I was fucking exhausted.

William looked introspective as I finished and I suddenly wished that he could tell me what he was thinking.

After a few more minutes sitting in companionable silence, William gently transferred a slumbering Darktan to the pillow on the trundle bed and then

opened his pack. Pulling out a toothbrush and what looked suspiciously like flannel pyjamas, he turned to me expectantly. I struggled up from the floor and gave him a hand up. Leading him to the bathroom I quickly brushed my own teeth before leaving him alone to finish his before-bed routine. Back in my bedroom I started to undress. When down to my undies, I hesitated. Normally I slept naked but tonight, I wasn't sure what to do. Perhaps the sexual-innuendo-charged evening was to blame, but I didn't feel comfortable being naked with William sleeping in the same room. I decided to keep my undies on and slid between the sheets on my bed to await William's return from the bathroom. I'd already turned the main light off and had turned my bedside lamp on after realising that unlike other friends I'd had sleep-overs with in the past, we wouldn't be able to talk in the dark.

The opening door heralded William's return and I listened to him shifting around below me on the trundle as he settled in. I'd just started to wonder if he'd fall straight to sleep when a book arced up from the floor and landed frighteningly close to my balls. "Arse," I grumbled as I picked it up to read the title on the well-worn, tattered cover. "*The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*." I rolled to the edge of my bed and looked down on William. "Do you want me to read this?" I asked. Knowing that William couldn't read, and often became embarrassed by that, I was surprised that he'd brought a book with him. I got a warm, fuzzy feeling in my tummy when I realised that he trusted me enough to share this with me.

Rolling back onto my bed, I opened the book to the first chapter and started to read. "One day, when he was naughty, Mr Bunnsy looked over the hedge..." I rolled back over and peered down at William. "Dude! What the fuck?" William rolled his eyes and gesticulated for me to continue reading. With a huff of exasperation I flopped back onto my pillow. I couldn't believe that I was reading nursery rhymes to a twenty-something guy. With a sigh, I continued. "Mr Bunnsy looked over the hedge into Farmer Fred's field and it was full of fresh green lettuces." Again I paused, but before I could whine about the reading material again, William's head appeared above the mattress and he glared at me. Obviously my halting oration wasn't appreciated. I glared back for a moment before lifting the blankets between us. William hitched his brow in question. "Hop in with me," I mumbled. "It's too hard to talk to you when you're down there."

William crawled up onto the mattress beside me and settled down with his head against mine as I started to read out loud again. I found it strangely

distracting feeling his body lying against mine. Distracting, yet at the same time, nice.

By the time I'd reached the closing paragraph of chapter one, I was hooked and William was asleep, snoring softly in my ear.

After a few more hours of reading, I heard Darktan, whose name I now understood, scratching in the corner of my room where William had earlier set up a small litter box. I'd been impressed when he explained that Darktan was toilet trained. I could hear the rat exploring my room as I continued to read until eventually, I felt a pulling sensation on the sheet and realised that he was attempting to get up onto the bed. Putting the book down, I rolled over and reached down to hoist him up. The minute his paws hit the mattress, he scurried over to William and curled up in the corner created by William's neck and shoulder. He regarded me balefully with one beady eye and then appeared to promptly fall asleep. I looked at the sleeping William and rat and found myself getting the swoopy feeling in my tummy again. I was so very thankful that I had found him and that he was my friend. The idea of not having him in my life gave me a pain in my chest that I just didn't understand. Never before had I felt like this about a friend, or for that matter, anyone. After spending a few more minutes contemplating the sleeping tableau, I turned the light off and snuggled under the blankets.

When I woke up in the morning, I could feel my nose being tickled by William's hair. I slowly opened my eyes and promptly reared back in fright, toppling off the bed and onto the floor. In my panic, I ended up dragging the sheets and blankets with me and also dragging the disgruntled Darktan along for the ride. Holy fuck, his teeth were freaky scary when seen from only inches away. I shuddered from the memory of the ratty yawn that had startled me into my flailing flight off the bed. William's bleary-eyed face appeared over the edge of the bed and his laugh at my predicament made me grudgingly smile. While I untangled myself, Darktan scampered over to the toilet corner and William swung his legs over the side of the bed putting his crotch level with my eyes. For some reason, I was unable to look away from the morning erection that tented his... ohmygod!... his Superman pyjamas.

Dragging my eyes away from his crotch I smirked up at him. "Nice jimjams!"

He blushed in embarrassment before launching himself at me. With a growl of mock outrage, he started trying to smother me with a pillow, and I writhed

and gasped with laughter as I fought him off. As the wrestling continued, the blankets slipped down my body and I felt William's residual erection rub against my own. I went from amused and mildly aroused to hard as a fucking rock in seconds and desperately tried to push him off before he felt me. I didn't know what the fuck was going on with my libido but I felt certain that inadvertently humping him would freak him the fuck out as much as me getting hard in the first place did to me. What. The. Fuck?

Keeping myself draped in the blankets, I pulled on my discarded jeans from the night before and crammed my recalcitrant hard-on into the too-small space behind the zipper. I seriously regretted my penchant for wearing skin-tight jeans this morning. Eventually, the actual pain I felt as the zipper finally closed helped deflate my erection and I discarded the blanket and stood without too much humiliation. William waited by the door with Darktan in his arms and I told him he could use the bathroom first and I'd start breakfast.

Staring into the fridge, I could see enough Chinese leftovers for a couple of people. There was also the ever-present chocolate custard and tinned peaches. I opened a cupboard to see what cereal we had and apart from an unopened box of Fruit Loops, we were out of traditional breakfast foods. I was still standing, staring into the cupboard, when Mick wandered in and flopped into one of the chairs at the table.

"Make us a coffee, would ya?" he mumbled before laying his head on the table.

Obviously, the night before was making him feel fragile. I put the kettle on and wandered down to Seth's door. Opening it up I was nearly knocked over by the smell of stale beer that escaped the room. Covering my nose I stuck my head around the door. "Seth." I whispered. When he didn't move, I decided to be a bit louder. "Seth." I wasn't yelling but the flinch from the bed indicated that I'd been heard. "Do you want the leftover Chinese for brekkie or can William and I have it?"

Seth started gagging so I took that as a no and softly closed the door. Poor bastard, I thought to myself as I wandered down to the bathroom.

I couldn't hear the shower running so I knocked on the door and waited. William opened the door with a towel wrapped around his waist and I was instantly hard. For some reason I couldn't look away from his nipples. They were tight and puckered and I really, really, really wanted to play with them. My hand twitched as I thought about what they would feel like.

What. The. Fuck?

Dragging my eyes up to William's face, I was met with a sardonic eye brow lift and a foamy mouth with toothbrush sticking out. I imagined licking the toothpaste foam off and felt a throb from my dick. Not. Good. William shrugged and started closing the door and I realised I hadn't asked him what he wanted for breakfast yet. I started to babble about Fruit Loops and Chinese to halt the closing door and finally, I managed to get a coherent sentence out.

"Do you want Fruit Loops or Chinese for brekkie?" I'd decided to keep my wits by not looking at William and now became mesmerised by the sight of a rat bathing in my bathroom sink. He crouched on the soap holder and every few seconds, stuck a paw under the dribbling tap before using the water to wash his face. Cutest fucking thing ever and thankfully enough of a distraction for my dick to deflate. If this kept happening, I'd have to invest in some looser pants 'cause I risked my 'nads every time I got a stiffy in my skinny jeans.

William clicked his fingers in front of my face to get my attention and pulled the side of his eyes out giving them an asian look. Chinese it was then.

With a nod, I stepped away from the door and headed back toward the kitchen.

I entered the kitchen just as the kettle clicked off and I decided to deal with the coffee first. Turning to Mick, I started to ask him how he took it when I noticed his face relaxed in sleep and a growing pool of drool on the table. With a shudder of revulsion, I made his coffee standard and placed it on the table with a strip of ibuprofen. I had just opened the fridge to retrieve the Chinese when my phone beeped. I retrieved it from my pocket and saw that it was a text from Seth. Really?

Coffee, drugs, bucket was the succinct message.

I quickly made up another cup of coffee and popped a couple of the pills from the blister pack sitting near Mick's head before grabbing a mixing bowl and heading up the hallway to Seth's room. The funk was, if possible, worse than before and I tried to hold my breath as I dashed to the bed, depositing coffee and pills on the bedside table and plonking the bowl on the bed beside Seth. I then quickly walked over to the window and opened it up to clear the air. The parted curtains let in some light and made Seth whimper from the bed.

"Turn the light off, Joshy," he croaked.

I let the curtains fall closed again and tiptoed from the room.

I could see that the bathroom door was open so I hurried back to the kitchen. Dashing past the now snoring Mick, I pulled a couple of containers of leftovers from the fridge and shared the food out between two plates. Putting the first plate in the microwave, I watched it slowly spin while I thought about what had happened earlier. Never before had I reacted so strongly to anyone. I'd had girlfriends in the past but I realised now that I considered them more buddies than romantic partners. Even my memories of seeing William's naked chest was enough to make me start chubbing up. Was I gay? I mean, I was obviously attracted to William but was that a one-off or a sign of burgeoning homosexuality?

Mick made a snuffling sound and I turned my head to look at him. Did I find Mick attractive? I contemplated the snoring man. Face mashed into the tabletop and lips twisted and puckered by his awkward sleeping position. Uh... no. Mick did nothing for me. I then considered the men I'd seen briefly on the porno; bulging muscles, oiled skin, cocks like a baby's arm. Nup. As the microwave dinged to indicate it was finished, William wandered into the kitchen and I was again instantly hard. Oh god. Whatever the fuck was going on—gay, straight, or bi—William was obviously it and a bit as far as my libido was concerned. Awkward.

I gave William the plate from the microwave and, keeping my crotch discreetly pressed into the under-bench cupboards, put the second plate in to heat up. William mimed that he wanted rings and after a couple of minutes I realised he wanted the Fruit Loops. Weird, but okay. Realising I'd have to turn around to get them out of their cupboard, I pointed to where they were kept so I could keep myself covered. I definitely needed looser jeans. Or a long shirt. Or both. Fuck.

William poured a small serve of Fruit Loops into a bowl and placed the bowl and a squirming Darktan onto the table. The rat scurried over to the bowl and perched on the side before delicately picking up one Fruit Loop in his hands and starting to nibble. Every time Mick snored or grunted, Darktan paused his eating, which made me laugh.

We took our food into the lounge so that we didn't have to share the table with the drooling Mick. When I'd finished eating, I turned on the TV and left William and Darktan watching morning cartoons while I had a shower. Back in my room, the only loose pants I could find were some old track pants of Seth's but I decided that discretion was better than fashion in this case and pulled them on. All my T-shirts were tight too, so I went into the laundry and grabbed one

of Seth's out of the ironing basket. Decently covered and hard-on well camouflaged, I collected William and Darktan and we headed back to his place.

Out in the morning light and fresh air, I found myself slipping back into my usual role of chatterbox. I was still hyper-aware of William but I pushed the weird attraction into the back of my mind by distracting myself with a running monologue on what I wanted to do with my clan when the next *Staff and Claw* campaign commenced.

The day had started warming up and I was sweating by the time we reached William's house. His grandfather, already ensconced on the veranda, got a quick hug from William before he headed inside to drop off his bag. I sat on the steps and contemplated the view.

Within minutes, William reappeared with two towels. Miming swimming, he beckoned for me to follow him. I was a bit surprised because I was fairly sure I would have noticed a swimming pool and the beach was a decent drive by car. I trundled after William with a shrug as he led me further up the hill behind the house. The trees created a cool oasis and our pace became languid as we allowed Darktan to snuffle along the path. When we crested the hill, William scooped the rat up and led me down toward a rocky outcrop. The closer we got, the more clearly I could hear the sound of gushing water. Eventually, we reached the edge of a cliff and I stared down into a deep, green pool being fed by the churning water beside us. William led me back up the creek a way to a shallower stretch where we could cross and then we followed a switchback track down into the damp hollow that contained the pool.

It was like entering an alien world, the air, cool and moist from the waterfall spray. Ferns clung to the wet rocks, their fronds waving in the turbulence created by the waterfall nearby. The air became cooler as we descended. At the bottom of the track William plonked Darktan on a small beach and started to undress, completely unselfconscious of his nudity. I couldn't stop looking as more and more skin was revealed. He was beautiful. I stood there unmoving as he stripped the last few items away and dived into the water. While he swam away from me toward the cascade of the waterfall, I quickly stripped and plunged into the, frankly, freezing water before he noticed my wayward cock. The temperature of the water sorted my problem out within seconds and I wondered if my poor dangly bits would ever reappear as the cold made my balls shrivel and suck up.

With my arousal now negated by the cold water, I relaxed. The otherworldly feel of the place kept me mute and I floated on my back staring at the circle of sky exposed above. It was an almost spiritual experience and I felt blessed that William had shared it with me.

The temperature of the water soon became refreshing as the heat of the day started to reach the dank depths and the humidity rose. I wanted to stay here forever but the prosaic needs of our bodies soon became apparent as first my, and then William's stomach rumbled with hunger. We quickly dried off and started our trek back up to the world above.

Stepping out of the shadowy depths and into the sunlight again was startling. I hadn't noticed the absence of birdsong until it once again appeared. I had a strange ringing in my ears from the noise of the waterfall and I found myself following William in an almost dreamlike state. He led us back up the creek to the crossing and, with Darktan perched on his shoulder, started to cross. About halfway to the other side, William stumbled and I watched in horror as Darktan got thrown into the fast-moving water. William tried to grab him but the water had already pulled the frantically swimming rat out of reach. William's screams wrenched me back to reality and I watched as he desperately waded down the creek in an attempt to rescue Darktan. The speed of the churning creek water pushed the rat toward the falls' edge faster than he could wade. Without even being conscious of moving, I found myself running alongside the creek, past the struggling rat. I waded into the thigh-high water and braced myself against the current that tried to push me toward the fatally high fall behind me. I could feel the yawning space of empty air behind my back as I watched Darktan being washed and tumbled by the water closer to where I was braced. At one point I thought he would slip past, but a rock under the water created an eddy that sent him tumbling into my waiting hands. Turning, I saw a distraught William waiting for me on the bank and I carefully waded to the creek edge and handed him a limp Darktan.

William took off his shirt and wrapped Darktan up, crooning and sobbing all the while. I rushed over and peeled back an edge of the cotton cocoon to see if he was still alive and was reassured to hear the sound of bruxing. With a sigh of relief I turned my attention to William, who still wept in obvious distress. I pulled him into my arms and started to try and soothe him. Running my hands up and down his back, I whispered soothing words in his ear. "Shhh," I kept on saying. "Shhh."

I guided William down and despite the fact we were almost the same size, he curled into my arms. The sobbing had stopped but he was still wracked by

the occasional tremor. Darktan peered out of his cocoon and William gently petted his nose as I held them both.

I don't know how long we sat there beside the creek. William had stopped crying a while ago and if his tummy hadn't rumbled again, I would have stayed there indefinitely. William looked up at me with wide eyes out of a face ravaged by the crying storm he'd just had. I pulled my T-shirt off and using the damp bottom edge, wiped his eyes before holding it up and instructing him to blow.

Now relatively calm and tidied up, I pushed him gently off my nearly-numb legs and stood. We quietly walked back down the hill toward his home with William casting me looks out of the corner of his eye.

Back at the house, I told William's grandfather what had happened while William entered the house with Darktan. He'd seen William's red and swollen eyes as we stepped up onto the veranda and become concerned but relaxed after I'd explained. I entered the house and started to search for William. He wasn't in any of the rooms I passed and it wasn't until I reached the kitchen that I found him. He'd just shut the door to the extension with his arms full of clothes. With a wan smile he beckoned me and I followed him into a large, old-fashioned bathroom. He handed me a pair of jeans, a white T-shirt and a blue checked flannel shirt. Not my usual attire but with my pants saturated and my, or rather, Seth's T-shirt covered in tears and snot, I was grateful for the dry clothes William offered. We stripped out of our wet clothes and dressed in companionable silence. Today felt like one of the longest days of my life but it seemed to have cemented my friendship with William in some way. When doing up the flannel shirt, I suddenly found myself with an armful of shuddering William.

"Hey," I crooned. "It's okay. He's okay." I hugged him tight and buried my nose in his hair. This felt so right.

William pulled back slightly and looked at me. Slowly, he leant forward and touched his mouth to mine. The barely-there pressure was enough to make me whimper and I tightened my arms to pull him closer. I was instantly hard and when I pushed myself against William, I could feel an answering hardness against my erection. Opening my mouth I deepened the kiss. Touching William's warm tongue with mine, I started to rock my hips to increase the friction between us. I'd just grabbed his arse to pull him harder against me when the slam of the front screen door made us push apart from each other. We were standing in the bathroom panting. William looked at me with a startled

expression and I watched the movement of his tongue as he licked his lips. I wanted to taste those lips again but not here where his grandfather could disturb us.

“Come home with me?” I whispered.

William smiled and held out his hand. Grasping it in mine, I held him steady as he stepped over the wet clothes piled on the floor and led him toward the front door.

“I’ll bring him home later,” I shouted toward the kitchen where I could hear movement and then led the smiling William off the veranda and toward the town below, all the while rubbing my thumb across the back of his hand, almost as if to reassure myself that this beautiful man and what we’d shared was real.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author Bio

Susan Beck is an irreverent middle-aged woman with too many children, a warped sense of humour, and a husband who doesn't want her to use her real name when writing porn. You can usually find her ignoring the housework whilst reading her kindle with a coffee close by.

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