

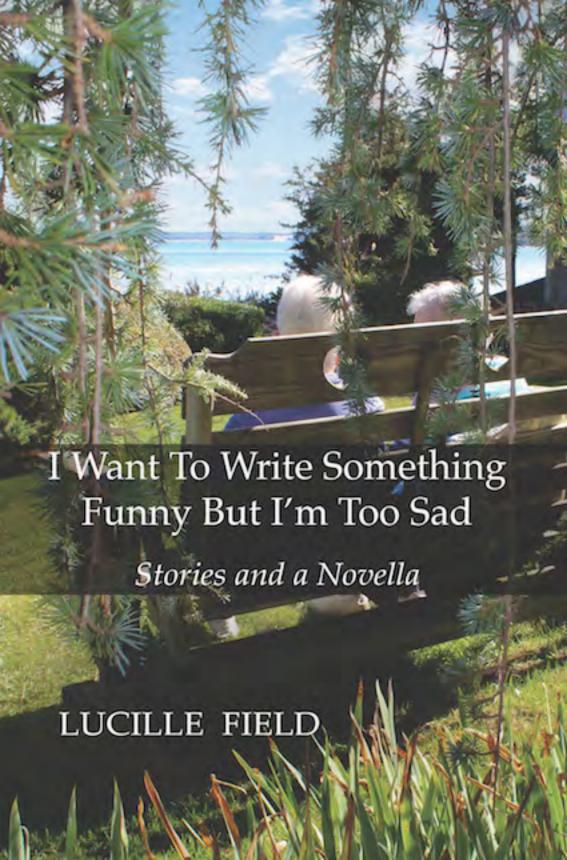
Aging lesbian relationships, focused on late life pleasures and transitions.

I Want To Write Something Funny But I'm Too Sad

by Lucille Field

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I Want To Write Something Funny But I'm Too Sad

Lucille Field

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Also by Lucille Field

On the Way To Wonderland

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Toys

bag of good pot was stuck inside the raw chicken's cavity. They had packed Scrabble, Monopoly, and plenty of books. A cassette player and lots of music tapes—dance, opera, jazz, country, were in a carry—on with other odds and ends, including Annie's toys. She had put in a major collection of all sorts of dildos and vibrators: doubleheaders, ticklers, big ones, small ones—you name it, she had it.

"You can't take all that stuff," her girlfriend Jo said. "There's no room in that bag for all that stuff, and who knows if they open everything to check." She was a nervous wreck about Annie's toys. It was 1980, before x-ray machines and terrorist hijackings, and Annie felt sure her "pals," as she called them, would be okay.

"Okay, I'll just take a few things, necessities," she teased, and repacked her favorites in a zippered canvas tote bag.

A group of six lesbians went to Vieques, Puerto Rico, two times every winter: Annie and Jo, Beth and Phyllis—master chef and bartender—Martha and Lynn—doctor and lawyer, filled the small plane for eight, including the pilots. They flew from San Juan to their little island, loaded down with food and

wine to have in their house on a mango farm overlooking the sea. Annie and Jo, architects, had bought the house together and renovated it beautifully.

There was only one small market on the island, a telephone booth, and a combination restaurant/bar/dancehall, so they had to bring all the necessities with them. Fish and seafood were plentiful, along with eggs and an occasional chicken. When customs wanted to know why they were bringing in a chicken when Vieques had plenty, they replied, "We all keep kosher."

They had made friends with an elderly local artist who grew vegetables on a small patch; that she was willing to sell to them when her crop was good. The women were prepared for everything culinary: they took turns cooking exotic seafood meals, and devoured mangoes until they got stomachaches.

They greedily ate their own cooking, no matter what each cook came up with, including sea turtle steaks, with which Beth had created many dishes. (This was before they knew the creatures were endangered.) Once in a while they ate in the one island restaurant and danced with the locals, who were almost too friendly.

They had a wonderful time snorkeling, boating, swimming, and sunbathing every day. It was an era long before sunblock, so they used tanning creams and oils with abandon, all browning perfectly, except for Jo, who turned red and blistered.

Across from Annie and Jo's house, which was called Lesbos Lark was the nearby island of Culebra, the site of a U.S. military base. They could hear the guns firing during the Navy and Marine training sessions, but most of the time it was

peaceful. The beaches were empty and private, the sand pristine, the Caribbean calm, a brilliant turquoise jewel.

On Saturdays, they managed to get radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera, which they listened to under beach grape trees, drinking tropical drinks they had concocted like the Vieques Velvet Victim, made with vodka, vanilla, and vegetables. There was a special magic in hearing the sound of Joan Sutherland's sparkling soprano singing Norma, decorating the velvety, incoming murmur of the waves.

After two weeks of paradise, they were heading back home. Having flown on the little plane to San Juan, they were ready at American Airlines to put their baggage through to New York. The airport was filled with large families with many bags and packages. Babies were crying in a jarring variety of pitches, and children ran around crashing into people with abandon.

The women were settling down for a long wait on the customs line, but before they could get organized, Lynn came running up.

"They're opening bags and looking through everything, even handbags. Who knows why—drugs, probably."

"Make sure your stuff is okay," Jo warned. "Good thing there's no weed left," she said in a self-congratulating voice. "And there are no police dogs," she boasted, as if she had arranged it personally.

"Annie," said Lynn's girlfriend Martha, "I'll just die if they see your toys. You've got to get rid of them."

"All of them?" asked Annie, holding her hand over her heart.

"Absolutely all," insisted Martha. Beth and Phyllis shook their heads violently in agreement, while Jo was covering her laughter with coughs.

"All," added Lynn, echoed by Martha.

"What should I do with them?" Annie moaned. "They're good. And expensive." She was crestfallen. "They're practically new," she said, "can't I hide them somewhere?"

"No, get rid of all of it, now!" came the insistent order from Jo. "And hurry, we have to get on line."

Jo took a place with her friends on the line, moving her head in disapproval. "I told her not to bring those things, but she never listens." Then she smiled.

Annie looked around the airport and saw the room marked Damas, took her canvas bag inside, and looked for a garbage pail. The only one she saw was already stuffed full. She moved into one of the cubicles and saw the receptacle for used sanitary supplies. She checked all four—full. She went back to the hallway between the "Damas" and "Hombres" rooms. Outside the men's room was a trash bin, partly empty. She looked around, and then stuffed her canvas bag with the open top, into the space. The zipper had broken when she tried to close it. Some of the toys would not stay covered in the bag, especially the double dildo (which, sadly, had never been used.) It had been her favorite "show and tell" object. She stuffed it down as much as it would go. Now the pail was full, and she had a hard time getting the cover on until she sat on it. Luckily, she thought, no men had come in. She hoped no one would try to open it until after they had taken off. When Annie

looked back before leaving, it looked like a penis was sticking out of the can. She raced back to her friends, breathing hard.

An announcement had been made that their flight was delayed, possibly for an hour. The six women found seats. "And they never even opened the bag," Annie said aloud without intending to. Jo poked her with a sharp elbow.

"Look, see over there," Jo hissed, "by the door where the men's room is."

"Oh shit," moaned Beth. Phyllis laughed nervously.

At the desk were several airport security men passing around the canvas bag filled with Annie's toys. Trying to shield their activity, they held one by one up turning them this way and that, then realizing they could be seen, emptied the bag on the floor, hiding the contents. They laughed.

The only words Annie recognized were mira, mira, look. *Oh god*, she thought, *they'll figure it out and we'll be in hot salsa*. Jo slumped in her seat. Lynn was biting her nails. The friends buried their heads in their books.

"They know, these guys know. We'll all be busted," whined Lynn.

"For what?" Annie asked.

"Indecent exposure," Jo said.

Annie looked up and saw one of the men standing across the aisle from her. His dark brown eyes met hers. How did he know? He must have seen her putting the bag in the pail. *This is it, we're cooked,* she thought. The man smiled broadly at her. Grinning at all of them, he made a lavish thumbs-up gesture, and strutted away.

The Geriatric Girl's Gym

he sign read: THE GERIATRIC GIRLS' GYM: Grandmas Welcome. It made Valiante giggle, and then laugh when she saw the SLOW sign (watch out for our women with walkers), as she drove into the village of Far Moreover.

"That settles it," Valiante said to Hiddigeigei, the little blue hippo sitting on her dashboard she had gotten from Zoe, her last girlfriend, who had taken off with another woman and broken her heart. "That sign is almost as oxymoronic as my name. I'm not so sure how valiant I am at this point in my life."

She drove past the real estate office, Slickton Dream Homes, she was dealing with. "No matter what this house looks like, if I can afford it," she told Hiddigeigei, "I'm going to buy it, fix it up, and live here. I just know this place will be perfect for me."

Actually, the house wasn't in as bad shape as she thought it would be, based on the low asking price. It was something between a cottage and a shack, and had a certain amount of *je ne sais* whatever. And if you drove fast enough, it was only ten minutes from a beach.

"Isn't it adorable, Ms. Valenti? Charming, I just love it, and you can do so much with it," the enthusiastic real estate

woman said, almost bouncing off the ground in spite of her generous body, miraculously balanced on towering spiked heels.

"The name is Valiante (which she spelled out slowly), pronounced valiant, Valiante Strongwoman, Ms. Slickton."

Valiante began to walk the grounds, stopping now and then to peer into the windows. The agent slowed down, waddling after her and commenting as they went.

"In the winter, when the leaves are off, if you lean all the way to the left and squint, sometimes you get a water view of the marsh. There are ducks and swans occasionally, but you have to walk over to the water to see them." She stopped and patted her heart. "There's a great blue heron, who winters over and fishes in the marsh." She finally seemed to have caught her breath and ability to speak. "And you can get to the beach in no time." Ms Slickton waved her hand in all four directions.

"Really," said Valiante dryly. "Do you think we can see the inside?" She headed for the front door and turned the knob. The door seemed locked but opened with a slight push. Cozy, that's the word, cozy, she thought as she cast an eye over the sitting room, which had a wood stove in the corner and displayed a broken–down chair in the middle of the floor. There were some surprisingly nice wood planks on the floor, and a good amount of light coming through the grimy windows. This property had obviously not been staged for potential buyers. Good, thought Valiante, someone wants a quick sale.

There were two rooms probably meant to be bedrooms, and another small room that faced a stand of cedar and juniper trees in the backyard. A bare kitchen with only a sink, of sorts (no appliances to be seen), and a bathroom with a rusty showerhead, a floor drain, and the bottom part of a toilet completed this "adorable, sweet cottage," as Ms. Real Estate called it. Needs work, needs lots of work, Valiante thought, and turned to find the agent almost on top of her back. Ms. Slickton had nothing to say.

"What is the real price?" Valiante took a notepad from her shoulder bag.

"Well, the owner died and left the cottage to his plumber, and the plumber said I should get the most I can for it." She smiled a question.

"I'll give him \$24,132 cash," and Valiante walked out the door to her car. She turned as she was opening the door, "By the way, Ms. Slickton, where is Near Moreover?"

Seven weeks later, Valiante took a surveying look around her new home. Ms. Slickton had recommended two women contractors who laughed when Valiante asked how long it would take to get permits. "We don't do permits here," they said, "and anyway, we own the hardware–lumber–tile–anything and everything you need supply company." After a big breath, she said "And we, Nanci and Drew, she said, pointing to Drew, are the fastest workers in Far Moreover." They had no trouble with the plans that Valiante herself had drawn. If the customer wanted "cozy with character," that's what it would be, exactly how she wanted it—and that's what Valiante got.

The walls were hung with work by women artists, most of them her friends: a mixture of abstract expressionist paintings, seascapes, and impressionistic watercolors. The nude

sculptures of women were obviously derivative of Brancusi, although done by her favorite sculptor, a woman she had known since college. A variety of photographs, mostly of waterfalls, adorned the walls of the bathroom, which now had a tub and shower, a fast-flushing toilet, a sink with faucets that emptied into a graceful bowl, with a mirrored medicine chest hanging over it, and lots of shelves for towels and other necessities, like soap—a putto lying head on hand, stretched out to make the soap dish, and other toiletries. The furnishings were an eclectic hodgepodge of styles and periods, but somehow satisfying and comforting. There were rugs scattered hither and thither, from different parts of the world yet making some strange sense to Valiante, and just the way she wanted it. A second bathroom had been placed where a small back porch had been, contemporary in design with tiles of naked women in water scenes: Leda and her swan on a lake, a brown beauty washing her long black hair under a waterfall, and a Godiva-like figure, without her horse, drinking from a spouting fountain. An open shower, with no walls or doors but a well-placed drain, was cool and inviting. Best of all was the kitchen, where everything was new, shiny, and filled with professional appliances ready for Valiante's expert cooking. She was almost content.

It was early spring and she was ready for Far Moreover, on her way to find out if it was ready for her. She draped a shawl around her shoulders, opened the front door, and stepped outside onto her newly landscaped half acre. Nothing much was happening yet, but there was greenery, thanks to the trees wearing a hint of leaves, mulch where crocuses and

daffodils were just starting to poke through, and some bushes here and there with names she wasn't sure about.

The high point of her day was approaching with a visit to the Geriatric Girls' Gym, from her "Must Do Today" agenda. She retrieved her bag from inside the house, fished out her car keys, and was on her way.

The first hand she shook upon arrival was that of a trim woman of a certain age, Japanese, with a short cut of absolutely white hair, wearing black shorts and a black T–shirt with GGG on it in large purple letters.

"You must be Ms. Strongwoman. Welcome to the GGG. I'm Sunshine, but please call me Sunni." She grinned a big toothy smile. "Can you pronounce your first name for me, I didn't quite get it on the phone." A bigger smile, ear to ear actually, followed.

Valiante was again spelled out slowly. "It's pronounced valiant," she instructed.

"Oh, how unusual, may I call you Val? I imagine everyone does."

"No, no one does. It's not my name," Valiante said, not smiling.

Sunni bowed her head in acquiescence. "What can I do for you, Ms. Strongwoman? Valiante, that is. Strongwoman is the perfect name for a GG–Gymer. How did you come by it?" Sunni was speaking faster than her mouth could handle the words, and she finally stopped when she tripped over her tongue. She was having a hard time charming this woman.

"My parents died and left it to me. Can I see the gym and equipment now, please?"

"Of course, but first there are a few details, if you don't mind," and Sunni took a form from a folder. "Just fill this out: address, phones, email, age, and primary care physician who can tell us if you have any restrictions or other information regarding your ability for exercise." Valiante felt Sunni looking at her carefully, as if what she saw would allow her to ask the next question. Sunni saw a very tall, quite stunning woman, with one half of her head of auburn hair cropped or possibly even shaved, and the other half partly covering her elegant, fine features. Prominent cheekbones supported brilliant green eyes that stared back at her, never seeming to blink. Sunni pulled herself to her full 5'4", tried to finger her short white hair behind her ears and asked the question. "Are you retired? You really don't look old enough. We are geriatric girls here, after all," she almost simpered.

"Why, do you have age restrictions?" Valiante was getting peevish. "I am forty-five, is that too young or too old?"

"No problem," Sunni answered, and then asked if Valiante was single. "You see, our gym is for women only. By members' request, mornings are reserved for single girls, and the afternoon sessions for married or coupled women, who can invite men friends and such."

Valiante said she was unattached, and for a moment thought of Zoe. She asked if she could have a tour before they proceeded. Sunni saw that the applicant was getting irritated with the delay, and quickly agreed to take Valiante around the gym before she filled out the forms, and so the two women began their exploration.

Classical music was playing inside, a Haydn allegro movement. The colors were mauve and dusty rose, and the equipment was almost completely occupied by mature women of all shapes, colors, and sizes. The women on the bikes were chatting quietly; those on the treadmills were reading; others were pulling, pushing, and pounding punching bags. There were Stairmasters, shuttles, weights, balls, elastic bands, and other equipment Valiante had never seen before. Another separate space had tables and chairs, water, a juice station, and a power–smoothie counter. A display of various gym accessories that were for sale, and GGG T–shirts in many colors were at another counter. These women of Far Moreover could be very proud of their gym. It was GGGGreat. Valiante chuckled silently.

Everything was pink in this gym, except for the equipment, Sunni pointed out, the color as one of the virtues of the establishment with pride: She listed the bathrooms with fast flush toilets and bidets, dressing rooms, lockless lockers, showers, and neatly shelved toiletries with pride.

"Are the morning members all from Far Moreover? When you refer to them as single, what does that mean?" Valiante knew she was being very inquisitive, but she wanted to know.

"Oh, the girls are all local, lots of them live in comfortable trailers in a retirement community started by two of them, Ardora and Marvel. They used to teach at the same school. Most of them never married, some are divorced, a few are widows—Honey and Canary maybe. I can't remember all that gossip. We're a mixed bunch of bags," Sunni said, mixing her metaphors without care. "We don't talk about stuff like that. We respect privacy...sometimes." Sunni rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, they'll answer your questions, if you have any, and be prepared, they'll want to know all about you." Sunni headed back toward her reception counter.

When Valiante asked when she could start, Sunni said after she filled out and returned the forms, and once her doctor gave details about her health and permission for her to join. She would have to make a two months' payment in advance and sign up for a year. Valiante took out her checkbook. She was ready, willing, and able. This was fertile territory for her project, if she could use such language, and she made short shrift of the questionnaire and wrote out the significant payment with pleasure. She would fax her doctor for the required details. Far Moreover GGGers, here I come.

"Leave the rest to us, Valiante, we will have this done in no time, and I'll call you as soon as the Geriatric Girls' Gym is yours." Sunni took the check and gave a quick look at the forms. "What does this say, here at 'employment?' I can't quite read it."

"Retired, it says retired."

"But you are so young to be retired. What did you do?"

For the first time during her gym visit, Valiante smiled sweetly. "I am a sex therapist."

This was met by a gasp from Sunni. "For lesbians." Another smile from Valiante, even sweeter. Sunni sat down hard on a nearby bench. "Actually, for older lesbians," continued Valiante, and sat down next to her.

A few days passed, then the weekend, with no word from the gym. Valiante waited patiently; she worked in her garden, put time in at her computer, and took long walks. The weather was gorgeous. "Spring has sprung, the bird is on the wung," came to mind. Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, she mused.

Valiante's ex, Zoe, now her close friend, was visiting for the weekend. Valiante knew Zoe could not quite remember why they had broken up—Valiante knew it had nothing to do with her work and availability—it was Zoe's own messing around with someone else, Valiante reminded her. Oh yes, Zoe agreed, that was it, but that was over. They couldn't really separate completely, so it seemed close friendship was the best option. Valiante still suffered from broken—heart syndrome, which was why she had moved to Far Moreover; why she had her gestalt moment to research and write the book when she saw the GGGym sign; why she had settled for friendship in place of love. She'd vowed never to suffer from heartbreak again, and that was final, absolutely.

The women were in Valiante's kitchen, wearing the GGG aprons Sunni had given Valiante when she had left the gym. Valiante's apron was almost covering her shorts. Zoe's was over her underwear, She had on a thong—somewhat disconcerting to Valiante. Was the damned woman being seductive? Valiante wondered, and her jaw tightened. No way.

This weekend they'd cooked fabulous vegetarian meals while they talked and reminisced. A local vegetable stand had opened and was selling beautiful asparagus, so the women had them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner: asparagus omelet in the morning; midday asparagus au gratin with a gluten–free multigrain bread Valiante had baked; and in the evening, steamed asparagus, sesame Brussels sprouts, with red and

green peppers stuffed with white beans and brown rice, and zucchini doused in no gluten herbed bread crumbs.

Zoe leaned back contentedly in one of the living room club chairs that not only swiveled, but rocked easily, and surveyed the comfortable room. "My pee smells from all that asparagus," she said.

"Mine too." Valiante swiveled toward Zoe. "So how do you like my little village?"

"I love it. I'm coming for a visit maybe one weekend a month, if that's okay with you, oh ravishing ex-lover."

"I'll be here with arms full of veggies, if you bring the wine." Valiante stood and topped off their glasses with the lovely Sancerre Zoe had brought. She threw a large shawl over Zoe's legs, draped over the arm of the chair. "Shameless hussy," Valiante hissed. Zoe gave her the finger in response.

"How did they come up with a name like Far Whatever, do you suppose?" Zoe asked. "It's really strange."

"I think some early settlers from England wanted to name the place with something connected to where they came from, and Far Moreover fit the bill, you know, like Far Rockaway in New York." Valiante pulled the hassock near her chair close and put her feet up. Valiante liked to get her long legs off the ground any chance she could. *Good thing at least I am wearing real underpants and shorts*, she thought. But why the hell was she so obsessed with underwear, or was it what was under the underwear? Hell, she was glad Zoe was here with her—she missed her when she was not.

Zoe peeled a navel orange and handed a segment to Valiante. "Makes no sense, the name Over Farmore, I mean it's like your name, Ms. V, a name that's so hard to live up to, oh love of my life. Whatever were your parents thinking?" They laughed and shared more of the orange. Valiante was used to her friend's teasing.

"Well, what are you going to do here, honeypot, do they need a sex therapist this far from a city?" Valiante poured more wine into their glasses. Zoe sipped hers. The taste of orange with the Sancerre was delicious.

"I am going to start my new life by working out at the GGG every morning, starting tomorrow." Valiante went back to her chair and spun around clockwise a few times. "And then, I'm going to write a really sexy book about the GGG'ers."

"Remind me Prince Valiant, what in the goddess's name is a GGG, the Golly Gorgeous Gang?" Zoe spun counter– clockwise in her chair.

"You are looking at the newest almost–member of the Geriatric Girls' Gym, managed by Ms. Sunshine, who also makes delicious, nutritious GGG smoothies. And if you're a good girl, I'll buy you a GGG T–shirt of your very own, which will stand as your passport to Far Moreover. And you can keep the apron."

Zoe spun off her chair, fell, and started to hiccup. She always got the hiccups when she laughed too hard.

Valiante showed up at the gym at 7:00 AM sharp Monday morning, and greeted Sunni politely at the front counter. Her mood was much improved after the fine weekend.

"Did you get the medical report from my doctor? She told me she'd fax it to you on Friday. Here are all the other things you asked for. I'm ready to start, rarin' to go." She was in high gear and began walking into the exercise room without waiting for Sunni to respond. She looked around the room. It was empty. Valiante shrugged, strode toward the bikes, adjusted the height on a large one, and levitated up to the seat.

The manager followed, looked up at her and said timidly, "We don't usually start until 8:00 AM. Seven is a bit early for the women. I was in early this morning to get things ready. I usually come in early on Mondays. When the ladies come, before we get started we sing a song or read something as a warmup."

"My goodness," Valiante crooned, "do you do God Bless America, and the Pledge of Allegiance or 'Rock Around the Clock' or what?" Watch the sarcasm, girl, she thought to herself, you're starting off on the wrong quip.

"We have a committee that decides and makes the choices. It's very stimulating and a good way to start the workouts." Sunni's ivory skin reddened slightly.

Valiante started pedaling fast as Sunni backed off thinking that she'd better remember that the newest member was a sex therapist, and who knew what strange habits the woman might have. Valiante thought maybe she should visit Sunni's father's restaurant, The Sue-She Far Moreover Delec-Table De-Light. Yes, that's what she would do, when she had the time to do so.

Valiante felt good, strong, and ready for the GGGers when they arrived. She had brought her unread issues of *Opera News* to read as she walked the treadmill and pedaled the bike to nowhere. Valiante had decided to start with the latest one she'd received from the Metropolitan Opera Guild, and planned to go backwards until she would get to the first issue

she had received but not read. She always looked at the covers, but never had time to read them. Or maybe she would start at this one with Renee Fleming on the cover, and alternate it with the oldest one, with Luciano Pavarotti on the cover. Wouldn't that be great fun, she thought. Was she losing her mind? The magazine plan was ridiculous, so were her other plans. Nevertheless, she would go with them. Everything she was doing since she broke up with Zoe was a little crazy, like moving to Far Moreover for example, or like the idea for her book. She pedaled faster, imagining she was Dorothy escaping the wicked witch on her own bicycle. Time would tell, she thought, or else she'd just have to get a new clock.

She pedaled until 8:00 AM without even noticing that GGGers were arriving in small groups, taking places around the room and doing some stretches. When Sunni walked in they stopped and waited. Sunni said, "Good morning, darling GGGers," and got a "Good morning, Sunni honey," in return.

Someone sang a pitch, and the women began to sing "You Are My Sunshine" in eleven- part-harmony, one to a part. Valiante did not join in. She refrained from putting her fingers in her ears.

Sunni smiled her big smile. "Girls," she said sweetly, "would you form a circle? We have a new member starting with us today, so we'll do our GGGGreeting." She took Valiante by the hand and led her to the center of the circle. "Everybody, this is Valiante Strongwoman. Let's begin. I'll start." She joined the circle, and began clapping and singing, "Hello dear Valiante, yes indeed, yes indeed, yes indeed, my name is Sunni, yes indeed, yes indeed my darling."

Each clapping woman joined the circle, taking her turn to greet the newcomer, and introduced herself by name. A caramel brown-skinned woman, taller by an inch than Valiante, stepped out of the circle and gave her a major hug. "My name is Vita, yes indeed," she wiggled her hips and raised her eyebrows as she sang her 'yes indeeds' in a deep, husky alto, and met Valiante's eyes for a long moment before moving back into the circle. Valiante stood transfixed. Yes, indeed, she would know this tall, black Walküre with a crown of hair so red it was almost a sunset; this goddess, younger than all the other GG's; she, Valiante, would know this Vita.

One by one they sang their greeting, sang their names, and what names they had: Vita, Dolly, Ardora, Chastity, Izzy, Honey, Bella, Marvel, Canary, Joy, Lucide, and Sunni. Valiante's name was a good addition—she was thirteen, her lucky number. But how would she remember all the other names? Ah hah, she noticed, they all wore nametags.

Valiante headed for one of the treadmills. Sunni approached, holding out a GGG tag with her name inscribed. "Here you are, Valiante, this makes it official." Valiante tried hard to look grateful and dignified, appreciative, as though a great honor was being bestowed upon her. Actually, she was having fun; she felt like a five-year-old. Sunni held out the nametag. "May I?"

"Of course," Valiante answered, "but watch out for my breast, I'm quite attached to it." Giggles from Ms. Sunshine. She felt Sunni's surreptitious little poke at her left boob as the manager carefully pinned the tag over it and not into it.

"My goodness, Valiante, you don't seem to be wearing a bra. Heavens, how can you exercise with no bra?"

"No problem, why should I?" Valiante replied. "My bosom stands up for itself perfectly well. Would you like to see?" More giggles. Face red, Sunni retreated.

Valiante unfurled her *Opera News*, set the machine for speed 4.0, and pressed Quick Start. Her plan for the GGG was going to take some careful thought but she'd figure it out. She was off to a good start, at least on the treadmill.

"My dear child," came a high, thin voice from the left, "you are going much too fast, you're going to win the race." This was followed by a series of quick little snorts, meant to be mirth. Valiante turned to face a woman on the adjoining treadmill going at a moderate pace, which you might call slow and not be wrong. She had a pert, pretty face, topped with a lot of shiny, jet–black curls that bobbed up and down as she walked. Her smile showed absolutely perfect white dentures, parenthesized by a pair of deep dimples in her cheeks.

Valiante read her neighbor's name card and waved. "Oh hi, Dolly, would you like me to slow down? I aim to please."

"Heavens, you actually remember my name," She became so flustered, she completely forgot about the nametag she was wearing. "I am impressed. Is that a trick you have, remembering names? Or is it because of your profession?"

"No trick at all," changing the wave to point at the name card, as Dolly reddened with embarrassment.

"I forgot I was wearing it, I forget things these days." Dolly straightened the card.

"So what do you know about my profession, Dolly, and how do you know it?" Valiante made sure to be pleasant and not confrontational. She slowed her pace and smiled.

"Oh, Sunni told us you were a psychotherapist when we met Saturday morning at The GGG Breakfast Club. We're all so excited and," she paused to breathe, "well, intrigued, I guess."

"Is that all, she didn't tell you any more?" Valiante's plan didn't allow for any further information for everyone at this time. But it was possible that Sunni had told all.

Dolly nodded. "I'm taking a Psych 101 course at the Far Moreover Community College, Retired Women's Department of Creative Aging, and I know that therapists aren't allowed to say anything about what they shouldn't talk about. Right?"

"It's true, we don't reveal privileged information; we have to protect our clients." Valiante shut the treadmill down and hopped off. "See you later, Dolly. Nice talking with you."

"Will we see you at the smoothie juice station? We all meet there at our break to raise our blood sugar in case it drops from too much exercise." Dolly carefully descended in order to be on the same level with Valiante, but her 5'2" made it impossible to meet the eyes of the much taller woman. She got back up to stand on the treadmill, adding some needed inches.

Valiante bent a bit at the knees to shorten herself. "I only drink water at the gym, but I'll say hello." She bowed with a flourish, and went off to try the weights. Well, she thought, Dolly seemed a friendly sort, cute as a doll. Would she fit into the scheme, this little woman who was the essence of straight?

By the end of her hour-and-a-half workout, she discovered that all the GGGs knew where she lived, what, and with whom she had renovated her cottage, and that she was a retired therapist. They did not know anything more, thanks to Sunni's discretion. Valiante had left them with a lot to talk

about and much to find out about, but the object of their curiosity was not ready to reveal anything more. They would have to wait.

Valiante's gardens were coming to life as spring progressed. Daffodils, iris, and tulips provided color, while the cherry tree blossomed along with the flowering plum. She went to the gym most mornings, unless she had to leave the village for one reason or other. A visit to a doctor or lawyer, lunch or dinner with a city friend—there was always something to take her from Far Moreover. She was happy to go, but happier to come home. This Saturday, she had invited the dozen Geriatric Girls to her cottage for lawn games and lunch. They all eagerly accepted, curious to see exactly where and how Valiante lived. Zoe would not be coming till Sunday; she had taken Monday off from her job at the LGBTQ information desk at the Main Library, and would stay for both days.

The day came bright and sunny, and everyone arrived early. A croquet game was set up on one side of the lawn, badminton on the other. There were pitchers of lemonade and cut up vegetables set on tables, but the ladies wanted to see the house first and examine things up close. They were all so curious that Valiante expected them to take out magnifying glasses for closer scrutiny.

Once inside, the GGGymers examined the furnishings with compliments. Vita seemed only to be interested in Valiante's books that lined the walls in nearly every room. She moved slowly from shelf to shelf reading all the titles, and spent the most time at the shelf that held only women poets.

Audre Lorde's work interested her most and she lingered, reading while seated in a nearby chair. Valiante stopped at her side, and handed her a volume by Jewelle Gomez. "Take a look at these, Vita, especially Flamingoes and Bears, it's pure delight. And I have a good collection of the work of Vita Sackville West, if you're interested." Vita nodded and grasped Valiante's hand in assent.

The paintings and sculptures of nudes in the living room and bedrooms got the most attention from the other women, with some heavy whispering among them. The king–size bed in the master bedroom got a few knowing looks, and a gorgeous realistic painting of two women in bed, called The Lovers, much like the Corbet painting, aroused conversation. The textbooks on sex therapy and LGBTQ issues made things buzz.

Once outside again, Valiante saw the lemonade attacked, and was not pleased to see her guests head for the chairs and lounges instead of the games. The women arranged themselves in a horseshoe with the refreshments at the open end. Ardora, a curvaceous green-eyed blonde with a face lifted up from her sharp jawline, asked Valiante if it was all right to ask her a few questions, and then, despite a warning look from Sunni, and without waiting for an answer, went right ahead and asked. "Are you or have you ever been married Valiante?"

"Not really," was the reply. "Some close encounters, but too much trouble," was added.

"What kind of therapy did you practice?" came from Dolly.

Valiante wondered why it had taken so long to ask that question. "Sex therapy," she said.

It got really quiet until Chastity piped up with "What is that?" sounding like a three-year- old being naughty.

"It's therapy to help people with their sex problems, like impotence, premature ejaculation, penile dysfunction, frigidity, inability to experience orgasm, and many other issues."

It was very quiet, except for a soft breeze rustling the new leaves on the trees, a few birds singing, and some slurping of lemonade.

"I have a question for you, Sunni. Who owns the Geriatric Girls Gym—do you know?" Valiante was met with silence.

Finally Sunni replied, speaking very softly, "It's a secret, but if you all promise not to tell..." Everyone waited, and after a long pause while she examined her nails, Sunni spoke. "It's my father, Kyo Takashimaya. You will remember please that this is secret and you have promised."

"Bella asked, "But why is it a secret? Is it something illegal?"

Sunni bit her lip, and then explained, "My father is a very proud man. He did not want me to tell people that I was the owner's daughter, and that was how I had my job as manager. Also, he did not know what the word geriatric meant, and he was worried about it. I had to explain it. He only knows about his restaurant, and making sashimi and sushi, not a geriatric gym." Sunni squirmed and bent her head to look at the grass. "And he is having a tax issue, just a checkup examination," she said, making it sound like a medical condition.

"Not to worry, Sunni, we won't tell. Let's all have dinner at the restaurant someday soon." Valiante suggested. "Let's eat there as a group once a month, so Mr. Takashimaya can get

to know us and feel comfortable with his daughter's friends at the gym. Everyone agreed, and Sunni smiled with appreciation. "Games anyone? Questions? More lemonade?" Valiante raised a pitcher. No takers.

Chastity again: "By the way, Valiante, what is LGBTQ? That's not a word, is it?"

"Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer." Valiante had a much-needed swallow of lemonade, her answer had been quite a mouthful. "And I think you might like to know that I only treated lesbians, queers, or transpeople. Does that shock you?" The women filled the silence with murmurs of denial, or nervous little coughs. Lucide and Bella stood, which was a signal for all the others to do the same. "Any more questions. No? Okay, I'm around and available if you do. Lunch will be on the porch in an hour and twenty minutes," Valiante cheerfully announced. "Ready for some fun first?" she asked, pointing to the badminton court.

Some of the women went to the games area, but most stood around in small groups and talked. Canary and Dolly hit the shuttlecocks over the net with their rackets halfheartedly, but not really engaged in a game. After a while, they took off for a walk. Sunni stared into space and bit daintily at a cuticle. She smiled gratefully at Bella, who came to sit beside her.

Their host started to walk to the house when Isolda, called Izzy, one of the younger women, probably about fifty, sidled up to her and asked Valiante, without preamble, "How do you know if you're a lesbian, if you never went to bed with a woman?"

"That's a big question, Izzy, and I don't think I can give you an answer with so much going on around us. We need some privacy, don't you think?" Izzy looked lost, shoulders drooping, head down.

"Tell you what," Valiante spoke with some energy, "you can come and talk with me—not therapy, no money, just a talk to see if we can figure it out. Would you like to do that?"

Izzy brightened up immediately and stepped up jauntily to the plate. They made a date to have tea the next week.

Lunch was served at the big oblong table on the dining porch. Valiante had made a beautiful cold lobster salad and home-baked knotted rolls. When they were finished with that course, Marvel cleared her throat, squared her shoulders, and said, "I've been thinking." She paused and thought for a minute, then began again. "We've been talking about your occupation as a therapist, and we're all curious and have questions." Valiante put her cutlery down and faced the handsome woman eye to eye. Marvel wore her hair clipped very close to her scalp in a crew cut. She certainly fit the "butch" image. Valiante nodded and waited. "Remember that years ago, groups of women used to get together and just talk about their lives and problems?" Valiante nodded again. "Well, we wondered if you would be interested in our getting together once a week or so, and just talk, nothing formal, just talk, like women used to do?" "Oh, you mean MR groups, I think they used to call them," piped up Honey, one of the older women whom everyone seemed to take care of. Marvel smiled kindly at her.

"I think you mean CR, consciousness-raising groups," Marvel gently corrected.

"Yes, isn't that what I meant to say?" Honey joined in the laughter at her question, and opened her eyes flirtatiously while pursing her lips playfully at Marvel.

Vita came around to her chair and hugged her, almost lifting the small woman off her feet. "Exactly, sweet Honey," and stopped at Valiante's chair. "I think that's a great idea, valiant woman. This group is so bonded, yet we never talk about personal things, issues, problems. It would be a treat to exercise our tongues, instead of just our bodies."

"Really!" Canary pretended to fan herself with her napkin. "What are you saying, Vita?" and stood, knocking her chair over, stretched her arms wide, and sang "Ta da!"

Vita picked up the chair and sat Canary in it, shook her finger and said, "Behave yourself, woman. Canary's just showing off," Vita explained. More laughing, but somewhat uneasy, Valiante thought.

Valiante looked around the table. This was definitely the next step. It was happening fast, but seemed to be a natural progression. She was very pleased that the women seemed so eager to form a CR group that would offer an opportunity to talk about anything that was on their minds, to become closer in a different way than they were at the GGG. *Good*, she thought, *very good indeed*.

"I need to think about this...see if it is ethical for me to form such a group. After all, you could sit around and talk casually without me present. I've told you, as a sex therapist, I helped lesbians and other women with their special problems—broken love affairs, family issues, stuff like that. This may not be what you have in mind."

"But that was group therapy, wasn't it, Valiante?" asked Lucide. "My sister did that, but that was real therapy. We're talking about a friends' group, not a patients' group—but a consciousness raising group, to learn more about ourselves, right?" She turned to ask everyone.

"That's right, Lucide, and we know this, Valiante," Dolly interjected, "you've been very straightforward. Oh dear, is 'straight' a wrong word?" Valiante laughed. Maybe these women were more informed than she realized. "Besides, we might have sex problems that we never talk about, and other secrets that trouble us, that we'd like to share, or get advice about." Dolly added, her cheeks reddening.

"I will give this some serious thought. No payment will be involved. This would not be therapy, but hopefully, it would be helpful for you all. I'll just think about whether we could just have informal discussion meetings, similar to your breakfast club—maybe instead of your breakfast club—to talk about whatever you wished, but not a coffee klatch just to be social. Give me some time and I'll let you know. Oh, one thing more, you've probably noticed that I make notes in the little book I always have with me. Research, habit, is that okay with you?" No one objected. She held the book up. "I have a few questions, okay?" Everyone nodded.

"First, have any of you been married?" Honey, Canary, Bella and Ardora raised their hands. "How many are widows?" Honey and Canary's hands went up. "How many divorced?" Bella and Ardora whooped their assent. "Can I keep going?" Valiante asked. Unanimous yes.

"How many of you have always been single?" Marvel's hand was the first up, followed by Izzy, Sunni, Dolly, and Lucide, in close pursuit.

Vita spoke out in her rich voice, "You ain't reached my category yet, girl, so you better keep going." Valiante blew her a kiss and raised her own hand to join the single women. Chastity and Joy remained with their hands in their laps.

"Let's see, how can I ask this, how many of you have been engaged or had a serious relationship with a man, but didn't marry him?" Joy began to cry. Chastity had a coughing fit.

"I was engaged to my boyfriend, we were getting married when he was back from Vietnam, and he never came back. And I never got married." Joy wiped her eyes. Ardora used a clean tissue to wipe the mascara the tears had streaked and Joy gave her a grateful smile. "That was a long time ago."

Chastity stood, tall and voluptuous, "Can you imagine being cursed with a name like mine? Well here's how I dealt with it, I slept with everyone I wanted to, man, woman or anything in between. Chastity, my ass!" She sat down. Everyone cheered.

Valiante was astonished, blown away by the honesty of the women, but she was not done yet. There were Marvel and Vita left.

Marvel lit a cigarette, the only one she allowed herself for the day, and said in an almost inaudible voice, "I'm a lesbian, have been all my life. Mostly, 'I'm So Lucky To Be Me'. She sang the first line of a Leonard Bernstein piece from On The Town and put her cigarette out in her cup.

"Cool," said Vita. There were murmurs of assent around the table. "And I ain't talking," Vita proclaimed. "I'll let you know when I know, and tell you how it works out." And with that she stood up and left the table. Valiante set her little black book aside.

The lunch ended on a lighter note with much jollity and innuendo, and a few naughty jokes. Sex was in the air; after all, it was spring and love was in bloom. Valiante made entries in her notebook about her planned book, Every Woman is a Lesbian: No Matter Her Age, Race, or Religion. I don't like that title, Valiante thought, I'll have to make some changes. Does anything ever go according to plan? As a careful researcher with several books under her belt, she knew the answer to that question.

A month had passed and Zoe was back for another weekend with Valiante, this time bringing her new girlfriend, Ginger. "Well this is a record for you, Valiante cupcake. As far as I can tell, there is not now, nor has there been a new lover in that mammoth bed of yours since you moved to Far Moreover. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm a retired woman. I exhaust myself at the GGG six days a week. I'm too old and too weak for a lover." Valiante tried to look pathetic.

"Yeah, sure," Zoe smirked, "tell me another tall tale, hot stuff." Valiante ignored her and went on. "My mother says I can't do those nasty things any more. And, there are no eligible dykes in Far Moreover, none that I can cozy up to. Besides, I'm doing volunteer work here with my 'Let's Talk It Under' group, and outlining my book. Who needs sex?" Valiante exclaimed with open arms and a raucous whoop.

Ginger leapt into Valiante's arms, "I've got a great gal for you to meet. Whaddaya say?"

Zoe answered for her friend, "Yes."

Valiante shook her head no. Ginger shrugged and pulled Zoe to her feet. "Let's dance."

"There's no music," Zoe whined, and then began to move slowly, bending her body to Ginger's, holding her close as a CD Valiante put on spun out the notes to "I'll be Loving You."

Valiante sat and watched the women dance. She thought of the many times she and Zoe danced, had made love. Stop it. She reprimanded herself. Be happy for Zoe. *Nothing like a new romance*, she thought, and took a small toke on the joint she held in her thumb and forefinger. *What's the use of getting high and hot*, she thought, *when I'm here—all by myself, alone*, quoting an old song from the forties. She inhaled deeply and held it for a long time.

This damned plan is spitting in my face, she thought, my own issues are getting in the way. All I wanted to do is find a little town, and I did; find a group of mature straight women who were tight, close, did everything together—the GGG was perfect—infiltrate and convert them. Valiante was now talking out loud: "I did not intend any religious or spiritual stuff except for what came from friendship and then love. I meant to prove that deep down, and with all their nerve endings in the right places, women are or can be lesbians."

Realizing she was almost as loud as the music, she continued her thoughts to herself. Then I'll write a book about it, a sizzling hot book. Shit, what is wrong with me? Valiante asks herself and thinks she's the one who's miserable. Vita the African Queen is in her way. She's just not thinking right. She's distracting me. Zoe and Ginger are upsetting her and she's getting really annoyed with herself. High, where are you? Feels pretty low to

me. Okay, be valiant, Valiante, do something. She must have said the last sentence out very loud because Zoe and Ginger stopped dancing and stared at her. Valiante waved and blew them a kiss.

Valiante took her cell phone from her pocket, looked up the Vs in its listing, saw the only names were Valiante and Vita. This is wrong, only two Vs, no Valerie, no Violet, no Vagina. Uh oh, she had to stop thinking this way. After a minute she reopened, hit the name, and invited Vita to dinner tomorrow. She checked for dietary concerns, no problems and set the time. Change of plan, again, Valiante smiled. After all, we live in deeds, not words, says the old adage.

The three women spent the next morning shopping and planning the dinner. First there would be butternut squash soup; followed by gluten–free linguine topped by assorted vegetables in a light yogurt, creamy tomato sauce, with sautéed mixed mushrooms decorating the top. A salad of assorted Asian greens and beans with blood orange pieces and sesame dressing; plus a gluten–free pastry they could all eat, a surprise made by Ginger.

"You devil, Valiante, I should have known you had something up your sleeve. There is no town or community safe from your lechery," Zoe said as she continued to expertly cut up vegetables.

"Zoe, this is research. Vita is one of the gymers, and I need to get to know her better. She's different from the other women: younger, smarter, more sophisticated, more complex."

"Are we going to meet the other eleven women one by one, as we come out? I mean, come here to Far Moreover?"

Ginger asked coyly. "That'll take eleven more months of research for all."

"Oh stop it, you two. This is a serious project I'm working on. I don't need you being cute. And I expect you to behave when Vita is here. Discretion is in order."

"Does Vita know that you're a lesbian?" Zoe cut her finger and cursed.

"She checked out every book in my collection, so she'd have to be a fool not to know, and besides, they all know because I told them."

"I don't believe you, Dr. Valiante Strongwoman, lesbian therapist supreme."

Valiante shrugged, "That's your problem, Zoe. And, Vita's the only African-American in the GGs, certainly the only one with red hair. I thought you'd like to know that."

"All the better, the group was sounding awfully homogeneous, but I still don't believe you," Zoe added as a non sequitur. "Valiante ignored her ex's comment, and added, "Did I forget to mention that Sunni is Japanese-American? Her father owns the best Asian restaurant in town."

"How many others are there?" Ginger asked, as she washed the blood off the knife, and some of the vegetables Zoe had cut along with her finger. She leered at Zoe with her best vampire imitation.

"None." Valiante made the sign of the cross at the wouldbe bloodsucker.

"Let's get back to Vita. What if she thinks that you have all those books on the subject because you specialize in treating lesbians, not because you are one?" Zoe thumbed her nose at Valiante. "That is, if you still are one—a lesbian, I mean, not a vampire."

Ginger put on the band–aid Valiante provided, and kissed Zoe's cut finger. "Awwwllll bedda, baby."

Zoe raised an eyebrow and pulled her finger back.

"If she doesn't know, she's sure gonna find out tonight," Zoe said, pretended to be a silent film villain and twirling a make-believe mustache. "Ginger and I gonna be our 'nat-u-ral woman' selves."

Valiante tried to not think about what she was feeling. Was it jealousy? What was this thing called love, anyway? She had broken up with Zoe because Zoe was having an affair, so how could she be jealous of Ginger and her ex now? Ginger flirted with everyone, she was hard to figure out. Made no sense to Valiante. Maybe she should see a good therapist. "But I am a good therapist." She finished setting the table.

Vita arrived at 7:05 with a basket full of portulaca in assorted bright colors, tomatoes from her greenhouse she apologized for, but saying they were pretty good anyway, and baby bok choy. "I'm a vegetarian, but I didn't remember if I told you. I didn't want you to do anything especially for me. I'll just eat what I can. And thanks so much for inviting me."

Introductions were accomplished, wine was poured, a Dvorak string quartet CD was softly playing. On the coffee table sat a platter of mixed olives and feta cheese, and a bowl of sliced raw carrots, peppers, radishes, fennel and seedless cucumbers. It was very quiet in the room. The women listened to the music, ate, drank, and exchanged pleasantries. Finally, Vita stood herself up and pulled her tight jeans loose around

her crotch. "These are quite close–fitting and they get caught in my parts." Everyone laughed. She remained standing. "Okay, I'm going to ask you straight out, are you all lesbians, or dykes, or queers, or whatever you want to call yourselves?" She waited.

It didn't take but a breath and all three voices said in unison, "Yes."

"You betcha, honey," from Zoe.

"And I'm her current babe, sorta," offered Ginger.

"And what about you, Dr. Valiante? Did you say yes also?"

"Guilty as charged, as you know, Ms. Vita," Valiante answered, catching Zoe's eye and looking away quickly. "Well, now that that's settled, let's have dinner," she continued, "out on the porch. Absolutely vegetarian and organic, cooked by, the three mustbequeer!" Zoe waved her cap with a flourish, and they curtsied low in return.

Dinner was delicious; everyone laughed at anything anyone said; Ginger and Zoe were shameless, smooching, and silly. When Ginger's dessert arrived, the women howled with delight. It was called Ladyfingers Surprise, and it was no mere trifle. It came in a huge bowl filled with kiwi, grapes, peaches, pears, apricots, cherries, lady apples, assorted nuts, and topped with yogurt custard. Surrounding the fruit and custard, which was formed in the shape of a vagina, were ladyfingers caressing the best spots. It was a gorgeous work of art.

"Can we really eat this?" asked Vita.

"Way to go, sweetheart," directed Zoe, grinning at Ginger. And they did, every last morsel, with much suggestiveness and innuendo. Shameless, as promised.

When they were having coffee in the living room, it got quiet again, really quiet. There was no music, no laughter, no questions, until Vita turned to Valiante and asked, "What are you up to, Valiante? Why are you in Far Moreover, at the Gym? Is this some kind of game?"

"No, it is not a game, and it's not anything hurtful or harmful. I'm doing research for a book I have in mind, and this village, the gym, those women are perfect subjects for me to write about." Valiante offered her hand to Vita, who accepted it carefully, as a kind of peace offering.

"What kind of book, Valiante? Is it a novel, a text, a memoir, what?" Vita retrieved her hand.

"I'm not sure, it was going to be a textbook for college Women Studies programs, then it changed to a memoir, and now I don't know what it will be, but I think it might be titled Every Woman is a Lesbian...I have to see how things go." Valiante stood to pour coffee for everyone and stopped in front of Vita. "I promise that as soon as it gets clearer for me, I'll share it with you. I promise." She put a warm and intimate tone on the last offer of information.

Vita grudgingly shook her head, then shrugged her shoulders, but with a smile said, "Good thing I love a mystery, girl," assuaged for the moment.

Ginger stood and twirled, "Let's dance, sweeties. We've got to work off that dessert." She put on a CD of forties swing music and reached for Zoe while Vita pulled Valiante to her feet. Halfway through, they changed partners, breaking in like

their parents used to do at parties, then the foursome made a pretense of square dancing, which had no relationship to the music on the recording. Vita and Ginger stayed, dancing closely together. When "Feels Like I'm Falling In Love" came on the player, the two couples kept dancing as if they were conjoined.

Valiante was stymied; she needed to do some more research with the Geriatric Girls so she could make a serious start with background material. She decided to join the group during break time at the juice and smoothie station, to take over the conversation and steer it away from gossip so they could talk about personal matters, like love and sex. Did they talk about their husbands, boyfriends, lovers; what about children and grandchildren; how did they spend their time away from the gym, and with whom; what were their plans for the future? This would take time—well, she had time. Where should she begin? She'd bait the hook and throw out the line. She commandeered a treadmill, set the speed to five, and away she raced.

They were an even dozen today, and it took time for them to get their drinks. Valiante raised the glass of carrot-celery-pomegranate juice she had opted for instead of water, and looked hopefully at the women while avoiding meeting Vita's eyes. "I thought, now that we know each other better, that we could start having some girl talk."

"Yes," Honey offered hopefully, "like a CR group."

"If that meets with everyone's approval, that would be great, but let's set a time limit so we don't lose out on our exercise. We'll save the leftovers for our "Let's Talk It Under"

time." Valiante was obviously pleased. Was this was going to be easier than she thought?

"What should we talk about, ourselves?" Ardora asked. "Like problems or other personal things?"

At this point Sunni came for her daily ginseng honey lemon iced tea, which was ready for her at the counter, thanks to Izzy, whose turn it was this week to make the drinks.

"Can I join the circle, women? What are you talking about?"

"We're going to spend our half hour break talking about ourselves, Dolly said knowingly, "as well as with our other Talk group. You can be part of it, Sunni, right GGs?" Everyone nodded or spoke affirmatively. "To get in touch with our consciousnesses," Bella inserted, "it'll be good for us." Ardora and Marvel clicked their glasses, then turned to their neighbors and did the same with them.

"I have a suggestion on how to start," Vita interjected. "We should go around the circle, starting with the women to my left: Honey, Bella, Ardora and Marvel, and continuing with Joy, Canary, and Lucide, ending with Dolly, Chastity, Izzy, and me."

"What about Sunni?" asked Bella, in her most maternal voice.

"And Sunni, of course. That makes an even dozen," Vita said triumphantly, as if she had created a tray of cupcakes.

"No, we're a 'bakers' dozen,' thirteen." Lucide clarified. Vita nodded her approval.

"Will there be time for bathroom?" Canary asked, plaintively. "I have to pee every twenty-two minutes. Valiante nodded reassuringly, while Vita put her arms around Canary.

Valiante watched this with interest, time for her to intervene before it turns into Vita's show, she decided. "We'd better have some time limits, or we'll be here all day, and the afternoon women won't like that, Valiante pointed out." She waved her hands in a circle to include each of the women. "Let's get going now! We'll stop at 12:40, that will be a half hour, and we'll continue next time. She clapped, and laughing, said "Then it's back to the torture room for the last hour." Valiante knew this plan would not work at the gym, she just wanted to get things going. "Who'd like to begin?"

She was surprised to see Joy's hand go up first. The woman had hardly spoken to her at all. Valiante nodded encouragingly at her, who at this moment seemed misnamed. Valainte had never even seen Joy smile.

"My name is Joy, and I'm miserable," and the woman began to sob. The GGGers alongside Joy moved to embrace her; the other women in the circle offered comforting words.

Valiante immediately rose, went to the woman and put her arms around her and whispered something gently into Joy's ear, and turned to the group: "I think it would be better if we arranged to have our talk group meet Mondays, once a week at my house, at 4:00 PM for about ninety minutes, with tea and talk, starting today. Is that cool with everyone? I know this is a quick decision, but I think we can agree that the gym is the place to get our bodies in shape, and my house will be where we can get our bobbleheads steady." They readily agreed, bobbling their heads and high–fiving one another. Valiante was relieved the transition had worked so well.

Honey said, "I baked cookies before I came to gym this morning: egg, gluten, sugar, peanut, salt, dairy, and fat free. It

was an experiment, so they might be taste–free, should I bring them?"

"Why not," Canary tweeted in a singsong voice, "we GGGers are the taste-y cookies."

Valiante walked to a bike, mounted, and sat. *The plan changes and moves again*, she thought, *but the way I hoped it would*. Except for Joy's outburst, it was hard to get the GGs to be serious, and there was not much exercise happening either. She started to pedal slowly, and then, with a burst of energy, sped away.

As arranged, Izzy arrived promptly at 2:00 to get an answer to her earlier question: "How do you know if you're a lesbian, if you never went to bed with a woman?"

Valiante had turned one of the two bedrooms into a guest room, which also served as her study. Bookshelves covered one wall, a desk lined another, along with a couch that opened to a bed when needed. There were some small Indian rugs scattered around the room in the blues and greens of the furniture, which emulated the sky and grass that showed through the window looking out on the garden. Pillows the colors of the garden flowers made the room bright and cheerful. Art displayed a variety of flowers on whatever wall space was available, and an assortment of purple and red tulips and freesia sat in a ceramic vase on the small round brass tray that served as a coffee table.

She offered one of the two club chairs to Izzy, and sat nearby on the other. Izzy's feet could barely reach the floor she was a tiny woman, but her posture was almost haughty, and she gained in attitude what she didn't have in size. Her fingers moved her dark hair behind her ears, and she shook her bangs into place. She offered a bright, open smile, and Valiante realized that Izzy was very beautiful. Two small bottles of Poland Spring water and glasses took up the remaining space on the tray table. Sunshine touched the water and made it sparkle, and the room was alive with good vibes.

"Do you remember what I asked you?" Izzy questioned, not meeting Valiante's eyes.

Valiante answered the question with a question of her own. "What makes you think you might be a lesbian even though you've never made love with a woman, Izzy?" After a deep breath, as if to fill her lungs with courage, Izzy managed to look at Valiante. After a gentle sigh, she began to speak, hesitated, and making a mighty effort to organize her thoughts, began again.

"Well, I had a very strange experience that I never had before, I mean, I just am very, well, I just don't know what happened, oh shit, this is ridiculous, I think I'll—" and she stood up as if to leave.

Valiante smiled benignly, and pulled her legs up to the edge of her chair. "Izzy, there is nothing you can tell me that would shock or upset me. You can't tell me anything I haven't heard before. This is between us, not to go any farther than this room, it's absolutely between you and me. You can trust me."

Izzy sat, rummaged in her canvas bag, brought out her own plastic bottle of water—or what Valiante assumed was water—opened it, and drank half. She stood again and walked to the window, her back to Valiante. "Well, okay, here goes. You won't laugh will you?" Without waiting for an answer,

she continued. "Here's what happened. Some of us, the GGs, were on a trip, to, well it doesn't matter where, but we shared beds, six of us in three rooms. Queen size beds, so they were big, and we didn't have to touch. I'm not telling you who I had to share a bed with, so don't ask." She stopped and drank from her bottle she was holding close to her breast.

"I'm just listening, Izzy, no questions asked."

"So, well, um, she fell asleep. I just couldn't, and then it was weird, I mean nothing was touching, I wasn't touching anything—I mean I wasn't touching any part of myself. My hands were outside the covers, I swear." Her words were coming faster and faster as if she couldn't wait to get to the finish line. "And I was on my side of the bed. Honest." More water, the bottle was almost empty. What would Izzy do when there was no more whatever it was to drink, and the story wasn't over, Valiante wondered.

"Anyway," Izzy held her breath, exhaled, and stammered, her words stumbling out. "Anyway. I had, you know, this is really crazy, well, I had an orgasm, all by itself, without any encouragement from me." She turned, sat down, and put the bottle to her lips, but it was empty. Valiante reached over and took one of the bottles of water from her side table and handed it to Izzy.

"Lucky lady, I know lots of women who'd be thrilled to have your talent." Valiante took her bottle and toasted Izzy. "But why do you think you might be a lesbian? One orgasm does not make that so."

Izzy, calmer now that she had revealed her secret, met Valiante's gaze. "I've always had crushes on girls in school, women where I worked, and this one at the gym. I mean I can't take my eyes off her, but I have to make it seem that I barely notice her. For goddess' sake, I'm fifty-two-years old, this is crazy."

"I think it's marvelous, too marvelous for words." Valiante leaned and took Izzy's hand for a moment and squeezed. "Enjoy it, reach out and hold it, come alive, come."

Izzy looked at Valiante with eyes wide with wonder, was this woman nuts?

"So what, Izzy, maybe you're a lesbian, maybe you're a woman who's in love with a woman, maybe you're ready for love? Why not a lesbian? A lesbian by any other name would still be a woman. And you are a woman, and what a woman. I think you are great."

"So what should I do? What should I say? What?" Izzy jumped up and stood before Valiante. "I don't know what I can do."

"Invite her for dinner; find a trip the two of you can take; play tennis, go to the opera, be best friends and see where you can get to from there. I bet she has the hots for you too."

When Izzy asked Valiante if they could talk privately again, they made a date. A happier Izzy started for her nearby home to think things over, she said, before the get–together later. "I'll be back," she waved gaily to Valiante, as she practically skipped to her car.

The GGGers were due in an hour for their Geriatric Girls' Gabtime Group. Valiante went to the kitchen to lay out cups, saucers, napkins, and boil lots of water. *Things were moving along very nicely*, she thought, *and now it would be telling time*.

They arrived in a small bus for twelve that belonged to the gym. As promised, Honey came with cookies, Lucide brought a bowl of grapes, Bella came armed with a knife and a platter of cheese, and Chastity brought crackers. Dolly had a flat of pink impatiens, ready to go in the ground. Valiante was overwhelmed. "You can't do this every time you come here. It's too generous."

"Nonsense, we'll do as we like. We always do," boasted Vita, "let's sit outside," She brought small folding beach chairs from the bus. Ardora and Joy went into the house to do the tea prep, and in five minutes, everything was ready.

Joy said, "Okay, I want to start where I left off this morning."

"You go girl," encouraged Ardora, handing her a box of tissues. The women arranged themselves comfortably around the table that held the snacks and tea. They turned to look at Joy, and smiled at her in support. Valiante sat in the circle, making herself an equal part of the group. Everyone was quiet, except for the sound of chewing. The cookies would have done better with a hacksaw.

Joy sat up straight in her chair, tossed her long, straight, silvery–blonde hair in place, and said, "I'm not really miserable, I'm just not happy. Well, that's not always the case either; I'm happy when I'm with you all at the gym; I'm happy when..." and she stopped talking. It was as if she could think of no other time when she was happy. Everyone sipped and waited. They had given up on the cookies.

Valiante poured more tea and passed the kettle, and asked, "What do you think would make you happy? Can you

remember times in the past when you were very happy? Tell us, if you can."

"The best time in my life was when I had a boyfriend. Then he went to Vietnam and got killed, and that was the end of happy. I'm still sad, and I'm lonely. No one to dress up for, put makeup on for, cook for, go to the movies with, be happy with."

"What about us, Joy, you say you're happy at the gym, because you're with us, right?" Ardora lifted her chin with the question.

"Yes, that's right," chimed in some of the women.

Joy stretched out her legs and looked around the circle. "Yes, but it's not the same. I love you all, but I'm not in love with you. Well maybe, I mean, you know what I mean, don't you?" Her question ended with an intense look at Ardora.

"What's the difference?" Bella's somewhat strident voice, tinged with a Brooklyn accent, rang out as she extended her hands. Her cropped pepper and salt hair moved with her head, which she was nodding in answer to her own question. "Love, in love, it's all the same, love is love," sounding more like her ancestors as she spoke.

"Love is love," repeated Sunni, "even in Japan."

"And even in Israel," Bella gave Sunni a hug, "especially in Israel."

Honey was squirming in her seat, not seeming comfortable with the conversation. "I love my dog," she said, "I love my sister and brother and their children. I never had any children I mean, but I don't know anything about romantic love. I can't even go to the movies anymore, the people are all doing sex on

the screen. As the oldest woman in this room, I'm proud to say I'm a virgin."

Marvel applauded. "That's really cool, Honeybun. But don't you think you might have missed out on something special, something great? There must be something to it, this sex thing." At this she stood, put her hands on her hips, spread her legs, and sang, "Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it, let's do it, let's fall in love." At that, she pulled Honey up into her arms and added, "I'm hot for you, Honey darlin', you're the bees knees, the cat's meow, you're in all my dreams, little Honeypot. Whaddya say, let's fall in love."

Everyone clapped and whistled and Canary shouted, "Yes, yes! Let's all do it, let's fall in love." No one knew if she was serious or just having fun. Valiante thought it was a little bit of both. What a beginning, she thought, I'm going to have to be careful to not let this go too fast, to get out of hand. She did not want a broken hearts club.

The women fell on the cheese and crackers, the grapes disappeared and the tea was ignored. When Lucide brought out a bottle of wine, an opener, plastic cups, and Bella said l'chaim, everyone cheered and thus ended the first Geriatric Girls Gabtime Group. Vita and Valiante thumbed up at each other.

The weeks passed into the summer. The Gabtime Group usually met twice a week, becoming more open and revealing more each time. The women seemed to be getting closer as well, making plans as couples for museums, theater, and longer trips. The GGGers now knew that Valiante was gathering material for her book about women's groups—no

names—and they were quite pleased about being part of her project, though they didn't know the book's title. With their permission, Valiante recorded parts of Gabbers (as they called themselves) meetings, and they were used to seeing Valiante make frequent jottings in her ever present notebook.

Zoe and Ginger now came for weekends every other week, and Vita usually joined them to make a foursome. Ginger was a charmer, and they all enjoyed being with one another more and more, but Valiante had to prepare herself for Ginger and Zoe each time they came. What is wrong with me? she scolded herself, I love both those women, they are my dearest friends. When they spent two weeks' vacation with Valiante, they came to the GGGym almost every day. It seemed Far Moreover was becoming Close Moreover for them.

Things were changing at the gym. The women were pairing off into what seemed like steady "best friend" couples. As the weeks went by, there was hand-holding and lots of longing looks. Valiante made a chart, she thought the coupling worked this way:

Marvel and Honey; Ardora and Joy; Bella and Sunni; Izzy and Chastity; Canary and Dolly; Lucide and Carmen

Carmen was the new woman from Cuba Lucide had met in her writing workshop and brought to the Gym. Diversity was thus enhanced. The group was quite fond of her, especially now that Carmen was teaching them to dance the tango and samba. And wonder of wonders, Joy seemed happy, she smiled most of the time. No one could figure out what was happening with Vita and Valiante. They seemed close, constantly exchanging confidences, but nothing that looked like the real thing.

Izzy had come to talk with Valiante several times, revealing that the object of her ardor was Chastity. "How can I have had the big L for a girl named Chastity. Isn't that silly?"

"No," Valiante answered. "What's in a name? A rose is a rose...did you tell her how you feel?" Izzy shook her head no. "Well, you're together all the time; I saw you hugging at the water fountain. You might be happily surprised if you told her."Time marched on and Izzy stopped asking for private time, lost weight, glowed. Valiante had lots of notes to write in her little black book.

The heat of August was hard to bear. The gym had closed for the entire month. Instead, the GGGers met three times a week at different houses, wherever there was air conditioning. This meeting of the Geriatric Girls Gabtime Group was taking place on the beach. Every couple brought an umbrella, beach chairs, and cold drinks. Valiante provided a picnic of cut and peeled melons, a medley of sliced fruits, Greek yogurt, deviled eggs, all kept icily cold in her large ice chest. Zoe and Ginger had come down from the city to escape the heat, and helped Valiante carry the load from the car. The beach they had chosen was completely private, with not another person to be seen.

When they were settled into a colorful circle of umbrellas and chairs, Chastity stood with arms outstretched, facing Valiante. "We are gathered today, to make an announcement: GGGers, with the help of the Gabbers—as you probably have already deciphered, dearest Valiante—this auspicious group

has evolved. We have coupled off (first as best friends), and then having fallen passionately in love with love and each other, are really partners." The couples kissed, pranced in the sand, and then came to embrace Valiante. "We don't know exactly how you did it, but you helped make it happen. You changed our lives. Thank you." Chastity plopped down next to Izzy and took her in her arms.

Canary and Dolly emerged from their swim, dripping from head to toe. They each picked up a towel and dried the other. When they realized that everyone was watching, they wrapped up in the towels and sat down. "What did we interrupt?" Dolly asked.

"Chastity was thanking Valiante for changing our lives." Lucide explained.

Valiante picked up where Lucide had left off. "No my dears, you made it happen. You changed your lives. I only provided the opportunity, the possibilities. I made a space and you filled it." Valiante took a deviled egg from the ice chest, raised it, and toasted the women, "You are the best subjects I've ever experienced. You are the goodest eggs I've ever known. I love you, each and every one of you." And she popped the deviled egg into her mouth in one fell swoop. Everyone ululated.

Lucide and Carmen began passing plates of food and bug lotion. The afternoon breeze had come up and the waves of heat diminished. A few of the women napped in their chairs. Except for the waves and the shore birds, it was quiet, until the sound of castanets playing a Spanish rhythm clicked and joined in to create a trio with the birds and waves. Ginger rose and began to dance in the sand, bending and swirling in

sensuous movement, Carmen's castanets urging her on. Carmen stood and joined Ginger in the dance, the wooden discs in the Cuban woman's agile fingers providing all the music the two women needed. When they collapsed with exhaustion into each other's arms, the sun was beginning to set in a band of color that bathed all the Geriatric Girls' faces in a rosy, youthful glow. Valiante put her notebook back in her bag and marveled at the scene. She had a book: All Women Can Be Lesbians If They Really Try, Valiante's latest title, but probably not her last.

That evening, Ginger, Zoe, Valiante, and Vita sat on the porch having gin and tonics before dinner. "That was quite a day," Zoe commented. "Amazing. Do you have enough material for your book?" she asked Valiante.

"I've got everything I need, I just have to put it together." Valiante clicked her glass with Zoe's, then with the others.'

"Well, what's missing?" Vita questioned. "Did you achieve the hypothesis you started out with, whatever that really was?"

"And what kind of book is it now, a memoir, or what?" Zoe questioned.

"I bet it's a thriller novel," Ginger teased.

Valiante raised her eyebrows. "Maybe, Ginger girl, it's almost finished, but there's an important piece missing. I'll tie up a few loose ends, then I think it's on the way." Valiante waited. Time passed quietly. Drinks were sipped.

"Yes," said Ginger. "There is something more." She went to Vita and pulled her from her chair. "We've already told Zoe, so now we're telling you. Vita and I fell in love the first moment we laid eyes on each other. We belong together. We two are the women we've been searching for all our lives. My flirting—all of that stuff was just for fun."

"Wait a damn minute, what about you and Zoe?" Valiante asked Ginger. "Someone's got a broken heart here." She looked long at her former lover. "This just doesn't feel right."

"Oh, you mean the game we were playing, my little pop tart?" Zoe teased

"What game, Medusssssa?" Valiante hissed, and stood up to face both Ginger and Zoe.

"That was just a game Zoe and I were playing!" Ginger rose and did a little bump and grind into Valiante's belly. "To get you jealous, so you'd remember how much you love her." She ended with one more, but lower–placed grind. "We let Vita into the scheme after a while. Did it work?"

"Brava," saluted Valiante, "I think you did that very well—the game, I mean. However, I don't know if I should kill you or kiss you. She decided on the latter, to everyone's delight."

Vita moved to Valiante, "It was obvious to me from the very beginning that you and Zoe were still in love, have always been in love. You needed to play for a while, to be adventuresome, but it was always Valiante and Zoe, and that's how it should be." She raised her glass to Ginger, "Finding you was the treasure I never expected. It was love at first sight: corny, but true." Ginger clicked her glass with Vita's, knocking it out of her hand, much to her own amusement.

Valiante held out her arms and Zoe piled into them, as Ginger and Vita watched like proud mothers. The couples were coupled. It seemed that life was just a bowl of cherries. After dinner of a mammoth salad with everything imaginable from the refrigerator—greens, yellows and reds, plus dried cranberries and roasted walnuts—they sat on the screened porch Valiante had added onto the house, watching Venus and the full moon flirting in the sky. "It's too hot to dance, but not to make love," was Ginger's pronouncement.

"Not yet," admonished Valiante. "I want to tell you about my book. It's titled The Geriatric Girls and the Therapist. I wanted to write about a group of unattached older women, who lived and socialized together in a safe space, in a far off community. My theory was that if placed in the right environment, with the possibility of open communication, with me on hand to make sure nothing harmful was happening, the inevitable would happen."

"And what was that, the inevitable?" Zoe asked, knowing the answer.

Valiante laughed and reached for her lover's hand. "That they would form close friendships, and eventually fall in love. And that's just what happened."

"In lust, also, I would hope." Ginger got up and twirled, then sat in Vita's lap.

"I imagine so," Valiante replied. "These were almost all 'straight women,' and what amazed me was how unlikely some of the couples were, unexpectedly so; how quickly it all happened; how brave the women are. They identify themselves as a new kind of woman, the Later Lady Lesbians, or the LaLaLes." She finished her drink and added, "I have disguised the place and the women to protect their privacy, added a few sex scenes...I think the novel will be serious fun! And, I have a publisher, Spinsters' Glue."

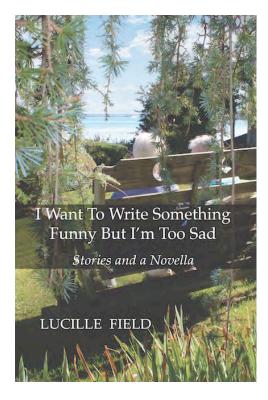
"Yay," the quartet shouted, and they made a hugging circle.

"So what does this all prove?" Vita asked in her most professorial voice.

"That, under the right circumstances, all women can be, or are lesbians—at least that's what happens in my novel," Valiante answered with a villain's leer.

"I like that plenty, Valiante. Makes good sense to me. Now let's go to bed," urged Ginger, pulling Vita out of her chair.

"And prove that all's well that ends in bed," proclaimed Valiante to Zoe. *She* would have the last word this time.



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