

Credits

Amy McDonald

Marissa was looking through old photos when the video phone rang. She shut the photo window, clicked on her headset, and accepted the call.

The caller was computer-generated, gender-neutral. Its name badge said, 'Jo'. A council worker.

'Marissa Phillips?' it digitised.

'Yes.' Marissa had paid her rates. She didn't have any overdue disks. 'What is this about?'

'Congratulations,' the image said. 'Your name has reached the top of the waiting list. You will be the next ratepayer to access the PMV.'

'Hang on.' She hadn't spoken to anyone for a few days. 'You mean the car?'

'Yes. You have won the usage of Council's people moving vehicle for a period of one week.'

The list. The car. Marissa forced herself to focus on the monitor.

'Please report to the Town Hall at 08.00,' the image was saying, 'Monday June 20 with payment of 500 carbon credits, your identity card and all necessary inter-Council visas.'

Marisa made hurried notes. June 20 was only a week away.

The digital council worker continued. 'This prize is strictly for personal use. Mandatory detention will result from inappropriate transport. Specifics will be messaged to you in the coming minutes. Again, congratulations.' The call ended.

Marissa stared at the blank screen. She thought about travel. A smile formed and grew. She opened a new window and keyed in the number she knew by heart.

Jane's scarred face was dangerous when she answered, her eyes distracted. Marissa greeted her with, 'You've been reading that stuff again, haven't you?'

Jane focused on the webcam. 'Gorgeous, did you really call to interrogate my download habits?' She looked tired, unwashed, but her eyes were warm.

'If they catch you with propaganda—'

'Mar, they'll never know.'

'What, like last time?'

'Same old Mar, always trying to straighten me out.'

'I should give up, shouldn't I?' They laughed gently. 'Jane, I just got a call from the Council.'

'What?' Jane's eyes were cautious now.

Marissa struggled to keep her face serious. 'I'm at the top of the list.' Her voice lifted with the corners of her mouth. 'I got the car. Can I come and visit?'

‘No. Really?’

Marissa nodded, her eyes crinkling and wet.

‘Of course, Mar!’ Despite the grafts, Jane pulled her mouth into a smile. The women giggled like they used to.

Marissa was the first to sober. The link-up was expensive. ‘It’s in a week. Is that all right?’

‘Yeah. Have you got enough credits for the batteries?’

‘Think so. Might need some of yours to get back.’ Jane’s proximity to the dam meant she had a more reliable energy source. Marissa’s credits—from the geothermal plant—had been irregular since the last heat flux.

‘Whatever you need.’

‘See you then, beautiful.’ Marissa ended the call. In the drawer of her desk she filtered through spare respirators, cables, old sticks that still functioned in her ancient computer, and other bits of plastic detritus until she found her identity card. Marissa uncapped it and plugged it in. Her old visas appeared on the screen. She scrolled to the most recent one, issued ten years before, the last time she had made it to the top of the list.

Marissa remembered the trip vividly. She remembered Jane, small and scared at the hospital, her sweaty hand shaking in Marissa’s as the doctor explained the diagnosis.

Although it had ended years before, Marissa had written ‘partner’ on Jane’s admittance form, and Jane had squeezed her hand when she read it.

She ejected her identity card, recapped it and squeezed it in her palm. She clicked open the photos again. Jane and Marissa at the beach. Jane and Marissa driving in their own car. Jane and Marissa happy and smiling. Jane without grafts, with her own skin, without all the cancers.

Ten years was a long time.

The morning of the 20th was overcast and humid, identical to the days before and all the days to come.

At the Town Hall a worker embedded a tracker in Marissa’s arm and virtual-stamped her visa. She collected the car from the Town Hall, loaded her destination and paid her credits.

Driving, Marissa watched the derelict solar power station grow and shrink again on the side of the road. She remembered the newspaper headlines: ‘Scientists shocked!’ and ‘Solar plant fails in changed climate’.

She had been inside the station once before. Jane had called, hissing a rapid request for rescue. Marissa had sped to the station, then driven through the gates with her headlights off, her

fingertips humming with adrenalin.

Jane had stepped out into the road as Marissa pulled up. She was wearing all black.

‘You’re fucking brilliant, Mar,’ she’d said.

Marissa anticipated a panic-fuelled kiss. Instead, Jane turned and a woman with a shaved head ran low and fast out of shadows to join them. The two climbed into the back.

Marissa reversed out of the power station.

At the gates, an explosion shook the car. The strange woman punched the air. Jane screamed, ‘Research that, fuckers!’

Marissa remembered watching them in the rearview attack each other with hot mouths. Jane’s long hair burned, backlit by the pursuing lights of a security car. The woman slipped her hand into Jane’s shirt and Marissa turned her eyes to the road.

That was the last time they had seen each other, until Jane rang about the cancers.

Her arrival at Jane’s was perfect. At dinner, memories of happier times covered the blankness of the food rations.

The night was dark and warm. Candles flickered on a small table. Jane was draped on the chaise, her foot dangling.

‘What was that woman’s name?’ Marissa was sprawled on the floor, her eyelids hovering low.

‘Which one?’ They smiled at the inference.

Marissa picked her glass up off a stack of disks. ‘Butch with a shaved head. Remember that night at the power station?’

‘Susan.’ The words came out slow and heavy.

Marissa looked away. ‘I was so jealous of you, then.’

The women watched their own memories for a while.

Jane stretched and sat up. ‘They found another one.’

‘Cancer? Where?’

Jane put a finger to the corner of one eye.

‘When are you booked in?’

‘I’m not.’ Jane’s grafts shone silver in the candlelight.

Marissa’s finger softly traced the spider’s web of scars on Jane’s foot. ‘I wish you’d just had the gene therapy like everyone else.’

‘What?’ Jane stiffened. Her patchworked cheeks bloomed. ‘Too late for that, Marissa.’ She clawed at her eyelid. ‘I’m half pigskin, for God’s sake. I’ve got no tits, no uterus.’ Snot glistened

on her lip. 'I'm not even a woman anymore!' Jane threw her glass hard. It bounced, then lay still. She watched it, beaten.

Marissa knelt and took Jane in her arms. 'To me, you're an exceptional woman.'

Jane shook softly as the women held each other. Marissa watched the night through her friend's window.

Marissa took the breakfast tray into Jane's room. 'Morning.' She set the tray down.

Jane read against plumped pillows.

'OK. We're going to pretend this is coffee.' Marissa poured hot drinks. There was no heady aroma. No anticipation.

Jane's eyes smiled. She pulled back the sheet and Marissa slipped in.

The women sipped their drinks and remembered coffee.

After a pause, Marissa said, 'Come back with me.' She reached for the other's hand. 'In the car.'

'You don't have enough credits. And they'd find out. I'd be detained.'

'Hey, where's the eco-warrior I fell in love with?'

Jane finished her drink. 'You don't need to rescue me.'

Marissa put her hand on Jane's knee and felt frailty through the sheet. 'Let me.'

There was silence. Then, 'OK,' but the word was so tired.

Marissa closed the car's storage compartment. Bags and cartons pressed against the glass. Jane watched from the doorway. The early morning was no cooler.

'Come on.' Marissa took her by the elbow but she didn't move. She watched Jane's face change.

'What about your things?' Marissa's voice thickened.

Jane put her hand to Marissa's smooth cheek. 'Sell them. Call me more often.'

'Oh, Janey.' The women watched the shapeless orange glow that used to be a clear round disk push up over the horizon. Marissa wiped her eyes roughly with the back of her hand. 'I'll put my name back on the list. Come check on you.'

Jane brushed her hand up from Marissa's cheek, slowly around her ear, through her hair and down the side of her neck. She leant in close and pressed her scarred lips against her friend's. The kiss was salty. She pulled back. 'Forget the list, Mar.'

Marissa gulped in air and blew it, slow and controlled, out through her lips. She gripped Jane's upper arms. 'You're sure?'

'Yes. Please.'

They both nodded with lowered heads. The slightest breeze kicked dust around their feet. Marissa walked to the car for the drive home.

'Credits' was first published in *Climate* (CAE, 2007)