

## Julie Brickman

### LUST'S END

Rob scarcely noticed his first imaginal failure. A gorgeous long legged blonde walked into his classroom and he could not imagine her naked. Overtired, he thought to himself, remembering his rather inventive performance with Christine the night before. Pristine Christine, he used to call her. Not anymore.

The second incident alarmed him because he was out with the woman. Johanna Stephen Sands was a brunette with pale skin and large undulating breasts. New to academe, she was actually enthusiastic about a contract job with the English department, and she was smart: smart without the poisonous edge Rob hated in so many of his snaketongued colleagues. Toasting kir against martini, wine against wine, they drank to her success. As he gazed through the black silk of her blouse at her creamy, plump breasts, a red circle materialized around one breast, then the other, followed by a thick red line right across the nipples. Maybe, he thought, she was wearing some new type of bra that they sold in feminist boutiques. An anti-male bra, with a little switchblade that popped out when you touched it without asking. Rob blinked vigorously several times. The red circles disappeared. He did not invite Johanna back to his condominium that night.

The following weekend at Cafe des Copains, a lanky miniskirted waitress strode up to Rob's table, and instead of picturing her legs hooked over his shoulders, he saw them in baggy grey sweats as she jogged effortlessly past him. In the park, tossing a glorious smile his way as she went. Never in his life could he remember adding clothes onto a woman. At his club the next day his imagination changed a tightmuscled young redhead out of iridescent dancercise tights into a pinstriped suit. As he watched the swing of her briefcase recede, Rob began to wonder what was happening to him. The worst was in the classroom. That year his graduate seminar was almost all women, which he used to love. He would take them out in little hordes for coffee, and as their eyes clung to his witty, moving lips, he disrobed them. He didn't do it on purpose; an item of clothing would just slip off after he'd made a particularly clever remark, as if Henry Miller were dispensing rewards. The taut boyish woman with prepubescent breasts would suddenly look naked from the waist up; the fleshy one with engulfing thighs would ripple from a gauzy white caftan. It was fantasy heaven, his own personal *Playboy*. His tongue sprang new muscles; his brain turned new corners; his wit knew no bounds. He loved them all.

A few years earlier when the repressive university regime tinkered with its admission standards to encourage applications from women and minorities, Rob had been a vocal supporter. He had chaired the departmental committee on the educationally disadvantaged and published brilliant articles in the faculty newsletter and the *CAUT Bulletin*. When the associate dean of the arts, a woman, lost the competition for dean to an outside male applicant, he wrote a scathing letter to *The Globe and Mail*. He acquired an enviable reputation as one of the rare male allies of feminist causes. Women poured into his classes, all types of women: old, young, black, yellow, red, pink, and coffeeskinned; beanpoles and midgets; women with Afros, burgundy streaks, spikes, and crewcuts, even one with a shaved head like Sinead, the Irish singer he had seen on one of those late night rock videos (in his mind she shaved her pubic hair and looked like an eight-year-old girl--impish, impudent, innocent-as she stood naked before him; watching her made him tremble). Keeping up with these women took large chunks of his energy; he found less and less private time to work and think.

There had always been troublemakers, the raging dykey women who didn't think any man could be an ally. When they first appeared in his classes, he could pick them out. They were

the ones in Birkenstocks and thick socks or combat boots. Devoid of makeup with straggly hair, they read Rita Mae Brown, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Radclyffe Hall. (The thought of their naked flesh repelled him; it would be reptilian, crusty and damp, with slimy, intestinal pudenda.) When he made a joke about how censorship would affect the modern erotic female, they stared at him with cold, contemptuous faces. After such a class, Rob would seek the company of a gentler female colleague or student who would console him, explaining that these were separatists who believed that women should remove themselves from all male influence for a while. He shouldn't mind, they told him, it wasn't personal. But Rob was sensitive to what other people thought; those critical faces *felt* personal. He began to guide his virile tongue by their reactions.

After awhile, he could no longer tell who they were. Criticism could come from anywhere. Radical voices spoke from beautiful faces. They could no longer be attributed to the fat, the old, the ugly, the unmarried. Soon they started to contradict each other in class, and it became harder to tailor his opinions to appease them. No matter what he said, some woman always found chauvinist implications. He felt like he was dodging fastballs all the time, and watched his influence dwindle as he let their voices take over his classes. One of his colleagues got hauled down to the sexual harassment centre for sleeping with a student who claimed she had acquiesced only out of fear for her grade. In the men's room his colleague whispered: she was willing, she agreed, she hung around after class, spent hours having intimate chats with me in the faculty club. No one believed him. The student had spiral notebooks filled with evidence of her attempts to refuse him; she had tapes of his phone calls, photocopies of his letters, and lists of other students who had witnessed his pathetic approaches. The colleague was put on temporary suspension and required to seek professional help. Rob's nervousness increased; things were veering out of control.

In classes, his favourite female students slipped further from his lusty imagination. Brenda's tight mauve sweater turned into army fatigues after he joked about Barbara Bush(less). A helmet popped onto Kim's shimmering hair when he mentioned a seminal paper. As he presented the thrust of an argument, the whole array of moist, dripping lips thinned into dry sneers. Rob hurried out of class to escape their clamouring voices, but the throng pursued him, carrying bayonets where purses once had hung.

The voices began to talk at him from inside his head: commenting, nagging, scolding, informing, judging. Doris Lessing is not humourless, pigbrain, a low voice rumbled when he stopped reading *The Golden Notebook*. Rape is the Vietnam of female experience, another chided when he flung down his fifth paper on rape in twentieth century American literature. Abortion law is a permanent War Measures Act! this one screamed at him all the way through his attempt to read Henderson's bill on fathers' rights. My body, my body, my body, she shrieked, NOT Henderson's body, not daddy's body, NOT MY BABY'S BODY, and not part of the body of law. Rob couldn't think. Pregnant women carried men's babies. That's why men picked wives so much more carefully than mistresses. He smiled: it felt good to hear his own thoughts.

It didn't last. Casting his mind around women writers trying to find some that he liked (to not look sexist) and could assign to his classes (without stimulating those hideous domestic issue papers), he found himself wallowing around in the sex lives of women writers. Maybe this was the best criterion, he thought, to save himself from the tightcunted writing of the dyke brigade. Woolf, his favourite (the only woman he thought could write at all) had a celibate *marriage*. Rob shuddered (one day without sex left him raging). Willa Cather was a dyke. Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, and who knew how many others. Then there were the spinsters: Austen, Dickinson, Pym, Sarton, Bronte (Emily). What about Djuna Barnes? Dyke? She wrote about them implying that profound sexiness and dykiness sprung from the

same vaginal wells. A weird thought. What did that mean? Independence, a voice answered: fuck a hundred or don't fuck at all, but never get stuck in servitude.

Rob hated these thoughts. He didn't want to understand the complex plights of women. Understanding crippled his aggressive tongue and compromised his ability to castrate his adversaries with one verbal swath. He no longer enlived faculty meetings with sexy quips and irreverent jabs. The wreath of laughter that had always enveloped his lonely, fragile soul disappeared. Once one of the voices used his tongue to lecture a colleague about the necessity of malebashing. After that, he shut his lips firmly at meetings. His big, fleshy face acquired a pinched look; his wide lips pursed in a permanent pout.

Johanna confided more deeply in him."} want to get into tenure stream right away!' she said over Benedictine and coffee. "There's a position coming up in my area next year, and I'm going to apply for it." Being an academic had been her dream from childhood; her mother, a high school French teacher and a frustrated intellectual, was redeemed by Johanna's career. Professionally, Johanna used her mother's unmarried name, and with each publication, the maternal face that had dimmed her childhood with gloom, lightened and eased. Rob, a member of the powerful tenure and promotions committee, understood that he could help Johanna. He knew exactly what she should do: where to publish, how many papers, which committees to join, which to avoid. Sleeping with Johanna would ruin her; she'd just be another woman fucking up her chances. How should he talk to her then? Rob often counselled new male colleagues; he recognized their bellyup deference to his position and rewarded them with his assistance. But bellyup for women had always been sexual: what if it wasn't? What if Johanna just wanted help? friendship? what if her intense excitement wasn't laced with sexual innuendo? was about work? ideas? Disoriented, Rob played safe, gave her information, and took her straight home.

Relationships fascinated Rob now. He puzzled and pondered and speculated about them, even sought women just to talk about them. He read writers he had previously disdained: Marge Piercy, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Robin Morgan, even resorted to social scientists like Phyllis Chesler, Judith Herman, and Ann Jones. Men in their books were vague, shadowy figures with dim interior lives or selfish, critical, violent, furious bastards. The real lives of women occurred in the spaces between their time with men, the time they spent with each other. Men's accomplishments, their thinking, hardly mattered. Instead, how much housework men did, the type of time they spent with children, if they were supportive (listened to women complain), dependent (had to be looked after) or possessive (undercut women's friends, passions), were the qualities of note. Incredibly, these women laughed with each other about men's sexual frenzies, how men raced around to fuck away their anxieties with insipid baby cunts. An equation appeared: strong cunts inspire weak cocks. Men, it seemed, lost their erections with strong women. They had to be coaxed, teased, coddled and sucked, which could take hours and still result in a semisoft prick. (Female psychiatrists labelled the phenomenon *primary male flaccidity*, and debated whether it was a sexual dysfunction or an intractable characterological disorder.) Pricks, according to these writers, only stayed hard when men called the sexual shots (like when to stick it in). Some women considered a soft prick a compliment, an ode to their independence. Were dominance and hard pricks really related? Rob thought about his prick history. He'd only been impotent with his ex-wife, and her bitchiness had caused it. *Hadn't it?*

Microscopic details about male bodies littered the pages. Pectoral size, chest hair, moles, callouses, skin textures, baldness, paunches, and salty smells leapt into Rob's sexual consciousness. How did he fare? he wondered, was he attractive enough? He angled for opinions from women friends, and extorted compliments from lovers. When he shopped for clothes, which he did with increasing frequency, he thought about what they'd said. It

became harder to decide what to buy. Christine liked him baggy and trendy; Johanna preferred the corporate look; Kim directed him to L.L. Bean. Rob bought all three and varied them according to who he might see.

Some days he couldn't manage. He didn't want to be stripped, judged, assessed, and criticized by women. He examined himself minutely in the mirror, pouring over every blemish, agonizing over every flaw. His midriff bulge, thick ears, purple appendectomy scar, and flabby biceps panicked him. He loathed his body. Clothes became armour to distract penetrating female eyes.

It might be a relief to get married. To settle down with one voice, one set of eyes, and one set of opinions. But ambitious women, reluctant to endure the tumultuous clashes of will that marriage seemed to inspire, preferred lovers. "Men come and go," Christine told him, "but my flute is here to stay." Rob didn't want to settle for a witless blonde with a pallid billboard face; he would forever be propping her up just to feel safe himself, but what choice did he have. It was a woman's world. Dread invaded his solitude until he could hardly work at all.

After their next dinner Johanna invited him back to her condo. *Maybe she's the one. She's capable and ambitious. I could encourage her; she's unsure of herself.* He whipped the cream for their Irish coffees, then carried the empty mugs back to the kitchen and rinsed them carefully. Good husband material, she'd think, someone who could look after things while she battled for tenure. Her bedroom was frilly and pink; the sheets on the delicate bed had roses on them. Rob climbed awkwardly into bed like a flabby, clumsy giant. No matter how she stroked him, he couldn't get an erection. Even when she sucked him for what seemed like hours (but was fifteen minutes by the hot pink hands on her bedside clock), he never got completely hard. Of course she asked what was wrong, if there was anything he particularly wanted her to do. Hold me, he implored, let's just cuddle.

In desperation, Rob decided to write about his condition. But his mind was severed from the genital power that had inspired his greatest work. He no longer believed in that power; it had no place in the world. Even with the help of the complete *Oxford* and his exhaustive thesaurus, not a word came. The English language had no vocabulary to describe the jailing of a gender.