

The ART *of*
PERSUASION



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FREMANTLE PRESS

Passing the time

Hazel peered through the window of their flat, watching out for Beth. She'd be easy to spot in her striped yellow dress and pink floppy hat, the one she always wore to protect her very fair skin. *Alabaster*, she insisted, her only compensation for having curly red hair. But there was nothing to see except masses of cars and hulking trucks clogging up the four-lane highway. There'd been talk of turning it into six—or was it eight?—to accommodate all the commuters, who were not so much attached to their cars as riveted to the metal. More roads would mean even more noise, congestion and toxic fumes: an evil incantation for her hometown city. Perth. It might have more cars per capita than most other cities in the world, but it was a great place to bring up children, according to her mother: lots of sunshine, beautiful beaches, a relatively low crime rate. Which was great if you wanted to bring up children. Hazel turned to face the room, tried to feel grateful for the glossy jarrah floorboards, high ceilings and art deco cornices that almost made up for the dodgy plumbing, peeling paint and cockroach visitations. Tried to give thanks for a landlord who wasn't lordly and had even changed a light bulb at the last inspection.

Hazel remembered the riddle: How many Marxists does it take to change a light bulb?

None. The light bulb contains the seeds of its own revolution.

She checked her watch. Five pm. Beth should have been home by now, her first day of relief teaching at a private boys school. It was hard to imagine Beth in a place like that, trying to look buttoned up and decorous. Hazel had tried to dissuade her—*the school's named after a saint, think about that*—but it was only a couple of weeks, Beth said, plus she needed the money, and after a month of waiting tables in a café that served a coffee called ristretto and another called doppio and where the barista was even wankier than the coffee, even the smallest stab at teaching would make her feel professional again. *Professional?* Hazel had held her tongue. What other profession was held in such contempt by the general population—well, apart from politics, the law, journalism, banking and the arts? In what other profession did nearly fifty percent of new recruits leave within five years? No mentoring, unruly classes, the burden of useless bureaucracy, and no time to go to the toilet some days, what with lunch duty, bus duty, playground duty. Not that the students had ever *played*, as such; more like pushed and elbowed and hung out in gangs and tried not to think of their future.

Hazel padded to the kitchen, poured milk into a saucepan and put it on a hot plate. Milo, her comfort drink since childhood, although you had to stop the milk from coming to the boil so it didn't form that horrible skin on top. Another first-world problem, she knew, like the fact that her favourite shampoo had gone up two dollars and she hadn't had sex for seven months, and the even worse fact that she'd never been in love. But her most pressing problem right now was being out of work. Seventeen months since she'd quit her teaching job, then failed to complete another uni course, failed at serving beef empanadas at corporate conventions, bailed out of an online program about selling real estate. She heaped in three spoons of sugar and stirred. Wasn't there a reason that sugar lifted the spirits? Something about boosting serotonin levels? Or was it an evolutionary thing, how sweet things in the wild

could soothe the savage beast? Or was it the savage breast? Probably breast, because *savage beast* was a tautology. Or was it a redundancy? All these pointless questions, when the only question worth asking, apparently, was *to be or not to be*. He'd be a gloomy bastard to wake up to in the morning, old Hamlet, moaning that life was *weary, stale and flat*, then barking *get thee to a nunnery*. A nunnery also meant a whorehouse, her lit. teacher had explained, insisting that the play, like life as a whole, was full of double meanings. Life was a hole, alright: Hazel knew she'd fallen right into it, after thinking it would be cool to be a teacher, pointing out double meanings to her students, encouraging reflection on being and not being.

She finished making her Milo and trudged to the living room, which had barely enough room for two beanbags and a mini coffee table. She put down her mug, eased her way into the purple beanbag, tried not to think about her latest debacle in the chatting-up routine. Last week, in the pub. *I'm Pilar*, she'd said, hoping to sound breathily alluring (while forced to shout above the clamour). She'd always loved the sound of Pilar: it conjured a dark-eyed señorita leaning over a balcony, an importunate lover calling from below, violins melting in the background. The guy in the pub had dark brown eyes, a kissable mouth, and not a hint of macho in his voice. So what had she been hoping for? Escape from her humdrum self, a smudge of warmth, a hint of affirmation? Whatever else might be on offer when you took off your clothes, took a deep breath and tried to make yourself known?

He'd asked if Pilar was *a wog's name*.

The door opened onto an angry face.

'I got the sack,' said Beth. 'After one fucking day.' She stepped inside, slammed the door, put her hands on her hips. 'A mother complained cos I told her year nine brat to pull his head in. I wish I'd told him to shove it up his arse instead.' She made a loud harrumphing noise. 'I did lunch duty today, and all these boys were swaggering round saying the c word, which I really,

really hate because it's so degrading to women. So I went over and gave them a serve, didn't I, but all they did was laugh cos I'm only the relief. Which is exactly what that year nine brat said when I told him to stop being so disruptive. And then he gets on his phone and squeals to mummy, the little shit.'

'They don't know what they're missing,' said Hazel. 'Having you for their teacher.'

She struggled out of the beanbag and gave her friend a wish-I-could-help-you-beat-the-system kind of hug, which was tighter than a normal hug but didn't last very long.

'Well, all is not completely lost,' said Beth, chirpy again. 'The social science teacher asked me to a party on Saturday night. He said to bring as many people as I like.'

'I'm not in the mood for a party,' said Hazel. 'And in any case, I'm busy. I want to keep working on my project.' Because everyone needed a project, and she knew she'd be hopeless at knitting scarves or making jewellery out of beads. 'I'm reading the less famous works of famous writers,' she said. 'I've started with A for Jane Austen.'

'What, her entire oeuvre?'

'It's just oeuvre, Beth. You don't need *entire*.'

'OK, smart-arse. So why do you want to do that, anyway?'

'Because I've only read *Pride and Prejudice*.'

'Which always makes the top ten when they do those best-of lists,' said Beth.

'Along with *To Kill a Mockingbird*,' added Hazel. 'Plus *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Cloudstreet*.'

God, hadn't anyone read anything since they'd left high school? Her friends only read online these days, good stuff admittedly, about the environment and marriage equality and politics in general, but an awful lot of garbage as well. Like the compelling fact that one of the Kardashians had just given birth or was about to give birth or was keen to regain her pre-birth body by working out with a personal trainer for ten hours every day.

‘*Persuasion* is Austen’s last completed novel,’ said Hazel. ‘I think the title’s intriguing. And when I’ve finished that, I’ll try *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. I’ve forgotten the names of the other two. Anyway, it will give me a structure. A goal.’

‘So it’s not for fun, then?’

Hazel screwed up her face. ‘I have to admit, I’m not exactly enraptured by *Persuasion*.’

‘Then come to the party instead. You might get enraptured by a man like Mr Darcy.’

‘Who isn’t in *Persuasion*.’

‘But remember that scene when Darcy walks out of the lake in those tight, wet breeches? Talk about hot!’

‘But that scene’s not in the novel.’

‘Who cares?’

‘I do. Those wet breeches. The blatant sexual display. It’s not in keeping with nineteenth-century sexual morés.’

‘Oh, *morés*, is it?’ said Beth, and laughed. ‘Do you know how Colin Firth managed to play Mr Darcy all haughty and stiff? He said he kept imagining a poker up his arse.’

‘You waste too much time reading celebrity magazines.’

Beth shot her a look. ‘It was in a serious article about adapting the novel into a TV series. And you spend way too much time in your room.’ Her voice softened. ‘Come to the party, hey? It might even be fun. Remember fun?’

Hazel shrugged. ‘My novel might pick up,’ she said. ‘Captain Wentworth’s back in town after seven years away and he’s meant to be a bit of a charmer. Seductive, in Austen’s read-between-the-lines kind of way.’

‘So you’ll settle for sex in the head, then. That’s no fun at all.’

She gave Hazel a pleading look. The girl who’d sidled up to her on their first day of school and told her she looked good. *Good?* Beth had gone on to explain: *You look like you won’t hurt anyone.* And then she’d asked if they could be friends. *Best friends, if I really like you and you really like me.* Eighteen

years ago, and still they loved each other fiercely.

There were days, sometimes weeks, when Beth was the only person who touched her.

Hazel had been right after all, because according to Beth, the party was a disaster. Not that you should judge a decision by its outcome: Philosophy 101. Still, the only guy who'd talked to Beth was a happy clappy who carried on about resurrection, and the only girl who talked to her thought Taylor Swift was a musical genius. Beth said she was ready to shoot them both and was home by ten o'clock. Would have been home by nine except for all the stupid roadworks.

They managed to survive Easter Sunday by rationing their chocolate eggs. Hazel's mother had given them a gigantic Cadbury's rabbit apiece; Beth's mother had given Beth a lecture about getting a decent job. Then the two friends survived Monday by going to Rikki's flat and watching old DVDs of *Seinfeld*, whose unspeakably narcissistic characters made them all feel better about themselves. The following morning, after Beth had made pancakes and then mooched back to bed, Hazel took a walk to Bay View Terrace. The street was bristling with gym-fit mothers and their sylph-like daughters in their designer jeans ripped across the knees, silky black tops sliding off tanned shoulders. Hazel felt invisible among these glamorous women, as she walked past the funky boutiques and the trendy hair salon, the restaurant with windows so dark that people on the outside couldn't possibly see in. Talk about symbolic. Next up was an exclusive bed-and-bath shop selling towels big enough to dry the corpulent participants in an ancient Roman orgy. She looked at the entrance to Claremont Quarter, with more high-end clothes shops inside: Alannah Hill, Gorman, Tiger Lily, and a huge glossy sign for Calvin Klein, promising *Deep Euphoria*. As opposed to shallow euphoria, Hazel thought.

All this gloss and style, so different, her mother had told her, from the shop that used to nestle at the bottom of Bay View Terrace. A homely space, run by two sweet old ladies and crammed with cotton reels, buttons, zips, hooks and eyes. A haberdashery, that was the word, devoted to the small things in life, now superseded by obscenely pricey off-the-peg clothes made in third-world sweatshops. And near the corner there'd once been a family-run bakery selling homemade pies and sloppy vanilla slices and doughnuts as big as saucepans. Hazel would have killed for a doughnut right now, especially one dripping with artificial strawberry jam. But this part of town offered only really fancy stuff like iced chai frappes and turmeric lattes, or earnest muffins stuffed with bran and completely devoid of taste.

Still, she'd had to come here to check out *the dress*. Again. The one she'd seen in the window a few weeks back, when she'd dared to slink inside and sneak a look at the price. Two hundred dollars: an absolute steal for Claremont Quarter but roughly one hundred and fifty dollars more than she could spare. And yet here she was, taking another look at the black lacy number with its low-scooped neckline, classy and sexy at the same unaffordable time. Not that she'd have an occasion to wear such a dress, or anyone to wear it for. Still, it couldn't hurt, could it, to saunter into the shop and try it on? Just to feel, for a moment, like the person she imagined she could be.

And then something else came into her head. The angry guy at a party last week, telling some other guy to stop complaining about his *brand new majorly disappointing* video game. *Quit fucking moaning, you dick*, the angry guy had railed. *Try walking twenty kilometres for a bucket of clean drinking water.*

Parties

Another invitation arrived from out of the blue, this time from an old friend: *Huge announcement for me and Dora my place Saturday at 8.* Smart, big-hearted Todd, who told Hazel way back in school about *the restorative power of language* in William Wordsworth's poetry. *Restorative.* She'd nearly swooned.

William Wordsworth, Captain Wentworth, Todd Liu. All the good guys were either dead, fictional or taken.

'Do you reckon they're moving in together?' said Beth. 'After all these years?'

'Five.'

'Maybe they're getting engaged,' said Beth. 'Dora's been hinting for ages about putting a big sparkly thing on her finger.' She shook her head. 'Think of what you could buy instead. You could donate to a worthy cause. You know, buy a well for a village. Plus a goat and a pig. And a trip to Paris with what's left over.'

'Still, he's devoted to Dora.'

'Another one of life's great mysteries.'

'She's very sweet, Beth. She never says a bad word about anyone.'

Beth laughed. 'Yawn, yawn,' she said.

‘Hazel! It’s SO FABULOUS to SEE YOU!!’

Dora was one of those people who, no matter what the subject, always spoke in capital letters and exclamation marks. She would tell you that the weather was MILD!!!! Or the movie was OK!!!! The first time Hazel met her, she thought Dora was INCREDIBLY ENTHUSIASTIC about life, but now she was convinced that she wasn’t VERY BRIGHT!!!!, because in five mildly envious years of knowing her, Hazel had never heard her say one vaguely interesting thing.

‘Where did you get that DRESS!! And your HAIR!! You look so GLAMOROUS!!!’

The dress was, in truth, killing her. It was not so much nipped in at the waist as digging great chunks into her flesh. Snug when she bought it two years ago and even tighter now, but Beth insisted it looked amazing. She’d insisted on dyeing Hazel’s hair as well: the colour on the packet was a subtle golden-brown but had turned out a lurid kind of copper instead. Hazel gave Dora a peck on the cheek and wandered off, spotted the usual crowd of old uni friends, plus a couple of lugubrious teachers. They reminded Hazel why she’d rather not be here, in her tight dress and with her outrageous hair. She’d much rather be invisible.

Beth handed her a glass and filled it to the brim with wine.

‘You’re going to have fun tonight,’ she said, ‘whether you like it or not.’ Emphatically, like a former teacher. Then she was gone, offering wine, dispensing good cheer. Hazel chatted to some friends who were going camping down south, lying under the stars and getting stoned, and did she want some of it now because they had some really good stuff. She had to say no because the last time she was stoned she’d felt like a lettuce being nibbled by angry rabbits. Next she talked to Gav, who was dropping out of law and switching to music because he liked to sing in the shower. She figured he must be stoned. Then she bumped into Will and James, who’d broken up so many times that no one knew for sure

if they were on again or off again. They debated the relative merits of *Please Like Me* and *Arrested Development*, until Ed charged up with the latest medical gossip. *A really gross story*, he said—everyone gathering round now—about some student who got chucked out of the faculty after a female patient lodged a furious complaint. The student thought he'd share a laugh while the woman was lying on the bed, legs wide open, and asked her a simple question. *Do you know why they call it a pap smear? No. Because ladies wouldn't have one if they call it a cunt scrape.*

Everyone looked horrified, then tried not to laugh.

Next up, Hazel commiserated with Chloe, who'd just thrown in her PhD in cultural anthropology because she'd looked down from her doctoral mountain and knew she was going to fall. Then more commiserations with Sarah who'd lost her job as a graphic designer because the company had gone bust. *Last hired, first fired*, she said, and shrugged. And what's more, she was so damned fed up with horrible men.

'Like, this morning, I'm standing at the bus stop and a car slows down and guess what? A couple of meatheads lean out the window and shout disgusting things at me, mostly involving my vagina.'

'Well, get this,' said Chloe. 'I'm getting ready for the party, right? And this guy I used to date, Craig. Remember Craig?'

Hazel and Sarah shuddered.

'Well, he phones me out of nowhere, about some argument we had way back when. He starts shouting at me, tells me women don't have the monopoly on victimhood because dickhead is just as offensive as the c word. And then he called me the c word.'

'What a dickhead,' said Sarah.

'Even worse,' said Chloe. 'Yesterday, I'm standing in the supermarket queue and some middle-aged corporate in a suit rubs himself up against me. And you know how you're so gobsmacked you just can't believe it's happening? Well, by the

time I reacted he'd already taken off.'

Hazel tried hard to remember what they'd learned in gender studies: that masculinity was a social construct that could always be deconstructed and then reconstructed for benefit of both genders, for society as a whole. But hearing those nasty stories, it was hard to forget the morons hanging out of their cars, the bullying creep on the phone, the guy who'd treated Chloe like a lamppost or a fence.

And then they spotted Simon. Three unattached women looking his way. Blond, blue-eyed Simon, with his boyish face and sun-gold hair that kept falling into his eyes.

'Simon's going places in the Greens,' said Chloe. 'I see his name all over the place. I heard he might contest the next election.'

Hazel was surprised. Simon was only twenty-five, like her.

'He cornered me last year,' she said, 'and talked me into handing out how-to-vote cards.'

She'd been hoping to see him at the polling booth, but instead she'd seen a lot of grumpy voters moaning about being forced to vote. Even more who'd rolled their eyes at her borrowed T-shirt: 'Standing Up for What Matters'.

Chloe nudged her in the side. 'You should think about it, too, Hazel.'

'What? Simon?'

'No, standing for the Greens. You're smart and really articulate and—'

'Shall I laugh now, or save it for later? I'm not even a member.'

'Well, it's about time you joined,' said Sarah. 'The issues are important. Plus you get to meet a superior brand of male. Clever and caring and sometimes really hot.'

'Hazel!'

A pair of arms grabbed her round the waist, spun her round. Todd. As beautiful as ever: Malaysian-Chinese, fine-boned, smooth-skinned, with a newly shaven head that added to his sexy, sculptured look. He told Hazel, in lower case letters, that

she looked gorgeous, and as Chloe and Sarah drifted away, she asked him for a hint about the big announcement. Todd lowered his head, told her quietly that they were *having a baby*. *Well, Dora is, anyway*. Hazel was startled, but kissed him on the cheek, said what people usually say: ‘Congratulations! Any wedding plans?’

‘I’ve bought the ring,’ he said, flatly. ‘The diamond. But it’s being re-sized, so Dora has to wait til she can wear it.’

‘Oh, a diamond. That’s, well—’

‘Yeah, I know, but it’s what she wanted. And her mum and dad wanted. I had to borrow the money from mine to pay for the stupid thing. And I don’t even have a job, do I?’

‘But, well, you’ll have the baby,’ Hazel said, carefully. ‘That’s the important thing, isn’t it? And each other.’

Todd kept his voice low. ‘Do you think someone can really forget to take the pill?’ he said. ‘After five years?’

Hazel couldn’t help looking round the room to see what might be written on his girlfriend’s pretty face. But Dora was surrounded by a bunch of girls Hazel didn’t know, all of them oohing and aahing over something, maybe the prospect of a diamond or one of those puffy white wedding gowns that in a high, swirling wind might lift you into the sky. She turned back to Todd. Disconcerted. Wary.

‘I know it’s none of my business,’ she said, ‘but, well, there has to be—’

‘Trust, yeah, I know. But see, the thing is, I love her and we’ve been together for a lifetime and so I can’t—you know—accuse her. I just can’t.’ He fixed Hazel with a look. ‘She’s a very good person,’ he said, as though Hazel might object. ‘She’s loyal and kind and, well, we fit together really well.’

So there it was: fantastic sex as the key to enduring coupledom. She was sick of hearing about sex, however obliquely. Sick of thinking about it and trying not to, of wanting it and trying not to. It dismayed and sometimes distressed her.

She saw Dora rushing up, putting her arms around Todd's waist, telling him it was time for their announcement, while Hazel stood there passing the time, hoping for a better time, because it was always about time, wasn't it? No time and show time and time for you and time for me, a time for every purpose under heaven. Was that T.S. Eliot quoting the Bible? One of those saints he was always on about?

'Hazel, are you OK?' said Dora. 'You look REALLY WEIRD!'

'I'm fine, thanks. Just hearing things in my head.'

'You could see a DOCTOR!! If the VOICES get REALLY BAD!!!'

How long will this take, thought Hazel. How many more hours until she could go home and stick a pillow over her head? Not to do herself in, though, because she was only mildly, not clinically, depressed, and you had to cling to the crucial difference.

Still, here was Simon, standing right in front of her and smiling.

'Hazel, great to see you,' he said. 'We haven't caught up for ages.'

'Months.' Nearly eight, to be precise. 'Since the federal election, remember?'

'And what a bummer that—' Simon stopped. 'Are you OK, Hazel? You look a bit down. Has something happened?'

God. Not tears. A few sensitive words and she was in danger of blubbering. So she pulled back her shoulders, told him she just needed a good night's sleep. Or was it a night's good sleep? And why should the world care anyway?

'How's law going?' she said.

'Boring as bat shit. But I'm volunteering at Legal Aid so that helps relieve the boredom.'

'Well, it's great that you're helping.'

She remembered another reason she liked Simon: he was a really caring guy, committed to changing the world. But not the kind of person who threw their caring in your face so you

had to wipe it off with a tissue.

‘I wish I could help get more votes,’ he said. ‘You know the Greens had a swing against them? Over three percent.’

She did. And she knew she’d been useless as well. She’d handed out—what?—maybe twenty how-to-vote cards in two long hours? Simon was beginning to fire now, about people getting *so pissed off* with the two major parties. ‘All their lies and broken promises,’ he said. ‘And not listening to the people. There’s going to be more and more people voting for the minor parties. For independents.’

‘You mean the independents who hate minor parties like the Greens,’ said Hazel. ‘Who hate asylum seekers and women and gays, just about any victimised group you care to name.’ She remembered the obnoxious guy at the polling booth. ‘So get this, Simon,’ she said. ‘There was a guy handing out cards for the Lib Dems, carrying on about women getting *special treatment* while poor old men like him get nothing. So, I was thinking, would that be the special treatment women get at the hands of their abusers? Or less money going into their pay packets? More women living in poverty than men? Then he started bleating about needing massive cuts to health and education to bring down the deficit. And don’t get him started on foreign aid. *What have foreigners ever done for us*, that kind of thing. But I didn’t say a word because he was pretty massive himself, with a face like a demented pugilist.’

‘Well, I had a guy from Family First next to me,’ said Simon. ‘A guy in a pure white shirt and a phony grin, like he’s flogging used cars. Anyway, this woman’s walking in to vote and the Family First guy shoves a leaflet in her hands and she checks it out, screws up her face like she’s thinking really hard. *Family, that sounds nice*, she says, *I think I might vote for you*. She didn’t have a clue that his idea of family is exclusively nuclear and exclusively straight.’

‘And don’t forget xenophobic and fiercely Right to Life,’ said Hazel. ‘Never trust a party with the word *family* in it. Or

democratic. Or freedom. They'll all be tyrannical or bigoted.

She could see Simon's eyes widening.

'You know, Hazel, the Greens could use some volunteers right now,' he said. 'We're spreading the word about our policies. Another grassroots campaign.'

'But there's no election for ages, Simon. Federal *or* state.'

'Sure, except we need to keep people aware of the big issues. Asylum seekers. Climate change. Get this: I had one guy at the booth who said he wasn't fussed about climate change cos he wouldn't be around when it happened. People in this joint, they just don't seem to care.'

Hazel laughed. 'My dad said we used to have a number plate with the slogan *State of Excitement*, but he reckoned we should call it *State of Couldn't Give a Damn*. I suggested *Vegetative State*.'

Simon didn't laugh with her. He was looking kind of stern.

'You know, Hazel, you'd be really good at doorknocking,' he said.

'You're kidding me, right? I'd rather poke my eye out with a burnt stick. Which is another thing my dad likes to say. Seriously, I could do without doors being slammed in my face or people abusing me. I'm way too much of a coward.'

'It's actually not that hard,' said Simon, and took a step closer. 'You focus on the issues instead of your fear. And you listen. That's the most important thing, because people always want to be listened to. It makes them feel empowered.'

His eyes were so bright, fixed on her. Only her. 'You'd be great, Hazel, honestly. You're smart and articulate, believe in social justice, and we can get you up to speed on policy.'

He moved even closer. 'You can be very persuasive,' he said.

Was there something in his voice as well?

She looked into his eyes, at the point of no return. Told him she'd do it. He called her an angel and gave her a mighty hug. Most definitely not an embrace. Because words had important shades of meaning, which was why you should never use a

thesaurus, and she'd done it again, hadn't she? Misread the sexual cues. Then Simon drew away, said he'd text her details of some training meeting coming up soon. Grinning broadly, pleased with himself.

'You'll be fine, honestly,' he said. 'I can't thank you enough.'

Hazel could think of other ways for him to thank her, but the moment—if there'd ever been one—had already passed her by. And now she was stuck with a commitment. Really soon. A terrifying one. Serves me right, she thought: it's a punishment for my impure motives.

Simon dug her in the ribs. She really wished people wouldn't do that.

'Hey, come and meet my new girlfriend,' he said. 'Felicia. She's a maths student from Italy, she's only been here for a couple of months. She's really clever and crazy beautiful, and she has a great big heart.'

Well, who would have thought?

'We met at the beach. We were both body surfing and accidentally collided.'

'Accidentally? You're not fooling anyone, Simon.'

'But it's true. It was just one of those crazy things, a stroke of good luck.'

So that's what it came down to in the end, Hazel thought. None of that complex, heady stuff about free will versus determinism. You just needed to be involved in a non-fatal accident to find that person of your waking, sleeping dreams.

Simon dug her in the side. Again. 'What do you think of the big news?' he said. 'The baby.'

The whole bloody room must know by now, Hazel thought. Maybe she should just have a baby and be done with it. Women always had that to fall back on, didn't they? Because what else could she do, she sighed, feeling her body slump: with her B.A., majoring in English, plus a dash of gender studies, philosophy, ancient history and French. A mercifully brief Dip. Ed.

Well, pretty much what she was doing right now: standing around at a party, leaden with disappointment, and waiting to go home.

She heard a male voice behind her *checking out the talent*, turned to see a really lanky guy looking round the room, staring telescopically. *Checking out the talent indeed*: as though women were merrily tap dancing on *Australian* fucking *Idol*.