

# 40 SOMETHING

Pasquale Maria Palmieri



Eloquent Books

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## Also by Pasquale Maria Palmieri

### **Fiction**

*L'Albero (My only friend is a tree)*

*Rebirth*

*Noi (Us)*

*Love You Dad*

### **Non-Fiction**

*Please Read Me (Before you get married or remarried)*

### **Theatre**

*Albatross*

*Benjamin Mary*

*Doors*

*For Alessandra, Marco e Mauro... my lovely family*

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## **STARRING around the big table**

Luca Armani, 48, born Italy, photographer

Pamela Clarke, 40, born Australia, author (former drug addict)

Patricia O’Kane, 42, born Australia, actress out of work

Liam Freeman, 45, born Israel, entrepreneur Casanova

Ross Mill, 51, born Australia, architect

Kathy Fisher Mill, 51, born Australia, nurse/health administrator

Michael Whilshire, 40, born Australia, car dealer

Josephine Zilikis (Josie), 35, born Australia, business woman

Manuel Montez, 65, born Spain, lawyer, womanizer

Allison McKenzie Pedrera, 62, born Scotland, teacher

Jonas Friedrick Kursten, 60, born Austria, film maker

Silvie Chia Kursten, 40, born Singapore, ex model

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# 1

## MELBOURNE 2000 SOMETHING

*Man of Italian origin, over 45, multi-divorced, strong build, searching for perfect match: a sensually beautiful Woman, warm, fun lover, positive, secure and self confident for joyful encounters and deep conversations, no strings attached. Available late evenings. Are you there?*

“What now?”

“We offer the safest way to meet voice to voice before you meet face to face. Just call our number and follow the simple instructions. Enter your voice mail box and PIN number to listen to your messages and choose who to respond to. Don’t give out your own phone number or home address, just use your personal code ID. We will send you a statement in the mail to confirm your bankcard payment.”

“Thank you.”

Luca hung up, feeling like a child who had just done something naughty.

This was the first time he had contacted a singles’ agency to meet a woman, something that wouldn’t have even crossed his mind after his first divorce.

Somehow it still didn’t feel right. He couldn’t help perceiving it as some kind of failure. His chatterbox wouldn’t stop nagging him about how low he had fallen.

The phone rang, making him jump in anticipation, before realizing how silly he was. He answered, still looking around as if he had been sprung doing something wrong. His heart pounding, running away from his thoughts, as if their two energies couldn't communicate with each other any more, kept apart by the power of persistent social brainwashing and conditioning.

"Armani photography... Luca speaking.."

During his twenty-odd years in Australia, he had grown more and more grateful for having a surname that sounded so familiar, riding on the fame and glory of his homonymous icon.

"Are you coming tonight?"

"Who is this?" wondering if anyone could have already found out what he had just done, randomly recollecting as much as possible of the real and present around him.

"It's me, Kathy... what are you on? You sound so vague... are you coming to dinner tonight? Didn't Michael tell you about it?"

"Hi Kathy, ciao... no, I didn't know. But let me see... I will have to cancel my date with... Monica Bellucci, and..."

"Sure... so, are you coming?"

"Who else will be there?"

"The usual..."

"OK. What time?"

One of the things Luca had most difficulty with since living in Melbourne, was adjusting to the time when people usually sat down to dinner. He just couldn't get used to eating earlier than nine or preferably even later. These early evening time slots often created a social problem for him in an environment where things normally went by the book, with little or no room for change and improvisation.

He used to joke about it, saying that in Southern Europe only peasants and farmers would eat that early and go to bed when their chickens do. A remark that wasn't always taken with the same lightness and humour as it was intended.

But he was a gypsy at heart and found it extremely difficult to comply with rules and regulations. He would just refuse to follow, an

instinctive reaction before any structured thought could materialize and bear any impact on his actions.

A sort of disquietude and intolerance he had known since childhood for the ways of adult life he had never learned to relate to; coded gestures that made him feel like wanting to disappear rather than embracing the same set of thoughts and actions required to conform; confusing noises that made it impossible for him to understand who was saying what and who was doing what, or even which was the original idea.

He often fantasized about having his things ready to stuff into a backpack, all set to get up and go, at the drop of a hat.

“See you tonight then, and bring some wine. The food is on the house... Ciao bello!”

All of Luca’s friends could say *ciao bello* and *ciao bella*, they just loved saying it, it was almost a password in their group. Things Italian had been <in> for quite a while, and the days when the <wog thing> bore the stigma of inferiority belonged to a less glorious past. At least most of it did. Efficiency, punctuality, reliability and the like were not items Italians were renowned for and were still not taken for granted. Nevertheless, greeting and leaving with a casual <ciao> had become a chic thing to do.

As a matter of fact, Luca’s group of friends looked like a micro-version of Australian society; a mixture of different original nationalities melded together with the sort of tolerance and acceptance unheard-of in other countries.

# 2

## DINNER WITH FRIENDS

“I own it all, it’s all mine, I’m the only one on the planet. Make room, move out of my way...”

“Hi Luca... what are you mumbling about?”

Luca delivered the bag with the wine to Ross, almost pushing his way in through the door.

“I walked here, from the studio, coming down Church Street... the usual Saturday’s slow migratory flocks, strolling in search of a place to escape for a night out... A couple walking right in front of me; they just suddenly stop and turn around; he looks at me as if I shouldn’t be there; in fact he doesn’t even look at me, he walks straight-on as if I wasn’t there; I barely avoided him. I can’t believe it! What’s wrong with human beings?”

Ross and Luca had met in Canada, both expatriates working in Montreal, in their early twenties, at the start of their careers, with all options still open and free.

Ross, just graduated from architecture school, had travelled from his native Melbourne through Asia and Europe to see the world and have a go at big corporate projects.

Luca had left his secular Rome to widen his horizons. His search for new inspirations led him to North America where, following the

footsteps of his ideological mentor, Ansell Adams, he tried to absorb and capture the evasive landscape split between the inverse vibes of native, white and black man.

Both were dreamers and adventurers, pushing the boundaries of the square they were born in, thirsty for the new awaiting ahead. A two decade long friendship that had survived both Luca's continued '*gypsy-ing*' around the globe and the fundamental differences in their personalities, by now more closely resembling the affectionate indulgence of brothers.

"Calm down, come and tell us all about it."

Blues music was playing in the background of Ross and Kathy's living room. Luca loved that space, where the modern minimalist lines of Ross's ingenious design seamlessly met the old and traditional absorbed during their voyages through the Orient and Europe.

The colours and shapes and lights were all softly whispering, without creating individual statements, like a sunset with no hero, where all the elements come together to create the same magic repeating itself every evening, yet never repeating itself.

Pamela tapped the chair next to her, inviting Luca to sit there, careful not to stop the flow of the conversation around the dinner table about a speed fine, which, by the looks of it and everybody's involvement, must have started and gained momentum quite some time earlier.

Kathy looked at Luca and made a gesture with her hand, inviting him to help himself to the food on the table.

"Isn't it ridiculous, how they take us for a joy ride pretending to actually look after us?"

"What do you expect? It's the only way they have to make money, now that our assets have been sold up. All that is left are taxes and fines to generate revenue..."

"Pass the wine, would you?"

"Any one for another beer? I'm going to the kitchen."

"Yes please, I'll have one."

“Isn’t there some way to stop it? It’s so frustrating!”

“Four K above the speed limit... how am I supposed to know? On a wide road like that... you can’t even tell the difference. Is it safer to keep looking at the dashboard rather than having both eyes on the road? If I wasn’t driving my mother’s car, I wouldn’t pay this fine. I’d take it to court and make it a... What is it called, when you bring a claim to court on behalf of a group of people in a similar situation?”

“A class action.”

“That’s it, thanks Manu. A class action! And become the flag bearer... a suffragette, the catalyst to promote a reality check and a wake-up call to all levels of government who act as if they own us, as if they were some kind of royalty above scrutiny. We are the ones paying their salary; they work for us. Not the other way around.”

Patricia’s cheeks had become even rosier than usual as she started playing with the idea of firing up a revolution, her ancestral Irish blood still flowing through her veins. It made a stunning contrast to the angelic look of her light blue, child-like eyes and the soft cascading curls of her reddish-blond hair.

“Patricia, have you ever realized that on average from January to April, every single person actually works for the Government? Some more, some less, but we all devolve quite a few months’ income, every year throughout our entire working life, to an entity that is supposed to administer that money—our money—to protect and better our life, instead of protecting and improving just their own.”

Liam was a hardliner single like Patricia; they were the only two in the group who had never been married. He could have easily been labelled a womaniser, if it weren’t for his natural charm and sophisticated manners making anyone, man or woman, forgive whatever he said or did.

“Shit, Liam, when you put it like that, it makes me feel good not to be a full time partaker—actually, I should say part-giver—in the social compulsory fundraising. There is some advantage in being a starving actress after all!”

“Manuel, the law’s your domain; what do you think? Does she stand a chance of getting the fine cancelled?”

“Patricia, if you take it to court, you haven’t much more to lose than money. That’s if you’re found guilty... worse scenario. The judiciary system in this country is one of the fairest in the world and it really works. If you have a valid point, the judge will listen and make up his mind in an impartial way. I only suggest that you might have to dress for the occasion... I mean to dress... you know... show less of your voluptuous body...”

Luca quickly grabbed the opening offered by the animated confusion that followed Manuel’s comment.

“I’ll never understand humans. We all share the space around us, and yet people seem locked up in their own world, prisoners of the false security subsidized by the one-size-fits-all syndrome, filled with set beliefs and precast images borrowed off the shelves... Why should she dress-up for the occasion? To fit whose vision of right and wrong? What’s so offensive about being herself? It spells honesty in my books and it should be rewarded instead.”

“Thank you Luca.”

“No worries mate... any time.”

Their glasses joined with a clean crystal sound, touching in midair across the table, in the chaos of passionate words bouncing back and forth and around Manuel’s remark; from mouths to ears, and again, in all directions, shot at random as if exploding out of a box of fireworks lit by a fallen match.

It took a while before the air turned reasonably clear again, alliances made and broken, as one by one they all ran out of stamina and determination to stay within each individual truth zone.

“That’s Manuel for you. Almost forty years of marriage, and forty years of sexual innuendos! He just can’t take his eyes off a woman’s bosom; that cleavage showing between the opening of a shirt or under a singlet drives him crazy. I don’t believe he’s ever looked at my face when talking, at least not for the first ten years of our relationship; he gets all muddled up, my poor baby... still so attached to mama’s breasts.”

# 3

## THE LONGEST MARRIED

Allison and Manuel were the longest married and the only couple besides Ross and Kathy to still be the original twosome. Allison was born in Edinburgh, her Scottish motherland well alive in her fiery personality. A tough match for the similarly hot tempered but more emotional latino Manuel.

He had moved to Australia with his parents as a young boy. The family had left Seville in search for a more secure future, leaving behind a Spain strangled by General Franco's dictatorship; a contradiction in terms in Manuel's mind, who regarded his upbringing under his father's Spanish rule as equally dictatorial. He was brought-up as a Spaniard in Melbourne; in Allison's words '*as a male chauvinistic pig*'. And the fact that his family's ancestors, back a few centuries ago, had embraced the Islamic religion at the time of the Moors' invasion of the South of Spain, did not do much to help his overall view on women.

But he had never been an orthodox follower of the parental traditions, and the opportunity to break partially free from his family's cultural stronghold finally presented itself when he met Allison. He had just finished law school then, and she was visiting relatives, taking a long break before starting her teaching career back home. Their fundamentally different backgrounds offered a real challenge, as their love story was not appreciated in either of their respective camps,

which made them even more determined to pursue it against all odds. One year later when Manuel was picked by a law firm, who believed in his legal genius, Allison moved permanently to Melbourne and they got married. Both were attracted by the challenge to explore at first and later to tame, the wild and different in one-another; an activity which still kept them very busy, with alternating short-lived victories.

“Whenever I hear the two of you talking, I feel grateful for my intuition and foresight, never to get married. Do you ever let go of this tug of war? How can you live under such pressure? You always sound so frustrated.”

“Liam, I ask myself that same question everyday. I can’t even imagine what my life could have been, had I never met Allison. Or at least not married her... I see it as a form of life on another planet, unknown, mysterious and exciting. I’m sixty-five this year, thinking about buying into a retirement village, with no idea of how I got here in the first place... We get to accept the imperfect as something perfect and settle in.”

Allison rolled her eyes, adopting that typical teacher’s expression of superiority when a student has messed up big-time, scanning her entire arsenal before choosing her weapon and unleashing all her invested power to crush her frozen victim’s self-esteem.

Manuel, well trained in the courts of law, was used to quickly adjusting the direction of his argument at the first sign of losing the jury’s favours.

“But she is my angel. Where would I be without her support? She raised our three children practically by herself. I was never home or, if I was, I’d often be locked up in my studio preparing for a case till late at night or through entire weekends. And look at what a good job she’s done! Food always ready on the table, the house spotless, help and advice available to the whole family at all times. She’s been like a personal taxi driver to our children for years, covering school and after school commitments, on top of looking after her own teaching duties at a very demanding private institution. What more could a man ask for?”

He reached for her hand, digging deep into his childhood memories for the sort of expression he would use when desperately wanting his parents to buy him some hard-to-get toy.

Allison made a half-hearted attempt to move away, before accepting a little kiss on her cheek. A soft smile of victory on both their faces, they were happy to settle for a draw, this time around.

# 4

## THE BIG DINING TABLE

The unexpectedly fast truce negotiated between Allison and Manuel left everybody in a sudden vacuum of silence, unsure if there was more to come, whether to release the tension with a big laugh, or move the conversation to a different topic. An awkward kind of silence, as for a time there were only the soft noises of forks and knives on plates, of wine poured into half-empty glasses, of bodies adjusting on their chairs. The music in the background filled that vacuum for a few moments, waiting for the energy to reset.

The murmur of random voices slowly picked up again, on a more intimate level, of people sitting tightly around the big table, really made for ten and threatening to overflow when arranging all twelve of them.

The table was a real feature of Ross and Kathy's place. No one else in the group could host a sit-down dinner for everybody, which was something that Kathy had absolutely wanted. She came from a big family, raised on a farm not far from Daylesford, North-West of Melbourne, and strongly believed in the connecting force of sitting around a table at dinner, rather than having to perform a balancing act with a wobbling plate in one hand, a glass in the other, and serviette and cutlery held in desperately needed imaginary ones.

Ross didn't like anything mass-produced, in him it prompted the sort of discomfort at stomach level that other people might get for the greasy taste of fast food. So he chose only one-off pieces for his home, often designed by himself.

The big dining table was one of Kathy's discoveries, during a weekend outing in the country. Close to seventy years old, it qualified as an antique in Australian terms, tantalising Ross's passion for restoration. He worked on it for over a month before upgrading it to the status of one of his proud creations, a showpiece of rare Tasmanian solid red oak and an integral part of the Mills' household.

# 5

## THE LATEST ACQUISITIONS

Pamela, Michael and Josie were the latest acquisitions to Ross and Kathy's big dinner table, by now the central meeting point for twelve assorted individuals who shared a friendship rather resembling the form of an extended family.

"So, Pamela, how is your book going? Anything new happening?"

"Oh, hi stranger! Where have you been? I haven't seen you for ages."

"Working, working, working. I've been flat out. You know how it goes... nothing for weeks and then all of a sudden it pours in. It's the beast of commercial photography. Three agencies called at the same time with jobs needed yesterday... But what about your book?"

"What can I say Luca? It's happening and it's not happening, who knows? I just hope for the best. Promotions, interviews, publicity kits sent to press and TV networks... It's all in motion... I sit and wait... In the meantime I clean homes to pay the bills. I've got quite a few now, they keep me busy five days a week, basically full time, and it's all cash in hand... I'm not complaining."

"You are my hero Pamela! A real inspiration! If your heart was not already taken, I would court you desperately..."

Pamela gave Luca a push on the shoulder, followed by one of her sweet smiles that he loved so much, making him happy as a puppy dog

who, having just attracted a passer-by's playful attention, starts panting and licking and wagging its tail, throwing itself to the ground, paws up in the air asking for more. He pushed her back, in a juvenile game of mixed innocence and malice, of hide and seek of subtle emotions shy to manifest their underground life.

Pamela was all Luca saw in her, and more. Mother of three daughters by two different fathers, both disappeared from her life even before the birth of their accidental children, leaving her to cope alone.

A striking blonde, she attracted lots of attention, both wanted and unwanted. Originally from a wealthy Brighton family, she was destined for the very best in life: top student in one of the most prestigious private schools and a bright, beautiful, intelligent girl, with a brilliant personality, easily succeeding at anything she attempted. No one around her could have foreseen that she would instead fall into the vicious circle of drugs, sinking in it deeper and deeper, becoming a lost junkie.

She then met a rock musician from Sydney and moved in with him, slowly losing control of her own life. When his band became quite popular and won a record contract, including a one-year tour of the States, she didn't think twice and followed him. Vanessa was born soon after, seventeen years ago, as the result of a pregnancy discovered too late. The rock musician simply freaked out, and dumped her like a carton of milk passed its use-by-date, on her own in San Francisco. Too ashamed, confused and shy to ask for anyone's help, she couldn't see any option other than to get down and stay on, surviving with odd jobs in bars, more drugs, more rock, for seven long and hard years. When she met Ashley, a small-time dealer caught in the machinery of petty crime, of delirious gangs, made of copied gestures. It was an on-and-off relationship, a puzzle of mostly occasional encounters when she needed a hit in exchange for sexual favours. She got pregnant again and Ashley made sure he wasn't seen around her any more.

Already consumed by the struggle to give Vanessa at least the appearance of a "normal" upbringing, she knew she couldn't cope with the new situation, that she had to stop her addiction and get a

real life. The idea of losing her children, that they could be taken away and awarded to the State, was so scary that she decided to swallow her pride, or whatever was left of it, and jump on the first available flight. She returned to Melbourne, to her parents' home, where the twins Phoebe and Emily were born a few months later.

The full rehabilitation took two years, but she came out of the experience a new woman, a butterfly free from the larva she once was.

It was then that she decided to write a book about the present danger of drugs, an evil of today's society to which no one is immune by definition. It could hit any family, at any social strata, striking like a plague which doesn't know any boundaries, leaving no place to hide and feel forever safe. Pamela answered her call as the mission of her life, rented a unit, started cleaning homes for a living, writing her book under the cover of stillness at night.

The night had become her best friend, her ally in the battle for survival; a time with no requests for urgent attention, bringing her the precious gift of silence wrapped with a deep joy, free of guilt for time stolen from the demanding commitments of a mother of three; a teenager about to finish high school and two nine year olds still in primary, in the same grade as Michael's daughter.

"Pamela, what are you going to do with the twins these coming school holidays?"

Pamela looked at Michael as if he were a drunk who had accidentally just bumped into her outside a pub door.

"What do you think? You smart..."

"Seriously Pamela, I'm not teasing... Josie and I are planning to go to her parents' farm and Michaela asked if we could take Phoebe and Emily with us. She feels like the third twin... they are so close those three. It will help us too, Michaela gets so bored on her own, even when we go just for the weekend."

"Is Sally allowing you to take Michaela away for two weeks?"

"Believe it or not, that's what it seems..."

"She must have found someone to keep her busy in bed!"

Sally Baker, a computer programmer from London, was Michael's ex wife. A walking hormonal imbalance since things started to go sour between the two, turned hysterical ninja on a mission of destruction during the painful divorce procedures, and absolutely restlessly aggressive ever after.

The present relationship, made of quick pick-ups and drop-offs of their daughter Michaela on Sally's door-step on alternate weekends, with a minimum exchange of words confined only to practical arrangements and constantly on the verge of exploding into confrontation and fighting, had not improved since Michael met Josie a year ago.

In fact, when Josie moved, luggage and all, into the family home, it actually peaked back to the record high, previously reached only at the time of the infamous bloody alimony and custody battles of three years before. Michael bought that house prior to marrying Sally and fought desperately for it, managing to keep it for himself as the result of a fat cash payout, part of the settlement—agreed between their respective lawyers and sealed by the court—which included his rightful access to Michaela every second weekend.

“She's as unpredictable as Melbourne's weather! Now she's gone all mellow on us. Who knows how long it's going to last...”

“Josie, let's not allow her to run our life. Who cares! Her menstrual cycle is not our responsibility... leave her alone!”

Easier said than done. Josie felt like the outsider, with no room to move, as if she had to repress her own feelings and not to rock the boat, with no authority and no right even to be there when it came to Michael's protective attitude towards his past and present relationship with Sally. He wanted that door to stay shut and locked at all times, restricting all communications to a slot opening and closing only at specific times, fully under his control, like in a high security jail when passing basic necessities and daily meals.

His face actually changed expression even at just the mention of Sally's name, his eyes freezing to a paranoid stare, his voice half a pitch higher, his head jolting into a slight angle as if the weight in his brain had shifted from right to left and back again. A similar look to when

dealing with a difficult customer, who wouldn't take his word at face value, in his prestigious second hand car showroom.

"Thank you Michael, it's nice of you to ask. School holidays are my nightmare. I never know what to do with the twins. Holiday programs are so expensive, and I can't ask my mother to look after them, she doesn't get holidays from work either. But Josie, is it OK with you too? What about your parents? Will they be happy with an invasion of kids?"

"Of course they'll be happy! Josie's parents love playing grannies."

"Ehi! I asked Josie... let her speak for herself."

"Michael's right, my parents will love it. And I don't have a problem with it... the twins will be welcome."

Josie was at an age when she had started to feel that any opportunity lost, could be her last. She really loved Michael, even if obviously not always enjoying the occasional pushing around, and Michael had made clear to her that he was happy to get into a steady relationship again, but only on his terms. He didn't want to experience a repetition of his ordeal with Sally, and his behaviour with Josie was more the result of a reaction to a still tender wound, than his true personality. Josie could perceive it and this intuition, coupled with the growing desire to have a child before reaching forty, made her close one eye for the moment and keep the other on the alert to control her reactions. She had not even mentioned a word about her maternity plan to Michael, aware that the time wasn't right as yet, though confident of being able to turn things around within her time frame, sometime during the next four years.

Josie was born to Greek parents, brought up with Saturday Greek school like almost any other child walking a similar path in life. Her parents were applying continuous pressure for her to settle down, get married and *'make babies'*, as her sisters and cousins had already done. At thirty-five, she was the middle one of three daughters and the only rebel, choosing independence rather than focusing exclusively on marriage as the main female career goal.

By the time she had become a certified practising accountant, both her sisters had already delivered their second child, having become traditional housewives. The family chemistry turned even more bitter when she quit her secure job with a prestigious accounting firm, to start her own business.

It was actually an act of genius. In a society tamed to fast food, she started what had become a successful franchise in only three years. Translating the two concepts of McDonalds and Tapas Bar into Greek, '*Zorba*', the first and only '*Greek food coffee bar*', as she baptised it, had grown to eight outlets around Melbourne, also spreading interstate with one opening in Sydney.

It was an idea that had made her quite a wealthy woman in her own right, but one which her family saw as an invasion of men's territory, something not really suited to a woman who was supposed to stay home and make time to look for a husband, instead of swinging around all day on her own caring for a very demanding business.

Michael sold her a vintage Morgan, got taken by her silky, shining, long, black hair and her bubbly personality and started dating her, going steady for the first time since his draining divorce, which had pushed him into a spiral of recrimination, insecurity, fear, anger and all kinds of mixed ill-thoughts.

Luca had become his main confidant during those painful years, a sort of experienced guru with two terminal marriages behind him, a reliable reference showing on his personal resume.

# 6

## THE “X” NIGHTMARES

“Michael, did you forget to tell Luca about tonight?”

“Was I supposed to?” Slotting into his tilted neck comic look, when fearing an imminent attack.

“That <S> look again!”

“What <S> look?”

Patricia was always quick to make fun of Michael’s peculiar pose and his wicked obsession with Sally whenever she could.

“Leave him alone... I am here, am I not? No harm done.”

“Luca is right... let’s give him time to snap out of it.”

“Snap out of what, Jonas? Stop patronising me! I don’t need it, not from you guys... as if it’s not hard enough as it is!”

Michael stood up, his neck even more tilted to the side, his voice at an even higher pitch, his eyes wide open and frozen in an even more tragic-comic look.

“It’s easy for you to make fun of me, you don’t have anyone relentlessly nibbling away and chewing on your nerves!”

“Calm down, Michael. No one means it that way. You just have to learn to let go. I know it’s not easy, but you really must try to start laughing about it. I can relate perfectly, I felt the same... it took ages to get rid of Jenny’s negative energy. Ex wives don’t just disappear into thin air, they tend to stick to you like Melbourne’s flies.”

“You should have been there. Jenny drove Jonas through the roof, she didn’t give up for years! And imagine how much bitchier

she become after we met, and even more when we got married. Her psychotic games became insane! Sally's an angel and an amateur in comparison!"

"I almost lost you in the process... do you remember dear?"

"Do I remember it? It's only a couple of years since I stopped having nightmares about it!"

Jonas and Silvie had been married ten years, exactly the same time as Jonas and his ex wife Jenny. He met Jenny at the end of the roaring sixties, in a Melbourne much less cosmopolitan than at present. When pubs used to shut at five in the afternoon, and anyone with even the barest percentage of creativity and lateral thinking in their DNA was wearing long hair and coloured clothes, in the middle of the Vietnam war.

Jonas was no exception. A young film maker then, born in Vienna, he had been teamed up with a foreign correspondent by one of the major Austrian TV stations, and based in Hanoi to report about a war already lost. Determined to get the most unbiased outlook possible, they decided to document the endeavours of an Australian garrison, even more unsure than their American comrades about why they were there and what they were dying for.

He quickly got sick of the awful absurdities he witnessed. He resigned from his job and followed a group of wounded soldiers returning to Melbourne, continuing to film the human drama of war and the emotional agony of those unwilling heroes once thrown back into *'normal'* life. The rest is history.

"Luca, you must remember too. You were the first to warn Silvie about how messy my life was when you introduced us. You'd been quite reluctant to give in when I kept pressuring you to arrange it."

"How could I forget? You went bananas at first sight when I showed you the shots I had taken of her... you totally lost your mind. You bought I don't know how many copies of that magazine to make a collage to keep over your bed."

"Male fantasies... how do you do it? How can you make love to a photograph?"

“What about you women? Have you ever walked into a teenage girl’s room? Anyway, I didn’t have to make love to pictures, I had the advantage of being a friend of the photographer who took them, oh yeah!”

Silvie, a model hand-picked by a talent scout in Singapore, quickly had become one of the most in demand within the industry through the late eighties. Her exotic beauty was splashed about on billboards, magazines and TV commercials all around Australia for years; her rise to stardom even more surprising at a time when the ‘*Asian look*’ was not exactly popular with conservative Australians, who had always considered the Asian invasion a present and imminent danger to the racial integrity of a country they believed ended up in that part of the world by accident. A country they would be quite happy to power away from its geographical location if only they could, and move it as close to mother England as possible.

“Michael, you are going to get sick if you don’t stop revelling about Sally. Actually, do you want to know the magic secret? You are stuck in a defensive position to avoid being hurt... Let go. Holding on is the same as being possessive, an ego problem. Start to be good to her, irrespective of her behaviour, and don’t expect anything in return. Refrain from criticizing her. Any kind of judgement tells you that there is something wrong with yourself. You end up living in fear and to make yourself feel safer, you look for faults in others. Her rejection of you is numbing your feelings about yourself and the ones you love. Value yourself more and rediscover the original energy to carry out your true passions.”

“Get real, Jonas! Words, words, words... be good to her? She’s already cost me an arm and a leg, almost sent me broke and my business into receivership. She even wanted the house! Be good to her, what a joke! Let’s go Josie, I need some fresh air...”

“Jonas, Michael is right. Do you remember how nothing anyone said could help you when you were in the same shit? Give him time.”

“I know. But it is so frustrating not to be able to use your own experience to help others! Ex wives... what a pain!”

“What about ex husbands and ex boyfriends?”

“Let’s not start a gender war now... OK, ex wives and ex husbands, they are both a pain... all exes are a pain! But Michael, please, don’t take it wrongly, I didn’t mean to give you a lecture...”

“I know, I know... it’s just that sometimes it gets all too much...”

“Come on, give me a hug... friends?”

“Do I have to?”

“I don’t want you to leave on a bad note... come on...”

Hugging among male friends was more a European custom, quite foreign to Anglo-Saxons, and Michael felt quite uneasy performing the act without going stiff like a broom, and deflating like a balloon whilst being squashed between Jonas’ arms.

Patricia couldn’t help it, bursting into a loud laugh, contaminating everyone else including Michael, who eventually regained his composure, smiling and miming a couple of punches, boxer style, to Jonas’ belly.

“OK, OK... you win,” bending away, pretending to be hit.

“Don’t mess around with me... I am tough.”

“Yeah... you are so tough that—”

“Old material Jonas, spare us, please!”

Michael and Josie went around the big table, hugging, kissing, patting on shoulders, not missing anyone, in a ritual that usually took several minutes to complete.

They thanked Ross and Kathy for dinner, finalised a few more arrangements with Pamela regarding the twins, promised Luca to call for a beer after work, forgave Patricia for her friendly sarcasm, asked Jonas and Silvie to a brunch to discuss strategies on how to mould a hysterical ex wife’s attitude, and left.

The energy around the big table slowly settled down after some concerned comments about Sally’s unreasonable actions, melting into more intimate conversations along with the soft music in the background and a few rounds of coffee with Port, fading into the night until one by one they all left.

The cosy warmth of the room still resounded with words, laughs, dreams, perceived failures and successes, the unresolved problems of the world, stories shared with no beginning and no end, all left in mid air, until next time.