

Holly-Jane Rahlens



Extract 2:

## *Memoirs of an Ex-Cheerleader*

“What are you sulking about the whole day?” my father asks me during lunch.

I know I shouldn’t be sulking. It won’t get me any closer to a pair of heels. But somehow I just can’t jump over my shadow. I seem to be sulking about everything, about my orthopedic shoes and about moving. And then there’s Becky and Mark, Priscilla and Mark, a dress for the Winter Ball that I don’t have, the absence of my violin.

“She wouldn’t help me with math,” Wendy, the little snitch, says.

“That’s not true!” I shriek. “I said I would. Later.”

“So?” my father asks. “What’s the matter?”

He can’t be serious. Does he really want me to tell him “what the matter is?” If I told him that I’m sulking because I don’t want to move, he would have to defend himself. And that’s the last thing a despot longs to do.

My mother looks at me. She sighs, knowing that another atomic blast is in the making if I say what’s really on my mind. But she’s an honorable woman. How can she not be concerned? “What’s wrong, sweetie?” she asks, which is tantamount to saying “let it all out.”

But it’s a no-win situation. I’m damned if I say what’s on my mind, and I’m damned if I don’t. I decide to take a middle course. I will tell a truth but I won’t mention the move or my violin. Those are the touchiest subjects.

“Oh, Mommy,” I blurt out, “can’t I get high heels? All the girls will be wearing them to the Winter Ball.”

In the short, stunned moment of silence that follows my outburst, we’re suddenly aware of muffled voices issuing from our living room wall.

“For God’s sake, Murray!” we make out Gloria Bernstein saying. “It’s only one thirty in the afternoon! Don’t you have any sense of control any more?”

“You’re a broken record!” Murray Bernstein responds.

“My head’s broken!” she hollers back. “From banging it against the wall. Look at it. The wall’s full of holes. I’m tired of—”

We all look at the wall. Our luck, there really would be holes from her head. But we don’t see any.

“What are you talking about all of a sudden?” my father says.

For a second I don’t know who he’s addressing. Me? Gloria Bernstein? Even Mrs. Bernstein wonders, for on the other side of our living room wall she stops talking mid-sentence. I think she and Murray are listening to us now.

“How many times do we have to say no?” my father says, turning to me and raising his voice a thousand decibels.

Uh-oh. So he’s talking to me. And about the heels I want so desperately. My plan has backfired.

“How many times?” he repeats.

“Walter, please. Do you have to holler?” my mother says.

Outside, in the hallway, the Bernstein’s apartment door swings open. And then slams shut. We hear Murray Bernstein stomp past our apartment and down the hallway toward the elevator. If my father is Tyrannosaurus Walt, Becky’s Dad is Brontosaurus Bernstein.

“Honeybunch,” my mother says to me. “Dr. Friedman said you can’t wear heels until your arches strengthen. You know that. Excessive femoral anteversion sometimes takes a while. The doctor said to be patient.”

“I can’t even pronounce the frigging thing,” my father says, “let alone be patient!”

“Well then let’s see who’s first — you learning how to pronounce ‘excessive femoral anteversion’ or Susie’s feet growing out of it. And do you mind watching your language in front of the girls?”

“My language?” my father protests. “You’re the bad example! You’re the one who’s throwing words around like ‘expletive amoral aversions!’”

You see? That’s the problem with my father. Just when you can’t stand his guts, he goes and says something funny and makes you laugh. Even I have to laugh at his mistake. I wonder if he made it on purpose.

My mother turns to me. She puts her hand on mine and pats it. She has tiny hands, but her nails are long and manicured. She gets them done with her hair every Friday after work at the beauty parlor next to the Pix movie theater.

“But still,” barks my father, “I’d like to know what’s taking so long!”

Wait a sec — wasn’t he just in a good mood? Why’s he screaming again? Really — he’s so unpredictable.

“What’s taking so long?” T-Walt repeats for emphasis and bangs his fist on the table. It accidentally hits his dish. To everyone’s surprise a lamb chop jumps out of the plate and careens to the floor. He bends down and picks it up. “What does it take to walk straight?” he says, throwing the chop back in the plate. “Why can’t my daughter walk straight? Do you have any idea how much money we’re dishing out to that foot doctor?”

“Oh Walter, how could you be so cruel?” my mother cries out. “It’s not Susie’s fault! If you finally got a decent job instead of futzing around with those encyclopedias maybe we could send her to that specialist over in Cedarhurst. Dr. Martin Kohler. That’s his name. Or at least we could buy her a more fashionable pair of orthopedic shoes.”

“Fashionable orthopedic shoes?” I cry out. It was an oxymoron. Miss Swift, the thwarted English teacher, should know that. “I want heels! High heels!”

But no one's listening to me.

"Why don't you take her to Dr. Friedman for her next appointment," says my mother to my father. "On Thursday. The 21st. And you can ask him yourself what's taking so long."

"I will!" says T-Walt. "And I'll give him a piece of my mind too!"

We hear the door to the Bernsteins swing open again. "Murray?" Mrs. Bernstein calls out. "The game's about to start!"

But Murray is gone.

Gloria shuts the door.

Tyrannosaurus Walt jumps up. "You heard. The game's about to start. The Cardinals and the Giants." He turns to my mother. "How much would it take to give a guy a break?" His voice is warmer now. The thought of the game has lifted his spirits. In fact, he's actually smiling at her. "Eh? How much? I only got my territory last week and already sold one set. The commissions aren't great, but as soon as I sell five, it'll double. And then we'll be on Easy Street. I get my own leads. It's not like I'm going door-to-door. You can't beat that. I just gotta get the hang of it." He gives her a hug, bending down and burying his nose in the curlers at the nape of her neck. Very romantic. I'll have to tell D.C. Comics to put that picture on their next Young Love cover.

"Oh, Walter," my mother says, but I can tell she's succumbing to his charm.

"I don't want fashionable orthopedic shoes!" I say. "Is anyone listening to me?"