

I

‘Cathie, you look really *great!* I’d kill for a sun-tan like that!’

I tell Julie she looks great too. Julie’s in Year 10 too, and she’s my best friend. Like we share our girlish hopes and aspirations, and yep, we agree: It’s Time. So we put on our new string bikinis. And we go hunting.

We’re strolling along Queen Elizabeth Drive, trying to look sort of casual, like we know what we’re doing. A couple of cool looking spunks start following, and I know where they are looking. You can feel it. Two hot prods, one on each cheek.

This is it, and it’s a first for both of us. I turn.

I toss my hair like you should. Face up, big smile.

‘Oh Jesus,’ I hear. ‘Go back to where ya come from!’

What’s he on about? ‘You...’ I start.

Then it hits me. He thinks I’m a slope, a Viet from a boat! I’m like I’m kicked in the guts. I grab Julie’s hand and haul her out of their sight. Then I hug her and start howling my eyes out on her shoulder.

‘I don’t feel like doing nothing, now.’ I sniff.

‘Me neither,’ she says, stepping back, looking at me kinda differently.

So I spare her, and do what the guy said. I go back to where I come from, which is 21 Marlin Street Bondi.

I go straight to my room. I am angry. I stand in front of my long mirror still in my bikini, just like that bastard saw me. I check myself out. So tell me, just what’s so wrong with me?

My hair's long and black, as glossy as a polished shoe. That new shampoo's made it so bouncy I can flick it like a whip. My fringe is like it's painted on.

I like my eyes. I really do. They are deep brown and soft. They're like kangaroo eyes, but in the front of my face of course, and with a nicer shape. My grandma's eyes are like mine, only wrinklier. When I widen my eyes, and press my face flat against the mirror, a cute owl stares back at me. True. You try it. That is, if you've got brown eyes.

My face. Not bad. I pinch my nose in a bit. That's better. I push my cheeks up. Yeah, higher cheekbones would be better too. I like my lips, but. They curl up at the ends, making a kinda quirky smile.

My arms and shoulders. After my eyes, they're my favourite bits of me. Sort of round and firm, but slim, not bony like some, floppy like others. Nice colour, like most of me, a goldie-brown. Julie not only said she liked it, she wanted to be that colour too. And that's not the first time I've been told that neither.

Smallish boobs, but I like their tight shape. They fit my bikini top real neat, not like two bloody great salmon in a sling.

My waist. Nothing to worry about there.

And then we have Terra Australis Incognita, even if I didn't want it to be. Right now she's safely hiding out of harm's way, and there she stays. For the time being, anyway.

Legs are okay, that nice goldie-brown. Calves a nice shape.

Feet are feet. I look down at my toes and see ten little television sets like with square toenails for screens. They're cute, although I say it myself.

Yeah, all the bits of me are fine. I wouldn't really want

to change any of them. It's how they hang together. That's why I'm staring at myself.

That's the problem.

You see, I'm ABC. No, not Australian Broadcasting Commission. Australian Born Chinese. Bananas, we call ourselves. You know, yellow on the outside, white on the inside — ta daa.

Dad's ABC too, so's Mum. Her Mum though was born in Canton. That's my grandma with my kangaroo eyes, like I said.

Now get this. Julie's Dad was born in Holland and her Mum in Poland. So I reckon I'm more Australian than Julie is.

Would somebody please explain?

Now let me level with you. The above is an article I wrote called 'ABC'. It was mostly true except I'd never even seen my grandmothers, either of them, let alone their eyes. My Mum and Dad weren't born in Australia, but in Hong Kong. But if I said that it would spoil the story. And my hair wasn't long, not then; I'd cut it short just before that happened. But all the rest was true.

Year 10 was when Julie and I thought it was about time we wouldn't be good little virgins any more. And what happened? Like I said in the article, I couldn't even give it away.

That was when I knew, for the first time really, just how different I was from other kids. I'd known my parents were Chinese, of course, but big deal, it didn't make that much difference. Bringing kids home was a bit of a problem because Mum wasn't comfortable speaking English, but that was true of quite a few other kids at our school. All that changed when Pauline Hanson poisoned the air with stories about Asians over-running Australia. 'Would

somebody please explain?’ she whined. Thanks a fucking million, Pauline you bitch.

That was when I decided I was going to be as Australian as I possibly could be. I couldn’t afford an eye job, anyway I liked my eyes as they were, as I said. But I put blond streaks through my hair and decided to become a surfer-chick. You don’t get to be much more Australian than that. And that’s where Dazza and the boys came in, so to speak. If we wanted to be accepted into the gang, we spread our legs. That was the price.

Fucking Dazza, staring at me with those pale blue, glassy marbles in his skull, pointed to open door of his Kombi van and the scungy mattress inside. ‘In ya get and spread ’em wide,’ he said in that gritty, tight-arsed Philip Ruddock-type voice of his.

It fucking hurt. The only good part was that in two thrusts, he was done. And proud of it. He reckoned it proved how highly sexed he was.

Then Moz, then Spaghead, then Jacko to give the porridge a final stir. Jacko was my steady, would you believe. He and I hadn’t done it before, not the whole way. Now I realised why. Jacko was saving me up for the boys. Breaking in your chick was a test of where your real loyalties lay. Doing your mates a good turn is what they called it.

Gang rape is what I called it.

Julie’s turn was the next Saturday.

And I still hadn’t lost my virginity ’cause I saw where it went.

When I was in Year 11, I saw the local paper, the *Eastern Suburbs Local News*, was running a competition: an article of up to one thousand words on a current event. So I entered ‘ABC’. It won first prize. I got a hundred bucks,

and an impressive looking plaque thing, with a brass plate engraved with the following:

Eastern Suburbs Local News
1997 Literary Competition
WINNER
Cathie Lee

But what fired me up was what the judge said at the award. He said it was really revealing and personal, but like it packed a punch too, as in social comment. I felt so great as I wandered out to the judge. He shook my hand then gave me the cheque and the plaque. It was then that it hit me.

I'm going to be a journo!

And that decision changed my life much more than what happened in the back of a Kombi van behind the North Bondi Surf Lifesaving Club six years ago. It explains why I'm right now a recently graduated journalist, not a junkie selling herself to support the habit she picked up from the beach boys, or just some dumb checkout chick.

Or a single mum like poor old Julie

We did *Puberty Blues* for English in Year 11. It's by the Salami Sisters, as they called themselves, but their real names were Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey. Both went on to become writers, but back then in the seventies they were surfie-chicks just like I was in the nineties. Kathy writes in a piss-taking style that really appeals to me. I'd *like* to think a little bit of her style rubbed off on me, but she'd probably disagree with that. Anyway, they wrote about what arseholes surfies were and how badly they treated their girls. They called them 'swamp hogs', or 'glamour maggots' for the pretty ones. Ms. Barnett, our English teacher, said she thought we'd think *Puberty Blues* would be 'relevant.'

It was bloody relevant all right. It made me realise that nothing had changed in more than twenty years. The guys then thought that chicks had two uses in life. They still do. The first is that you sit on the beach, watch them surf, and then when they felt they'd done their thing for the day, you had to tell them how fucking wonderful they looked and how clever they were at cavorting around in the tubes. I had to say that my Jacko was better than Julie's Spaghead, Julie had to say that her Spaghead was better than my Jacko, and we all had to agree that Dazza was just ginormously wonderful, Super-Surfie, Terror of the Tubes.

The second use we chicks had was, yes, you've got it. We were an alternative to masturbation. That is, when they felt like being sociable. And if a girl didn't feel like being sociable, tough, they'd kill her. Yup, that's what I said. And that's just what they did, at Stockton Beach, Newcastle, some years ago. True. I'm not kidding. There was even a film about it. Ms. Barnett got the videotape and showed it to us. Mind you, that didn't happen very often, the killing I mean, but it was an object lesson. Girls, don't argue, just do it. That's what ya there for, isn't it?

Looking back, I'm amazed I stood nearly a year of that shit. It was a dog of an existence. Pretending to the world what a wild and pleasure-soaked life you were leading only made it worse. It was that plaque that did it for me. I would be a journalist and specialise in exposing bastardry by the boys. I meant bastardry in the surfie gangs, the rugby clubs, the school playground, stuff like that. Now my world's a bigger place, I include Canberra, after what they did to Carmel, Cheryl and Natasha.

After that, Dazza and Jacko and all the other surfie zombies, with their salty, wet bodies and blank eyes, could

go fuck each other as far as I was concerned. I'm willing to bet they did too. They'd see it as going upmarket.

Leaving those dickheads was the easy part. Leaving Julie with them wasn't easy, I must say. But Spaghead—at least she thought it was Spaghead—had knocked her up. So she left school halfway through Year 11. We both had a good cry together, but what could I do?

I had to get on with my own life.

I found out what I needed to do to be a journalist when I met Ms. Barnett in the corridor. I tried to be casual, like I don't really give a shit about this.

"Scuse me, Ms. Barnett. Gotta minute?"

Ms. Barnett was tall, bespectacled, ancient. Must have been forty at least, but she wore tight jeans and low necklines. Half of her was trying to act like us, the other half was all teacher, superior and knowing. Right now she was like teacher.

'Yes, Cathie, I can spare a minute.' She held her watch to her face and had a good hard look at it. 'But only a minute.'

'I wanna be a journalist. What do I have to do? Like do I need to go to uni and stuff?'

'You, Cathie? A journalist?' She laughed and walked on. 'Yes, you'd have to do a degree in Communications or Journalism. It's a popular course. You'd need a University Admissions Index in the nineties! And as you know, half that's your internal assessment. I have to be honest with you. As I recall your performance to date, you wouldn't have a hope.'

She glanced down at me. I'd given up all attempts at being casual after what she'd just said. This was serious. I widened my eyes, blinked slowly and swallowed. I stopped

walking, she stopped walking. She said in a kinder sort of voice. 'But what made you think of journalism, Cathie?'

'Oh, well, it's like I won a competition run by the *Eastern Suburbs Local News*. I got a hundred dollars and a plaque thing!'

'Really? Could I read it?'

'Yeah, sure. It's right here.' I shrugged off my backpack. I'd brought the plaque too, just in case I'd need to prove to the suspicious old bat that it existed. I produced that first. 'See? That's the plaque.'

She took it. Her eyes widened. She handed it back with a funny look on her face, like all the certainties in the world were suddenly up for grabs. I handed her the article.

She started reading then looked up. 'Come with me.'

She led me to the English staff room and hauled me in. There was a bunch of cubicles, a few teachers sitting, marking stuff I supposed. She sat at one and motioned me to grab a chair. She read, eyes widening. She grinned at the last line, looked up.

'Did you really write this? Anyone help you?'

Hey, give me some credit, you old slag! I jumped up, knocking my chair over. 'Yes, every single word! And no, no one helped me. The judge said some pretty good things about it and that's why I want to be a journalist!'

I was aware of silence. Got a bit carried away there. Four pairs of teacherly eyes were staring at me. Another pair stared at the desktop: Barnett's. I picked my chair up, grinned weakly, and sat down again.

'Sorry, Cathie, no offence. It's, well, so good. I can see why you won.' Barnett tried to explain herself. 'I just didn't think you had it in you, what with the company you're keeping...' smirk, smirk.

'Kept.' Whoops, lower your voice, Cathie. 'From now

on, I'm determined. Will you please help me, like tell me what I need to do? Or not.' *No favours, Ms. B, just do your fucking job is all I'm asking.*

She checked my preliminary internal results to date. We agreed I'd need to work my arse off to turn my cumulative score around. That meant no mucking around in school for the next eighteen months. It also meant swotting like a total nerd for the exams next year. That I could handle. What really worried me was that internal assessment. I'd not only have to work like crazy *all* the freaking time, but brown-nose the teachers as well! That was not me. Not, not, not.

But I'd made my mind up and so my life swung round 180 degrees. I became a model student, no partying, no sex. Well, none worth bothering you about. But I did make one compromise. I kept the blond streaks in my hair.

It drove my Dad crazy.

Eighteen months later, I was like, 'Michelle Grattan, move over. Emma Tom, eat your heart out. Kathy Lette, you'd better watch it too, you know. World, listen up: CATHIE LEE IS HERE!'

Yup, I'd made it in spades. My UAI was 96. I was going to go university: the B.A. in Journalism, School of Communications, University of Central Sydney! Whoooooee!!

I re-dyed my hair to its original colour to mark the occasion.

And my Dad smiled at me again.