Chapter 5

MARDI GRAS: An Old-Fashioned Love Story

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

for Alan and Naomi

Mardi Gras.

She wears a short bright dress and high heels. He wears a white t-shirt and black bike pants. She looks pretty. He has the crew-cut clean look. Standard uniforms. She is straight straight. He is gay, but ...

It's their first Mardi Gras. They hadn't intended to spend it together.

Months earlier, the first time he saw her, he said, "Oh no" as he groaned. She said, "He's gorgeous, but he's gay" and at that point was still able to file him in an archive in her heart, like she did with many of the gorgeous gay boys.

Sydney, Mardi Gras. A place and time of exposures and revelations. Where masks of propriety and social conventions drop to the bottom of the Harbour. Where irrational regulations are queried. Where party masks and costumes create illusions through which the real illusions are exposed.

What they had kept safely locked away for months, moulded into innocent and manageable shapes by the unquestioning of assumptions and categories, comes completely undone as the music pounds, and the laserlights pierce the dancing bodies.

Her delicious body dances in front of him. Her eyes come up to meet his and sear him so that he needs oxygen in the heat, in the dance-floor sauna of sweating bodies. He can only look away, and fill his lungs with the Amyl, the smoke and the body colognes wafting around them. He tries to feel the same erotic energy for the sexy men dancing around him. But he can no longer block out the painful thought: he has fallen in love with HER.

He had been so comfortable for such a long time. Sometimes, if asked, he would say he was bisexual. But when he was with a man, this was overlooked. He fitted in. His first love had been a woman. She was black. As a teenager, he had not had the strength to challenge the racism. The relationship collapsed. From then on, he was gay. It was a lesser rebellion. He had a couple of lapses now and again. But only because the women initiated it, and it flattered him, ... and it felt good, actually. He had stabilised soon after, presenting a gay front with just the odd sideways glance at a woman or the quickening pulse to control.

We are simply dancing, she reminds herself. Simply dancing ... his firm thighs in bicycle shorts, the sweat shining on his arms. Simply dancing ... until too many times his eyes on her, drinking parts of her in, and her own eyes playing hide-and-seek with his mouth, his shoulders, his crotch. Simply dancing ... her lungs gasping for oxygen so she can keep some control.

"What's happening here?" she thinks in confusion. "He's gay and I'm heading for heartache. After years of faghag expertise, how could this happen to me?" She had always enjoyed the flirtation with him because it meant nothing to him. She'd say things like, "What could make you turn heterosexual?" He'd say, "Your legs" and just for a second ... but then they'd laugh. She couldn't take him seriously. And that had become more and more painful. She realised she was falling in love with HIM.

They dance, his fingertips touching her waist, pulling her closer ... or did she push forward? They sway together.

And the masks slide off their wet bodies.

They cling in stillness, while the revellers swarm around them. They are both part of and apart from them.

They make some attempts to retrieve the masks. She thinks, "He is gay, isn't he? I'm not going to be his experiment with hetsex." He thinks, "Why her when I'm surrounded by these male hunks? Is this her idea of kinky sex?" They stare at each other with suspicion. They pull apart and then feel themselves melting into each other.

She shakes her head slowly. “We can’t,” she says. “I know,” he says. Not much conviction in their voices.

She’s frustrated. He’s supposed to be reliable company. He’s frustrated. He’s finally at a Mardi Gras and all he wants to do is hold this woman.

“Let’s go,” he says and they make their way out of the hall. She remembers how they’d entered. A man in leather, backside firm and tanned, had passed by them, mesmerising them. They had caught the lust in each other’s eyes. “It’s tempting,” she’d said. “I have a far better chance at him than you,” he’d teased. “You never know,” she’d remarked, but agreed with him nevertheless. They had laughed and begun to dance.

In the taxi on the way home, as she’s about to get out, he whispers, “I love you”. She slams the door.

He calls out, “I’ll be thinking of you”, and she runs across the road and only looks back when she thinks the taxi’s gone. But he’s waving. She waves too, whispers goodbye, and blows him a kiss.

This is the end, she decides, as she takes the lift to her room. Short and sweet. He will regret Mardi Gras tomorrow. He will feel uncomfortable next time he sees her. It was all in the heat of the moment. He is now wondering how on earth he could have felt whatever he felt for a woman, and this plain mediocre naive woman in particular. She will have to readjust her mask, and pretend it was all a mistake for her too.

In the taxi, he worries that her wave and that kiss are rather too definite. She knows how he really feels. That what was said was from his heart. Will she still feel the same? Will she ever want to at least talk about this? He feels so confused, and yet things have never seemed clearer.

Nothing will happen. It cannot. In their separate rooms, as they struggle to get some sleep while the new day’s sun slices through the post-Mardi Gras haze, they feel both relieved and sad at this thought.

All they know for sure is how they feel – the love, the joy, the breathtaking freedom of having it all said and unmasked. And the sadness, the pain, the trap that they’re in now that it’s all been said and unmasked.

Where do they go from here? Their labels and neat categories have collapsed. Their worlds have lost definite boundaries, and yet this borderlessness feels so refreshing, so alive. As if they have clawed out of coffins and through six feet of soil.

Mardi Gras.

She wears a black high-cut body-suit. He wears bright purple bike pants and bare chest. Her hair is in an intricate formation. He is growing his. She is not-so-straight straight. He is bisexual. They enjoy the Mardi Gras together.

It's been a strange, painful, traumatic year. In trying to be true to their new unfixed selves, they have hurt those they love and been hurt in return. They've done things, said things, made decisions, taken risks they never thought they would. That's what happens when the labels and categories no longer fit. There's few other role models.

But they're here again at Mardi Gras, stronger together than last year. The struggle is still on, still pieces to put together in a jigsaw puzzle that is far more flexible and fluid than the socially constructed one they left behind. But just for tonight, they want to celebrate the good times they've had, they want to be themselves hoping those selves together don't matter.

Because they have discovered their two selves together do matter so much, not only in straight land where their relationship can't be pinned to a wall, neatly labeled and conveniently ignored. It also matters in their Oxford Street neighbourhood amongst the so-called radical who can become conservative and oppressive. Oxford Street is not such a haven anymore. There are less smiles, more blatant stares.

On the night at an HIV political rally, one of the prominent HIV-positive speakers, an old friend, has just given a stirring speech on the need to end discrimination, on the need to let people love whom they choose and release the heterosexist stranglehold. They move forward to congratulate him. He doesn't have anything to say to her now, and only this to sneer at him, "So, have you stopped sleeping with women yet?"

Bouncers at the doors of gay venues are puzzled for months. "Do you realize this is a gay place?" "I'm bi and my girlfriend-" and they reluctantly let them in with a look of almost parental disapproval. Or- "Sorry, no straights tonight." Or- "It's GAY men only." Or suddenly they're paying double what the two gay guys in front of them paid. His bisexuality could only be overlooked when with a man.

He sits at a supposedly with-it cafe. The men at the next table converse: "Here he is again. He holds her hand pretending to be straight but when she's not around, he's here hoping to score." She rages at the stereotypes they have of her. They can only slot her into one of two possible frames – the naive duped woman, or the conniving woman attempting to convert a gay man into straight. They don't seem to be able to transcend these soap opera scenarios.

In a gay sex-shop back-room: "He hangs around gay places for a thrill but he's just a naughty straight boy." Or- "He's only here to perve, but he never takes up the offers. She's got him well-trained". Should he explain? "I've got the right to say no as much as I've got the right to say yes."

They've often sat in gay places and watched other male-female couples for clues. Are they bi, straight, good friends, who knows? Should it matter?

Mardi Gras.

She is wearing black velvet short shorts, a bustierre, and suspenders with fish-nets. He wears a leather and chain harness and leather short shorts. Her hair is wild. His is sleeked back into a pony-tail. She is queer-straight. He is bisexual. At the Parade and at the dance, people stare. They want to figure it out. Put them in a neat box. Is he gay? Is he straight? Are they together? Are they friends? Is she a femme dyke? Is she a post-op transsexual success story? Is he a leather man? What on earth is she then? His SM slave?

They enjoy the Mardi Gras together. Their lives and other relationships have regained much balance. There is much healing, forgiveness, solid friendships on steady ground, and their regrets, mistakes and angers are somehow easier to live with.

Their "mixed marriage", as they call it, is now old news. They have very accepting close friends, while others politely tolerate, and still others hover in the dark shadows and wait for disaster so they can pounce. Their closet has swinging doors on it. Some people will probably never be told, others will be eased into it gradually, and still others know-and-do-not-want-to-know-and-so-pretend-they-do-not-know-because-they-don't-know-what-to-do-if-they-say-they-do-know. Others have become armchair anthropologists researching this peculiar social phenomena.

The gossip has died down in their Oxford Street neighbourhood. They're like pieces of furniture that you can't axe for firewood, you can't feel comfortable with, and you feel funny having them around, but somehow they're there and actually would be missed if they were thrown out. And you know, they're quite nice pieces of furniture anyway. Indeed, many younger immigrants to these blocks don't really care. Everyone's queer and you can't tell who's who anymore. And identity politics can become too confining.

"A mixed cultural, mixed gender marriage". They compare notes on split ends and hair dyes. He wears her mascara on special nights out and flutters the eyelashes at all the good-looking boys who hear him say how much he loves her. She wears his leather shorts, experiments with his leather and chain harness, and dreams about fulfilling her big fantasy, being behind one of those tough sexy-looking dykes on bikes in a future Mardi Gras. He has the same fantasy.

He won the best-dressed award at a gay fancy-dress event by wearing her old school uniform, replete with straw hat and fish-net stockings. They went as schoolgirl buddies which they sometimes feel they are as they giggle and stir about the way their "rebellion" confounds their overseers. Their conversations give away the fact that this is not a straight couple. But the way they are together means neither of them are gay. They're best friends and they're in love, but don't own a rulebook.

He says, "I don't know whether to be jealous when a man comes onto you because he's chatting up the person I love or because he's not coming onto me." She laughs and says, "Be both and neither."

He says: "If we break up, I'll be hunting along Oxford Street, looking for another woman to fuck me." She says: "I hope you find her and are happy with her." And she loves him too much not to mean it.

He says: "I really like him. Almost began wanting to get to know him a little better but then he said he hates bisexual men." She says: "Don't worry, there'll be someone else. That attitude is on its way out."

He says: "I'm monogamous with you because I want to be." She says: "That's OK. You might change your mind tomorrow."

She says: "I wish I was bisexual too." He says: "You're bisexual by marriage. Anyway, if you can say that, then you are. You can be a bisexual virgin just like a straight or gay virgin."

One day he slides a ring onto her finger. "Like a nice straight boy," he says and then she reads what he's written in the card: "Don't marry me forever. This is not a proposal."

They dream of an old age when they'll stroll down Oxford Street together and everyone is just sexual with no prefixes and creating whatever form of love they need. They'll remember the days they were breaking the rules of both the rulers and the rebels. They'll remember the hurt they caused and the hurt they bore. Time might have brought new questions of each other, new expectations from each other, as they glided and stumbled along between being "friends" and "lovers". But if they've called it quits before then, nothing will make them regret or forget the power and beauty of what they had.