



Apoca[hot]lips

AT WAR WITH CUPID ... THE WINNERS & A BUNCH OF LOSERS



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**At War with Cupid ...
The Winners & a Bunch of Losers**

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For Jasper, Bailey & Remy

Eros: The Greek god of love | Cupid: His Roman counterpart

'His arrows are of different power: some are golden, and kindle love in the heart they wound; others are blunt and heavy with lead, and produce aversion to a lover.'

(Ov. Met. i. 468; Eurip. Iphig. Aul. 548.)

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Part One
A Taboo Romance

Prologue

The mirror. The goddamn, bloody mirror. A ‘transportation system’ like no other. Looking at it could be a moving experience, but too often it had taken me down. Not so long ago, it took me into hell. Then it brought me back.

Today, though, as I stood in front of it, turned this way and that, it was forgiving—generous, even. I loved what I saw. *Yeah, baby!* I was a sizzling hot tamale in my heavenly, wicked, ruby-red dress!

Maybe demure in its knee length, but its plunging neckline exposed a good amount of cleavage. Teamed with the dress was a pair of red patent, barely there high-heeled sandals with slender toe and ankle straps.

For a long time I’d kitted out in wishy-washy colours to blend in, to disappear. No more. I wasn’t a ‘mistake’ like my parents had said. I was meant to be here, I was meant to shine! And right now, I felt like a princess. A shameless one.

My hair hung loose, covering half of my half-bare back. The wild curls would start to drop once I left the air-conditioned room and was outside in the humidity that was rare for an Adelaide summer. Not much I could do about the weather.

I faced the mirror now, leaned in and checked my make-up. It could have passed for a professional job. I’d taken extra care applying it, especially around the eyes. I looked into them.

Uh-oh. A short-sighted move.

Thank God for my contact lenses, those water-loving, plasticky discs that meant I didn’t have to wear glasses. But they hardly shielded my eyes from the memories pooling beyond them—the fearful and ridiculous sequence of events that led to my present niggling concerns. Made me wonder ... all in all, was I ready to put myself out there again? Was I ready for a date (with destiny)?

I moved away from the mirror and sat in the easy chair in the corner of the room, my thoughts drifting back in time to that momentous night three years earlier, when it all began.

Although, realistically, the signs—implicit in dreams and in desires—are there long before something manifests for anyone. As a child, I’d fantasised about a fairy-tale prince. I grew up and found one, but he wasn’t the man of my dreams. Turned out I wasn’t the woman of his. It was okay. We had two terrific children, an amicable divorce and a solid friendship. I was okay.

Then just when the wish for happily-ever-after had lost its sway over me, just when I'd stopped looking—when I felt that maybe *I* was 'The One' for me—it happened. I was in my forty-sixth year.

It was a balmy Saturday evening when the handsome, silver-tongued prince rolled up in his shiny bachelor Mercedes convertible. He professed his undying love for me and claimed it was written in the stars that he and I were destined to be together forever.

I told him to fuck off.

Chapter One


Once Upon A Bloody Time

‘I think I need to be alone,’ I’d said. It was a politically correct way of saying fuck off. So he left. But his revelation had roused the fire-breathing dragon in my psyche, and I spent the night doing battle with it.

In fairy tales, this was the handsome prince’s job. He was supposed to rescue the damsel in distress. And much as I’d worshipped his character, hers kind of pissed me off. As a child, I didn’t know the meaning of ‘grow some balls’, but by God, I had ’em! I wished she did. Still, what she lacked in moxie, she made up for in gentility. I couldn’t identify with that. It bothered me a little, because I was a girl. And girls were supposed to be all pink and meek and froufrou. I didn’t play by the book, though.

When my mother, Sylvia, started reading fairy tales to me in the late 1950s, they’d been scrubbed clean of all the scatological stuff of their earlier versions. If they hadn’t been, she would have Ajaxed my books and hung the authors out to dry. But try as she might, while I was under her roof she couldn’t scrub my mouth clean.

When I got used to the taste of soap, she relied on words to shame me into moral purity. ‘*Tu es possédé par le diable lui même!*’ (You are possessed by the devil himself!). It didn’t work. And it was a bit harsh coming from someone who wasn’t all that ladylike. Also, saying it in French didn’t soften the delivery any, just because it’s a romance language (the main one of several languages she and my father, Joe, spoke). Anyway, did having a dirty mind mean I was possessed? *I* didn’t think so. I just had a kinship with the raw stories—the ancient myths. I assumed it was because my life had felt like a Greek tragedy, and because the female characters had more substance than the milquetoast maidens of those fluffy, bullshit fairy tales.

My prince—the one I’d told to fuck off—had loved me, potty mouth and all, his whole life and most of mine (I’m a week older than him). But it wasn’t like he’d carved ‘Ralph Brill  Ruth Roth’ on a tree trunk. No. That would have been creepy, because Ralph Brill, my best friend, was also my first cousin. His mother, Norma, was my mother’s older sister by seven years.

‘We *used* to be cousins,’ he’d argued that night, before I sent him on his way. It was a daft

comment. Just because he'd accidentally discovered six months earlier that he'd been adopted, I couldn't merely stamp out the deeply etched imprint that said we were blood related. Like that—*poof!* Be that as it may, once I'd slain the dragon, I unearthed some very strong feelings for Ralph. And that imprint was being challenged by the image of getting naked with him ... *Mmm, mmm, oh ...*

Well, my insistent prince returned the next morning. Dishevelled, looking like he'd ridden in on horseback, he appeared more pauper than prince. But schlumpy didn't eclipse his six-footness of sexy gorgeousness. It didn't hide his roundish face with its chiselled jawline, his subtle chin dimple or his Cupid's-bow lips. Schlumpy didn't mask his sturdy physique (all these features had lent themselves to his previous profession as a model, before he became a psychologist). And schlumpy didn't veil my lust. So, I confessed my feelings for him.

Ralph cupped my face in his hands and kissed me, softly at first, then passionately and feverishly, then softly again. He led me to the bedroom, where he planted scorching butterfly kisses along my neck as he deftly hooked his fingers under the spaghetti straps of my nightie, and pushed them down over my shoulders. The nightie fell to the floor. Ralph feasted his eyes on my semi-nakedness, and with the utmost reverence, he removed my panties.

'My God, Ruthie, you are so incredibly beautiful.' His voice was husky with desire as he stroked my breasts, teasing each nipple with his thumbs.

I lifted up his T-shirt and he took it the rest of the way. As he dropped his jeans and briefs, I gasped at the size of his throbbing manhood. Although, from an unfortunate extended family gathering in his backyard when we were fifteen, I already knew that my prince was hung like the horse he rode in on.

Zooming around on his father's Bantam motorbike, the vibrations got Ralph all excited. His excitement fell out of his hand-me-down, oversized shorts and too-loose Y-fronts. This, in full view of a whole bunch of relatives and friends.

Now, with his junk intentionally exposed, Ralph tilted his head ever so slightly at my reaction. A bemused half-smile crossed his lips. It seemed to say, *You've never let me forget the incident. How could you forget the biggest part of it?*

He became serious again and moved in close. In one smooth motion, he scooped me into his

arms and placed me on the bed. He lay down next to me and slowly and deliberately mapped the contours of my body with his hand. Next, he was above me, lowering himself onto me. We melted into each other, our kisses becoming hungrier and more desperate. He paused and looked into my eyes, then he moved south, his tongue snaking down my stomach and coming to rest at the Promised Land. With practised precision and broad strokes, he explored, and didn't stop until I arched and shuddered, crying out in pleasure. Ralph slid back up my body and pressed his hips against mine as he plunge—

Blah, blah, blah ...

It was the stuff of romance novels—those fabulous, sexed up fairy tales. It didn't happen, though. And it had never been my reality.

If my issues with the fairy tales of my childhood had been limited solely to an aversion to the damsel, then this romantic interlude might have unfurled like Rapunzel's hair, and the prince would have mounted *me*. But, questioning the credibility of these fantasy couplings from when I was very little undoubtedly set up blocks: At best, I'd experienced the odd fleeting impression of the fairy-tale.

I was four when my father read *Sleeping Beauty* to me for the first time. I went to sleep happy, but there was no prince next to my bed when I woke up. Confusion. Joe read stories to me every night, but I only got to hear *Sleeping Beauty* once a week. It was the Monday night special. One night a year later, when Joe was out, Sylvia read it to me. Cognition. A light came on. Suspicion.

'Why would the printh want to kith Thleeping Beauty?' I asked Sylvia. 'If she'th been athleep for a hundred yearth, her breath would ththink and she'd look like shit.'

She slapped me for swearing and switched the light off. The question went unanswered.

It was a reasonable one, though, based on fact, not fantasy. Two nights before, I'd stared with wide-eyed fascination as Sylvia applied her make-up for a dinner dance they were going to. The next morning, I climbed into my parents' bed. Again, I stared at my mother with fascination as she lay there with panda eyes. Her pillowcase smeared with lipstick and foundation, she was snoring, drooling and blasting me with rhythmic swooshes of breath as foul as pre-treatment at a sewage plant.

After that, I had trouble imagining anyone wanting to come close to a hundred years' worth of this nasty pong. And when Joe had rolled over and farted, I thought, *Really? This is it? This is*

the prince?

Sylvia was hardly the damsel, though. She may have started out as one, but this damsel in distress had become embittered. Through a fairy-tale lens, I saw her more along the lines of the wicked stepmother, the evil queen, the witch. From the depths of my ancient survival consciousness, I experienced her as a harpy—in the old myths, the harpies were foul-tempered nasties with the face of a woman and the body of a bird. They swooped, stole food from plates, took a dump on the remains, and left their victims starving and deprived of nourishment.

Despite all this, I believed in the prince because I had a role model for him in Ralph. Ralph always had my back. He was my hero. But ... my low opinion of the fairy-tale blueprint aside, and notwithstanding the difficulty in getting my head around the fact that Ralph and I weren't biologically connected, 'it' most likely didn't happen because the bottom line is this: To have a prince, you have to be princess material. And I was never made to feel like one at home.

So, what *did* take place when the prince came back that morning?

Chapter Two

The Balls in His Court

Ralph had been so concerned about losing me—about losing *us*—he was prepared to remain just best friends. He apologised for his ill-conceived declaration of love from the night before, then added, ‘I hope it doesn’t change anything between us.’

‘I hope it does,’ I said. Not exactly a confession; more a suggestion.

As that sunk in, he cried. I took a step towards him and we hugged. It was a long hug. Ralph hung on tightly and released a sigh of relief. Or ... was that a sigh of pleasure?

Oh God ... Please, please don't try to kiss me!

The memory of Sylvia’s vomitous morning breath had not diminished over four decades. And with Ralph’s rheumy eyes, rumpled clothes and mussed hair—which I couldn’t see past—I imagined he hadn’t given any thought to brushing his teeth before leaving home.

But he kept hugging, didn’t push it, didn’t attempt to kiss me.

Why not? Why aren't you at least trying to kiss me?

I’d just woken from the single hour’s sleep I’d managed to get. Was only one hour of snoring enough to cause bad breath? I surreptitiously brought my hand down, cupped it over my mouth and nose and blew into it. My breath seemed okay to me. But even if it stunk to high heaven, would Ralph care? Sleeping Beauty’s halitosis was not a deal-breaker for Prince Prototype. He didn’t give a crap about her rank air. And if he’d been a womaniser, he would have cared even less.

Ralph had been a womaniser. He’d had an oversupply of raging adolescent hormones that hadn’t started to mature until a few years ago. And womanisers don’t just hug you. Womanisers slip their hands under your nightie. They fondle your breasts and then they slide their fingers inside your panties. *Oh God.* Womanisers caress you between your legs ... *Oh my. Oh, mmm.* But first, womanisers cover your mouth with their mouth and probe it with their ... furry morning tongues—

Shit!

I shot my hand up and locked my fingers around the back of his neck in a death grip. He misread it. I felt him growing hard.

Shit!

‘I want to court you,’ he said.

Huh? ‘*What?*’ I whispered into his chest.

‘I said, I want to court you, Ruthie.’

“‘Court” me?”

‘Yes.’

You’re shittin’ me!

I wasn’t all that surprised, but I still felt like laughing. ‘Court’ sounded so seventeenth century, but then ... my Don Juan had his mother tongue tied to the same era as the original fictional philanderer. Ralph hadn’t heard this kind of lingo in his working-class home environment. Maybe his biological parents, whoever they were, were bluebloods. Or not. I always just thought he’d over-identified with the chivalrous heroes of his adoptive mother’s many period romance novels (which he’d sworn blind he never read—*liar, liar, pants on fire*) to further distance himself from his boorish, pit bull-like father and siblings. It had only served to make him stand out like a swashbuckling dog’s balls.

I disengaged from the hug and took a step back. The earnest look on Ralph’s face said, *Really, I do want to court you.*

Okay, then. First things first. ‘I need to brush my teeth,’ I said. ‘You can use the main bathroom. There’re new toothbrushes in the top drawer.’ *Subtle.*

I went to my en-suite and Ralph went to fix himself up a bit. When we met up a few minutes later in the hallway, I had a panic attack at the thought of having sex with my cousin (who wasn’t really my cousin and who had yet to start courting me). We pretty much started off the morning the same way the previous evening ended: Ralph clamped his hand over my mouth and said, ‘Just breathe. *Breathe!*’

My breathing slowed and regulated itself, and we eyed each other like a pair of self-conscious teenagers. Grunge had not been a fashion trend in our adolescence, though. And Ralph’s spruce up from the neck up was in sharp contrast to his grunginess from the neck down.

He cleared his throat. ‘Can I borrow your iron?’

Shit. Our bond was such that he often ‘heard’ my thoughts.

‘Uh, why?’ *That’s it, play dumb.*

‘My clothes are wrinkled.’

‘Oh ... I hadn’t noticed.’ *Dumber.*

He gave me a quizzical look. I reddened.

‘Anyway, I feel unkempt.’

Ralph used to feel unkempt when a hair was out of place. It wasn’t just vanity. He had obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. It came on (and was self-diagnosed) not long after his backyard expo. He’d been in a state of remission for quite some time, but he lapsed when he felt vulnerable. I felt vulnerable too. He needed to iron. I needed to eat.

I set up the ironing board in the laundry and came back into the kitchen, where he was still loitering. I inclined my head and raised an eyebrow. ‘You hungry?’

It was a rhetorical question; Ralph was always hungry. But as a psychologist, he fancied himself as an expert on body language. Even so, he filtered my question through his skirt-chasing alter ego, which refiltered it through its lizard-brain. Ralph inclined *his* head, raised an eyebrow, gave me a lustful smile and edged closer. I felt a stirring down under.

Oh God. I need to be more specific. ‘Uh, d’ya want some breakfast?’ As in ... not crumpet, not muffin.

Ralph backed off a bit and nodded. ‘Mm. I could eat. Mm. I could eat.’ Repetition repetition— another OCPD symptom.

‘Okay, but I’m gonna have a shower before I make it.’

Again, he misread it as an invitation and he fixed me with a rakish smile. Again, I felt that little quiver. *Shit.* Blood was rushing to the wrong place. I needed that shower; I needed to stay alert.

I marched across to the hallway linen closet, grabbed a fresh towel and shoved it into his chest. ‘Here ya go.’ *Make sure yours is a cold shower.* I held up a finger. *I’m not done yet.* I went back to the closet and fished out a pink Gillette Daisy disposable from an open packet (it gave me silky legs. It could give him a silky face just in case he wore me down and I let him kiss me). I put the razor on top of the towel. ‘There’s aftershave in the drawer under where you found the toothbrush.’

A bewildered expression crossed his face. Understandable. I was sending mixed signals. I left him standing there staring after me as I disappeared into my en-suite and locked the door (and double-checked it was locked).

I finished before Ralph did. I threw on a loose, stretchy cotton T-shirt dress and gathered my

wet hair up into a ponytail. I was pfaffing around in the kitchen when he came out wearing just the towel around his slim waist. His damp, medium-length brown hair was slicked back and starting to curl up at the bottom as it dried.

With ripped biceps that bulged, but not in a steroidal, sinewy kind of way, and broad shoulders, Ralph was the pinnacle of perfection. He used to wax his torso in his modelling days, but when he switched vocations and his psychology practice grew sufficiently for him to knock back modelling assignments, he stopped his hair removal. His well-developed pecs were now covered with a light smattering of soft, downy hair that tapered down his toned abs and disappeared under the towel. I snuck looks as I took stuff out of the fridge.

His state of undress unnerved me. Even worse, I sensed him ogling me. I turned around and was alarmed by his proximity. He'd moved in a little closer. His face was smooth-shaven and gave off the woodsy scent of Joop! Homme. *Dear God*. Our eyes locked. Without looking down, I saw his nipples become erect—I have the wide peripheral vision of a goat—and I swear I could almost hear the *whooshing* of his brain flooding with endorphins, and the *lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dubbing* of his heart rate increasing.

I about-faced to avoid his intense gaze and to stave off another panic attack. I inserted four slices of bread into the toaster (one for me, three for him), cracked and beat the bejesus out of the eggs, and brewed the coffee.

Telepathic bucket of cold water. I felt him watching me for some time before he padded away to press his unkempt clothes.

He didn't bother to put them on before he sat down for breakfast and tucked into his food.

Watching his guns coil and uncoil with the movements of sawing with his knife, and weightlifting his loaded fork, was getting me hot. But Ralph was oblivious to my heavy breathing. He was too busy making love to his omelette: *'Mmm, nom nom nom, mmm.'* Ralph sometimes moaned while he ate, usually when he was nervous. It was one of his many quirks that I mostly ignored; I was so accustomed to them.

He had a voracious appetite, like Fat Bastard, Dr Evil's obese henchman in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (if he had the same metabolism as Fat Bastard, he wouldn't be sitting in my kitchen half-naked—*ecch*. I have cacomorphobia, a dread of the morbidly obese). Ralph's relationship with food was a typically Jewish one just like mine (but he could eat me under the table ... and had earlier looked like he wanted to). His healthy appetite probably wasn't encoded

in his DNA, though (Norma and Albie—Ralph’s st-t-t-tuttering, bully-boy German father—assumed his biological mother wasn’t Jewish: They’d have known if she was; nothing stays secret for long in the Jewish community. They converted Ralph when they adopted him). His love affair with food was probably influenced by childhood circumstances. Having grown up relatively poor, he was often hungry as a child, but once he started working and was earning a good living, he overstocked his fridge and pantry.

I stopped eating, and watched him as he *mmed* and *nom nommed* and polished off his breakfast. Then, with meticulous care, he lined up his cutlery so that it pointed upwards to twelve o’clock, but he turned the fork upside down so the prongs were touching the plate. He once told me he’d heard this practice was The European way and it was Euro-chic for a man-about-town. I told him I’d heard it was *de rigueur* for a wanker. I smiled at the memory.

Ralph looked up, and caught me watching him and smiling. He returned a crooked, closed-mouth, flirtatious grin, cocking one eyebrow questioningly. Then his eyes caressed my body—the parts he could see above the breakfast bar—read ... ‘tits’ (I am much shorter than him). It was clear his shower had restored order and his confidence. My shower had washed away my defences. *Shit*. I wanted to yell at him to stop thinking with his dick, but I couldn’t form the words. My bean was sprouting again! *No, no, no. This cannot happen. I haven’t waxed my bikini line. I look like an African bush pig. And, and, anyway, you’re my cousin!* I focused on my food and unconsciously started shovelling it into my mouth. I made a mental note to google ‘stages of courtship’.

Ralph and I made polite small talk over our coffee. It was as if I’d been on a first date with a stranger I’d picked up, let him spend the night, then couldn’t wait for him to finish his breakfast and leave. That kind of thing had never happened to me; I was only going by what I’d seen in movies. It was uncomfortable. I imagined it was how the female movie character would feel if she were really at one with her role. But I was disturbed that I felt this way with my best friend.

I assumed that as a psychologist, Ralph understood. Although, expertise in human behaviour or not, it probably would have been hard for him to get some distance from an experience he himself was immersed in.

He helped me clear up, then said, ‘I think I’ll get dressed now.’

Thank God! But ... what about the underpants? You’re not going to wear the undies you had on last night, are you? So, how do I say this without being offensive? ‘Uh, Casper’s got a jockey

three-pack in his drawer. One's still in the packet. It's yours.'

Casper is my son (real name Jake, nicknamed Casper because my GP at the time said my pregnancy was a phantom one). At fifteen, Casper was built more like Ralph than like his father, Reuben, who was medium height and frame. Already standing at five feet ten inches, Casper was a good-looking boy-man. Like his dad, he had thick, wavy black hair, brown eyes, and an almost perpetual tan. Casper and his older sister, Hannah, were at Reuben's for the weekend. Reuben and I had been divorced for fifteen months.

'It's fine. I'll just go commando,' Ralph said.

What? Freeballing? Oh boy. After that fateful afternoon thirty years ago, Ralph had imprisoned his 'boys' in tight jocks. Now they were gonna hang l-l-l-loose—a pair of nuts escaping the insanity of years of restraint—

'Ruthie?'

'Huh?'

'I said it's okay, I'll go comm—'

'Yeah, yeah. Whatever.' *Just make sure the barn door stays closed.*

He started heading towards the laundry where he'd left his clothes, when a loud *thunk* on the front door startled him. 'What was that?'

'Oh, just the paperboy. I swear, one of these days he's gonna deliver it straight through the lounge room window.'

Ralph looked at the window, looked back at me, looked at the front door and walked past the laundry.

Oh shit! You've overshot. 'Where are you going?'

'To bring in the paper.'

'No-no-no! I'll get it!'

Ralph turned and stared at me, a perplexed expression on his face. 'I'm already here.'

Fuck. The butterflies in my stomach were going to revert to the pupa stage. I exhaled noisily. 'Ralph. You *cannot* go out there with just a towel.'

He didn't twig at first, but then shook his head. 'Ruthie ... you gotta stop worrying about the neighbours.' He opened the door, took a few steps out and retrieved the paper.

Crap.

'Neighbours' was a catch-all term for 'everyone'. (Sylvia had an unhealthy obsession with

the need for people's approval. Except mine. If she had, she might have treated me a little more kindly; not been so critical.) My torturous night ended with indifference to what the neighbours would think, but not so much to what the neighbours would say. Specifically, Olive Portnoy, the flap-jawed pisspot who lived across the road from me.

I looked at Ralph with a sense of resignation. 'Go get dressed. We need to talk.'

Chapter Three

Portnoy's Complaint

'You've changed your mind, haven't you? This isn't going to happen with us, is it?' Ralph looked frightened and forlorn.

'What? Oh. No-no-no.' *We need to talk* had been a poor choice of words, a hope-dasher. 'I meant, we need to talk, you know, to get things out there instead of tiptoeing around each other.'

He breathed a sigh of relief. 'Yeah.' He stared at me, waiting for me to initiate the conversation.

I looked down at his towel. *Like ... hello!* He got it. He ducked into the laundry, collected his clothes and made for the bathroom.

I walked over to the living room window and adjusted the angle of the plantation shutters enough for me to be able to see Portnoy's place.

It had been a year since I'd moved into my home. A relatively new, single-storey, three-bedroom duplex, it was located on a quiet street. It had been advertised as a townhouse because it looked like it was part of a boutique block of eight—four identical pairs of homes next door to each other. The realtor must have thought that 'large townhouse' had more pulling power than 'small duplex'. The realtor also drove a really, really big car and carried a really, really big briefcase. Ralph had said this man's preoccupation with bigness compensated for smallness elsewhere, and that his 'pulling power' might stretch the truth, but little else.

Each pair of duplexes had a mirrored floor plan. Viewed from the street, my duplex was on the right. My driveway and my neighbour's, separated by a narrow bed of dwarf Agapanthus, led to abutting single garages. At the rear of the garage and partitioned off from it was the laundry with two access doors—one leading into the garage, the other leading into the lounge. Behind the laundry was the U-shaped kitchen with island divider. The main bathroom was behind that, then the master bedroom, with its en-suite on the left behind the bathroom and a walk-in closet on the right. French doors opened out into a courtyard. On the front right side of my duplex was a long living area, then Hannah and Casper's bedrooms. The duplexes had grey slate roofs and glossy, fire-engine red front doors. The exterior walls were rendered and painted in an oatmeal colour.

The rest of the street had similarly configured housing. Most, mine included, had no front

fence; the boundary line was where the lawn met the footpath. It gave the street a sense of openness, which extended to the neighbours—friendly people who minded their own business. The only blot on the landscape was the scandalmongering Olive Portnoy and her ramshackle cottage.

Her front yard looked like the suburb's central waste facility. Many of the neighbours had complained to the council, who sent their people out. These pen pushers had to be seen to be doing something, but nothing changed.

I ran out one morning when I saw a short, dumpy, whiskered, white-haired inspector surveying her house. He held a clipboard against his protuberant belly and was writing something on an official-looking form when I approached him. I told him what I thought. He agreed that the yard was extremely cluttered, but in his opinion nothing really constituted a fire hazard—not even the odd weed poking out through the broken concrete that was littered with car parts, an upended birdbath, flowerless flowerpots, rusted-out appliances, newspapers, and plastic crates.

Yeah, well, what about the army of garden gnomes? I'd asked him. Of the twenty or so of these little bearded fuckers with their red pointy hats, seven held guns—one even had a bazooka! What about firearm regulations? I'd asked him. I wasn't being serious but I didn't much like that he'd snorted his disdain and eyed me with contempt.

Oh, yes. Go ahead and disparage me and my concerns, I'd thought. You ... you fat, jollyless bastard with your gold-plated pension just around the corner. Maybe you could don a red pointy hat and retire in her garden as Bad Santa. And I hope that when you don't deliver, the others shoot you with their clay weapons. In the balls. Maybe then you'll have more respect for gun laws! Ho ho ho.

I thought back to about eight months before that ineffectual exchange, when I'd made an offer on my place.

The agent called me the next day and tried to squeeze me for another twenty thousand as a counter-offer to a fake counter-offer to my original one (which the vendor had already accepted). I refused. He came back to me two hours later. The fake counter-offerers had reneged. 'What luck,' he said. 'It's yours,' he said. 'Indeed,' I said, and counter-offered ten thousand dollars *less* than my original one. The vendor accepted.

In hindsight, I could see that they'd capitulated because whatever the place was marketed as—duplex, townhouse, castle, Wonderland—Portnoy's shithole was going to make the surrounding properties hard to sell. I didn't feel so complacent on the day I moved in. I hadn't thought to question the strategic placement of four vans parked across the road in front of the shithole whenever I met with the agent.

In the months since, I conceded that the only way things would change was when the old woman snuffed it. Odds-on it wasn't going to be anytime soon. She was like the Hydra, the nine-headed water snake of ancient myth. Cut off one head, it just grew another two. People like Portnoy live forever.

Now, standing here staring at the snake's dump, I felt grateful that my bedroom didn't face the god-awful view. I wasn't so grateful that this woman was a snoop. A malignant mole of the Jewish community, she had a direct link to my mother.

Sylvia had never met the spinster Portnoy. Nor had I. (In fact, I knew of no one who had. Spies need to operate incognito.) But mommy dearest had finagled the hag's number from a friend of an acquaintance of an acquaintance. My smothering mother was thrilled to have an association with someone who stalked and talked. She was unaware that I knew Portnoy was her informant. How naïve. Gossips gossip to everyone, and about everyone.

I momentarily regretted buying this place, but then as I turned away from the window and took in the soothing pastel décor of my living area, as I glimpsed my off-white, state-of-the-art kitchen, as I thought of my spacious bedroom and of having my own bathroom, I turned back to the window and thought, *No—I'm not going to let you drive me out!* Maybe I could plant a tall-growing privacy hedge. Would I need council permission? Would they send out the Kris Kringle troll again? I needed to speak to Phoebe and Zac, who owned the adjoining duplex. I was certain they'd be open to the idea of having something to screen out the eyesore across the road.

My musings were interrupted when Ralph came back. He was wearing his perfectly pressed, Fabuloned T-shirt and jeans.

Why have you ironed creases into your jeans? Should a man iron creases into his jeans? I didn't recall seeing them before, not in his jeans. His OC behaviour had amped up.

I had a pair of large two-seater, pale mushroom-pink leather sofas in my lounge room. Facing each other, they were separated by a heavy travertine and jarrah coffee table. Ralph sat on one sofa, I sat on the other. We held each other's gaze for a moment before he prompted me. 'I'm

listening.’

Noooo! Seriously? You’re using Frasier Crane’s by-line? I had the urge to laugh again. That had always been my problem—wanting to laugh at the wrong time. I’d had little self-restraint as a child, and it hadn’t improved much over the years.

Think disturbing thoughts, think disturbing thoughts. I did, and the urge passed. But then Ralph crossed his legs. *Think disturbing thoughts.* I did, but they turned to dirty ones—*Ooh. How does that work when you go commando? Does it chafe? Does the rubbing turn you on? Oh God, I wanna come back in my next life as a man so I know what it’s like to have balls.* The dirty thoughts turned back into disturbing ones: *I did have ‘balls’ as a child, but they’d become like undescended testicles over the years. Man! I was convinced I’d regrown them last night, but—*

‘Ruthie?’

I looked up at him. ‘Mm?’

He was eyeing me expectantly.

Oh. Right. You’re listening.

I pulled my knees up and hugged them against my chest, dragging my shift down over my knees at the same time so my knickers were concealed. I took a deep breath, blew out audibly and said, ‘What is *wrong* with me?’ I was about to say more when the phone rang. I checked my watch. It wasn’t even eight o’clock. I launched off the couch and made a dash for the kitchen. I don’t like early-morning calls, or late-night ones. Sylvia had me believing they were bad omens—‘Whorebringers of doom,’ she’d said. I was all the more anxious now that Hannah had her licence.

I almost dropped the phone. ‘H-hello?’

‘Have you got a man there?’ Sylvia didn’t mince words and her tone was accusatory.

Crap. Must get Caller ID.

The old bag across the road probably had Sylvia’s number on speed dial. Her living room window overlooked the street. The venetians covering the window had a permanent diamond shape between two of the slats as a result of prising them apart too many times. It often felt like I was under surveillance. It often felt like I’d never left my childhood home.

‘I’m waiting!’ Sylvia’s grating voice penetrated my thoughts.

Well, you can wait a little longer. I walked back into the lounge with the cordless flip phone and plonked down onto the sofa.

‘Hello, are you there?’

‘Yees, I’m here.’ I mouthed ‘*Sylvia*’ to Ralph. He nodded like he’d already figured it out. My perfunctory attitude was no doubt a dead giveaway.

‘Then answer my question!’

‘What makes you think I have a man here?’ I looked at Ralph, smiling. His eyes had widened.

‘Uh, uh ... the children are at Reuben’s. When they’re with Reuben, you usually go out. You’re not married anymore. You might bring someone home.’ Her hesitant tone had turned into a cold clipped one.

‘And what if I did?’

‘Well, you need to think of your children!’

I lay down. ‘Oh, I know. I do.’ I yawned loudly; it conveyed my ennui. ‘But like you said, they’re not here.’

‘B-but they’ll come home soon. And it’s not good for them to find a strange man in the house!’

‘True.’ I let her stew for a bit before adding, ‘Who said anything about a *strange* man in the house, though?’

‘So there *is* someone there, I knew it!’

I didn’t respond. I could hear her mind ticking over in the silence. Then ... *ker-ching!*

‘Is it Reuben?’

Reuben? ‘Well, that wouldn’t make much sense, would it? If the kids are there, why would he be here?’

Several seconds passed as she tried to process this. Before she could respond, I said, ‘Anyway, why don’t you just ask Portnoy?’

Her telltale, involuntary sharp intake of breath left me feeling smug. There’d be plenty of time to wallow in guilt later on. For now, I was on a roll. Toying with *Sylvia* was like an extreme sport that caused an adrenaline surge. I expected a hot-tempered response, and got one.

‘How would *she* know?’ If *Sylvia* were wooden, her nose would have been growing right about now.

‘Well, let’s seeeeee. I can’t think of any other reason why you’d think there’s a man in my house unless you heard it from her.’

‘Uh, I-I’m your mother. I know you like the back of my hand!’ she snapped. ‘Who’s there?’
‘Why don’t you ask the back of your hand?’
‘*Oeuf!* Always with the smart mouth. I’m asking *you*. *Pest!*’

For as long as I could remember, Sylvia had regularly full-stopped our exchanges with *pest* and prefaced them with *oeuf*. *Oeuf* is French for egg. *Oeuf!* meant she was, well, eggy. For Sylvia, *oeuf* was the well-bred equivalent of *fuck*. I’d never heard the relatives or anyone else use it, so it seemed original. But because Sylvia tended to speak in clichés, I assumed it was commonly used in her homeland, Egypt. I’d never been there, so I didn’t know. I never bothered to ask.

‘*Oeuf!* WHO IS THERE?’ Her yelling dragged me back up into the present again. ‘Answer me, *pest!*’

The game had become tedious. Time to put her out of her misery. ‘Ralph’s here.’

‘Ralph?’ Another moment of silence passed while she digested this. *Tick-tock, tick-tock*—
‘Why has he only got a towel on?’

And there we have it. This reminded me of when I used to play hide-and-seek with a three-year-old Hannah. When she was the hider, she’d remain in front of me but she’d cover her face. Sylvia wasn’t even hiding her face. And she sure wasn’t covering her arse. I turned to Ralph and smirked as I answered my mother’s question with another one. ‘What makes you think he’s only got a towel on?’

Ralph’s eyebrows shot up. His face wore a stunned but knowing expression that seemed to say, *How can someone so predictable never cease to amaze you?*

‘Uh, I, uh ... never mind, just answer the question, *pest!*’

‘And what if my answer to your question is no?’

‘Then I’d say you were *lying!*’

I imagined Portnoy had provided Sylvia with just the bare bones, which would have left her in a tortured state. Even if she’d had all the facts, though, Sylvia fleshed things out however she wanted to. But it kind of worked in my favour. If I let her come up with the story, she couldn’t blame me for pissing her off.

‘Well, I guess you’ve already decided what the answer is, so why bother asking?’

‘He had a shower there, didn’t he? Did you have sex with him? You did, didn’t you? I just know it! I can tell something’s been going on with you two since he found out he’s adopted. I’ve

seen the way you look at each other. I'm not blind and I'm not stupid.'

No. You're not blind.

'And Norma says the same thing.' These backup words dripped with censure. My aunt might have made the same observation, but she was not a disapproving sort. 'So. *Did you have sex with him?*'

I looked at Ralph, rolled my eyes. 'Yeah. We had sex.'

The sarcasm went over the top of her head. She gasped and slammed the receiver down hard.

'Ow!' I pulled the phone away from my ear, stared at it with irritation, and flipped it shut forcefully.

'Still think something's wrong with you?' Ralph quipped.

'*Hmph.* Not so much.' I sat up, closed my eyes and rolled my head around on my tense shoulders. 'Frasier' was smart enough to keep mum while I tried to calm my breathing. We sat in silence for a full minute before the phone rang again. My eyes flew open.

'Round two,' Ralph said. He knew my mother well. He favoured me with a sympathetic smile. It didn't help.

I let it ring out. But when it rang a second time, I didn't want to ignore it in case the call really was a 'whorebringer of doom'.

It was Joe. Things must have been bad for Sylvia to skip a couple of steps. 'I don't know what you said to your mother, but you better get over here. She's threatening to kill herself.'

Chapter Four

A Novel Whopper

‘And?’ I scoffed at my father’s half-hearted plea. ‘You’re using *that* to make a case to get me there!’

Joe snickered. He had a lot to answer for, but he also had a sense of humour. It helped him survive the marriage.

I asked why he couldn’t just deal with it. He said it was between my mother and me. ‘Leave-me-out-of-this’ was Joe’s anthem.

I hung up and looked at Ralph. ‘I know you’re adopted, but please don’t tell me you got the short end of the stick.’

He groaned. ‘Now what?’

‘She’s threatening to kill herself.’

He laughed out loud. ‘Does she need a hand? I know some people.’

‘I’ll ask. I gotta go over there. You know, damage control.’ I traipsed into the bedroom, slipped on a pair of espadrilles and grabbed my bag. ‘Won’t be long,’ I said as I headed for the front door.

He called after me, ‘D’you want me to come with you?’

I spun around to face him. ‘Hell, no! We’d be looking at collateral damage. Anyway, I caused this, I gotta fix it.’

Ralph gave me a long, hard look. ‘You did not cause this.’

I stared back and slowly nodded. ‘Yeah. You know what? You’re right.’ Sylvia had pegged me as the designated, unremitting thorn in her side. Over the years, she’d crafted a whole bag of tricks to make me feel responsible for her misery. When one, or ten, didn’t work, she’d pull another out of the hat. I didn’t always see it for what it was.

I felt more positive as I walked to my car. I’d left it in the driveway overnight. Before climbing in, I waved to Portnoy’s spyhole. I detected some movement there. Probably in retreat—the sleuth avoiding being caught out.

I should have been at my parents’ place seven minutes later—why did I buy a place so close to them?—but I didn’t feel an urgency. Sylvia never made good on these kinds of promises.

Besides, let Joe sweat for a bit. I drove around for about twenty minutes rehearsing what I'd say.

When I let myself in, I found Joe in the lounge. Lolling in his easy chair with one leg draped over the arm, he was vegged out in front of the tube. He was still in his mustardy waffle-knit Holeproof pyjamas. The middle island patch of grey hair on his baldish head was usually slicked back. Now it stood upright, strands of hair facing every which way. He looked like he'd just collapsed after beating a hasty retreat from his hotbed. He was cooling down with a bowl of ice cream.

I shook my head. 'It's not even nine o'clock and you're eating ice cream? On a health kick, are you?'

He looked at me with tired eyes. 'You sound like your mother.'

This did not help my mood. I shuddered. He pointed backwards with his thumb. 'In the bedroom.'

Where else?

Sylvia was stretched out on her bed. Its centre had yielded to her tall, fleshy frame as she lay in what had become her martyr position—on her stomach across the bed, head at nine o'clock, toes at three o'clock. Her gronde (grey + blonde) boofy hair was mussed, used tissues were strewn all over the bedspread, and a Harlequin romance novel lay open, face down on her pillow (Sylvia's bedhead bookcase could have passed for a Harlequin or Mills & Boon outlet). I tilted my head to read the title: *Hidden Rapture*. I sniggered at the irony. She heard me and sat bolt upright, her double chin wobbling from the sudden movement. She gave me a blue-eyed, same old, same old black look that was in sharp contrast to her wan complexion.

'How could you do this to me?' she screeched.

Huh? 'W-what have I done to you?' I was incredulous.

'You're sleeping with your cousin!' she shrieked.

'No. I'm not.'

'You said you had sex with him.'

'No-no-no. *You* decided I had sex with him. I just went along with you. There's no point arguing with you when you claim to "just know" something. But here's what *I* know. He is not my *blood* cous—'

'He *is* your bloody cousin! He's my sister's child, the fruit of her tenderloins!'

Oh God, a Harlequin cock-up of the first order. Ralph sprung from someone's 'tenderloins',

but certainly not your sister's. And he is no fruit, baby! He's a choice cut of gorgeous rump—

'Oeuf! Wipe that smirk off your face, *pest!* I know there's something going on with you and your cousin. I'm not blind. What you two are doing is ... it's voodoo!'

'Voodoo?'

'Yes. Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. It's voodoo, it's forbidden!'

I snorted. *That would be 'taboo'. Stupid.*

She shot me daggers. 'God's going to punish you for this!' she spat out her righteous indignation, then started wailing again. 'How could you do this to me?'

Again, 'Exactly, what am I doing to you?'

'You are going to make me the laughing stock of the whole community.'

Newsflash. With a husband who social farts like Big Bertha, you're already there. My father's unchecked tendencies had earned him such a reputation (and nickname), people actually believed his last name was Blow, not Roth. But here and now, my mother's martyr complex had worn thin.

'How is this about you?' I shrieked. 'How is *everything* always about you? What about ME?'

I stormed out.

'You'll be sorry when I die!' she squawked after me.

Whatever. You'll-be-sorry-when-I-die had lost its charge, I'd heard it so often.

Joe was still in front of the TV. I stopped short and stared at him, partly because he was sniggering, partly because he was now stuffing his ruddy face with chocolate cake. I yelled, 'You deal with her!' He stopped sniggering. I slammed the door on my way out.

Slow, measured breathing had helped me centre myself in the past, but sitting in my car inhaling and exhaling to the count of five didn't make much of a dent this time. I thought back to what had worked when I was a child, trapped in that oppressive environment.

An image of Sylvia as a horse sustained me. An old blonde mare on rickety legs, whinnying—*nei-ei-ei-ei-eigh, oe-oe-oe-oeuf, nei-ei-ei-ei-eigh*—snorting, baring big pink gums and big yellow teeth, massive lips retracted and flapping away through the nickering.

I drew on that image now. I drew a blank. *Zippo. Nada. No horse, not a frickin' dicky bird.* So, I seethed all the way home. I was a grown woman with a good, well-paying job working as a

feature writer for one of my two closest girlfriends, Maxi (Maxine Mayer-Rose), who was editor-in-chief of a popular women's magazine. I'd survived a divorce, owned my own home and had two well-adjusted children. Yet, whenever I went to my childhood home, I shrunk back into the posture of a petulant child.

I startled Ralph out of his brooding state as I burst back into the lounge. He was where I'd left him, but leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his chin resting in his hands. I screamed at him, 'Next time you wanna go out there with just a towel, *don't*. Lose the towel, go naked!'

I plopped down on the sofa opposite and exhaled noisily, exasperated.

He leaned back and scrunched up his face. 'So ... I take it, it didn't go too well?'

I told him what had happened. He was all ears (*I'm listening*). He didn't comment, though. He left me to get the rest off my chest.

'I don't get it. Last night—well, no, only a few hours ago—I had all these epiphanies. I thought I'd let go of a whole lot of fears. And everything was so clear. I even understood Sylvia. I mean, I really, really got her. I actually felt compassion for her. *Pff!* Imagine?'

Ralph gave me a worldly-wise smile.

'But now ... I dunno. Now, it's like it's all threatening to go down the crapper, you know? Like everything's changed but nothing's changed.' I looked down, stared at my knees and shook my head. I looked up at Ralph. He was watching me. I gave a helpless shrug.

He leaned forward again, rested his forearms on his thighs, clasped his hands, and spoke. 'How does that leave you feeling?'

I jerked my head back like a pigeon. I couldn't conceal my amusement. 'Seriously? Are you ... *geshhhhhtalting* me?' (I didn't know how the hell gestalt therapy worked, I just loved the pronunciation. It was one of those neat-sounding words, like *flapdoodle* or *shilly-shally*.)

Ralph responded with a sheepish grin, and then gave me puppy face—head tilted down, eyes up. It made him look less psychologist, more human. It made him look irresistible ... *mmm, mmm—*

'It was a bit therapeutic-ish, wasn't it? Is that even a word? Uh, anyway ... Look. It's hard for me to be detached. I'm one of the players in this psychodrama—'

More psychologist, less human.

'And I do feel kinda responsible for this. I mean, not for your mother's reaction—that's a

whole new ballgame,' he muttered. 'But I forgot about Portnoy. Under the circumstances, I shouldn't have gone out there wearing just a towel.'

'True. But I shouldn't have goaded Sylvia.'

Ralph the now-detached psychologist just nodded, and resisted saying something. A wise move.

'It wasn't nice, was it?' I was looking for validation. Although, was it validating to have someone agree that what you did wasn't nice?

Again, he didn't answer. Another wise move.

I screwed up my face. 'I'm feeling a bit like a lousy daughter.' I wasn't sure what was worse—to have a default feeling of guilt or to feel nothing, like Joe. Joe was emotionally shut down. 'I know she's unhappy with my father. With life, I guess. Why can't I be a little more tolerant? Why can't I just be the bigger person?'

'So ... you're asking why can't you be the parent to her child?'

Ralph's question had just put it in perspective. 'Thank you, I needed to hear that.' I smiled at him, but then raised an inquisitive eyebrow. 'Was that a *geshhhhhtalt* technique?'

He laughed at me. 'Nah. A client-centred one.'

Whatever ... it had worked. We sat in silence for a short time. I watched as he rubbed his chin and looked skyward. Ralph was 'ralphulating'. It was a term Maxi had coined years earlier because Ralph did this so often. *Ralphulate* was a hybrid of 'to ralph' (slang for 'to vomit') + to speculate, which added up to throwing up an idea he'd chewed over. He introduced these with, 'Hmm ...'

'Hmm ... seems a lot of your upset is because, as you said, everything's always about her—'

'Oh, always—'

'Well then, let's stop talking about her and make it about you.' He softly added, 'And me. Let's talk about us.'

Shit, in other words, you wanna talk about having sex with me!

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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