SEARCHING FOR SOPHIA

ANDREW SAW

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It's said real lovers don't just meet, they're a part of each other all along. Maybe it's their dateable DNA. I'm not sure. What I can tell you is that when the violinist Sophia Luca walked out of my office in Elizabeth Bay, my business partner Dr Joe Franken was stunned.

"Definitely didn't see that coming," he said, as she left the building.

"See what coming?"

"You heard her. She had this weird feeling we've known each other forever, practically since we were kids."

"A little unusual, so?"

"I know it's bizarre but I felt the same thing."

"Well, it's nice being noticed by talented women."

"So now I'm Harvey Weinstein?"

"Joe, you *know* I didn't say that, but you've never seen her before, right?"

"Never."

"So how does that work?"

"I wish I knew."

I'm Dr Tim Wilde. For twelve years Joe and I have run a successful veterinary practice on the southern shore of Sydney Harbour, about a ten-minute drive east of the Opera House. Elizabeth Bay is an unusual suburb, both shabby and elegant like an elderly courtesan who has seen better days. To the west along a low ridge, her streets run into the drug confusion and retail sex of Kings Cross. To the east, she's a haunt of elegant 1930s apartments and Georgian terraces, with the occasional mansion rolling its lawns down to the wintergreen harbour.

It rains cats and dogs in Elizabeth Bay, along with light showers of guinea pigs, goldfish, rabbits, snakes and budgerigars, so Joe and I are doing okay. We're both single, in our late thirties, living in good apartments with harbour views. We drive nice cars and travel abroad whenever we feel like it. All we're really missing is the right woman to love.

We're devoted to the animals, of course, and our work is important but, with the exception of the odd anorexic axolotl, our practice rarely encounters anything exotic. Wandering between the strip joints and organic grocers you're unlikely to be run down by a yak. On the other hand, if your guinea pig is buffing its claws and staring at you with an unpleasant look in its eye, Franken and Wilde is there to offer help. Although, as Joe never stops saying, "We're not just treating animals, Tim, we're treating whole families. Living things that keep other living things as pets need affection."

Some of our customers dote on creatures that slither in cold blood, but it's animals who pack or flock in nature that fall in love with their humans. They love like we do, with an attachment similar to that of human babies for their mothers. I've learned more about unconditional love from my feathered and furred patients than I have from any human. They've also taught me how terrible life becomes when devotion is ignored.

A nurse named Charlotte and her pet parrot were a case in point. Michael Hutchence was (and still is) a sulphur-crested cockatoo deeply in love with his human; and like all parrots, a passionate animal. His seventy-year life span and lifelong mating in the wild made him obsessed and possessive in captivity. Charlotte was freshly remarried in her early thirties with two small boys, and in Michael's cockatoo mind they'd been in love since she was a little girl. They'd shared the homework, the hockey, the eisteddfods, every teen crisis, her difficult divorce, even the birth of her children. But the new man in her life made Michael simmer with jealous fury. When Charlotte and her husband wanted more out of love by candlelight, Michael would fly to the top of the bedroom cupboard and peer

through flickering shadows with a baleful black eye. As soon as her husband's back was uppermost, he would swoop, a parrot out of hell landing talons first, biting and tearing at bare flesh.

The strain on Charlotte's marriage was considerable, but she couldn't give up the parrot she'd loved since she was eight years old. They tried the obvious but Michael had never lived in a cage. As a precursor to lovemaking, chasing an angry cockatoo flying from room to room was a disaster. Charlotte's claustrophobia eliminated shut windows and doors. Finally, after weeks of shattered crescendos, her husband had had enough. When Michael attacked he pivoted back onto his knees, snatched him up with both hands, and threw him into the garden. An hour later, peering through the bedroom window, Michael was ruffled and noticeably depressed, although not as depressed as Charlotte, who faced the dilemma of loving a man who throws sulphur-crested cockatoos.

When she came in with Michael early the next morning she was pale with contained rage. "I have to see Dr Joe."

"He's with a patient," I said, "but I could …"

"I'm sorry, but I need to see Joe straight away," she said, while Michael stared at me from her left shoulder with a single obsidian eye. "If I don't, I'll be forced to do something terrible. I'm serious, Tim."

This is significant. A meaningful engagement with the power of oestrogen is a vital part of veterinary practice. It's wives, mothers and girlfriends who initiate most of the pet care in Elizabeth Bay. Even when the surgery is flaming with rainbows, a clear understanding of oestrogen is very useful. We both get on well with our clients, but Joe has the edge.

Women with pets love Joe, there's no more honest way to put it. He has a presence that I've never been able to classify. There are plenty of words: empathy, humour, intelligence, but none really do the job when it comes to understanding Joe's relationships with our female clients. It's not as if he's stunningly prepossessing. For as

long as I've known him, he's referred to the anatomy supporting his glasses as his snout, for good reason. When his magnified marsupial eyes blink behind heavy spectacles it's like window blinds snapping up and down. He's very healthy, that I'll say for him. Twenty years of amateur boxing have given him a muscular welterweight frame, a good match for his emphatic nature.

He's most comfortable with women, but Joe is no ladies' man. His obsession with ethics prevents him manipulating for pleasure, although much of his charm does lie in his unusual view of devotion. "Love has been in the chemistry of the cosmos since the beginning of time," he said once when we were studying animal attachment at university.

"Actual love?" I remember asking, naturally dubious.

"It's a biochemical algorithm created in a supernova."

"What kind of biochemical algorithm?"

"A mix of lipids and alkaloids, electrical energy, magnetism – the stuff you should've learned in high school."

Over the years I've become used to such pronouncements, usually based on his fascination with obscure papers on astrochemistry. Joe is a walking TED Talk in that way – often mystifying, but sincere.

When I took Charlotte into his surgery with a bewildered parrot clinging to her arm, Joe was managing the difficult birth of a white mouse doe's first brood. Michael Hutchence was in such bad shape he turned gloomily aside from the wriggling pink titbits on the examination table and buried his head in his loved one's armpit.

"Oh hello," said Joe, with a quick glance. "Michael causing trouble, is he?"

"It's pathological, Joe, I can't take it anymore."

"He loves you, Charlotte, he doesn't know what else to do."

"That's your solution?"

Joe stopped what he was doing and began the pastoral care that makes him so good at his job. Charlotte was struggling, I think, embarrassed by the threat of breaking down, and Joe filled the space between them with an easy compassion. Without being

invasive, he seemed to connect to a vulnerable part of Charlotte she was reluctant to reveal. Radiating kindness, he handed me his box of surgical gloves. "Tim, do us a favour and take over the delivery. So far the young mum's doing okay. Charlotte and Michael, come with me."

They went into his office to consult while I kept an eye on the doe to stop her killing her pups, something that mice often do if they're disturbed during birth.

After half an hour Charlotte left without Michael. On her way out she wrapped her arms around Joe in an intense hug. It was obvious she was deeply relieved.

"What did you say to her?" I asked, when he'd shown her out of the clinic.

"A lot of things, but in the end we talked about astrochemistry."

"Astrochemistry?"

"Actually, astrochemistry and love."

"Not your rant about the cosmos? She's medically trained, Joe, she'll think you're a lunatic."

"Not at all, she liked the science. I just said everything living is connected by a biochemical algorithm, including women and parrots, and a vital part of that biochemical algorithm is unstoppable attraction created by sentient genetics."

"In other words, aside from ruining Michael's life by locking him in a cage, there's not a lot we can do."

"Well, no."

Eventually, Joe convinced Charlotte to farm Michael out to her uncle Ralph, a retired show boy from the cruise ship circuit; but the real outcome for Charlotte was a reinvigorated marriage. Judging by what I witnessed in the surgery that day, Charlotte's vulnerability had turned to relief then, I hope, happiness.

Which brings me to the true point of my parrot story. Joe Franken's record of loving animals is brilliant. His relationship with our female customers is unique. But his history with women outside the clinic is a mess. He genuinely believes love is a fundamental

part of the universe, but what begins in a shower of stardust often collapses in six months or a year with a sad phut. Even though the end is rarely sordid, it's always demoralising, and Joe retreats back into his work for months on end.

For as long as Joe and I have been friends, we've been anxious to find "The One". Now that we're both in our late thirties, this inclination has morphed into a desire to start families but, with the exception of myself, I've never known anyone so hopeless at making love last as Joe Franken. Neither of us is predatory by nature, nor are we misogynists. We're just a couple of vets searching for the certainty of shared devotion.

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"Hah!" was the first word I heard from Dr Franken when he opened his front door.

I was looking at Joe thirty years in the future, assuming Joe wears a ponytail of white hair, pince-nez, a black tailcoat, and paints on a Groucho Marx moustache.

"Hah!" the doctor said a second time, peering up at me through an antique pair of pince-nez eyeglasses.

"Dr Franken?"

"You the coach?"

"Sorry?"

"The coach – the dialogue coach?"

"No, I'm Tim Wilde, Joe's friend from university."

"You don't teach dialogue?"

"No, sorry."

"By Jehovah, you'll think I'm out of my mind."

"Sorry?"

"I'm not a clown, son – I'm an obstetrician."

"Well, I."

"Never mind – come in, I upset the neighbours enough as it is."

He walked fast, leading me down a long corridor with polished wooden floors. There were African sculptures and Aboriginal dot paintings on the walls. As he strode in front of me I understood what he meant about the clown – his bulbous comedy shoes were slapping the polished floorboards like slabs of meat. A cool costume, I thought.

"It's for a charity night," he said over his shoulder. "The Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists."

Moving at speed, he turned a sharp left and we were catapulted into large living room with open dormer windows looking out over the harbour. He stopped in the middle of a Persian carpet and waved at the empty seating, clearly puzzled, the gesture magnified by his swirling black tailcoat.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

He walked over to the open windows and peered carefully through each; but he plainly saw nothing. There was the heavy ticking of a mantelpiece clock. The Supremes' "Baby Love" leaked softly out of a distant room. He turned, scratching his head, and started as if seeing me for the first time.

"Dialogue?"

"Sorry, Dr Franken, no."

"Call me Jack, or Dr Frankenstein – everyone wants to."

"I'm okay for now, thanks."

"My wife, the plastic surgeon, tells me Dr Frankenstein gave his monster Botox. That'd account for the big shiny forehead. What do you think?"

An answer would have been easier if Dr Franken hadn't been smiling. Was he laughing at me, testing for some Aryan prejudice?

"I don't know, I'm sorry."

"So who are you again?"

"Tim Wilde, I'm doing vet science with Joe."

"Ah right, well sit and I'll go for help. They could be anywhere. The place is a bloody maze."

I was left alone with the distant sound of The Supremes. Like the hallway before it, the living room was defined by African and Aboriginal art, plus some Japanese prints; most of it was surrounded by carpets and wall hangings from Asia and the Middle East. It was as if I was in a nineteenth-century salon, where Monet might become distracted on his way to lunch.

I stepped out onto the veranda and was shocked by the view of the Opera House and the Bridge. They were too close for comfort and too beautifully lit, like a computer-generated illusion. The

Frankens' flat is the top half of a Victorian mansion in Kirribilli facing the Opera House across the harbour, the bottom half having been converted to consulting rooms for their practices. Soon I would get used to the maze of stairways and rooms and random encounters with wandering patients; but on that first day, in the middle of a summer afternoon, I was on a movie set.

I stepped back and turned into the gaze of two women watching me through a dormer window. The older one smiled. "Hello."

For a confused two seconds I was caught out. I'd never seen women like these, except in magazines. I remember fine honey skin, auburn hair and Middle-Eastern eyes. It was a shock. I must have looked like a startled meerkat.

"Hello?" the older one repeated.

"Oh, sorry, I'm Tim, Joe's friend from vet school."

"Well, Tim from vet school," she said, "I'm Ashira and this is Joe's twin sister, Jarrah. Come in and we'll have a cup of coffee."

I stepped – well, stumbled really – back into the living room and tried to seem like an adult. It was years ago, but I can still describe the scene in detail. Ashira, in her fifties, was slightly built with fine features, as was Jarrah, but she was about my age, a girl clearly blossoming on her mother's genes, her beauty flowing out of an ancient world. If you're familiar with the famous portrait of Queen Nefertiti, you'll know what I mean.

"Joe says you've become great friends." Ashira smiled.

"Yes, I think so."

"You're a good-looking boy."

"Oh, okay."

"Do you play a lot of sport?"

"A bit."

"Your mother must be very proud."

"Sometimes."

Jarrah was watching carefully, her dark hair framing the side of her elfin face. She was sitting on a silk piano stool, her hands under her thighs, her honeyed features bathed in flickering sunlight.

When the trees outside moved in the breeze, soft shadows danced across her eyes. I was mesmerised.

"Jarrah is at Sydney University too," her mother said, beaming. "Studying medicine."

Jarrah's gaze became merciless. "Are you gay, Tim?"

"Sorry?"

Ashira rolled her eyes. "Jarrah, please."

"It's a simple question," the girl persisted, staring at me with a laser-like gaze.

"Jarrah, stop it."

"So are you, Tim?"

"Me? No, I don't think so, I like women."

"Me too."

"Jarrah!"

"Mum's just anxious because I'm out."

"Oh."

"Out this morning, as it happens," she continued, "over the bagels and lox. How about you – any outages planned?"

"I'm pretty much in, I think."

"Good for you, but you'd make a great gay man."

"Thanks."

"Jarrah, please. Tim, your sexuality is none of our business, but it seems that Dr Jarrah Franken has made it hers."

"Frankenstein, Mum – it's Frankenstein."

"I know your name, dear – it's your father's, and I'm proud to make it mine – but I'm just not sure it's suitable for an attractive young medical student."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh dear. Tim, do you have a sister as dreadful as this girl? I bet you don't."

"I'm an only child."

Jarrah was watching, ready to pounce. I knew exactly what she wanted to say, so I said it for her. "But many only children *are* gay."

"And where would musical comedy be without them!" Dr

Franken boomed, surging back into the room. For a small man he has an amazingly penetrating presence. He'd taken off his black tailcoat and wiped off his Groucho Marx moustache. The pince-nez had been transformed into sensible spectacles, and the clown shoes were gone in favour of bare feet; yet he was still an intense theatrical force.

"So how are the ladies treating you, Tim?"

"Very well."

Jarrah stared at her father hard. "A lady and a lesbian called Frankenstein, Dad, and we're treating him fine."

"I take it Jarrah's told you her news?"

"Yes, just then."

"It's taken up a lot of airtime today; but that's okay, it's our first family outing."

"Aside from the vaudeville," said Jarrah.

"I'm sorry about that, Tim, I've been working on a little comedy routine about Texan fundamentalism and the right to life."

"Plenty of laughs in abortion, Dad – should go down a treat."

Dr Franken's smile faded. "It's going too far, isn't it?"

"You know it is."

"But they're insane."

"Who, all those male obstetricians?"

"No, the fascists who politicise love."

"What's love got to do with it?"

"It's how they justify their fascism, Jarrah – the love of creation, God's love for the sanctity of unborn life."

"It's still not funny, Dad."

Sitting in the Frankens' elegant salon with a fine china cup of Turkish coffee on my lap, I could only think about my parents. The words lesbian, abortion and gay had rarely left their lips, at least not with me in the room; if my mother Sally had been introduced to a Jewish obstetrician called Frankenstein, her mouth would have set in concrete.

"What about you, Tim?" asked Dr Franken. "Any ideas from the

veterinary science point of view?"

"We haven't got to the reproductive bits yet, we're still learning about feet."

"Oh-ho, a sense of humour, excellent."

"Hilarious," said Jarrah. "Come on, Tim, what do you think?"

My mind was somewhere between a riot and a ride on a roller-coaster. I knew a little bit about fundamentalist Christianity, thanks to my mother, but I'd never been in a family debate in my life and, even if I had, the family Wilde would never have tackled the politicisation of love. I'd certainly never thought about it, but I just couldn't sit there like a lumbering boofhead.

"I don't really know how love works," I began carefully, "and I'm not sure that anyone really does, but …"

"Well, that's a cop-out," Jarrah said through a wicked smile.

"Let him finish," Dr Franken cautioned.

Let me finish? Let me finish what? I had no idea what I was going to say next. All I could do was grab the next wave and try not to land on my head. "But love doesn't seem easy to control," I continued, still cautious, "and if you can't control it in yourself, I don't see how you can legislate to control it in anybody else."

There was silence. I'm not saying it was a stunned silence, but it was certainly long enough for me to catch my breath.

"Good on you, Tim, you hit 'em with the perfect combo – left, right, left. Round one to you."

Joe had appeared at the dormer windows and was now leaning bare-chested against the polished timber, wearing a set of boxing gloves, with sweat pouring down his muscular chest.

"Don't walk in here like that, Joe," his mother said quickly, "I don't want you dripping on the rugs."

"It's okay, Mum, I know, I know. I'll have a shower and in the meantime leave my mate alone, okay? He's just a good-hearted goy from the beach."

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That week the love gods smiled. Stardust was in the air. Aphrodite and Eros had a logistics meeting and tweaked the cosmic algorithm for Sophia and Joe. It was surely the gods who made me buy Jarrah a cocktail a few days before the Sydney Symphony Orchestra launched its season of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*.

When I told Joe my cosmic theory he yelped. "Sophia playing *Scheherazade*? Fantastic! The Enchantress of a Thousand and One Nights."

I don't remember everything he said as he surged towards the Opera House for his date with *Scheherazade*, but I know he was adamant that the ferries scudding in and out of Circular Quay were like fireflies floating on honey. From the Botanic Gardens he noted intoxicating jasmine scent billowing on a zephyr-breeze.

It was a lovely night, no question, although it would have been nice to be in it without Joe's live commentary. The bars along the Opera House walk, he explained, were fields showered in stardust with beautiful courting gods and angels playing for their future lives. Under the waxing moon the giant sails of the Opera House were the wings of a giant pleasure machine.

"*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*," Joe puffed as he advanced before us.

"*A stately pleasure-dome decree;*
"*Where Alph, the sacred river, ran,*
"*Through caverns measureless to man*
"*Down to a sunless sea*."

"Oh for God's sake!" Jarrah yelled at his back.

"Just setting the mood."

"It's set already, like blancmange."

"It's enchantment."

"We get it, Joe, just shut up for a while, okay," she pleaded.

"But you do know what Scheherazade means?"

"You know we don't."

"Scheherazade means 'The person whose realm is free'. Isn't that amazing?"

When he turned with a grin, I could practically see the capillaries in his eyes pulsing with stardust. "She's a free woman, the mistress of her domain," he added breathlessly. "She can be whoever she wants to be."

All three of us had gone to some trouble for Sophia, whom Joe seemed to have conflated with the Persian princess. It was Jarrah and Joe who introduced me, a tee-shirt wearing surfer, to the unheard-of idea of dressing for pleasure. Jarrah was in a 1950s red silk Jacques Heim dress with a flared pleated skirt and red shoes, and Joe was in a Tom Ford-inspired charcoal bespoke suit with white shirt and silver tie.

At just over 65 kilos, Joe's muscular welterweight body makes him an ideal model. Jarrah's delicate frame does the same. Plodding along in their company, I felt like an expensively dressed giraffe.

All around us, citizens of a certain age were edging carefully up the steps to the Concert Hall, but Joe covered the ground in a series of bounds. When he reached the top, he spun around, grinning with very white teeth under flashing dark eyes. He spread his feet and punched the air with a left-right left-right boxing flurry. Pashmina-cloaked ladies flinched and an ancient gentleman in a cream fedora raised his cane.

When we finally slid towards our seats in the centre of the tenth row of the stalls, I feared the worst. It wasn't just that my classical music experience began and ended with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, it was the aura of Concert Hall self-satisfaction. We seemed to be in a crowd of devotees hoping to venerate music as an escape from the crass epidemic that is the twenty-first century; yet, fifty years

ago, this same audience would have been standing on their seats screaming at The Kinks and The Rolling Stones.

There was a dimming of lights, some furtive water slurps from the audience and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra filed onto the Concert Hall stage. I counted at least twenty-five violins, plus cellos, but there was no sign of Sophia. Joe was craning forward in the manner of an anxious ibis, and I was surprised to see that Jarrah had a small pair of binoculars.

"Can't wait to meet her afterwards?" I asked her.

"Nope, I need to study the alien in detail."

"You'll never keep those away from Joe."

"He's got his own."

"Right."

Finally there were just two empty chairs left next to the conductor's podium. A slight little man with a shaved skull appeared first and then finally Sophia materialised to a smattering of applause from the crowd. She strolled through the orchestra with grace, her back straight in a simple black dress, her dark hair tied in a bun accentuating her long pale neck, her violin and bow in her left hand. Even ten rows from the stage, I could feel the measured calm of an ice queen.

"God, she's a knockout," Jarrah said, peering through her binoculars.

"Told you," said Joe. "This is unbelievable, I think she's guest violin."

Sophia took her seat while the little man turned, faced the orchestra, lifted his violin to his chin and nodded to the oboes. A single note flowed into the concert hall. The strings followed and then the rest of the instruments. When they were tuned, he sat content. Meanwhile Sophia looked through the audience into the unknowable, her face as pale as sculptured marble. The conductor appeared; there was a flurry of applause, to which he responded with a long bow, and then it began.

To be honest, the best way to understand what happened to

us that night is to look for *Scheherazade* on You Tube. Nothing I can say here will ever do justice to those fifty minutes of music by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. After a few heavy chords from the full orchestra, Sophia stood and played a solo of such sinuous beauty and yet so full of melancholia I was taken to a place I'd never been before. I'd never heard the essence of love distilled with that kind of intensity. Then the orchestra took over with a beautiful sweeping melody flowing like waves on a caramel sea. For four movements the harmonies twisted and turned, streaming through delicate devotion, cold fury and rapture. Sophia's solos returned, taking me deeper into the sensory journey. She seemed to be channelling the sound of space and time.

The spirit she distilled was extraordinary, although I'm not sure if it was made more potent by the fact that I knew her. If she'd been a stranger it might have been different, I'm not sure. Whatever the case, I can pretty much guarantee that if you're falling in love you should devote fifty minutes to *Scheherazade.* The enchantment will take you deeper into who you are and the lover you could become.

As we edged through the crowds at intermission, I expected a lot of chatter, especially from Joe, but he was silent, lost I assumed in adoration. On a balcony overlooking the harbour with a drink in his hand, he stared expressionless at the distant lights of Kings Cross.

"I'm going home," he said, swallowing the last of his champagne. "This was the biggest mistake of my life."

What do you do when the love you've been searching for your whole life suddenly disappears?

"She's married, she had her affair and now she's home in Transylvania with her husband."

Such is the advice of your best friend and business partner, who is a Sydney veterinary surgeon just like you.

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