

Holly-Jane Rahlens



Extract 1:

Memoirs of an Ex-Cheerleader

Someone strikes a match. I turn to find Donna Kahn. She's a year older than us and quite the bold one, lighting up a Parliament. She passes the pack around. I glance sideways and see Mrs. Rosetti watching us. I decline the cigarette and the other Knockouts follow suit. Cynthia, Kathy and the twins light up.

Donna is styled a little like Becky, but she seems more authentic, more of a tramp than Becky. Becky, as I see it, is just wearing a costume — as if the basketball court were a stage and she a performer. I'm certain her Ronnie Spector Bad Girl-look is just a phase. Tomorrow she may be wearing her Leslie Gore get-up: a kilt, knee socks, and loafers with tassels like miniature feather dusters that clean her shoes when she walks. Or saddle shoes and a shirtwaist like Annette Funicello from the Mickey Mouse Club. For all I know she may go to school on Monday wearing a habit like the Singing Nun.

Klaaank! The basketball bangs against the fence and we jerk around. Lenny the Moron is laughing his head off.

“Sorry, girls,” he says, a wild smirk on his face.

“Dickhead,” says Donna Kahn laconically.

The boys slap Lenny across his back. “Hey, Dickhead!” they guffaw.

Dickhead? My father would literally wash my mouth out with soap if he heard me say something like that. Especially in public.

Becky's talking to the twins now, a few feet away, showing off her pink

transistor radio. The boys on the court are taking a break. We watch them wipe the sweat off their foreheads with a towel and pass a Coke bottle around as Mark, smiling his wonderful, crooked, summer surfer smile, walks over to us. He's standing so close to me I can see beads of perspiration along his hairline quiver when he breathes. "Hi," he says to me, running his fingers through his crew-cut hair.

I think I may faint. Stop breathing. Choke on my bubble gum.

"Nice to see you," he says.

My throat is so dry, when I gulp down some air, it feels as if I'm swallowing medicated talcum powder. "Nice to see you, too," I say.

"You live around here?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Up the block."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"In Becky Bernstein's building?"

"Yeah."

We stare at each other a moment.

"Do you have any more of that?" he asks, pointing to the pink gum that I have just cracked between my teeth.

"Yeah," I say, but then remember it was Becky's. "No! I mean, I don't know if I have any." I eagerly search my pockets and come up with a clump of aluminum foil. "I have half of a poppy seed bagel."

It looks like Mark may actually take it, but then we're interrupted by Becky. "Here," she says. She unwraps the rest of her bubble gum roll and hands it to him.

"Hey, thanks," he says, twisting off a piece. He pops it into his mouth, gives the rest back to her, and then ... he grabs Becky's hand and starts dribbling the basketball with her!

Okay, Becky is one of my best friends. But still. Why her? Why Little Miss Bad Girl? Why not Little Miss Cute As a Button? And anyway: he

was talking to me. We had just had such a deep conversation. I thought he liked me. Or did he just want the gum? I am confused.

With beginner's luck Becky manages to dribble the ball away from Mark, but then he slams it hard and it rolls away. But instead of going after it, he takes a gulp of Coke, offers the bottle to Becky, and casually puts his arm around her.

I am devastated. Mark has put his arm around Becky. His arm. He might just as well have kissed her. I cannot stand the sight of it. Of her. Of them. "I'm cold," I say to Elaine and Judy and twist around to go. But Elaine and Judy are gone. They're standing with Donna Kahn near the water fountain at the southeast corner of the park. I'm about to run off toward them, when Fat-Face-Frankie Spolansky jumps in front of me.

Uh-oh. This was all I needed.

I try to walk past him, but he blocks my way. "Would you mind moving?" I say.

Lenny "The Moron" Moronelli appears, blocking my way from behind. "Take a look at these," Frankie says to him. He's pointing to my feet, at my olive green orthopedic shoes. How could he? I hate him. And I hate my shoes. I will never wear them again.

"Look at these shoes!" Lenny the Moron says, waving the other boys over.

"Excellent craftsmanship!" says Fat-Face.

Excellent craftsmanship, my foot! He's making fun of my feet!

"Pigeon-toes!" says Lenny the Moron. His voice is so loud, its echo ricochets off the wall of the neighboring handball court and clobbers me over the head.

"Pigeon-toes!" says Melvin Minsky.

"Pigeon-toes!" says Loudmouth Landau.

The boys turn to Fat-Face Frankie, waiting for him to join in on the fun. "Pigeon-toes," he says.

I feel so klutzy. And ugly. So utterly clumsy. I wish I could just jump in the sandbox, urrow a hole, and disappear.

I look for help. Where's Mark? Maybe he'll save me! But he's at the other end of the basketball court, deep in conversation with Becky. Neither of them is aware of what's happening.

"Oh, shut up," I shout at Frankie who's closest to me. I push him away. "Get outta here!"

"Are you talking to me?" he says. He swats my hands away and his fingers graze my chest. Did he touch me there on purpose?

"Yes, you, too, Fatso! Leave me alone!"

He pushes me lightly with the sweaty, clammy palms of his hands. "Oooo, you're tough, aren't you?"

"You're damn right, I am! Dickhead!"

I can't believe I just said that.

Neither can Frankie. He bursts out laughing. "You really know how to talk dirty, don't you?"

I see Judy's big, cushiony body loping toward us now, aware of the ruckus. Elaine is still congregating at the water fountain with Donna Kahn.

Fat-Face's eyes are crawling all over me. "So come on, let's do 'it.' You wanna do 'it?' It'll only take two minutes."

"Do what?" I say. "What will only take two minutes?"

But then it clicks. And I am truly shocked — not because of the vulgarity. I'm used to boys like that. But I'm utterly startled by the time frame involved. Do it? In two minutes? Is that all it takes?

I give Fat-Face-Frankie Spolansky a shove that sends him spinning but trip over the trombone case that's been lying around. Judy runs over, helps me up, and whistles for Elaine. And we're off.