

Odyssey *in a* Teacup



PAULA HOUSEMAN

ODYSSEY IN A TEACUP

Paula Houseman

Title: Odyssey in a Teacup

Author: Paula Houseman

Publisher: WildWoman Publishing

Sydney, Australia

Amazon Kindle Publishing Consultant: Lama Jabr

Sydney, Australia

Copyright © 2015 Paula Houseman, WildWoman Publishing.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Connect with Paula Houseman

Website: <http://paulahouseman.com>

Social Networks

<https://www.linkedin.com/pub/paula-houseman/17/89/320>

<https://www.pinterest.com/paulahouseman>

<https://twitter.com/paulahouseman>

DEDICATION

For Kelly and Jared

CONTENTS

Part One: In Hot Water

Chapter One: Family Jewels

Chapter Two: Fourplay

**PART ONE:
IN HOT WATER**

Chapter One: Family Jewels

‘Hello, I’m Ruth Roth,’ I said to my bedroom mirror when I was five. I talked to it often, always starting with hello because my generation was brought up with manners ... or effective social conditioning, anyway.

This time, it replied with a bitchy reminder. ‘Yes, but you’re *just* Ruth. Not Ruth Michelle, nor Ruth Katherine. No middle name; one syllable. Not like Myron.’

Eleven months older than me, my brother My-ron Ste-phen Law-rence Roth got two middle names and six syllables. Even to my five-year-old sensibilities, the difference in naming reeked of injustice, so I whined through my gappy milk teeth to our father, Joe (Jo-seph Ben-ja-min Roth).

‘It’th not fair! Why did Myron get two middle name’th and I got none?’

‘Because the extra initials will look good printed in his cheque book.’

What fucking checked book? He’s only six years old! Oh, I knew these things were adult books, but still, fair’s fair. ‘I want a checked book too!’

‘Girls don’t need one.’

And there it was. Four bloody words that set a precedent for my standing in the family, and beyond. Then Syl-vi-a Es-ther Roth, our mother, put in her two cents’ worth, not only sealing the deal, but supergluing it, further contributing to my thorny relationship with mirrors.

‘*Oeuf!* What difference does it make? *Pest!*’

Our parents were born in Egypt of European ancestry. They are multilingual but mainly speak to each other in French. *Oeuf* means egg. Others might preface an irritated response with ‘Shit!’ Or ‘Godammit, child!’ But not Sylvia. I never questioned this as I assumed it was the norm, just like her use of *pest*. This word often closed a sentence, kind of like ‘Amen’ at the end of a prayer or creed. If it is so and so be it, then what’s to question? *Pest* thus became a metonym for Ruth.

My feelings about being a nuisance not worthy of a middle name grew legs on my first day in Grade 1, when the teacher, Mrs Taylor, called the roll:

‘Rivers, Susan Marie.’

‘Present,’ said Susan Marie Rivers.

‘Roberts, Paul Malcolm.’

‘Present,’ said Paul Malcolm Roberts.

Mrs Taylor paused for a bit before she said, ‘Roth, Ruth.’

‘Present.’

She paused again. ‘Don’t you have a middle name?’

‘No.’

‘Oh.’ She said it like it was something bad. The rest of the class must have thought so too because they sniggered.

I often fantasised about what it would be like to have a different name, an extra one, or even some extra syllables. It wasn’t like it was a big ask. And as we students mastered the vowels in the early years, I got my wish. Sort of. Shaun Farr, a very clever boy in my class, came up with the nickname, Rath-Reth-Rith-Roth-Ruth. That the other kids could even be bothered saying it whenever they spoke to me filled me with a sense of importance. Still, the name Ruth, in and of itself, brought its own problems.

My well-meaning, heavily accented Yugoslav, lots-of-syllables aunt, Miroslava (Miri), pronounced ‘th’ as ‘t’. So to her, I was ‘Root’.

‘Hullaw, Root. How arrr yoo, Root? Vot did yoo doo et school dis veek, Root?’

Joe was dirty-minded and foul-mouthed, so from an early age, I knew that a root wasn’t just the underground part of a plant. My older cousins knew it too, and because we had to spend every Sunday with the relatives, I was well and truly ‘rooted’ by early adolescence. It was only then that it became clear there was a need to stand my ground with Sylvia.

‘I AM NOT SEEING THESE PEOPLE ON SUNDAYS ANYMORE, YOU CAN’T MAKE ME!’

‘DON’T YOU DARE YELL AT ME!’

‘You yell at *me!*’

‘*Oeuf!* I’M YOUR MOTHER, I’M ALLOWED! And this is not a democracy; you’ll do as you’re told. *Pest!*’

That she demonstrated a political bent was pretty impressive; that she got her way was an outrage. But even when I was old enough to exercise my civil liberties, I couldn’t

escape my name, and yet another challenge that came with it.

The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, a movie released in 1972, popularised the expression to ‘cry Ruth’, meaning ‘to vomit’. To ‘cry Ruth’ became a national catchphrase. Friends, relatives and acquaintances alike hurled around me *ad nauseam*. It was awful at first, but then—in a perverse kind of way—I rejoiced in it. Being Ruth made me the centre of attention. Only one name with only one syllable but by God, I was one of the cool people! At least until the saying lost currency and I was once again uncool. Even knowing I had the same name as a biblical heroine didn’t appease me.

‘*Oeuf!* You’re never satisfied, *pest!*’

I might have been satisfied if I didn’t feel like a gatecrasher. Sylvia had fallen pregnant with me when Myron was only two months old. It was not exactly a dream come true. No woman in her right mind would want to get pregnant on the back of giving birth. It makes sense then that I was accidental, not incidental, but they (she and Joe) told me I was a ‘mistake’. Big difference between an accident and a mistake. Huge one! That label—feeling unwanted—was so unfair because even though there had been a nine-month gestational war between Sylvia and me, I slipped out of her vagina quickly and smoothly, rather like the soldiers slunk out of the Trojan Horse. Sylvia had conveniently forgotten her epic labour with Myron and she forgave him for the nasty perineal tears he’d caused, probably because he toed the line thereafter, where I was always stepping on it and over it.

Myron the sycophant was their jewel in the crown, invested with their hopes and dreams. I was the misfit, like the ugly duckling who ended up in the wrong family. I’m not ugly, though; Joe often told me I’d get by because of my looks. But he never said anything about substance. And just like in the story, being different, especially in the fifties and sixties, translated to ugly. Or invisible.

If you could have seen me back then, you’d have noticed the difference in appearance between them and me. And that hasn’t changed. Sylvia, Joe and Myron are tall, pale-skinned and blue-eyed. Sylvia and Myron have thick, blond hair; Joe’s hair—most of which he lost in his twenties—is thin and Grecian Formula brown. All three of them are double-chinned butterballs with appetites like Jabba the Hutt, and the same sluggish metabolism. If I were visible back then, it would have surprised you to know that my

appetite could match theirs and Jabba's (seems *my* thyroid works much more efficiently). If I were visible, you'd have seen the smallish, oval face, the large hazel eyes, olive skin, and reddish, mid-brown hair—not straight, not curly, but with a definite kick in it, parted on the left and extending a couple of inches below my shoulders. And you would also have noticed the high waist and long legs, giving the impression of height. But this was an illusion. Even as an adult, I'm a short-arse, a neat sixty-three and a half inch package. Convert me to a one hundred and sixty-one-centimetre package, if you prefer. In fact, when a desire to fit in took hold, I'd often lapse into everyman's land, and could be converted into practically anything you wanted me to be. It all started with this:

'Oeuf! Why can't you be like everyone else? Pest!'

Tried that on for size; didn't like it. Nor did she, it seemed:

'Oeuf! Why do you have to be like everyone else? Pest!'

Despite Sylvia's browbeating, I was never quite the right fit for her, and her hectoring could be dispiriting. She used to tell me that if I felt intimidated by a schoolteacher, I should imagine them on the toilet. I imagined *her* on the crapper one night just after we sat down for dinner and she started nagging. It didn't work. Then, an image came to mind quite unexpectedly: an old blonde mare whinnying—*nei-ei-ei-ei-eigh, oe-oe-oe-oeuf, nei-ei-ei-ei-eigh*—snorting, baring its big pink gums and big yellow teeth, massive lips retracted and flapping away through the nickering. Now *this* worked for me. But it backfired because I started laughing. Sylvia reared up on her hindquarters and slapped me down.

Living with this woman was punishing. Luckily, I had an ally close by in my cousin, Ralph Brill (single syllable, no middle name; he didn't give a shit). Also an outsider in his family, Ralph and I were best friends, kindred spirits. We were separated by only one week (I was first), but inseparable and in sync (one of our many commonalities was our names; 'to ralph' is American slang for 'to vomit'). He and I bonded as infants from the moment we could see a world beyond our own feet and hands.

Unsurprisingly, as a baby I only ever commando crawled. Ralph, on the other hand, bear crawled on his hands and feet like a chimp or ... a bear. Our mothers often got together, and when Ralph and I grew tired of our quadrupedalling and slithering around the floor, we could be found asleep in a corner with our arms around each other. Like

twins. They thought it was *so* cute. Later on, though, the fact that Ralph and I didn't see the world through the eyes of our nearest and dearest was not considered so cute. We were soon labelled the black sheep of our respective families.

Ralph and I had each other's back and our rare arguments were over minor things, although we did come to blows over a serious issue when we were five and a half. Ralph helped himself to some of my ice cream—and I lost it! I would give my cousin the ruffled, broderie anglaise shirt off my back, but *not my bloody ice cream*. I yelled at him, called him Ralph Shitface Brill! He cried, but then he hit back. 'Well at least now *I've* got a middle name! *Na-nana-naa-nah!*' I cried. Geez, who knew boys could be so bitchy?

Ralph's mother, Norma, is my mother's older sister. Unlike Sylvia, Auntie Norma is short and has wispy brown hair. But like Sylvia, she's 'well-upholstered'; although, Sylvia never considered herself fat: 'The doctor told me I'm fleshy.' She shared this fact with Myron and me when I was eight and I was learning about synonyms at school.

'Fleshy is just a synonym for fat,' I informed her. I didn't know about political correctness back then, and I didn't witness a whole lot of tact demonstrated at home. I got sent to my room.

Norma is married to Albie. Of German descent, Albie has pug-like features, is short, pasty-faced and bald (or maybe that should that be aesthetically disadvantaged, vertically challenged, Caucasoid, and follicularly impaired). He used to be fairly solid, but now he's just plain ... fleshy. And like Porky Pig, Albie has a rampant st-t-t-tut-t-t-ter.

Where Norma's a kind soul, Albie is *eine widerliche Scheiße* (an odious turd). He's a brute, and for a long time Ralph was his whipping boy. Ralph's mental acuity was his sword; albeit one that had a bit of a double edge. When Albie ripped into him with a stuttered string of invective, Ralph matched and mocked with a stuttered response. Not a great idea when you know the aggressor will retaliate with a 'stuttered' physical comeback: thwack-thwack-thwack.

Ralph is one of three boys. His two brothers also bullied him. Respectively six and three years older than Ralph, George and Simon only deserve lower case initials befitting those with a Napoleon complex (Albie also suffers from small man syndrome, but he's an *Arschloch* [arsehole] with a capital A). Still, Ralph staunchly and compassionately defended his brothers: 'They're only aggressive because they've got such über-small

penises.’

And then there’s Louise. Three years younger than Ralph, she was a welcome ‘surprise’, *not* a mistake. Even so, she constantly whined (and still does). Ralph nicknamed his sister ‘Louwhiney’ from the time she started mewling.

As children, George and Simon were stubby like their father and looked like pit bulls, and Louwhiney was a bit of a porker like Norma. But Ralph was the runt of the litter. He was the proverbial ugly duckling. Short and skinny, he had disproportionately huge teeth in a tiny, pale face, which was hidden behind thick, black-rimmed coke-bottle glasses (to correct a lazy eye). With his magnified eyes and his fine, mid-brown hair sticking out all over the place, he looked like a novelty Tweety Bird toilet brush. Ralph was also bookish, in contrast to his rugged and sporty brothers. That he could outfox them and his father with his smarts pissed them off no end. And bullies will stop short at nothing to get the upper hand.

When we were six, Albie’s brother, Kevin, gave Ralph a duckling as a pet. On the Sunday family gatherings at Ralph’s place, he’d put a little string around Daffy’s neck, and he and I would take the duck for a walk up and down the street. On Ralph’s seventh birthday, when he came home from school and went to feed Daffy, he couldn’t find him. Ralph wasn’t too worried because Daff always showed up sooner or later. And that he did. At dinnertime. Plucked. Roasted. À l’orange. *Happy Birthday*.

Of course, this was Albie’s idea. Ralph was inconsolable.

‘L-I-let the b-b-b-boy have one of the d-d-drumsticks, Norma,’ Alfie barked. It was a supposedly magnanimous gesture.

Nice going, Dummkopf!

That night, Ralph went to bed emotionally exhausted and on an empty stomach.

He was a real trouper, and rarely complained about his lot. My family was equally dysfunctional, but where we were on easy street, Ralph’s parents had trouble making ends meet. We went on holidays to far-flung locations; Ralph’s family stayed close to home. Myron and I always got brand new clothes; Ralph got hand-me-downs—underpants included—from his Uncle Kevin’s son, Gavin (Simon inherited George’s clothes but they were always too worn to pass on to Ralph). Cousin Gavin is only a year older than Ralph but about four sizes larger, so his clothes swam on Ralph. Today, it

might look super cool to have the crack of your arse showing above your too loose, too low-slung jeans, but back then, it was kind of tragic. And we always heard the whispers—what a *nebbish* (poor thing)—amongst the relatives at our Sunday get-togethers.

The venue for these torturous gatherings rotated on a weekly basis: Ralph's place, our place, Uncle Isaac's. Isaac, Norma and Sylvia's brother, is married to Miri. Polite and reserved, Isaac is five years older than Sylvia, and two years younger than Norma. He and Sylvia are similar looking, with their height, blond hair and blue eyes, but Isaac is fairly trim. Miri is typically Slavic in appearance, with a wide forehead, round face, and high cheekbones. She's short and rotund, and has dark brown hair. Isaac and Miri have three daughters—Mary, Betty and Zelda. Mary is the same age as George, Betty is the same age as Simon, and Zelda is the same age as Louwhiney. The two older girls resemble their father in looks and build, but Zelda is built like Shamu, only with an attractive face (like Miri's).

On the Sunday gatherings at my home, my two best girlfriends, Maxine Mayer-Rose and Yvette Klein (Maxi and Vette), would join us. The kids hung out in the backyard and if it rained, we played board games, marbles or charades on the large front verandah, which was undercover. The adults usually huddled in the lounge, smoking, the women gossiping and the men telling jokes. Notwithstanding the different nationalities, they're all Jewish and except for Albie, they all speak Yiddish. When the gossip was a little too scandalous or the jokes a little too risqué, they switched from English to Yiddish, which we kids didn't understand. Because Yiddish and German sound similar, Albie could understand, and be understood.

One particular Sunday when it was our turn, the get-together was relocated to Ralph's place because it was Albie's birthday. I was allowed to bring Maxi and Vette. On this warm, breezy summer's day, the adults sat on the back porch. The men set up folding chairs and a makeshift table—an old door, minus the handle, resting on a trestle. The women covered it with a couple of tatty cream-coloured, embroidered tablecloths, and brought out plates of food. Norma had made white bread sandwiches (Vegemite, cheese and tomato, mortadella and tomato, and just tomato). Sylvia had baked three Betty Crocker packet cakes (chocolate fudge, chiffon, and ginger), and Miri contributed potato

chips, party pies, sausage rolls, cordial, bottles of soft drink, beer for the men, and champagne for toasting (where my family was comfortably off, Miri and Isaac Neuman were loaded).

The older cousins, who had long since opted out of these gatherings, were there as well. They sat with the adults. Maxi, Vette, Ralph and I were now fifteen—too young to sit with the olds; too old to sit with the small fries. So after loading up our paper plates with food, we positioned ourselves in the far back corner of the big, level yard on one of the few patches of grass that wasn't dead. Louwhiney and Zelda shared a picnic blanket just next to the porch. Everyone was happily stuffing their faces. For once, there was quietude and harmony. No eruptions of laughter after a joke, because no one was telling any. No oohs and aahs from the women after a juicy bit of gossip because no one was spreading any. Albie suddenly broke the silence, startling everyone as he yelled across the yard to Ralph.

‘Boy, you can t-t-t-take the B-b-bantam for a s-s-spin.’

Seemed Herr Birthday Boy was in an unusually good mood. Ralph was thrilled to bits. He had longed to ride Albie's precious Bantam motorbike since he'd had a taste of the experience about six months earlier. He disappeared into the shed in the other far corner of the yard, very carefully wheeled the bike out and proudly mounted her. He took off slowly. Hard to believe that he'd only ever ridden the bike once before, because in no time he looked like a pro. With a couple of tats, a Wyatt Earp handlebar moustache, an Amish beard, a short (or long) ponytail and a leather jacket, Ralph could have passed for a Hells Angel rookie. Sitting astride this Bonsai Harley, though, he hardly looked the part with peach fuzzed cheeks, spiky hair, Gavin's oversized T-shirt and loose, sunshine yellow seersucker short shorts. But he had the attitude. He also had a captive audience for a bit, although once he was cruising smoothly, no one paid him much attention.

As Ralph zoomed round and round the yard, Maxi, Vette and I skirted the fence so as not to get run over, and made our way to the porch to top up our plates. Apart from the pattering and vrooming sound of the bike, there was general silence as adults and children were once again focused on shovelling food into their mouths. But as I moved to the south end of the table that held the drinks and paper cups, I heard Uncle Isaac whisper, *‘Oi! Nisht gut!’* That's Yiddish for ‘Oh! Not good!’

Squinting and staring into the yard, Isaac seemed to be speaking to no one in particular. I followed the direction of his gaze. *Oi! Nisht gut*, all right!

Seemed that as Ralph relaxed and the ride got easier, he got ... harder. And this wasn't the worst of it. As he stopped riding and put his foot down on the ground to steady himself, his 'packed lunch' (nuts and wiener) dropped out the side of his Gavin-shorts 'n' Gavin-Y-fronts. Hell, this is not good in any language! But still straddling the bike, Ralph was smiling broadly.

Really? Ralph! How can you not feel that? Oh, Ralph!

'*He's farkakt*,' whispered Uncle Isaac, meaning 'he's screwed.' Even more so because Albie heard and also turned to look.

'*Gottfluch es, d-d-dummer T-T-T-Trottell!*' he said through gritted teeth. This means 'God damn it, s-s-stupid n-n-n-nincompoop!'

'SHIT A BRICK!' screeched Maxi. This means 'shit a brick!'

Oh, Maxi. That got everyone's attention. Everyone's. They all turned to look.

'*Jesus*,' Vette whispered, and averted her eyes. She lapsed into silence like the rest of us. And the silence got more silent. The wind died, the leaves stopped rustling, and a cloud passed in front of the sun as if to stop it from seeing. Even nature was mortified.

Ralph looked down and saw that his 'boys' had joined us outside and were swaying in the not-breeze. His face turning tomato-red, he dropped the bike and bolted for the house with his tail between his legs, and both hands cupped around everything else between his legs. No one moved or spoke. And like everyone, I was immobilised, dumbstruck, horrified. Yet, at the same time—and I'm ashamed to say this—I wanted to laugh because one of The Beach Boys' hits was playing in my head, oombopbopping about good vibrations and excitations.

I suspect George and Simon heard the same song in their heads—God knows the void between their ears was big enough for them to hear it bouncing off the sides and echoing in quadraphonics—because they started to laugh. Bad call but also a good one, because it galvanised me into action—I was up like a shot, stopped dead and glared at them.

'At least he's got 'em,' I spat out.

A verbal kick in the balls that they didn't have. Still, it must have hurt. Tweedledee and Tweedledum-arse, bully-boys who were essentially cowards, cowered.

I ran through the house and found Ralph in his bedroom. He was lying on his bed curled up in the foetal position under a threadbare blanket. I nearly knocked over a bucket full of vomit next to the bed. The smell was so strong, I felt like adding to it. But this wouldn't have helped Ralph, who was sobbing, and I so wanted to comfort him. The level of humiliation he'd experienced cut deep. At first, I didn't know what to say or do. Stroking his head and cooing didn't make much of a difference. Then I instinctively put my hand on his shoulder and oh so gently said ... 'Nice tackle.'

Ralph stopped crying and turned to look at me. A slow smile spread across his tear-stained face. The boy rallied! It was a defining moment, where I not only came to understand a man's depth, but my counselling skills were born.

I had to draw on them at times in my relationship with Ralph. While life at home for me was not exactly a barrel of laughs, life with Albie, George and Simon would have been a nightmare. Yet in spite of Ralph's trials, he didn't go off the rails. Not to my mind, anyway. Certainly, he was severely traumatised when Daffy ended up swimming in orange juice, and the beatings left their mark. And although he didn't turn to crime, drugs or alcohol after the bike incident, Ralph's weird behaviour got weirder. He gave this a name.

'I have obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I do things obsessively and compulsively.'

Ralph went from not checking anything to obsessively and compulsively checking everything twice. Twice. He became fastidious. He also craved symmetry. He needed to do things in pairs and was fixated with even numbers. This seemed to gain a foothold when he asked me to come into the city with him to help him choose a pair of Jockey low-rise briefs.

'They're not a fashion item, they're just underpants. Why do you need me?'

'You're better at gauging size, and I need them to fit *perfectly*.' Perfectly understandable.

We stood in the Harris Scarfe underwear department on the Saturday morning, sizing up the briefs. I selected two possibilities; Ralph grabbed them both and headed for the counter. The salesman took Ralph's hip measurement, agreed that these were the right

size and watched patiently as he counted out and then recounted his pocket money (what he earned from his paper run less what he gave to Norma). He came up short both times and then looked at me.

‘Can you lend me twenty cents?’

‘Sure. But they’re called a *pair* of underpants. Why don’t you just start off with one pair till you have more money?’

‘They’re called a pair because they were originally made in two parts, and I don’t care that they’re still called that; we’re talking *one* piece of clothing.’

It can be hellish hard work trying to argue with a smart-mouthed obsessive-compulsive. The only time I had the edge on Ralph was when I called him odd. Mostly, though, I indulged his neuroses, and he indulged mine (by calling me Ruth-ie, which worked in both our interests). God knows I developed plenty, not least cacomorphobia, a dread of morbidly obese people. This was spawned by the spawn of Satan herself, cousin Zelda.

Our parents felt sorry for Zelda, so we kids were conditioned to tiptoe around her (it’s not hard to give a wide berth to someone with a titanic stern). *I* didn’t feel sorry for her at all. Buffered by the adults’ pity, Zelda regularly played the boohoo-I’m-fat card, and succeeded in making me her villain. Her pathological lying got me into trouble on family Sundays at our place.

‘Go to your room!’ Sylvia would yell, her tone brooking no argument.

She didn’t even give me the benefit of the doubt. I never, ever made fun of Zelda’s size—well ... not to her face. Ralph and I secretly nicknamed her Little Lotta, after the comic book character whose full name was Lotta Plump. And honestly, we were being kind. Zelda was shitloada plump! Anyway, she mouthed ‘Ha, ha’ every time I got banished. Then she would chant through my open window, ‘Sooky, sooky’ as I sat on the floor of my bedroom weeping over the injustice.

Where Zelda was my provocateur, Louwhiney was Ralph’s. She wasn’t as spectacularly porcine as Zelda, but still, she was a squealer just like her. And Ralph did a lot of time in his room because of his sister’s furphies.

Being scapegoated too often was wearing thin for Ralph and me. I’d had enough of hanging out with the rellos every weekend, and Ralph didn’t want to hang out in front of

them ever again. This time when I stated my case, I had more ammunition. Drawing on what I was learning about the various forms of government at school, I stood my ground with Sylvia.

‘This *is* a democracy, by the way, not an autocracy. I’m not going to these family things anymore. You cannot make me! I have democratic rights!’

‘*Oeuf!* I should have home-schooled you, *pest!*’

Would that have included sex education? Of course not! But Ralph’s expo had been an interesting introduction to it.

Chapter Two: Fourplay

Maxi, Vette and I have been friends since kindergarten. There's not much we don't know about each other. And glimpsing Ralph's dingle-dangle that afternoon launched a whole new level of, er, intercourse. Sure, we'd seen boys' bits when we were little—we shared baths with our big brothers. Ronnie is two years older than Maxi (they also have a younger brother, River. Maxi was thirteen when he was born). And Alex is three years older than Vette. This was the first time, though, that we'd seen the whole enchilada ... straight up. Ralph, on the other hand, had yet to see a fully ripened female 'noonie' (as Vette's mother called it), but he got a preview of coming attractions when he was nine and played peekaboo with Gwen.

A year younger than Ralph, Gwen was a skinny, fair-haired girl who lived two doors down from him. They were lying in the clearing of the little nearby park, which was overgrown with weeds. Gwen was a bit shy, so Ralph took the initiative. He stood up, pulled down his pants and flashed.

'Ta-da!'

Gwen recoiled. 'Oh, *iiick!*'

Having grown up with two sisters, no father present and only female cousins, she had never seen a boy naked. She assumed male gonads looked like her Ken doll's. Gwen thought Ralph was badly deformed, and told him as much. He set her straight.

'*All boys' privates look like this. They're not useless, seamless bulges like Ken's!*'

Never mind that Ralph actually spoke like this as a child; I suspect that six years on when his moving parts fell out of his shorts, he probably thought Ken was lucky.

Gwen looked again through narrowed eyes, and just shrugged. It was her turn. She lay back and pulled down her pants. Ralph scrutinised her exposed noonie, examining it from all angles. He then casually picked up a caterpillar that was marching across the clearing, and perched it on her pubic mound.

'Why d'ya do that?' I asked him when he relayed the story.

'I just wanted to see what it would look like.'

Wow ... so young and already contemplating the aesthetics of pubic topiary for a

woman. Clearly, Ralph was a mini man of vision. That he displayed a lack of it while he was straddling the mini bike was his hard luck.

A few months after his unfortunate display, Maxi, Vette and I attended a youth camp (Ralph's family couldn't afford to send him). It was here that I experienced my first lip kiss. A group of seventeen of us—eight boys, nine girls—were playing spin the bottle. I had a thing for Aaron Eisen, who was sitting directly opposite me in the circle. He spun the bottle but it didn't land on me. Cassandra was the lucky girl who got to kiss him. Then with her spin, the bottle pointed at Eugene, but Cassandra refused to kiss him because he was beastly looking. He still got to spin the bottle, though, and it stopped at me. I didn't want to kiss Eugene either, but ...

I had been paying close attention to kissing scenes in movies and frankly, I was sick of practising on my hand or the doorjamb. Even though the seventeen-to-one odds of my upcoming spin landing on Aaron were not great, if I did get lucky, I didn't want him to think I was inexperienced. So I let Eugene kiss me.

Eugene looked like a blobfish. He had fat, squishy, wet lips, and he opened his mouth really wide as he zoomed in. I had to match him or my whole head would have disappeared down his yawning gob. But when his tongue darted in and out of my mouth like a gecko, I retched. Eugene appeared wounded.

Maxi, who was sitting next to me, leaned over and whispered, *'Way to go, kemosabe!'*

This made me feel worse than I already did. Callous as it sounds, it wasn't that I felt guilty about almost yacking in Eugene's mouth and upsetting him, I was only concerned about Aaron's reaction. Would he ever want to kiss me with that special image imprinted on his psyche? I looked at Maxi sheepishly; she tried to make me feel better.

'Hey, don't look so worried. Check it out. You gave him a stiff.'

Ecch. If only she'd been talking about Aaron ...

The others then urged me to have my spin. The bottleneck pointed at Jonah. Jonah wasn't as ugly. His head was shaped like a turnip and he had a small mouth, which made his lips look frozen in a permanent pucker. He closed in on me and made sucking and nibbling movements, like a goldfish eating a long worm. There was no danger of being vacuumed into his blowhole or even his tongue shooting out, because the aperture width

was too narrow.

The kiss wasn't great, but it wasn't revolting. Jonah's face was flushed when he was done. With that, and with his strawberry-red hair, compact yap and a sudden, er, swelling, Jonah reminded me of the Dr Seuss character, Gustav the Goldfish. Little dude eats fish food and realises he's made a boo-boo. He grows twice as long, thick and wide; exceeding his fishbowl, his tail hangs outside. My thoughts got all lyrical:

*I regretted the deed, 'cause just like Eugene,
My kiss set in action a small part unseen.
Quite clear to all present, he wasn't a queen!
A formal salute in the pants of young Jonah!
The upshot of snogging; the boy gotta boner!*

Maybe I wasn't up there with the likes of Theodor Seuss Geisel just yet, but clearly, I had talent (even if it was as a prick teaser). And I was determined to exercise it.

Kissing became the sport du jour at that camp, and we three girls participated fully. It was also a first for Vette but for Maxi, it was just a refresher course. We kept up our kissing binge post-camp, working at bettering our personal bests.

Ralph wanted in. Not your average bloke, Ralph averaged himself by turning it into a pissing contest. He made a tally board at school during one of his woodwork classes.

'Why do we need this?' asked Maxi.

'So we can see who gets the longest list.'

'We already know you've got a long one that lists.'

He smiled at this. Yep, average bloke.

By comparing notes (not lists), we four learned a lot about the opposite sex. From Sylvia, I learned a lot about the opposite *of* sex.

One Saturday afternoon when Ralph, Maxi and Vette were over at my place, we sat in my bedroom pooling our experiences and gossiping. We talked about a girl in my class who did more than just kiss. Bridget was an attractive blonde. The girls at school nicknamed her Gidget (after the movie character), the petite and cutesy heroine of many teenage girls. Well, Bridget was the petite and cutesy heroine of many teenage boys. She

earned pocket money after school hours from her job in a deli, and she earned a reputation at school from her hand jobs behind the lunch shed. The boys nicknamed her Digit.

After my friends left, Sylvia, who was a walking cliché and often spouted them, called me into her bedroom. Her lips were tightly pursed in disapproval.

Shit. Here we go ...

‘I overheard your conversation about that girl, Digit, the one with the two jobs.’ *Jesus! If I weren’t so pissed off that she had eavesdropped, I would have laughed. It was like a really awesome game of Chinese whispers.* ‘This girl is a “nice” girl. Boys sleep with nice girls, but they marry “good” girls. Which do you want to be?’

It was not a question. It was a guilt-inducing statement pitched like a question, just for effect. That way, it looked like I was being given a choice. Sylvia was overprotective, and I’m sure she was concerned about my reputation, but only inasmuch as how my decisions would reflect on her parenting skills. Image was paramount. ‘What will the neighbours think?’ was a common catchcry during my childhood and adolescence, and Sylvia was tethered to it.

‘Well?’ she added when I didn’t respond.

‘Well what?’

‘I’m waiting for your answer.’

‘What’s to answer? It’s a rhetorical question.’ I don’t think she understood what a rhetorical question was because she looked confused. I just stared at her and raised one eyebrow.

‘Oeuf! Just keep your pawpaw covered up. Pest!’

Noonie was not the only pet name for genitalia that I was exposed to. In my family, a vagina was a pawpaw, and a penis was a fawkey. I didn’t question this. But I questioned Sylvia when one of her friends got pregnant. I was nine at the time.

‘How do you get pregnant?’

Sylvia wasn’t comfortable talking about it but obviously, she knew I’d be asking sooner or later, because she pulled out a sex education book from the bottom drawer of her dresser and gave it to me to read.

The book talked about the way a baby is made from a union of a tiny part of the

mother and a tiny part of the father. When I discussed this with Ralph, he reacted pretty strongly.

‘You’re wrong!’ He indignantly pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. ‘The father’s part is *not* a tiny part.’

Geez. Only nine years old and already prickly about the size of his organ. Like I said, Ralph was a visionary. But neither of us knew that this tiny father part referred to sperm (we didn’t even know what sperm was). And although I can’t remember the name of the author, it’s highly unlikely a man wrote that book; otherwise, even the size of a sperm would have been blown out of proportion. Here’s the thing, though. Relative to six feet of height and two hundred pounds of mass, a pecker is a piddling, teensy-weensy part of a man. Miniscule. Lilliputian.

The book also talked about how a baby grows in the uterus, which it likened to a balloon with a little opening at the bottom, and how, when the baby’s fully-grown, it pushes headfirst through the opening to the outside. Vagina didn’t rate a mention. *It* was called the tunnel between the balloon’s opening and the outside. I also don’t recall seeing the words vulva, penis or testicles. But compared to winkie and wee-wee, which is what Maxi heard at home, and Vette’s mum’s diddly-doo and noonie, fawkey and pawpaw sounded authentic to the four of us (and as Ralph and I were kin, Norma referred to them the same way that Sylvia did). I found out the truth a year later from a girl I shared a hospital room with when I had my appendix out. I quizzed Sylvia when she took me home.

‘How did you come up with the names fawkey and pawpaw?’

She bristled uncomfortably. ‘My mother called them that.’

‘Why?’

‘*Oeuf!* Does it matter? *Pest!* Ask her.’ Sound advice if only the woman hadn’t been dead for the last twenty years. And so, I was left to speculate.

It took me a few years of speculation, a lot more information about sex, and much discussion with Ralph, Maxi and Vette about this to come up with a plausible explanation. It may well have been that my grandmother, Ruby went to the local market one day, saw a cross-sectioned pawpaw in amongst the fruit display and thought, *oui, il ressemble un peu à la papaye* (yep, it looks a bit like a pawpaw). This presumes that Ruby

actually checked out her own pawpaw. She probably then stopped eating the fruit because she suddenly realised it was a wee bit too close to home. And since the apple doesn't fall far from tree, if Sylvia's puritanical mindset and her tendency to manipulate are an indication of her upbringing, then it's a safe bet that Ruby would have knowingly served pawpaw to her own husband (my grandfather, Jacob). Her accompanying thoughts? *Voici le cunnilingus tu continue à vouloir effectuer sur moi, mon chéri* (here's the cunnilingus you keep wanting to perform on me, darling). This might be a bit of a stretch because back then, a bloke would be more predisposed to plunging and thrusting than diving in headfirst. Still, eating pawpaw was probably the closest thing to sex Jacob was going to get.

I imagine the seeds of fawkey go back a lot further.

At the beginning of my fourth year in high school, I was learning about ancient Greece in history class. Greek mythology was a very large component of this because my teacher had a passion for it. His name was Zero Kosta ... poor bastard. For me, it was bad enough being a mistake, but this man must have truly felt like he was worth nothing from the get-go. Suddenly, my name didn't seem so bad.

I think Mr Kosta had first-hand knowledge of ancient times because he looked like he was raised from the crypt. He was cadaverous. Painfully thin, he had sunken cheeks in a narrow, ashen face, greyish teeth, and his hands were gnarled and shook a lot. But he was a mine of information and probably one of the best teachers I've ever had because he made the subject *interesting*. And although history in general wasn't my favourite course, I devoured the classic tales. They fascinated me. Maybe it was because my existence felt like a Greek tragedy. But as Mr Kosta told us, our lives were just ancient myths cloaked in the modern attire of defences and pretences (the ancients didn't give a crap what the neighbours thought).

Mr Zero Kosta was worth plenty to me. He had a highly developed sense of humour (with a name and looks like that, you'd have to). I regarded him as my mentor. Life, he said, is a *tragicomedy*. This perspective kind of explained the idiocy I had to deal with daily; it made it tolerable. And I think the ancient part of my brain was plump and full like Mr Kosta's because I was also attracted to the origin of things.

As for the origin of fawkey as a pet name for penis, in ancient myth, *Phorkys* was the

sea-god that presided over the hidden dangers of the deep. Combine Sylvia's fear of the hidden dangers of the vagina with man's tendency to worship his penis and hang its helmet in the deep, then it wasn't a real stretch to understand that herein lies the root of fawkey.

It also wasn't a real stretch to get the twofold meaning behind Sylvia's 'just keep your pawpaw covered up'. This says:

) Do not put out.

) It is not a pretty sight (and so said the mirror).

Sylvia had been trying to cunningly steer me towards converting that uninhibited fanny-celebration of childhood into the fanny-shame that takes hold in adolescence, and plagues us in adulthood. She was like a humungous, externalised, personified hymen.

'Sylvia obviously didn't pay much attention during biology,' said Ralph when we were discussing her prudish attitude one day. 'A beaver's very social, you know. Its natural habitat is outdoors. And it likes to gnaw on wood.'

Ralph's droll take on things suggested he also had a strong connection to that cobwebby primeval part of his brain. And it helped defuse many situations for me. At sixteen, though, my beaver wasn't quite ready to come outside. Nor were Maxi and Vette's. But there was no shortage of dates for any of us as we moved through adolescence and became increasingly easy on the eye (or so we kept being told).

Vette has porcelain skin, black corkscrew curls, green eyes and lush Betty Boop lips. She has an old-world look about her, like she's just stepped out of a Jane Austen novel. Although small-breasted and a smidge over five foot four (half an inch taller than me), she has a fat arse. Of course, we don't really know if the heroines of these romance novels had fat arses because their bustles would have hidden them. Our fashion trends didn't.

One Sunday afternoon when the relatives were at my place, the four of us were sitting with the caterpillars in that little park near Ralph's place. We were all lost in thought for a bit as we watched Vette drawing well rounded 'Ws' like so—() ()—in the dirt with a stick. She suddenly rubbed them out with her hand and looked up at Maxi and me.

'I wish I had a bum like you two.'

Christ, I'm so glad I don't have one like yours!

Neither Maxi nor I responded. Ralph did, though, distracting me from my shame over this unkind thought. ‘Hmm ... having a big caboose is not such a bad thing, you know—’

‘Good one, schmuck! She didn’t say anything about having a big bum, did she?’ Maxi leaped to Vette’s defence very quickly, maybe as a means of mitigating thoughts as unholy as mine.

‘No. I, er, I, er just meant it has its advantages. It can provide good leverage during sex. When you decide to start fornicating, I mean.’

Fornicating? Ralph—working class upbringing; upper-class diction.

‘How would you know? Are you holding out on us? Have *you* started ... “fornicating”?’

‘Not yet. I read it in a Playboy magazine. Simon keeps a stash of them under his bed.’

‘And you look at Playboy for the articles?’ I asked.

‘Yes. I like to think I’m deeper than your average male.’

‘Uh-huh, and reading Playboy articles is a real indicator of that!’ said Maxi.

We girls laughed. Ralph didn’t.

‘Hey, I’m trying to help you. You girls want to know more about sex; I’m just imparting a general male view that I’ve read about on the ins and outs of, yes, *fornicating*, so you won’t feel completely at a loss when some guy tries to penetrate more than your mind for the first time!’

Ralph’s sensitivity meant he was always more comfortable in female company. His views were diverse—from incredibly stupid to incredibly insightful, and more often than not, eccentric.

Vette’s views could be a little too rigid. We girls were caught up in the fairy tale with its handsome prince and happily-ever-after, but Vette was so totally lost in it, she couldn’t read between the lines. She dated lots of guys, but pulled the plug early in the piece on a few potential relationships because the guys did, well, annoying human stuff.

‘He scratched his balls in front of me. *Like a dog.*’ She whispered this last bit. It was a deal-breaker for Vette in a very promising six-week-long relationship with Anthony.

‘So what? As long as he doesn’t lick ‘em.’ Maxi was the most pragmatic of the three of us.

Vette’s father died when she was only two. Because her mother never remarried and

didn't even date (she worked long hours), Vette had no male role model when she was growing up. Her mum was also a stickler for good manners, so Vette didn't really get to witness primitive male behaviour from her brother or anyone else. Unlike me. The only time Joe didn't openly go at his knackers was when Vette and Maxi slept over.

'I don't recall the handsome prince scratching his nuts in any of the fairy tales I grew up with!'

'Of course not. But fairy tales also don't tell you the damsel in distress could turn into a bloated, hissy, snarly bitch once a month.'

'A woman's irrational behaviour doesn't need to be mentioned. It's a given. It's justifiable because we're at the mercy of our hormones. An itchy scrotum might be organic but it's not caused by a hormonal imbalance. So there's no excuse!'

Easy to say if you don't have balls.

Vette dated a procession of guys: Harry, Danny, Sam, Ari, David, Alan, Greg, Eric, Leslie, Adam, Derek, Michael, Martin, Benjy, Richard, Dennis, Roger, Raymond, Peter, Carl, Brian, Phillip, Eddy, and Teddy. Then came Henry.

At twenty-seven, Henry was ten years older than Vette. He was her counterpart in almost every way. A good-looking guy, Henry was short, small-breasted, had green eyes, thick lips and black frizzy hair. If she were the heroine of a romance novel, Henry would have been her hero (except without the fat arse). They seemed so right for each other.

'I'm gonna go all the way with him tonight,' she announced after three weeks of dating.

'Isn't it a bit soon?' I asked.

'Yes, but I'm at risk of dying a virgin!' Since Anthony, she hadn't dated anyone for more than two weeks.

She would be the first of the four of us to surrender her virginity. Ralph and Maxi spent that night at my place and we couldn't wait for Vette's call the next morning. Instead, she turned up looking forlorn.

'He was happy, but it was so disappointing.'

Maxi and I hugged her, but Ralph stood there pensively, rubbing the sparse bristles on his chin while he looked skyward for about ten seconds. This was his contemplative look.

'Hmm ... ' (Ralph hummed a lot—had from an early age). He was weighing up all the

information and formulating his thoughts. ‘I’ll be back soon.’ He dashed off and he returned half an hour later with a library book under his arm. The local library was just around the corner and Ralph had borrowing rights; he’d given my address when he applied for a library card.

‘What have you got?’ I asked. He held it up.

‘*Human Sexual Response* by William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson. Turns out women can blow too.’

The four of us sat on the floor of my bedroom with Sylvia’s homemade pound cake and cups of Bushells coffee as we pored over the pages in the book.

‘We should have stayed at my place last night,’ said Maxi.

‘Why?’

‘You know ... sex and drugs.’

She had a point. We’d be sitting on the floor of *her* bedroom with hash cookies and cups of Irish coffee. Even though there was a large bar in my house in between the L-shaped dining room and lounge, and it was chock-full of assorted bottles of alcohol, neither Joe nor Sylvia drank. The bar was purpose-built, but as a room divider and showpiece; the bottles stacked four deep in the bar all remained unopened, including the Irish whiskey.

The location and refreshments were irrelevant, though, as we learned about the four stages of physiological response to sexual stimulation: the excitement phase, plateau phase, orgasmic phase and resolution phase. Just reading it brought all four of us to the excitement phase, but Ralph had no doubt reached the plateau phase. I heard him moan almost imperceptibly as he leaned across my bed, grabbed my pillow and perched it on his lap. Maxi, Vette and I smiled at each other conspiratorially.

‘What?’ Ralph caught us out.

‘Why d’you need my pillow?’

‘To rest the book on.’

‘What ... to prop it up, hey ... Pinocchio?’ Maxi couldn’t resist.

Ralph blushed; we laughed. But I had to sleep with that pillow. *Please God, don’t let him reach the orgasmic phase.*

With all we discovered, when Vette left three hours later, she felt hopeful. She told

Henry everything she'd learned, and he tried to please her but it didn't happen for her. Vette was despondent. Turns out Henry had located her bean and worked it, but he was a man-child. It was like being on a road trip with a six-year-old who keeps asking every thirty seconds, 'Are we there yet?' Makes relaxation a real bitch.

Vette had a few more short relationships over the next couple of years, and then she entertained the idea of becoming a Jubu (a Jewish Buddhist). Strange. She wasn't into organised religion any more than Maxi, Ralph and I were.

'Why?' Maxi asked.

'Because men irritate me.'

'You can always become a lesbian. No study required for tha—'

Ralph interrupted Maxi. 'You do know that in Buddhist philosophy, a woman can only reach enlightenment on her deathbed if she becomes a man?'

'I know.'

I was confused. 'Er ... why would you wanna become a man if they annoy you?'

'Because this way I get my own dick to play with.'

We all laughed, but we were shocked to hear this from Vette.

'That's more the sort of thing *I* would say!' said Maxi.

Ralph and I nodded in agreement and then he said, 'Hmm ... looks like we have penis envy.'

'We? You've already got one, you idiot!' Maxi never held back. At five foot three (half an inch shorter than me), she might be small, but she sure could pack a wicked wallop.

Maxi is slim, and with her creamy skin, ample heaving bosom, piercing blue eyes, chestnut hair and pretty, heart-shaped face, just like Vette, she also looks like she's stepped out of a historical romance novel. But of the bodice ripper variety, with a swashbuckler cover. Maxi was too much for Sylvia's prissiness.

'That one, hmph! She's a "nice" girl. A bad influence.' Sylvia was an authority. And a logician. 'Yvette? She is a "good" girl. Quiet; polite.'

What ... so she can't possibly put out? Well, guess what; she already has. Ha!

Sylvia's low opinion of Maxi took a further dive when my intrepid friend posed topless for a football magazine. The picture appeared in its centre-page spread. In the

early seventies, that was very daring, and the sort of thing a Jewish girl just didn't do. No way. What would the neighbours think? Still, Vette and I envied Maxi, but Sylvia was incensed. When Maxi dropped round just after the footy magazine was published and in circulation, Sylvia wouldn't even acknowledge her. After Maxi left, Sylvia barged into my room and let loose with a verbal onslaught.

'That floozy! That strumpet! That *putana* is not welcome in this house!'

Hell, I'm not even welcome in this house, and I live here!

'*Pth-Pth-Pth.*' Sylvia made a spitting sound, the kind you make when you're trying to spit out hairs. She looked over her left shoulder as she did this. It was some superstitious crap about spitting on the devil (and it was *always* over the left; Lucifer must be a southpaw). She then stormed out. But a couple of minutes later I heard her fumbling around in the lounge room and striking a match. Ah yes, she was burning incense to ward off the evil spirit. Still not enough for her. She flew back into my room. This time, she brought in a turquoise blue glass 'evil eye' bead—☉—suspended on a thin chain, which she hung on the door of my wardrobe. It was added insurance for Greeks. But wait ... we weren't Greek, although, because of my sense of this ancient lineage, it made me feel like Cyclops was stalking me. Still, Sylvia was covering all the bases. I now heard her banging pots and pans in the kitchen.

Shit! I'd studied Macbeth in my last year of high school. Smatterings of the incantation of the three witches came back to me: *newt's eye, frog's toe, dog's tongue, leg of a lizard, and wing of an owlet, all boiling and bubbling in a hell-broth.* I expected Sylvia to zip back in on her invisible broomstick and force me to drink a vile potion with eyeball ice cubes. Quadruple indemnity? I'd plead with her; tell her there was no need. Any desire I might have had to bare my breasts in a football magazine evaporated, just like that. *Pfft.* Amazing stuff! Her pagan rituals were working.

Maxi's exploit made her the topic of juicy gossip in the Jewish community, but even though this audacious act would keep coming back to haunt her, she mostly kept running her own race. And despite her wild ways, she remained a 'good' girl. Until she started dating Ralph.

Ralph had harboured a crush on Maxi for a while, and not long after he saw the centrefold spread, he felt it was time to bite the bullet. The short, skinny, borderline-ugly

boy suddenly shot up at sixteen and started filling out. Now seventeen, and unlike his short and stocky family, he stood at just over six feet. Ralph had developed broad shoulders, a nice pair of biceps and a washboard stomach. The coke-bottle glasses were gone, replaced by contact lenses so you could see his brown, puppy-dog eyes without the distortion. His pearly-whites framed by Cupid's bow lips were now in proportion to his roundish face with its strong jaw. His hair had thickened and he wore it just above his shoulders. In short, Ralph had become very good-looking. Tweety Bird had transmogrified into a knockout (those of us in the know were careful not to liken his development to the ugly duckling story).

Looks aside, Maxi agreed to go out with Ralph based on the eyeful she copped *that* day in his backyard. Maxi called me early one Sunday morning three weeks into their relationship.

'We screwed.'

'Ooh, ooh! How was it?' I asked eagerly.

She sighed. 'He must have been speed-reading Masters and Johnson that day in your bedroom. He couldn't master his johnson ... so no time even to *look* for *my* on-switch! And it hurt.'

I sighed. I was just as disappointed as Maxi. In my Kathleen Woodiwiss novels, as the hero plunges his throbbing, turgid shaft into the virginal heroine's mossy grotto, after her initial cry of surprise and pain, she always writhes and moans in ecstasy as she arches against him. *Always*. Vette and Maxi might have looked like heroines of romance novels, but neither of their first sexual encounters reflected this. My faith in this genre to tell it like it is was badly shaken and it occurred to me that maybe Sylvia was right about sex. She'd told me a woman wasn't supposed to enjoy it—'Sex is just for the man'. Ralph kind of confirmed this when he turned up grinning from ear to ear not long after I hung up from Maxi.

'I despoiled Maxi last night.'

Jesus! Who the hell speaks this way unless you're Macbeth, Macduff or Hamlet?

We were used to Ralph's turn of phrase, but Maxi found being in a relationship with him exhausting. 'He's weird.'

Really? You're just noticing this?

‘He always taps things twice or repeats himself. Is there something wrong with him?’

‘Not that I know of.’ I wasn’t about to betray Ralph’s trust. No one else knew about his disorder.

‘Well, I’ve had enough.’

Ralph was desolate when Maxi ended it, but he came to accept that she only wanted friendship, nothing more. He didn’t speak to her for a few weeks, though.

After Ralph, Maxi really did become a ‘nice’ girl. ‘I’ve already got the reputation; may as well live up to it.’

At the time, the sexual revolution was gaining momentum. Maxi took advantage of these socially liberated attitudes, and she was having fun. For about six months, she bonked a different guy every week. Then, she met Marcus, MD.

Marcus was twenty-eight and didn’t seem her type (she usually went for the Cat Stevens kind, or the complete opposite—brawn). A surgical registrar, Marcus was average looking, average height, clean-cut, and clean-shaven. He was also supercilious and had such super small feet, it looked like he’d been a victim of foot binding.

A couple of months after they started dating, Maxi caught up with Vette, Ralph and me one Saturday afternoon at a little café near my place. Marcus didn’t join us. In between his long hours at the hospital and seeing Maxi, he liked to catch up on his sleep. And ‘doing coffee’ wasn’t his cup of tea. More to the point, we weren’t his cup of tea. *Guess what, fancy-pants!*

‘Uh, what do you see in him?’ Vette asked, tentatively.

A crooked half-smile played on Maxi’s lips. ‘Well ... when God made Marcus, He gave him a choice: big feet or big dick.’

Vette and I laughed; Ralph didn’t. Seems he still had some lingering resentment towards her for dumping him, and now he really did *not* get why she had.

‘The two aren’t mutually exclusive, you know,’ he said, cockily as he crossed his right leg over his left one in a figure four position, and waggled his size twelve well-shod foot.

Maxi gave him a long, hard look and winked. ‘I know that.’

Didn’t we all? The whole bloody kith and kin knew that!

Listening to these two fence was entertaining. They were alike in so many ways. One

oblique, the other brazen, they were both smart arses, which was probably why they couldn't make it work. But I questioned Maxi's devotion to Marcus; asked her how she tolerated his snootiness even if his throbbing, turgid shaft was a sizeable one. She just shrugged. A month later, though, she dropped him.

'A big schlong doesn't compensate for a small mind.'

We stared at her, open-mouthed.

'What? ... I'm not shallow!'

Ralph gazed at Maxi with a well-I-have-the-best-of-both-worlds look on his face. And maybe it had something to do with his disorder, but he generally inclined towards both worlds. After Maxi, he had yo-yoed between sexual famine and feast. Then he met someone who ritualised feast/famine/feast/famine ...

Monique was bulimic. Ralph spent most of the money he earned from his job in a men's clothing store on her. He wined and dined her. She snarfed and barfed. Monique was also monochromic: everything was black and white in her world. This would suit someone with OCPD to a T. But Ralph's tendency to think colourfully was at odds with his disorder. And his tendency to think outside the box was at odds with his relationship with Monique. We could only assume the attraction to her related to his overwhelming desire and tendency to think inside the box. Outside of that, we couldn't understand the appeal (Monique was a vain, social-climbing, bleached blonde scrag). Nor did we get a chance to.

Ralph gushed about his new squeeze in the early days—Mons this and Mons that—but when Maxi asked if her last name was Veneris or Pubis (and Vette and I laughed), Ralph refused to talk to the three of us for a good month. Then he unexpectedly turned up on my doorstep early one Saturday morning.

'It's over. I'm done with her ... and I've missed you, Ruthie.'

'I've missed you too! What happened?'

Mons was a catalogue model who had her sights set on the catwalk, and although she was the right height, she couldn't make it because her legs were too short.

'I told her vomiting would thin out her legs, not elongate them. She got so upset, she pilfered food from *my* plate and then, she threw that up! *My* food!'

Geez. Imagine.

‘Well, we had a big fight. She called me Daffy ... ’ Ralph’s voice broke and he got misty-eyed ‘... and that was it for me!’

Ralph went back to his loose ways for a while, but then he reconnected with Gwen, who found his outré behaviour adorable. A few weeks after they started going out, I asked him if he’d been harvesting caterpillars.

‘Don’t need to. She has her own home-grown army of them.’

While Ralph mounted a coup at every opportunity, I was getting cabin fever. The only viable solution was to sustain a loss: my virginity. Meantime, the beaver might be hiding in the backwoods, but it had been my ‘pet’ since before Sylvia issued her bullshit injunction. She couldn’t stop *me* from playing with it!

END OF THIS SAMPLE

Did you enjoy this sample?

The Odyssey In A Teacup is now available from these online stores:

