


Girlfriend *fiction*

The boy / friend

R. M. CORBET


ALLEN & UNWIN

lost & found



LOU AND I WERE OUT feeding the strays. All the tabbies and flabbies and scrawnies and toms that came by his house in the late afternoon. We were sitting side by side on his front step, watching their little pink tongues lap at the saucers of milk we'd laid out among the mountains of junk on his lawn, listening to their chorus of contented purrs.

'Can you hear that, Maude? I think it's an augmented fourth.'

'Does that mean it sounds like a jazz chord?'

'For jazz it would be an augmented *eleventh*.'

'Okay then.'

Talking to Lou could be like that. He was a musician. Musicians never make any sense when they talk about music. Most times, though, I'd know what Lou was thinking almost before he did; and augmented, diminished, demented or cemented, that flock of lost cats made me smile.

Lou had played sax ever since I'd known him. Ever since he was big enough to lift one. He'd practise and practise for

hours on end. He took his sax to school and he took it to bed. While the other kids were playing on their Game Boys, waving their lightsabers and trading Pokémon cards, Lou was busy listening to Charlie Parker and John Coltrane.

‘They were, like, sax players, right?’

‘They were like *gods*, Maude.’

There were posters of Bird and Coltrane on his wall, gazing down from on high. Lou did his best to convert me, but the sounds were too random and wild for my ears. All those tweedles and dweedles and screeches and squawks. I’d been raised on Hi-5 and the Wiggles, after all.

‘What do you think?’

‘It sounds cool,’ I’d lie.

‘Actually, it’s bebop.’

Musicians can be so annoying.

It’s hard to describe Lou how others might see him. The same way it’s hard to describe the back of your own hand. Lou was tall and gangly with a mop of brown hair that he never brushed. Bright eyes. Loose clothes. Shoelaces undone. He was all strange pronouncements and far-away gazes. There were plenty of girls who had said he was cute. To me, he was just Lou, my closest friend.

My friend who was a boy. Not my boyfriend.

We sat for a while without talking, watching the happy cats bask in the sun, smiling with their eyes closed and tail tips a-twitching. It made me feel sleepy, but Lou was restless. He was having trouble sitting still and his foot was tapping constantly. He shook his head, then smiled at me sheepishly.

I smiled back and raised half an eyebrow. He nodded and brushed his hair back with his fingers, took a deep breath, then let it all out.

‘Maude?’

‘Lou?’

‘Do you want to go see a movie?’

‘Why? What’s on?’

This simple question of mine seemed to completely unnerve him. He opened his mouth to speak and shut it again; then he shook his head at the complexity of it.

‘Does it matter what’s on? Let’s go to the movies.’

‘Tonight?’

‘You got a problem with that?’

‘No. Except that it’s Friday and . . .’

‘And what?’

‘It sounds like you’re asking me out.’

‘I am asking you out.’

‘It sounds like you’re asking me out on a date.’

‘It’s not a date. It’s a movie.’

Crap!

‘Sorry. I don’t know why I thought—’

‘It was just an idea, that’s all.’

Lou gazed at the lawn. The cats had all finished lapping at their saucers. Now they were cleaning their whiskers and licking their paws. There was no point in trying to fix what had happened. It was no use crying over spilt milk.

I stood up and grabbed my bag. For the first time in my life I had no idea what to say to my best friend.

‘See you tonight, then,’ I said.



Lou's was the last house on Willowbank Road, just across the park from the Merri Creek. I didn't feel like going home just right then, so I wandered my way along the water's edge. All the sleepy old weeping willows had been cut down and replaced by baby gum trees inside plastic boxes. The greenies had put up a big sign explaining how it was good for the ecosystem. The problem was, right then it looked like a logging disaster.

I sat down on the stump of a favourite old tree, in the place where the stream widened into a pool. Lou and I had used to sneak off there all the time. It was our secret place, beneath our secret tree. Once upon a time, when we were kids.

If I squinted my eyes I could still see it that way: how we'd sat on the bank with our toes in the sticky black mud, watching the ducks dive and dart on the pond; or kicked off our jeans on hot days and squelched round in the slime, searching for treasures and dinosaur bones, catching tadpoles and beetles to keep in glass jars. Then we'd tramp back to Lou's place to hose off the mud. We'd towel ourselves down and I'd borrow his clothes, while mine were hung out in the sunshine to dry.

I sat on the willow-stump, remembering. Somewhere in the distance I heard a dog bark. Then the faraway sound of a saxophone practising. I got up and brushed my school uniform down.

It's not a date, Maude McNaughton. Get a grip.

My house was number nine Willowbank Road. Lou's was number nineteen. His was downhill on the bendy bit. Mine was uphill on the straight stretch. Unlike Lou's clutter of saucers and mess, our house had a neat lawn where cats weren't allowed. Rows of begonias. The hose tightly rolled. The lawn clipped and whipper-snipped within an inch. Mum would be in the kitchen, preparing a tasty, nutritious meal. Dad would be home soon from another hard day at the office.

Feeling a sudden need for privacy, I sneaked in the back door and tiptoed upstairs. I slipped into my bedroom, shut the door softly behind me, and frowned at myself in the wardrobe mirror.

Maude McNaughton: only child.

I kicked off my school shoes and fell on my bed as I scrolled through the contacts in my phone. There was no one I wanted to message right then. I plugged in my iPod and ran through my playlists, till I found something happy to drown out the world. Something that wasn't tormented or augmented. Not quite the Wiggles, but something upbeat.

Something that didn't have saxophones.



The local cinema was just a short walk from our street, along the Merri Creek bike path then up to the main road. It was a grand old art-deco theatre with plush seats and red velvet curtains. Lou and I had used to go there for birthday parties.

We'd eat ice-cream cake and drink red fizz, then run around screaming till we felt like throwing up. I must have seen *Finding Nemo* there at least seven times.

Being there with Lou on our date that wasn't a date, a part of me still felt like running around screaming, to let off some nervous energy. It wasn't like I had much to be nervous about. I knew Lou. He knew me. We both knew the score. We had agreed to the terms and conditions. Sure, it was a Friday night. But we were there to see the movie, whatever it was. Why? Because Lou had suggested it.

It was all very simple and straightforward.

I wondered why part of me felt like throwing up.

Lou queued for our tickets while I bought the popcorn. It was general admission. There were plenty of seats. Instinctively, we both made our way to the centre block – the seats with the best view of the movie. Lou chose the row and I followed him in. I watched him sit down, and for one crazy moment I thought about leaving a seat vacant between us.

I didn't, of course.

The movie? The movie was okay. The truth was I hardly noticed it. Sitting beside Lou in the darkness all that time, with nothing but an armrest between us. Staring straight ahead at the big screen, passing the drink and the popcorn. Feeling his warm shoulder rub against mine. In the quiet, I could hear his soft breathing; could sense every small movement that he made, getting closer, then moving away again. How could I concentrate on the movie?

We watched till the end. We watched all the credits.

The names of the prop guys and personal assistants. The stuntpeople. The drivers. The caterers. The assistants to the assistants. We watched all those names without speaking.

‘Feel like a hot chocolate?’ he said.

‘Sure. Why not?’

Lou got our hot chocolates while I found a table in the cinema’s café. I sat down. He came and sat down. It was a very small table. There was just enough room for our hands and our drinks.

We tried to talk about the movie, the way that you do, but the conversation never got out of first gear. Lou said the main actor had been on the news for abusing the paparazzi. I said I’d heard he’d been in detox. Lou wondered if he’d had a facelift. I said his accent was all wrong. We agreed that the movie was okay, and we both gave it three-and-a-half stars out of five, like the critics do when they don’t know or don’t care.

With that out of the way, there was a hole in the conversation. Not a great gaping hole, but a hole nonetheless. Normally, such holes are filled with small talk, but Lou and I weren’t good at small talk. Likes and dislikes? Hobbies and interests? We already knew all that stuff. Instead, we sat sipping our hot drinks and watching the people around us. The couples who’d come on a date to the movies. The ones making plenty of small talk.

I opened my bag. ‘How much do I owe you?’

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I’ll pay.’

‘Seriously, how much?’

‘No really. It’s fine.’

‘You can’t pay. That would be wrong.’

‘Why would it be wrong?’

‘It would make it too much like a date.’

‘What if it *was* a date? What difference would that make?’

What DIFFERENCE?!

‘I don’t know. It just feels . . . strange.’

‘I’m a boy. You’re a girl. What’s so strange about that?’

‘I’m a boy. You’re a girl? Who are you – Tarzan?’

Lou stared at the ceiling. ‘Why are you making this complicated?’

I let my hair fall across my face so he wouldn’t see the heat in my cheeks. ‘You said it was just a movie.’

‘It *is* just a movie.’

‘So why are you paying?’

Lou looked sad. ‘Forget it. Forget everything.’

‘How about if I pay for us next time?’ I suggested.

‘It’s not like you owe me,’ he said.

We sat there in silence, playing with our hot chocolates. Mine tasted too sugary to drink, but I didn’t want him to think I was ungrateful. I was confused now. If Lou wanted this to be a date, why lie about it earlier? Wasn’t that tricking me here on false pretenses? Was he scared? Of *me*? Why was I making everything so hard for him?

The truth was, I didn’t know why. All I knew was, it felt weird between us. Very, very weird.

And what had he meant by *forget everything*?

We headed home once we'd finished our drinks. It was a clear night, and not very late. Merri Creek sounded gentle. The moon was half-full, or maybe half-empty. Plastic bags glowed like silver lanterns in the trees. We had stopped trying to talk. Both of us were lost in our own thoughts. I could have mentioned the stump of our old willow, but it hardly seemed like the best time.

When we got back to his place, he stopped at the gate.

'Did you want to come in?'

He didn't mean anything by it. He was being polite. But suddenly it felt entirely different from the thousand times he'd said it to me before.

'I should get home,' I said. 'Thanks for a fun night.'

'Do you want me to walk with you back to your house?'

'I'm fine,' I said, and we left it at that.

I walked past a few houses, then turned and looked back. Lou was watching. We waved. Then I went on my way. I had a strong impulse to look back again, but I knew that would only be stupid.



Back in my bedroom, I dug the movie ticket out of my pocket, scrunched it up into a tight ball, and threw it in my wastepaper basket. I felt drained. Guttled. My head hurt when I tried to make sense of it all. The different things I might have done or said. The things I wished I hadn't said. Or more to the point, wished *he* hadn't said.

What would this do to our friendship?

Under my bed was a locked wooden box filled with all the treasures I'd found by the creek over the years. There were marbles, old copper coins, bird feathers and bottle tops, polished stones, fragments of china and glass. Extra-precious things were stored in plastic zip-bags – dragonflies, white moths and shiny green beetles – airtight, safe and protected. Each treasure had its own story. Each one a small reminder of that secret world I'd shared with Lou, once upon a time, when we were kids.

I rescued the movie ticket from my bin, unscrunched it and pressed it until it was flat. I placed it inside the wooden box, then I locked the box and slid it back under my bed.

Not a treasure, exactly, but something worth keeping.
Something that had its own story.

biology



‘GOOD MORNING, LADIES. Please take out your books.’

The biology lab was a spooky place. Dissected animals floated inside glass jars on the windowsills. Mice, rats, lizards and snakes. They looked like props from the House of Horror.

Our teacher, Ms Webb, was more wax museum than horror. Her face was a blank and she never smiled. (Unless she was talking about her purebred Cavalier King Charles Spaniels.) I heard a soft groan from the back of the room as she switched on the data projector.

Not chromosomes again.

‘In most mammals, the Y chromosome contains the gene that triggers embryonic development of the male . . .’

I could feel my brain turning to mush.



I'd started Year 10 at an all-girls' school in the city three months ago. I got in on a part-scholarship. It was my parents' idea, not mine, but it's not like they'd forced me at knife point – I'd jumped through the hoops and walked on hot coals. My parents were so proud when they heard the news, I'd thought they would burst. Mum bawled and Dad wiped a tear from his eye. The fairytale ending. The happily ever after. I was the Eliza Doolittle of Willowbank Road.

I knew there would be strings attached.

Being on a scholarship meant being branded. Teachers expected you to set an example. Rivals competed to be smarter than you. Some girls resented you for getting a free ride. Others assumed you were poor. A cultured pearl. That you looked like the real thing, but weren't.

Lou and I had started out at the same high school. For three years we'd been inseparable. Now, whenever we compared notes, we'd always end up arguing. He'd assume my new school was the opposite of his, which was unfair and mostly untrue. Sure, my school cost lots of money to go to. It was a bus ride away while his was just around the corner. My school had gardens, where his was all concrete. He had no uniform, whereas I could get detention for having a single button undone. Plus his was co-ed and mine was Girls Only.

Admittedly, that last one was one serious difference.

Even though I missed Lou heaps, I didn't mind the school. The one thing I did mind was being called *ladies*, and being told to behave in a 'ladylike' manner: 'Close your legs, you're sitting inappropriately', 'Your skirt is too short', 'I don't want

to see your knees'. If they worried so much about seeing our legs, why did they make us wear dresses? This was the twenty-first century, after all.



The slide on the data projector was showing the difference between XX and XY chromosomes.

'Only after nine to thirteen weeks of pregnancy does the embryo develop sex organs,' said Ms Webb, and everyone laughed.

So much for the twenty-first century.

I imagined what it would be like having boys in our biology class, with boys and girls working together in groups. Would it be no big deal, or clearly distracting? Boys were like monsters or aliens to some girls. To other girls, they were like rock stars.

I straightened my legs and looked down at my shoes. My laces were loose. My new dress already had a small tear. Was it crazy to dress in a uniform, day after day? Or did it save us from having a fashion parade?

My old high school had been fun, but it did have its drawbacks: broken furniture and vandalised equipment; crowded classrooms with stressed-out teachers and hyper-active bores starved for attention. I wondered what Lou would be up to. Was he making new friends or going it alone?

I shook my head. What Lou did at his school was his business, not mine. I had a new school now. I needed to move

on. Make new friends. Branch out and stop looking back. I needed to start living in the here and now . . .



‘Maude McNaughton? Are you with us?’

I jumped out of my daydream. ‘Yes, Ms Webb.’

‘Would you care to explain to the rest of us?’

My eyes scanned the hieroglyphics she’d written on the board: *XXY, XYY, XD, ZD, ZZ*.

The room was deathly quiet. I gave it my best shot.

‘It’s about the difference between males and females, miss.’

‘Clearly. Please, go on.’

More? I shrank back in my chair.

‘There are males and there are females, miss. But sometimes it’s more complicated than that.’

‘In what way?’

I could feel every eye in the classroom upon me. Waiting for the new girl to stuff up.

‘The truth is, miss, I’m finding the whole subject of sex quite confusing.’

There were snorts of laughter from the three girls at the back of the room. I wished for a hole I could bury myself in.

‘Perhaps if you paid more attention, Maude.’

‘Yes, miss.’

I tried not to die of embarrassment while Phoebe Wu, the walking encyclopedia, set about clearly explaining it all. How

the dominant/recessive blah blah did something-or-other with the duplication/depletion blah blah blah. It sounded a lot like what I'd wanted to say, if I'd only known how to say it.

There were males and females. There were heterosexuals and homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals. There were boyfriends and girlfriends, old friends and new friends. True friends and lost friends and mutants.



At recess, outside in the courtyard, my face still felt torched with embarrassment. I looked up from my bench to see the three back-row girls standing there, smiling at me. Shauna, Bianca and Alison – the Magnets. I braced myself for the impact.

‘That was cute what you said about sex,’ said Bianca.

‘Cute and gutsy,’ said Shauna.

‘Mind if we sit here?’ said Alison. ‘Some scrag took our seat.’

It wasn't a purely random event. Bianca and I had been friends at primary school, though her entire personality had changed since that time. Her mouth was tighter, and she had started talking without using words: *They were, like . . . (shrugs), so I was, like . . . (waves).*

Now she was one of the Magnets.

I slid along the bench to let them sit down, then I slid a bit further to give them more room. Bianca (brown hair, hazel

eyes) sat next to me, then Shauna (blonde hair, green eyes), then Alison (blonde hair, hazel eyes) at the end. Bianca wasn't rude enough to look in my lunch box, but I was pretty sure the other two did. The Magnets weren't nosy, exactly. But, like any gang, they had their own codes of conduct and style.

There was some brief chitchat about Shauna's cheese dip – calories, grams of fat, that sort of thing. This turned into a discussion of favourite cheese types, from the everyday to the exotic. The only thing everyone agreed on was that cheese slices tasted like soap.

With the cheese details finally dispensed with, we sat rubbing knees while Alison entertained us with the bittersweet tale of her latest romance. Waving a celery stick around like a conductor's baton, she spared us no detail, emotional or physical. Shauna was the undisputed boy-magnet of the three, but Alison got points for trying. What she lacked in natural beauty and grace, she more than made up for in enthusiasm.

When she'd eaten her celery stick, Alison stopped monologuing to pick at the stringy bits stuck in her teeth.

Bianca turned to me. 'So, Maude, who is this boy of yours?'

Had I been thinking *out loud* back in class?

'The one who makes sex so confusing,' said Shauna.

'It sounded like someone has stolen your heart,' said Bianca.

I tried not to look shocked. 'Actually, there isn't anyone.'

'*Actually*,' said Alison, 'I hadn't finished my story yet.'

Bianca raised an eyebrow. Shauna looked bored.

‘Go right ahead,’ I said.

Alison went on to explain how her new boy had rung while she was in the bath. ‘I was, like, *covered* in shampoo and soap.’

‘Wouldn’t that rust out your phone?’ I asked.

‘You kill me, Maude,’ Shauna laughed.

Alison rolled her eyes. ‘He’d been saying all week how he needed to talk. But when I told him where I was, he went kind of quiet.’

‘I’ll bet,’ said Bianca.

‘Then he started going on about his last girlfriend, and how she just wouldn’t move on. How he felt responsible. How he wasn’t ready for another relationship right now. He was a mess, in the end.’

‘How embarrassing,’ said Shauna.

‘That’s when I told him he was dropped!’ said Alison. ‘I mean, *hello?* I was, like, *naked*, and he was, like, *babbling*.’

Bianca and Shauna both laughed out loud.

Alison turned to me. ‘How come you’re not laughing, Maude? Do you think I was mean?’

‘He sounds like a nice guy, that’s all.’

‘A nice guy? How?’

‘It sounds like he was calling to break up with you,’ I said. ‘He was just trying to let you down gently.’

Shauna snorted. Bianca was speechless.

Alison glared, fit to kill.

‘What would you know about boys, Maude?’ she scoffed.

different directions



THE FRONT YARD OF LOU'S place was messy enough, but the backyard was like another planet – an overgrown wilderness, cluttered with junk. There were sagging grapevines, broken banana lounges, a bike cemetery piled high with rusted wheels and frames, a woodpile, a falling-down toilet, and an old couch with weeds growing out of it. Past the fruit trees and gone-to-seed vegie garden there was a chicken coop, a fish pond and a big run-down barn called 'the studio'. When I'd suffered enough in my nice, tidy house, at the hands of my nice, polite family, with their long list of nice, tidy things to do, I'd slip out the side gate and skip down the street to Lou's place.

Maude McNaughton: getaway girl.

Lou was out in the studio with his brother, Miles. I could see them through the window, drilling holes in hub caps, bashing them into shape with mallets, and trying to thread them with bits of old wire. Miles was younger but wilder to look at. His hair was shaved at the sides and dyed yellow on

top, and he wore a military jacket with a big *A* for Anarchy painted on the back. Lou, in his overalls, looked more like a motor mechanic. All around them were lengths of chain, iron plates, drainpipes, paint tins and steel bolts. They'd been collecting scrap metal from the factory blocks, hammering and tuning it into weird new instruments for Lou's latest musical 'project'.

The Martins were a musical family. Lou's mum was a singer. His dad played piano. They performed in small jazz clubs and bars around town and were nocturnal, rarely waking before noon. They'd named their three kids after famous musicians: Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis. Go figure.

The studio was where the family's various bands came to rehearse. It was set up with a drum kit, a PA system, two amps, three mike stands, a mixer and a tangle of leads, an electric piano and several guitars. There were egg cartons stuck to the ceiling and thick velvet curtains at the windows, to deaden the sound. Posters of crooners and rock gods and punks adorned the walls: Elvis, Iggy Pop, Tool, the Clash, Blink 182, Joy Division . . .

Anyone apart from the Wiggles.

Near the start of high school, Lou had discovered punk rock. He was all torn jeans and pimples and worn leather jacket. After all those years of hard work and devotion to jazz, he'd put his old sax away under the bed; exchanged it for a guitar and a cheap little amp and got to work practising three basic chords. He'd tried talking me into playing the drums.

We could start our own band, like the White Stripes, he'd said. I'd told Lou I couldn't play drums if I tried. (I preferred quiet reading to making a noise.) And that one White Stripes was more than enough for this world.

Lou didn't mind that I'd scuttled his plans. Now here he was, three years later, designing and assembling his so-called 'post-punk industrial art-noise ensemble': the Funky Junk Orkestra.

Jazz plus Punk equals Junk.

I took a deep breath, pushed open the studio doors and went in. I hadn't heard a word from Lou in weeks. He'd avoided my calls and given one-word answers to my texts.

Lou appeared not to notice me, but as soon as Miles saw me he waved hello. Cautiously, I waved back and crept closer to watch.

'YOU GUYS LOOK BUSY,' I shouted over the noise.

'REHEARSAL TOMORROW. YOU COMING?' yelled Miles.

My heart dropped. *Rehearsal?*

'IT'S BAND MEMBERS ONLY,' Lou shouted.

I wasn't *invited?*

Miles looked confused. 'HOW COME MAUDE'S NOT A MEMBER?'

'I ASKED HER BUT SHE DOESN'T WANT TO.'

Liar!

Miles glanced at me.

'I'M NOT A MUSICIAN.' I shrugged.

'YOU COULD DO FRONT OF HOUSE.'

Lou shook his head and kept hammering.

‘MAUDE DOESN’T WANT TO DO FRONT OF HOUSE.’

‘HOW DO YOU KNOW? HAVE YOU ASKED HER?’ yelled Miles.

Lou stopped hammering and frowned at me.

‘Maude. Do you want to do Front of House?’

Doing Front of House meant twiddling the knobs on the band’s PA system. It meant untangling leads and plugging them into the right sockets. It meant adjusting mike stands and saying ‘*Check . . . One . . . Two . . . Three . . .*’ into microphones. It meant testing levels. It meant stopping feedback and buzzes and hiss. It meant fixing circuits and soldering leads. For all I knew, it meant lugging enormous speaker boxes and getting electrocuted in the rain. I had no idea how to do Front of House, and I was pretty sure I didn’t want to know.

‘Sure. I’ll do Front of House,’ I said.

Lou was unconvinced.

‘Even though you don’t know the first thing about it?’

‘If you want to teach me, I’m happy to learn.’

‘It’s a big commitment. Would you *really* want to?’

‘If you *really* think I can do it, I would.’

‘If you want to learn, I can teach you,’ said Lou.

‘If you want to teach me, I’m happy to try.’

‘It sounds like you’re not really serious,’ said Lou.

‘It sounds like you don’t really want to,’ I said.

Miles scratched his head.

‘So you don’t want to learn unless he wants to teach you, and he doesn’t want to teach you unless you want to learn?’

‘It’s hopeless.’ I nodded.

‘I told you,’ said Lou.

Miles shrugged then started up drilling again, while Lou and I continued to glare at each other.

There was no point in trying to make sense of it.

Through the glass doors, I noticed a girl standing watching us. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, a sweet baby face, low jeans and a tight top. I wondered how much she had seen of our spat.

When Lou saw the girl, he immediately put down his hammer and went over to let her in.

‘What a cool place!’ she said, looking around.

‘Jill’s trying out for the band,’ Lou explained. ‘Jill, this is Maude. You already know Miles.’

‘Are you in the band?’ she asked, smiling at me.

‘No. I’m the neighbour.’

I could have smiled more, but Jill was smiling enough for all of us. Not that I blamed her. If I had teeth like hers, I’d have smiled with them, too. Her blonde hair was perfect, the same way her teeth were. Too perfectly straight to be true.

‘Hope I’m not interrupting,’ she said.

‘We can do this another time,’ said Miles.

‘No, Maude was just leaving,’ said Lou.

Trying out for a junk band? What skills did you need? Apart from a cute face, blonde hair and straight teeth?



Feeling unwanted, I left them and went to see Ella.

In a house full of mess, Ella's room was the worst. There were clothes piled in heaps on the floor and the couch. Books were either stacked high or scattered around like leaves. There were figurine fairies and mythical beasts. Rows of farm animals lined up on shelves. Half-knitted scarves and strange glazed ceramics. Shreds of scrap paper with lists and odd diagrams. Glue sticks and magic tape, felt-tipped pens and coloured pencils. Ella was constantly making things then abandoning them. She had no time to look back. No time to clean up.

I was in awe of Lou's older sister. Not because Ella was enrolled at art college. Not because she was wild and uninhibited. Not because of her dreads or her piercings, her ripped dresses, her strange make-up or her freakishly high-pitched singing voice. I was in awe because Ella was older. Almost eighteen. Almost an adult.

Almost.

She was seated at her sewing machine, making warm winter pyjamas for one of her teddies. Ella had made clothes for all of her soft toys. Casual wear. Sports outfits. Fashionable attire. Her bed was so crowded with smartly dressed creatures, there was hardly any room left for her anymore.

'Maude! You skank! What brings?'

'I was just leaving, actually.'

‘Why? Did Lou boot you out?’

‘He’s got band rehearsal. He’s fairly flat-out.’

Ella put down her scissors and kicked her bedroom door closed with a thud. Then she picked up a big pile of clothes from her couch and threw them on the floor to make room for me.

‘He’s a jerk and a snot-ball!’

‘He’s just busy,’ I mumbled.

But Ella had a radar for matters of the heart. ‘He’s a grump and a bossy boots. There’s no excuse. Musicians!’ she snorted. ‘They’re all fanatics, you know.’

I cautiously took up my place on the couch while Ella paced her floor and informed me about her friends from art college. There was the classical cellist who practised twelve hours a day and wouldn’t answer the door or pick up the phone. There was the down-and-out composer of soundtracks for low-budget slasher movies, who had sold all his furniture to buy a one-way airfare to Hollywood. There was the death-metal frontman who took too many painkillers and performed strange incantations with spirits from the afterworld.

All the fanatical musician types were there.

‘They get so caught up in their music,’ sighed Ella. ‘It’s because they’re so passionate. They’re even worse when it comes to love.’

‘He told you, didn’t he!’

Ella nodded.

‘Lou’s not my boyfriend.’

‘I know he’s not.’

‘I never think about him in *that* way.’

‘I’m sure you don’t.’

‘If anything, he’s the opposite of a boyfriend.’

‘The *opposite*?’

‘Why are you smiling?’

Ella came over and sat down beside me. Together, we sank down deep into the spongy couch, looking up at the paint peeling from her ceiling.

‘Lou and you are old friends, Maude. You grew up together. You hung out together. Damn it, you even built your own tree house!’

‘So?’

‘So, what’s the difference between a boy-friend and a boyfriend, exactly?’

‘I would have thought that was obvious.’ I blushed.

‘It’s not all about getting your gear off!’ she laughed.

‘Please!’ I buried my face in my hands. ‘A boyfriend is a different person completely. It’s all about romance and finding true love.’

‘Handsome prince? White horse?’

‘Sure. Why not?’

‘So who says he can’t be an old friend as well?’

‘Lou’s not my boyfriend,’ I reminded her. ‘He’s got his junk music. I’m at my new school. We’re moving in different directions right now. And besides, he was being quite mean.’

‘Lou is a BOY, Maude. Boys are not like girls. They don’t think the same way. They don’t live in the same world we

live in. When it comes to discussing their feelings, they're utterly useless!

'You don't think he meant to be mean?'

Ella put one arm around my shoulder in a big-sisterly way.

'He's a dimwit. He can't really help it.'