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## Dial A Pavlova - Readers' Choice Retrospective by *Cassandra Atherton*

I was shopping in Alannah Hill when you severed the tip of your pinky. I was glad it was your pinky. Index fingers are so overrated. You were making mini meringues. Pavlova. Pavlov's dog. I was trying on a begonia "Oh My Lord" slip and deciding between the lime gingham rosette and the scarlet velvet choker. Diamond dogs. Tattooed ear. You didn't wait for me. You sliced the strawberries and peeled the kiwi fruit before I had even signed the credit card transaction form. When I stopped to consider the peach zebra striped underwear, the bald kiwi fruit slid across the bench and you julienned your pinky. You didn't wait for me. You didn't even wait for me to get in my car. You picked up the knife without thinking. You picked up the knife even though it is my job to slice the fruit, Lengthwise. In twelve segments. Twelve to circumnavigate the pavlova. Pavlovas. Pavlovae. Twelve paper-thin slices to settle into the cream. Kittens' tongues. You picked up the knife. Sever. Severe. Serves you right.

When I got home with my toffee-apple Alannah bag you were in the bedroom. Twenty-five pavlova bases were lining the bench. I didn't notice anything was wrong until I saw the tip of your finger on the chopping block. Initially I was impressed you hadn't cut into the marble bench top. Vertical scratches scouring the surface. And then I saw your bulbous hemisphere in a pool of blood. I thought you might be experimenting with raspberry coulis until I tasted it. Bitter orange. Tangelo. Like the peacharines my great aunt cross-fertilised in her garden. I pushed your fingertip to the side of the board with the end of my knife and sliced the apples. Pink Lady. Pink Ladies. Rydell High. The juice foamed for an instant before it mixed with the congealed blood. At last a real Pink Lady apple. Snowy white flesh tinged with remnants of red. A tie-dyed apple drinking your blood from the board. Soaking it up. Trapping your blood in its core. Feeding bloodied pips. Cox's Orange Pippin.

I place the slices of pink lady in the centre of the first six pavlovas. Inside the circle of halved strawberries. You call to me from the bedroom but I do not tell you I put apple on the pavlovas. You would never consent. It was always strawberries and kiwi fruits. Tradition. Fiddler on the Roof was your favourite musical. Topol was an older man but I never fantasised about him, much to your dismay. I only ever really fancied Jeremy Irons in Brideshead Revisited and Charles Bronson in Twinky. I never liked Sean Connery though. His accent drives me nuts. Macadamia. Caramelised cashews. I wonder if they would taste good as a Pavlova topping. You are sprawled on the bed watching a documentary on Jacqueline du Pre. You are crying not because your pinky hurts or because du Pres was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, but because you feel sorry for her cello. You once told me you could almost hear the strings calling to you. Begging you to take it inside. To look after it. I just wanted you to look after me and you couldn't even do that. All you could do was make pavlovas.

Your pinky stump is spotting the eiderdown. You tell me I will have to find a job. You tell me that you won't be able to make pavlovas for a while. I ask you what you are good for if you aren't good for making pavlovas. You shake your head and pat my side of the double bed. Slowly your blood soaks through the thick and thirsty paper towel you tied around and over the top of your finger. It spatters in a fine line across my pillow when you pat the bed. You draw your finger across my lips to give me a cherry gloss and kiss me. Reclaiming your blood from my lips. In that second I imagine you are Dracula and have the power to "take me away from all these Pavlovas". You ask me to pickle the tip of your finger in a jar. I decide to use the pinking shears to cut a circle of spotted material to cover the lid. Zig Zagged circumference. I always preferred diameters or radiuses. Radii. The Radison. A radium.

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Cassandra Atherton is a Melbourne writer and choreographer. She has almost completed her PhD on the...>>

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h no! Walking through the store, I felt that slight feeling. You know the one -- that bit of discomfort, maybe a slight wetness, or just a secret knowledge that seems to come from nowhere. I looked around, of course no-one could notice but I was embarrassed anyway.... >>

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Boil half a pack of pasta spirals, add a dash of curry powder; serve with salt and pepper. To drink, a cup of hot water--fresh from the kettle. Dessert: a little square of coloured paper and a few cones of hydro to help it kick in. Ignore your aching stomach--sit back and enjoy the colours as the hi... >>

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Circumference always reminds me of circumnavigate and circumlocution. As I cut the material I think about snipping into the fleshy pad on my index fingertip. Could I pickle both our fingers together? Would the pinking shears leave a cross in the centre of my fingerprint? Like Buffy's necklace. Or the dangly bit on rosary beads.

The phone rings twice and I agree to deliver four of my best pavlovas with the strawberry and kiwi fruit topping to Caroline Springs. I reach deep into the bottom cupboard for the cardboard delivery boxes and settle the pavlovas into them. One by one. At the last moment I decide to replace one of the perfect pavlovas with a blood spattered one. Syrup confetti. Glistening. I can almost see the greedy fingers reaching for another slice.

You call me into the bedroom and bleed on my thigh. Still. Throb. Thrill. I sit cross legged. Waiting. Watching. Whaching. Like that Glass Essay on Emily Bronte. I straddle you in a moment, holding your blunt finger above our heads. Scarlet shower. Carrie. Scream. I want you to rain on me until I return to the womb. But you only want me to design the pavlovas and spoon you in the afternoons between two and three. I let you finish watching Rikki Lake before I climax. Your jam tart blood reminding me of the Queen of Hearts. Alice In Wonderland. Squealing pig.

If I had your baby I wouldn't have to work. If I had your baby I could watch Rikki Lake and be spooned in the afternoon between two and three. You would adore me, the mother of your child. Like Elvis and Priscilla. But then I'd probably give birth to a screaming pig called Alice. Our sex life would end like Elvis and Priscilla's and I would go back to work part time with a pot belly and show everybody photos and movies scanned into my ibook of "our daughter". No, pavlova designing would have to satisfy me.

Babies would spoil any surreptitious visits to Alannah Hill and drinks at Bistro Vite late on a Thursday night. And anyway, nobody really likes babies when they are left alone with them. Alice would be the "apple of her father's eye", and "the bane of her mother's life". We would speak in magazine cliché and cluck over her all the time. And she would grow to be more beautiful than me with smoother skin and thicker hair. She would have sex at twelve like Lolita and you would stalk her lover, tormented with the knowledge that you could never have her like that. Spooning between two and three is inappropriate with your daughter. I would slap her. Red hand print. Because she was me and not me. Because she was the me I lost when I gave birth to her. Because she is a squealing pig.

He eats the pavlova with your blood coulis first. I want to call it 'jus' but desserts always have 'coulis'. You convince me to try a slice. I imagine your blood coating his throat and hold out my hand. He sucks my fingers to the base of their stems. I get confused. Blood, fingers, teeth and pavlovas entwine. He nips the pad of my index finger and I think of your pickled fingertip. In a jar. Suffocating. Deteriorating. I lick the cream from my palm and we have sex, standing up against the back of the front door. I am still holding the second pavlova box when he slumps against me. He gives me sixty dollars for the pavlovas and fifty dollars for the sex. I think of a new slogan: 'Dial a Pavlova: Pavlovas with more than just a smile.' Your blood is an aphrodisiac. He rings to tell me he wants another pavlova with 'raspberry coulis' next Tuesday.

I go into the bedroom and pinch your finger over a bowl. I remember how fashionable it is to cook with bodily fluids. I wish I could steal the heat from our bodies when we make love and mix it into the cream. Maybe I should leave the mixing bowl in our bedroom next time. Maybe it would just curdle.

The phone rings and I deliver four more blood spattered pavlovas to Taylors Lakes and Keilor Downs. They call me back each time for sex. I think I like it best in the kitchen sink. Something about the cleansing. Baptismal images. Like Anna Kournikova and Enrique Iglesias in the 'Escape' video clip.

You are still bleeding on the sheets when I return. Wasteful. I have two hundred and fifty dollars plus the pavlova money. I tell you I am going out for groceries. I go to Alannah Hill. To the other store in Prahran. Having sex with strangers to buy Alannah Hill clothes seems so apt. Alannah, herself, would approve of my methods. I need bigger hair and rounder eyes. I need a perfume break every half hour. I need Alannah's 'Nursery Rhyme' lingerie in baby blue. The sales assistants wrap my underwear in lime tissue. I don't go home straight away, I want to carry my toffee apple Alannah bag around for a while. I want to feel it skim my leg. Swinging. Seesaw. Never wanting to touch the ground. I decide to buy a beeper for my pavlova sex. I decide to buy a cherry coloured beeper to match my Alannah bag. I decide to boost sales that I will offer a free blow job with any two pavlovas purchased or more. I like the

placement of "or more". It is ambiguous. I will tell you that I am going to offer every fourth customer a free silver plated cake server. It sounds classier than a blow job.

I meet a friend at The Cheeky Dog. She has a Scanlan and Theodore bag. I am impressed. Although, as she works full time, I secretly feel I have the upper hand. She is on her lunch break and I drive her back to her car in Swanston street after we finish our white chocolate macchiatos. She tells me that she always parks in front of the brothel. Scarlet terrace. Coloured lights. Faded Grand Prix flags. I know what she means. I park in front of the brothel on Thursday nights to remind me. She tells me she's a whore. I tell her that the whole Britney Spears' virgin thing won't last. Nikki and Paris Hilton are the next Britney. Next month virginity will be out. She tells me that she only works to pay for her Scanlan and Theodore addiction. I tell her that I only design pavlovas to feed my Alannah addiction. We both thought we could work, save money and get out. You never get out. You never save money. You just keep buying things to make yourself feel better. She has a baby girl called Alice. I have the looking glass.

You sit on our bed waiting for the wound to heal. As night falls I pinch your finger until the bright blood squirts into my jar. Stained glass windows. Fenestration. Nasturtiums. I sketch a pavlova decorated with orange nasturtiums. Peppery petals softly overlapping around the circumference. I work out that if I sell three hundred and sixty three pavlovas a month I can buy half of Alannah's latest collection. I turn off my beeper and press my lips to your forehead. You gnaw at my collarbone. Pawing me. What will happen when you don't like my pavlova designs? Will blow jobs be enough to keep us together? You roughly shove your hand down my top and I worry you will pop my top button. I don't say anything. I have said things in the past and all they resulted in were screaming matches where you called me a beauty queen and I cried in the bath. Wrinkly fingers. Red blotchy legs. Runny nose.

Sometimes you let me bring a brandy balloon into the bedroom. On those nights you drink gin and I lick you with a golden tongue. Now you cling to me in the velvetine shadows. Nuzzling my neck. Peeling off my panties. What do we look like in bed together? Do we look comfortable? Do we look like a couple? If I let you sleep with your festering finger on my left breast will that make us a couple? You puncture the space between my legs. I am excited by your weight pinning my body to the creased sheet. You are heavy and moist and sticky. I think about pink lemonade and meringues when we have sex. I always do. They just pop into my head as I spiral out of your arms and rest on the roof. Watching your body undulate. I realise that even the French Lieutenant's woman knew The Rules as I break all of them. No wedding bells for me. Just endless unmade beds. And undressed pavlovas.

I crawl out from underneath your sleeping body. The man from Keilor Downs rings for two pavlovas, a blow job and straight sex on the dining table. He says that he will only need fifteen minutes in between and we can share one of the pavlovas. He wants the one with raspberry coulis. I wonder if you will ever chop off your other pinky. Or any of your fingers for that matter. Your pinky is healing. I will try and convince you to blood let. The customers want coulis. A lost customer represents one quarter of an Alannah skirt. A father of two in Calder Rise beeps me and orders a birthday pav and three mini pavs. I give him a coupon for three free sex acts and return in time for the dining table sex and a spoonful of pavlova. Your finger is healing and soon you will want to deliver the pavlovas. I think about setting up a rival business. Riven. Driven. Black market pavlovas. With licorice for decoration. Funeral, like Hypnotic Poison. I could never do it. I don't like to work hard. I decide to keep my private customers to myself. When I get home you are at the kitchen bench counting pavlova boxes. I tell you my idea for funeral pavlovas and you begin chopping licorice straps with your other hand. I hold my breath but you are more careful this time. You hold your pinky up and out of the way of the chopping block. I consider nudging you but it's not really in my nature. We fight, you call me a beauty queen and I sulk in the bath.

At 10.05 you bring me a piece of pavlova on the back of an envelope. Peace offering Piece offering. Slice. I want the strawberries to float across the bath. Like apple bobbing. But it sinks and the pavlova-cream makes oily circles around my exposed toes. I hold out my arms thinking that the heat may thin your blood but you leave me for the second min-pav in the kitchen. I wonder if anyone has ever been jealous of a pavlova. I wonder if pavlovas have ever broken up marriages. If people have ever preferred to spend time with their pavlovas rather than their partners. I wonder if I taste like cream and strawberries and water. I lick my arm but it only tastes like skin. If I drip water on the lino you will mop up my droplets so I go to bed and let our sheets dry my body. My skin feels slick. If you bleed on me I could be your pavlova. Pavlova personified. I would prefer to be a strawberry shortcake. Meringue

disappears on your tongue and I think I want to stay with you. Or the Caroline Springs' man. You are definitely my first choice. The Caroline Springs' man has children. He takes them to Smorgy's on Wednesdays and if they are noisy he pours cans of sambuca and cola down their throats. I could get him to send the children away. There must be lots of boarding schools in Switzerland. Everyone on T.V sends their kids there and often they come back older and villainous. Surprisingly, the villainous thing doesn't bother me. Cassius is a better man than Caesar. Without doubt. He didn't foam at the mouth or speak in Latin when he was stabbed. I mean, he ran onto the point of his sword. That's courageous. I wouldn't run onto the point of a sword even for an Alannah dress. What would be the point? Well, I know the point of the sword pun here, but I mean what would be the use when I couldn't wear the Alannah dress because I'd be dead or worse, bleeding. Messy death is the worst kind of death. I want to be buried in a 'Sex Kitten' shoe string strapped dress from the Alannah Summer collection from 2001. We didn't make enough pavlovas that year for me to afford one. I think you should achieve everything in death.

I decorate a pavlova for our dinner. I use pink gumballs and musk sticks to represent me and the ears of Caramello Koalas to represent you. I want to tell you that I will always be your partner in pavlovas but you think I am a pink princess. Not a pavlova partner. A Molly Ringwald. In Sixteen Candles or Pretty in Pink. You tell me that you wanted your ex-girlfriend to play Molly in a stage production of Breakfast Club. She played the Ally Sheedy character. I want you to give me diamond earrings. I want to dye my hair with Fera and have chocolate chip cookies and tea with my first love. I want to slice your fingers like Chinese sausages. Spicy plum. You grab me around the waist. I nestle into your thighs. You watch the pavlova as your throb against me. I know what comes next. You roll me in sugar and cream. Sprinkling icing sugar on my eyelashes. I pretend I am the Snow Queen. Ice Princess. Lara with a fur hat. You pretend I am a pavlova. I stick to you. I remember for a second how much you like mushy peas and realise I haven't made them for you for ages. Ice ages. I make a mental note to make you mushy peas after I finish my deliveries. Maybe you can come with me tonight. To Caroline Springs.

You nip my lip with your incisor. Inside. Insider. Raking your fingernails down my throat. In those moments you shave my body of sugared cream. My sugar daddy. You have kissed better doughnuts. You lick the pink cream from my throat. Cameo. Slithering between the cracks in your teeth and seeping into the crowns. You trace my veins with the blunt tip of your severed pinky. You begin to understand.

You watch from the car as I deliver four of our finest pavlovas to the Caroline Springs' man. You deliver our pamphlets to the neighbouring houses while I sink to my knees and unbuckle his leather belt. Snake. Snakes and Ladders. Serpents' eggs. Sirens. As he dozes I message you. The door is open, the kitchen cluttered. You take two kebab skewers from the sink and the Little Bo BEEP bottle from my bag and pierce his thumb just above the joint. He jumps. Jumping Jack. And I remember the orange jumping castles we hired for my fourteenth birthday party. You squeeze his thumb over the jar while I kiss him until there is no air left in the room. His thumb is drained white. Translucent. Throbbing beads of blood. You leave first. I give him a voucher and a fluorescent yellow band aid. He orders three more pavlovas for Friday. Taylor's Lakes' man, Deer Park man and Calder Rise man all make their donations and then we drive home. In silence. Golden silence. I rest my head against your shoulder. I have won you over. The Little Bo BEEP bottles are strapped to your belt. Like The Professional. The blood stains the glass scarlet. Liquid rouge. I get three more calls from three men in Brunswick. I think that Brunswick is full of frustrated artists. Flawed geniuses. But I pass Franco Cozzo in Sydney Road and change my mind. We stop off at each house but as we made a policy not to blood let until the third order I deliver traditional pavs with the 'coulis' dripping like wax down the side and French kiss each man on the way out.

I meet him in the emergency lane on the freeway. I don't know which freeway. It doesn't matter. He parks behind my car and taps on my window. Long fingers. Musician's fingers. Square, white nails. I feed him pavlova in the back seat. He lets me suck his fingers and nibble at the quick on either side of his thumbnail. I know in that instant that I will leave you. For him. For his floppy hair and perfect fingers. He puts his arm around me and tells me that I'm 'high maintenance'. I tell him that a girl needs to look after herself. He says he doesn't believe in romance. I shrug his arm from around my shoulders and straddle him. He thrusts into me. Silently. Choking on each breath he sucks from my open mouth. Slump. I wonder if 'slump' is an example of onomatopoeia. He reads my mind and cracks his knuckles I reel. Pink cotton reel. Cotton candy. Floss. I name him "Angel Clare". I imagine he needs me

as much as I need him. And his fingers. I ask him if I can sleep in his bed and make him welsh rarebit in the mornings. I know his answer. This is transitory. We make a list of rules. He likes me to be a beauty queen. I choose him. Over you. Every time. Over pavlovas and Alannah. He only chooses sex. No attachment. No commitment. Casual. Not even part-time. Volatile. Like high risk investments. I try to explain the 'Harry Met Sally' argument but I lie about the friendship part and change it to casual sex. I say that a man and a woman can never have casual sex without one of them becoming committed. Then I remember Vanilla Sky and change my mind about arguing altogether. I know that when you see me, you will forgive me. But your forgiveness is nothing compared to his fingers. I imagine them chopped up on our pavlovas. Perfect circles of skin. I think about the word 'palaver' and decide I am in a palaver. Pavlova. Pavlovae.

You hunt for us. Night of the hunter. Hide and seek. Sought after. 'Good looking sort,' Angel breathes. I hear your Little Bo Peep bottles tinkling. In your belt. Orion. Down Under saucepan. You flatten your palms against the window. I scream his name. It cuts through the Jack the Ripper night. Slice. Sluice. Raspberry juice. I see your face as he grinds my hips against the cherry upholstery. You christen us with blood. Splashed across the windscreen as you howl my name. You leave your last pavlova for me on the bonnet. Hood. Little Red Riding Hood.

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