

# Margaret Morgan

## FINGER PAINTING

This might sound really strange, but before I go to sleep, I try to programme my dreams. I can usually do it, too. Most of the time, I can choose the characters, and sometimes I can even work out the plot. I don't suppose I need to tell you that it's an erotic dream I'm after. I mean, who isn't? Anyway, next morning, before I really wake up, I remember my dream, and I make love. Solitary, but not alone, if you know what I mean.

This is my sex life. It makes me happy, so who are you to criticise? All of my friends have problems with their lovers, one way or another. But I don't, because my expectations are the same as my demands. And I don't settle for less. All my lovers know what I want. They're all different, some are slow and gentle, some are urgent and hard, but they all have only one goal: my pleasure.

Sometimes it gets a bit embarrassing the next day, if I meet the person I just made love with. I can't help it – I usually blush and I can't look them in the eye. Sometimes they think I'm being rude and brusque, but I don't mean it. Sometimes they're rude back. Then I won't dream about them anymore. Because it's very important not to confuse what happened during the night with the way they are during the day. They mustn't know what we did together.

Tonight it's cold and I'm wrapped in my quilt and the darkness. I'm a little drunk, but you've probably noticed that. Tonight. Tonight it's different, because on the other side of the wall, there's another body, yours, lying on another bed with another quilt. I can feel you as though you were lying right next to me. There is a sort of energy, an electrical charge coming through the brick and plaster, reaching for me. You are awake, I can tell. And you are thinking about me.

I'm trying to concentrate on something else, on nothing, even. Tonight I don't want to dream of lust. I don't want to dream. There's an old cure for insomnia, better than counting sheep: my mind is a blackboard, and whenever a thought tries to chalk itself on, I rub it off with the sweep of a duster.

Do I hear you sigh? Are you rolling on your bed, trying to get comfortable? Are you warm enough, or is it me that disturbs your sleep?

Blackboards. Blackboards are out of use now, I've heard. They use whiteboards, with thick felt pens that wipe off with sponges. Or overhead projectors with transparencies. No more motes of chalk dust, swirling in sunlight cones from classroom windows. Small yellow gumboots lined in front of the grey metal heater. Remember the smell of gas mingling with the scent of polished floorboards? I loved that smell.

I can hear a door opening. I can hear it creaking. A strip of light on the floor. Your footsteps. Quiet, trying not to trouble me. But they do. They stop near my door. Now they move on, and down the stairs. Silence. Now the toilet flushing.

I am asleep. I am asleep. I can't hear you. Go back to bed. Too drunk to drive home? Then sleep it off. Like me. I am asleep.

And when it rained, we were allowed to eat inside and we always bought meat pies from the canteen instead of salad sandwiches. We always did that. And then another smell was added: the sweet lingering odour of pastry and meat and tomato sauce. We never did much work for the rest of the day. A strangeness possessed us, and the teacher had to accept that we wouldn't do normal lessons. We wanted finger painting.

You're at my door. You're knocking, softly, in case I am asleep. A shadow breaks the line of light on the floor.

I *am* asleep. I can't hear you.

– Are you awake?

Should I snore? Pretend I'm not awake? When I was little, my mother would come in late at night to tell me to stop reading. I'd let the book fall on my nose, and make my breathing slow and deep. It always worked. She'd be chastened, I could hear her smile. I'd feel her take the book and my glasses, and she'd kiss my cheek and turn off the light.

The door opens and a shaft of light from your room touches my face. The light reflects from my eyes into yours.

– I'm sorry...

You begin to close the door, retreating.

– I'm awake.

– Can I talk to you?

– Come in.

I pull my quilt around my neck, sit up a little.

– I couldn't sleep. I...

You are sitting on the side of the bed. You are wrapped in a sheet. I can see your shoulders, your belly. You are pale in the gloom and the hair on your arm is fair and on end. Your nipple is hard in the cold air.

I lift the quilt, watching your eyes look at me, underneath.

– You'll get cold.

You climb in beside me.

You are gentle. Your hands are trembling a little as they brush my skin, as they explore then probe, finding the aching hot places. We submerge and our two fleshs rock together, bound by limbs and heat and fluid, rhythms changing and growing into dazzling white waves break over us in voiced relief.

The sun is shining as I fall back, short of breath and sated. I like you. We will dream of each other again. If you want.