



The Not-Normal Girl

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I struggled to fit in.

I didn't have much in common with other girls my age. Many of them liked playing indoors with Barbie dolls and tea sets, experimenting with make-up, or fiddling with each-others' hair.

My idea of fun, on the other hand, looked a bit different:

- Riding my pony...
- Building book-mazes for hagar, my pet rat...
- Rotten apricot fights with my sister, Soo and my best friend Sonja...
- Writing and illustrating stories and poems...
- Skinny-dipping in swamps and mud ponds...
- Climbing trees and building forts...
- Constructing home-made zip-lines (and falling off them)...
- Playing my piano...
- Brewing 'magic potion' like George from George's Marvellous Medicine...
- Playing matador-matador with Rooster Fight...
- Tarzan-swinging from willow tree boughs with Cousin Clare...
- Lick-fights and bum-biting...
- Fishing dead, bloated rats out of the septic tank, lining them up on the driveway and 'popping' them with bricks.

Dolls and tea sets bored me. I was indifferent to the lure of pretty outfits or the latest fashions. I didn't want to crochet doilies or bake cookies and I wasn't remotely interested in experimenting with make-up or fiddling with hair.

I wanted to explore! I wanted to search for hidden treasure! I wanted to create and invent! I wanted excitement and adventure!

The popular girly-girls at Arbor Primary School had little tolerance for the grubby, scabby-knee'd tomboy-from-the-plots who kept a pet rat. I was lumped in the same caste as the 'nerds', the 'dimwits,' and the unfortunate fat kid with zits and orthodontic headgear - tidily avoided by those who cared about their social position at school.

Candi, Fiona and Lara - the undisputed queens of the playground - were especially dismissive. They didn't look past me; they looked *through* me, as though I were invisible. A spook. An annoying gnat to be flicked away.

The wilful, rebellious part of me felt irritated by their blatant rebuffs and wanted to provoke them with poo-jokes and pranks - if only to *force* them to acknowledge my existence. But another part of me craved their acceptance. And so I invited them to my birthday parties (but they never showed up). When their parties came around, I wasn't invited. I was ignored when I tried to initiate conversations in the school corridor, and Candi would roll her eyes dramatically when anyone mentioned my name.

Occasionally, I'd wonder what it was about me that Candi & Co seemed to find so off-putting. Was I really *such* an outsider... such a separate species of human that there could be *no* possibility of friendship or common ground? That inner question was partly answered by Caireen Tuck, the school busybody and one of the few popular girls who made an effort to be nice to me. Caireen seemed genuinely concerned by my tomboy status and the way I presented myself to the world.

"Heather..." she'd sigh, in an exasperated tone that reminded me of my mother, "Why do you have to be so *different*? Why can't you just be *more like a girl*?"

'More like a girl?'... What did that even *mean*? How might a girl endeavour to become *more* like a girl? Wasn't I girl-enough... exactly as I was? Was I lacking some sort of special girl-ingredient that somehow rendered me *less-like-a-girl*?

Caireen's comment confused me so I brushed it off with an embarrassed laugh and a quick change of subject. Her well-meaning words, however, were like fresh fertiliser to a weed of a thought that had taken root in my mind:

"Heather Patterson... the way you are... is just... WRONG!"

I couldn't pinpoint where that thought came from or when it took root, but it was there. It lurked in the shadows; the growing idea that there was something inherently wrong with me. That I wasn't the way I was supposed to be. That I wasn't normal. I was beginning to seriously consider the possibility that I'd come off the production line with a major defect and Caireen's comment simply confirmed what the troll already knew.

I mean, what *normal* girl...

What normal girl does the things that you do?
What normal girl shares your twisted world-view?
What normal girl swings from willow tree strands
and dreams of adventure in faraway lands...?

What normal girl doesn't care what she wears?
What normal girl rides a bike down the stairs?
What normal girl rescues snakes from the pool
and gets into trouble with teachers at school?

Sliding down zip-lines and rolling in dirt...
Messily scoffing down choc'late dessert...
Prancing around like a foolhardy clown...
Shouldn't you tone yourself down?

What normal girl bites her Aunt Megan's bum?
What normal girl thinks a lick-fight is fun?
What normal girl builds rat-mazes from books...
or laughs at a joke 'til she pees in her broeks?

Swimming in swamplands and hiding in hay...
What normal girl would behave in this way?
Sitting through poo for dead rodents to pop...

... it's time for this nonsense to stop!





Mermaids, Princesses and Ballerinas

WHEN I WAS ABOUT TEN years old, my great-grandmother gave me an unforgettable Christmas present: a ballet book. It was a hard-cover annual filled with photos of professional ballerinas posing gracefully in gorgeous, embellished costumes. I adored their *pointé* ballet slippers and the satin ribbons wrapped around their delicate ankles. I marvelled at their sparkly tutus and the diamanté crowns perched upon their elegant heads. I wanted to be... *like them*.

Back then, I dreamed of being *special* - of having some kind of exceptional quality or ability that would cause others to marvel and gasp and say things like: "Wow! Look at her! Isn't she amazing?". I believed that special people - gifted people - were celebrated and accepted. They didn't need to be re-adjusted, realigned or sent back to the workshop for an extra layer of paint to hide their flaws.

I guess I wanted to feel special and important because I felt so...
uh-special...
so *uh-important...*
so 'meh'...

And so, to escape those persistent feelings of inadequacy, I indulged in elaborate fantasies, imagining myself as a mermaid, a shipwrecked princess or a beautiful ballerina.

Both the mermaid and the shipwrecked princess fantasies revolved around our swimming pool and a lilac dress with sequined bodice and a generous tulle skirt. The dress had once been used in a town hall theatre production and had somehow ended up in our dress-up box. I'd squeeze myself into that beloved frock and hurl myself dramatically into the swimming pool, imagining I was a princess who'd fallen overboard after her ship struck treacherous rocks. I loved drifting underwater, pretending I was drowning, watching the lilac tulle levitate around me, its sequins catching the sun's rays and dancing like stars on the bottom of the pool.

Surviving a shipwreck would surely make a person *very* special. Bonus points if said person was a princess! Imagine the stories she could tell to her audience of rapt admirers!

When I got bored of drowning, I'd pretend that a magic spell had transformed me into a mermaid and when I got tired of swimming, I'd morph back into the shipwrecked princess, haul my waterlogged self out the pool, and pretend I'd been washed up on the shores of a deserted island. Still wearing the bedraggled dress, I'd set off in search of food (which usually involved the apricot tree or worm-eaten offerings from my mother's failed attempt at a veggie garden).

The dogs and cats became dangerous predators, Hamlet the pig was my noble steed, and the treehouse was my refuge. But fantasy games couldn't last forever. Inevitably, the sun would set, and I'd be summoned inside for homework, supper, and a much-needed bath. And then I'd just be Heather again... and no longer special.

So, when Gran gave me that ballet book, it sparked a niggling thought that pestered me for days: What if... I could actually *become* the kind of admired heroine I'd dreamt about?

Of course, transforming myself into a real-life mermaid or shipwrecked princess was out of the question. But *what if*... I could become a real-life, bona-fide *ballerina*!? After all, ballerinas were so graceful and beautiful, and everyone loved and admired them. There was nothing dull or dud-like about ballerinas!

So I hatched a master plan:

STEP 1: Ask Mom to enrol me in ballet class.

STEP 2: Become ballerina.

STEP 3: Become famous and adored.

The End.

I pictured it all in vivid detail: I too would become a famous ballerina. I too would twirl on *pointé* across a grand stage in a sparkling tutu while audiences marvelled, applauded, and tossed red roses at my feet in adoration.

The first order of business, of course, was persuading Mom to enrol me in ballet classes. She was understandably reluctant, but my incessant nagging wore her down and she eventually buckled under the pressure and signed me up. The night before my first lesson, I went to bed with Gran's ballet book tucked under my pillow and I dreamed of tutus and tiaras.

The Hunchback of Notre-Dame

IT TOOK A SINGLE TUESDAY afternoon for the bottom to fall out of my fairy-tale fantasy.

Real-life ballet lessons didn't involve sparkly tutus, tiaras or even *pointé* slippers with satin ribbons. Instead, I was unceremoniously suited up in an unflattering, bum-enhancing black leotard with thigh-enlarging pink tights, and black, elasticated ballet slippers. And I did not feel very beautiful or ballerina-like at all.

Ballet lessons were held in the Scout Hall twice a week under the instruction of Jill Herring. Jill had short, bleached hair and a penchant for shiny purple unitards paired with matching leg-warmers. I often had the feeling she tolerated my presence in her class in the same way you'd tolerate your boss's child picking its nose and wiping the boogers on your new settee. You don't want to jeopardise the income that stems from the boss - even though you're entertaining dark thoughts about what you'd *like* to do with their snot-encrusted spawn. In the same way, Jill accepted any blundering ballerina-wannabe in her class. The ticket in was simple: money.

"I said tiptoe like a little fairy, Heather Patterson! Not stomp like a little elephant!" she'd caw in her high-pitched nasal voice.

"Yes ma'am," I'd reply, while indignantly thinking: "*But I was tiptoeing like a fairy!*"

"*Plié*... count with me ladies... one... two... **Heather Patterson!** Keep your back straight! Stop slouching! You look like the Hunchback of Notre-Dame!"

I felt awkward and out of place among the other little ballerinas-in-training. I certainly wasn't the most supple in our class. I couldn't touch my toes, couldn't do the splits, and certainly couldn't sit with my legs spread with my tummy flattened against the floor.

Nonetheless, after a year of practicing *pliés* and *pirouettes* - and being cast as a piece of rainbow in the annual ballet concert - it was time for our annual ballet exam. This was a very big deal. I was even granted time off school to participate. Jill had told us that a very important person from the Royal Academy of Dance would be coming to grade us, and when I met her, I was so nervous that I curtsied - as though she was the Queen. Or something.

The examiner was a tall, striking woman in her early sixties. She wore a flowy wrap-around skirt and a long-sleeved black leotard, its plunging neckline revealing a bony chest where a cleavage may once have existed. Her long silvery hair was scraped back into a headache-inducing bun, and her stern expression swiftly eliminated any hopes I had about charming my way into her good books.

When the time came, I danced, pointed, and skipped in time to the tinkly piano music, occasionally shooting hopeful (and unreciprocated) smiles in her general direction. She sat ramrod straight at her little desk, her back resembling an ironing board. The only things that moved were her pale eyes, which scrutinised my every move, and her expensive fountain pen, which scribbled aggressively on a special RAD-branded scoring sheet.

When it was all over, the verdict was as I'd expected: abysmal. The examiner didn't have many positive things to write about my dancing skills. The kindest thing she'd written was expressed under 'Overall Remarks' where she'd neatly penned two words: *Was willing*.

Indeed.

Was willing... but definitely not able. The spirit *was willing*, but the flesh was weak and I had the distinctly uncomfortable feeling that this would be a recurring theme in my life: *willing... yet weak*.

And so, with my fuzzy fantasies dashed of being the beautiful ballerina in a sparkling tutu - the next Margot Fonteyn - dazzling, graceful, admired and blah, blah, blah... I quit ballet.

My specialness would need to be found elsewhere.

The Munching Gallumphing

MY NEXT ELABORATE FANTASY was birthed a couple of weeks after I'd quit ballet. Again, the idea was sparked by a Christmas present, this time a combined gift to Soo and me from our parents. It was a trampoline, and we could scarcely contain our glee when men in overalls arrived to dig a hole in our back garden and install our new toy.

As always, my over-active imagination had planned (in intricate detail) how the whole trampoline-thing was going to work. I would *master* the art of trampoline jumping. I would learn how to perform triple somersaults and impressive Olympic-style manoeuvres. Everyone would be awestruck by my in-air tricks. The TV people would come and film me. Candi, Fiona and Lara would all be *begging* to be my friends.

After much impatient pacing, the installation men finally finished, and Soo and I were allowed on the trampoline. We loved it. There were squeals of delight as we double-bounced each other and pretended to be kangaroos. After a few minutes of jumping, I decided to attempt a few special tricks. I jumped as high as I could, bounced once on my bum, then sprang back to my feet.

"Hmm. Very impressive," I thought smugly. "Trampoline-champion in no time."

Just as I was imagining myself draped in a victory wreath on an Olympic podium, accepting my gold medal for trampoline jumping, Aunty Wendy arrived with Cousin Bev. Bev was four years my senior and the super-achiever of our family. She lived just down the road with her parents and sister and word of the new trampoline had reached her ears.

"Ooooh! Please can I have a turn?" she said, removing her shoes.

I pretended not to hear her. I had an uncomfortable feeling about what might transpire should Bev be permitted to test-drive the trampoline.

"Heather and Soo!" Mom yelled from the patio. "Let Bev have a turn! You girls can jump whenever you want! Give your cousin a chance!"

Reluctantly, I climbed off and slumped sulkily on the grass. Bev skipped onto the trampoline and within seconds performed a perfect in-air somersault, landing deftly on her feet. Then she did it again - two somersaults in a row, separated by a single bounce - and landed flawlessly.

As though it was just... *nothing*. As though she'd been trampoline-jumping since birth. The adults clapped enthusiastically from the patio as I glared daggers at my cousin.

"This is so much fun!" she laughed.

"Go home!" I thought spitefully.



Later that afternoon, once the coast was clear, I returned to the trampoline alone. Determined to set things straight. Determined to prove that there was *something* I could do better than Bev - even if it were only one, single thing.

"I can practice every day" I told myself. "Bev can't practice every day. She doesn't even have a trampoline. I'm gonna practice and practice until I can do a triple somersault! And besides, how hard can it be? I bet I can also do a somersault and land on my feet like Bev. I bet it's not such a big deal".

And so I began to jump. Higher and higher until I reached a height that I felt was sufficient to warrant a somersault. Then, with great gusto, I launched myself forward and thrust my knees upwards towards my chest - hoping for the best. *Crunch!!*

My over-eager knees over-shot my chest and ploughed full-force into my nose! I jolted out of the tuck and belly-flopped awkwardly onto the canvas, my left arm sliding between two springs, one of which clamped the sensitive skin under my arm in a brutal pinch.

I pulled my arm free, wincing in pain as blood streamed from my nose. With my ego bruised once again, I was deeply relieved that I'd attempted the somersault alone and that no-one had been present to witness my failure and humiliation. And as I slunk off the trampoline, I remembered the ballet examiner's fateful words: *was willing*.

"Yeah. Willing... but weak", I thought to myseeeeeeeelf.

Hopeful... yet failing
Lacking technique
Keen... but incapable
Willing... but weak

I resolved to keep my failed somersault attempt to myself. Nobody would know - *especially* not Bev. I wiped the tears from my eyes and the blood from my nose, retreated to my bedroom and consoled myself with half a tin of Nestlé Instant Hot Chocolate powder. And like the beautiful-ballerina fantasy before it, the Olympic-champion-trampoline-jumper fantasy vanished in a puff of smoke. Never to return.

A couple of weeks later, Mom arrived home with a set of newly developed photos. Among them was a print of Soo, Bev and me jumping on the trampoline. I stared at the image for a long time, a gnawing sense of unease spreading through my gut like mould.

"Something is wrong with me" I thought.
"Yes! *Something is very wrong with you*" agreed my inner troll.



THE TRAMPOLINE PHOTO: WHERE MY FIXATION WITH COMPARISONS BEGAN...



But I couldn't quite put my finger on *what* was wrong. So I began comparing myself with my sister and my cousin. Soo and Bev, I surmised, had thin legs. I had fat legs. My thighs touched in the middle. Bev's thighs didn't touch in the middle and neither did Soo's.

Conclusion: something was obviously wrong with *my* thighs.

Then there were the photos of the three of us posing in our school uniforms. *More* evidence of something amiss. Why was I so much taller than Soo and Bev? Why was I so much bigger? Bev was four years older than me and already in high school and yet I seemed to tower over her like a colossus.

And that's when I began to feel like a giant. Like a slow-witted, galumphing oaf. The kind you read about in fairy-tales, lumbering around *fee-fi-fo-fum'ming...* in search of things to steal or eat. The towering twits who are inevitably outwitted and outmatched by the small, the nimble and the clever.

And everything seemed to fall into place like a grim jigsaw puzzle; No wonder I couldn't tiptoe like a little fairy at ballet! It's because I *wasn't* a little fairy! I was an elephant! Just as Jill had said! I was a big, fat, munching-galumphant elephant (which was also why I couldn't perform a somersault).

"Elephants can't somersault" I thought glumly. "Elephants can only eat. And lumber around slowly. And squash things".

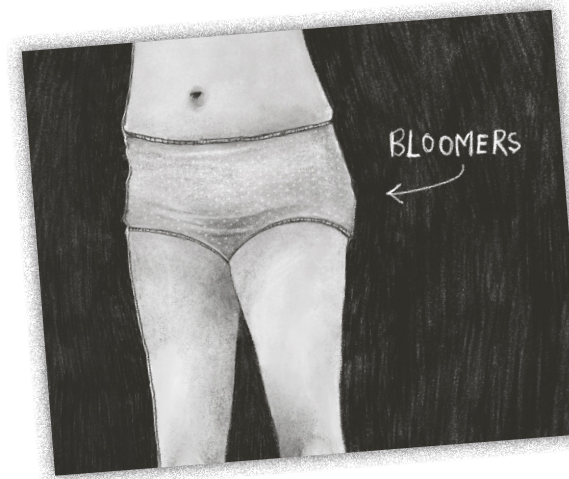
Heather-the-Elephant
Stupid and slow
Does nothing but guzzle
Does nothing but grow
The lumbering dufus
The munching-galumphant
She's useless at ballet
and trampoline jumping



Bums, Bee Stings and Bloomers

NOT-FITTING-IN and not-feeling-enough were persistent themes throughout my childhood and much (though thankfully not all) of my adult life. For the most part, I felt as though I was diagonally parked in a parallel universe... an alien of sorts.

Puberty, of course, was the most wretched time in this regard, and the communal girls' changing room at Arbor Primary delivered its own unique brand of dread. Twice a week, I was herded in with all the other girls to change into our (very unflattering) school-endorsed PT togs. It was always a mortifying experience. While the other girls wore cute matching bra-and-panty sets, I was the braless one with the large, greying waist-high, low-on-the-thigh knickers (which Soo and I had nicknamed *bloomers*).



For some mysterious reason - still unclear to me - Mom insisted on buying us enormous knickers. Maybe she thought that normal-size undies weren't modest enough, or perhaps she believed the boomers were warmer or comfier. It's a mystery.

All I remember is how acutely embarrassed I was of said bloomers and how I'd try to hide myself from the other girls during change-room time. It wasn't easy. I was significantly taller (and somewhat heftier) than other girls my age, I stuck out! I was... obvious.

Leg-shaving, bra-wearing and ear-piercing were rites of passage for eleven-year-old girls and I was the last in my age group to sample those particular fruits of womanhood. Mom didn't think I was old enough to shave my legs and informed me that I was only allowed to have my ears pierced once I turned thirteen. Additionally, she didn't see the point of buying me a bra until my 'bee stings' had developed into something more substantial.

Caireen Tuck, the perpetual busybody, wasn't about to let me hide.

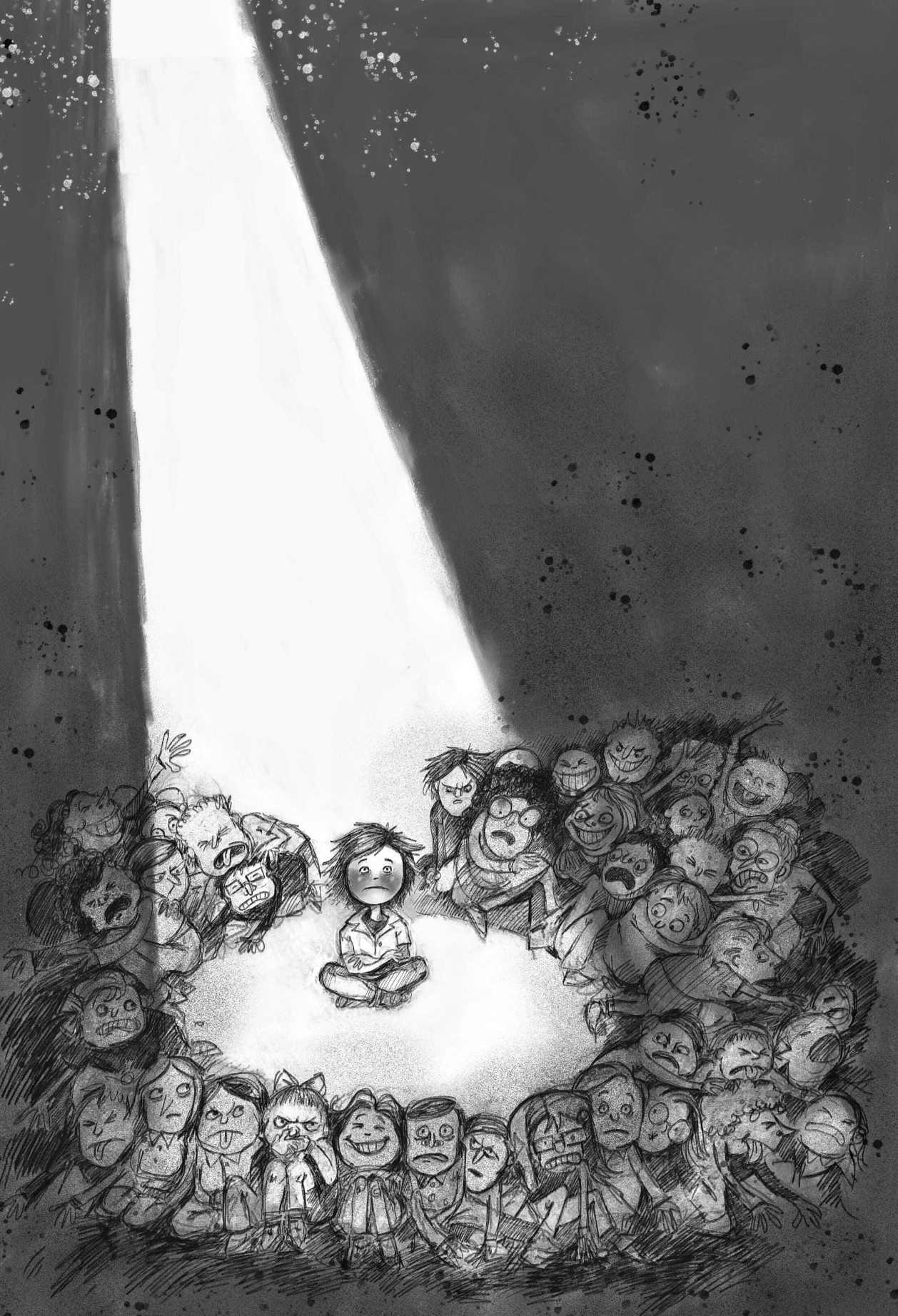
"Where did you get those ginormous panties from?" she'd ask, jabbing an accusatory finger toward the bloomers.

"My mom bought them for me," I'd reply, deeply hating the direction of the conversation and wishing that Caireen would focus her make-over projects elsewhere.

"Well, tell your mom to buy you proper panties - and a bra! You really *must* start behaving like a girl! You could even be quite pretty if you took care of yourself and lost some weight."

"Hmm. Okay," I'd mumble, wishing the ground would swallow me whole.

"I'm going to check up on you, okay? I want to make sure that you stop wearing those big, ugly panties!"



True to her word, Caireen made it her mission to monitor my undies and would regularly lift my skirt in order to perform an inspection. There were no privacy boundaries as far as Caireen Tuck was concerned. My skirt would be lifted and my undies checked in bathrooms, on the school field, in classrooms and in corridors.

“You’re still wearing the giant panties!” she’d declare. “And these ones have holes!”

During Caireen’s check-ups, my main concern wasn’t the greying bloomers or their holes; it was the fear that other kids might catch a glimpse of my bum. I was deeply ashamed of my backside and secretly believed that I had the fattest bum in the whole school... and possibly the world. But, as it turned out, my bum had more to offer than just its size...

Baked Beans

ONE FRIDAY AFTERNOON in late July, the entire school has herded into the hall at Arbor Primary to watch a play performed by the first and second graders (the “Gradies,” as we older kids smugly liked to call them). Packed in like sardines, we sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, all facing the stage. For a space crammed with rambunctious primary school kids, it was uncharacteristically quiet as we sat in hushed concentration, straining to hear what the little actors were saying. And that’s when it happened.

I farted.

It came out of nowhere - rapidly, unexpectedly and too late for me to adjust my sitting position to try and hold it in (I don’t think it’s possible to hold in a fart while sitting cross-legged on the floor). Worst of all, it was a terrible thundering eruption that blasted forth from my bowels like the battle-horns of war... and I was powerless to stop it.

SIDE-NOTE: I’m aware, for the sake of good storytelling, that people may occasionally exaggerate or embellish their most excruciating memories. But I swear this is exactly what happened: my fart actually *did* thunder on... and on... and on! And I know this, because sitting next to me on that wooden floor was my best friend, Sonja. And etched clearly into my memory is the horrified expression on her face as she clawed frantically at my knee like a terrified, trapped animal... pleading desperately for me to stop.

Which... eventually, I did.

There was a brief, shocked silence after the rumble from my bum had finally subsided followed by roars of laughter from all the kids in the school hall.

Everyone had heard the fart - teachers and gradies on the stage included. Children everywhere were turning around, craning their necks in an attempt to identify The Source.

It didn't take a genius to figure out who the culprit was. I was the only one... sitting alone... with my face the colour (and temperature) of molten lava... while those in my vicinity frantically scrambled to distance themselves from me (and any potential stench) as quickly as possible.

Even Sonja had abandoned her best-friend post, her face as red as mine. She seemed determined to broadcast to the room that she was an innocent bystander and had played no part in the unspeakable event.

I clearly remember how, in that moment, I'd begged God to turn me into an ant.

"Please God... please! Make me an ant so I can disappear and crawl away from this hall without being seen... please, please God!!"

But my prayers and pleas went unanswered. Instead, I had to sit exactly where I was for the remainder of the show while the kids around me giggled and whispered.

By the time it was over, I had a new nickname. Suddenly, everyone knew who Heather Patterson was. No longer the obscure-unnoticed, I was now the topic of general conversation. I was the famous Baked Beans!

"Here she comes!" they'd say.

"Who?"...

"Baked Beans! The girl who farted in the school hall!"

SHORTLY AFTER I'd turned twelve, at the end of my primary school year, the students in my grade were presented with autograph books. The books contained blank, pastel-coloured pages and were bound with a faux-leather cover emblazoned with the school badge.

They were a huge craze at the time. Everyone would be swapping autograph books, writing poems and messages for their friends. Most of my classmates would write sweet, heart-decorated messages to each-other like:

Remember M
Remember E
Put them together
Remember ME!

or...

A ring is round
and has no end
And that's how long
you'll be my friend

I had a different kind of message scrawled in my autograph book:

To Baked Beans,

Roses are red
Violets are blue
Your rat stinks
and so do you!

Ha! Ha! Ha!



HAPPINESS REQUIREMENTS OF YOUNG ME

ASSUMING, OF COURSE, THAT ALL MY BASIC HUMAN NEEDS WERE FIRST MET... (which they were)

Photo taken when I was 8-years-old

SPACE + FREEDOM TO EXPLORE...

SMORGASBORD OF DIVERSE EXPERIENCES

- ADDED BONUSES
- Animals + pets (especially cats)
- Music records + musicals..
- The presence of WATER (I loved to SWIM)...
- CHOCOLATE
- TREES to climb...

MOST IMPORTANT: Unconditional LOVE and acceptance of NEAREST + DEAREST.

LOTS OF TIME + SPACE for unstructured FREEPLAY...

ACCESS TO: Books, Art supplies, Musical instruments AND THE FREEDOM TO EXPERIMENT WITH THE ABOVE-MENTIONED...

One or two CLOSE friends...

ALONE-TIME IN THE COMPANY OF MY IMAGINATION.

CREATIVE OUTLETS + CONNECTIONS WITH A TRIBE... i.e. Amateur Theatre Productions, Art Classes, Choir...

MIDGE



The Much'ness

I'M AN INTROVERT (many artists and writers are), and honestly, I'm kinda grateful for this quirky character trait. I think my childhood might have been a lot harder if I were the kind of person who *needed* lots of friends... or *needed* lots of social interaction... or *needed* to be liked by my peers. Don't get me wrong - I *liked* having friends at school. But I didn't *need* them. And although I liked the *idea* of being liked and the *idea* of fitting in... I didn't need that either. Truth is, I didn't need much to be happy and content. All I needed was the unconditional love of a tiny handful of inner-circle people. I needed my parents. I needed my sister. I needed my best friend... and I needed regular doses of free-play and alone-time spent in the company of my own imagination. And because I had those needs met, my childhood was, for the most part, a happy one.

If you're an introvert like me, you'll understand the need for alone-time. There's a few significant differences between extroverts and introverts but the most obvious is probably this: introverts get peopled-out pretty quickly and need regular doses of alone-time to recharge their social batteries. Extroverts (like my mother) are the opposite. Too much alone-time leaves them feeling lonely. Their social batteries are recharged in the company of people.

This, of course, doesn't mean that introverts dislike the company of people. Nor does it mean that extroverts shun solitude. Most introverts enjoy connecting with like-minded souls and can yak for hours about stuff we find interesting or meaningful. However, if we find ourselves dutifully attending a party or any social event requiring us to mingle and make-nice with strangers, our social batteries drain at an alarming rate and it won't take long for us to start scanning the vicinity for a hiding place (or an escape route).

As a child, I was a social introvert (and I guess I still am). I wasn't shy and I enjoyed the company of family and friends but was equally content in my own company and could keep myself amused and entertained for hours, **watching** the weird shit that my own grey matter invented. In fact, it's where I found my sanctuary. If I was bored, frustrated or disenchanted, I'd disappear inside my head and allow my imagination to run wild.

My imagination was my escape from the mundane. It was my secret hideaway - a colourful, creative world without limitations or rules. But not everyone approved of this tendency to disappear into my head. The teachers at school, for instance, viewed it as a problem that needed fixing. They called it *daydreaming*.

In fact, Mrs Kelleher, my first grade teacher, wrote the following concerned note in my very first school report card:

SUBJECTS		Max.	Symbol Mark	Remarks of Class Teacher
First Language				Although Heather is making satisfactory progress she is often inclined to day dream in class and does not always concentrate on given tasks.
Oral Composition				
Recitation				
Reading: Prepared				
Unprepared				
Spelling Phonics				This is a pity as I feel she is capable of producing work of a higher quality. Let's see what we can do about this, Heather.
Written Composition				
Language Study				
TOTAL				
Second Language				
Oral Composition				B
Recitation				
Reading: Prepared				
Unprepared				
Spelling				
TOTAL				B+
Mathematics				
Writing				
Aggregate				

She wasn't the first (or the last) to draw attention to my 'problem'. It was a complaint issued by almost every teacher I encountered.

"Heather daydreams"

"Heather needs to stop daydreaming"

"Heather needs to focus on her schoolwork instead of daydreaming"

I was always uncomfortable with that word: *daydreaming*.

It seemed to imply sleep, a static state of nothingness. It sounded as though the teachers were accusing me of shirking... dozing off when I ought to be doing something more meaningful. Passive when I ought to be active.

But to me, it was the other way around. The *classroom* was the vapid void of stagnation and same'ness: the scraping of chalk on the blackboard... the droning monotone of the teachers... the never-ending lists of rules... the rows of identical desks populated with rows of identically-clad children reciting their ABC's in unison like robots... the beige paint on the walls... the beige tiles on the floors... it was all so... *flat*. And beige. And incomprehensibly dull.

But inside my head existed an entirely different world. Inside my head was where everything came alive. There were bustling, colourful cities with candy-striped towers and twirly turrets topped with glazed cherries. Bubblegum balloons and blimps shaped like fat sea creatures floated lazily across rainbow skies. Inside my head were secret laboratories where mad scientists churned out fantastical inventions which, once complete, were wrapped in shiny paper, topped with garish bows and distributed across the land by wagon-pulling kittens. Inside my head were imaginary lands with music, songs, creatures, stories, games, adventures and treasure hunts...

... and the whole marvellous spectacle was overseen by a Creative Director - a separate persona of sorts, with a mind a will of her own. This individual was the one in charge of my imagination. She was (and is) representative-of and responsible-for all of my creativity, dreams, imaginings and ideas.

Her name, by the way, is... *Hat*.

Now, before you summon the men in white coats, allow me to offer an explanation in the form of a metaphor.

Meet my Much'ness

If MY PHYSICAL BODY is an iPad, and my personality (mind, will and emotions) is the operating system installed on that iPad, then Hat is a non-negotiable app that came pre-installed with the Heather OS. Hat is my technicolour vivid imagination. Hat is all of my creativity wrapped up in a single app. Hat is my much'ness.

And I'm so familiar with this much'ness, I can describe her in detail:

Hat is small and round with apple-red cheeks, a mischievous grin and two short plaits that poke out from under her enormous top hat.

That hat, by the way, isn't just a hat; it's her creative toolbox. The purple ribbon encircling the base is stuffed with a jumble of miscellaneous tools and craft supplies that she uses to conjure her messy, magical masterpieces.



To be clear: I didn't *choose* to install the Hat-app. She's a built-in feature of the Heather-Operating-System and cannot be uninstalled. The only way to uninstall Hat would be to uninstall the Heather-OS entirely - which would, in a sense, lobotomise the *both* of us.

With me so far?

But see, the thing with the Hat-app is that she's a bit glitchy and has a tendency to launch herself at the most inconvenient and inappropriate times. Like when I'm supposed to be studying, admin'ing or making polite small-talk with people I don't *want* to make small-talk with... or for that matter, doing anything that I should (but don't want to) do.

Hat is stubborn, wilful and hates being told what to do. She doesn't like rules and especially not stupid rules invented by controlling people for the purpose of controlling others. She flagrantly ignores said rules and demands I ignore them too. And she's unimaginably distracting. She plays loud music when I'm trying to sleep, spray-paints purple dragons across my mind when I'm trying to think, and lies on her back making snow-angels on administrative documents (like bank statements and budgets).

Sometimes, when she's in an especially belligerent mood, she'll deposit small, steaming turds on top of glossy magazine adverts and other documents she deems vile and offensive (like traffic fines and body corporate rules).



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She whispers rude jokes into my ear when I'm trying to be stoic and serious. She gleefully shrieks *Fucking-Fucky-Fuck!* when I'm in the company of conservative religious folk who disapprove of potty language. She dances jigs on the heads of dull strangers that I'm supposed to be polite to and draws imaginary things... like fat blue pigeons shitting on the heads of people I don't like. Or pig snouts sprouting from the faces of oligarchs.

Or rivers of thick, yellow banana custard gushing from the yawping mouths of repugnant, power-hungry politicians whenever they attempt to speak.

And... *sigh*... (here's the part where you decide with certainty that I'm knitting with only one needle)... Hat composes, conducts and choreographs... *mmm*...

Musicals.

Yes! *Musicals!*

As in: full-technicolour-musical-productions-for-stage-and-screen.

For example, you might have noticed that the first chapter of this book contained a couple of randomly placed rhymes. Those rhymes are evidence of Hat running amok, composing and conducting musical theatre inside my head while I'm trying to write this story!

And, to clarify - these aren't just rhymes. They're songs. Sung in four-part-harmony by triple-threat performers. Each song comes with its own cast of characters, intricately designed sets, costumes props and choreography. Hat has masterminded every scene down to the tiniest detail. I even know the colour of the cotton she used to sew beads onto the trunk of the elephant prop for the *Heather-the-Elephant* song.

I blame my mother for this *thing* with musicals.

Mom had been an aspiring theatre director in her youth, so Soo and I were raised on a steady diet of Camelot, My Fair Lady, The Sound of Music, Mary Poppins, Oliver Twist, Annie... (and the list goes ever-on).

Every weekend, Dad would drive us to the video store to rent our favourite musical on VHS. After watching it (rewinding the tape, of course) and watching it agin, we'd huddle in front of the TV with our tape recorder, capturing every song. Once the songs were safely on cassette, we'd painstakingly transcribe all the lyrics, so when we watched the film for the zillionth time, we could sing along fluently.

To this day, it remains our sisterly party trick. If you ever happen across Soo and me at some random social event, here's a little experiment: sidle up and utter the following secret password: *She climbs a tree*...

See what happens next.

I mention Hat for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it's impossible for me to create this book without involving my much'ness. The pages are littered with photos, illustrations and songs because she insists on it. Hat believes that stories should be told in multi-dimensional ways and great effort should be spent on ensuring that things are... un-boring.

Sometimes, we'll argue about it.

I'll say: *"C'mon. How will anyone ever take me seriously if I fill my books with scribbles and songs? What real writer does such a thing? I'm a middle-aged woman! It's time for me to grow up and write a proper book... in the normal, proper way that normal authors write books!"...*

At this point, Hat will make a rude noise and will sing a ranty rhyme in response:

Boring! Boring! Boring!
What a stupid plot!
Why pretend to be
the kind of writer that you're not?

Yawning! Yawning! Yawning!
Your argument is dull
With all your wishful thinking,
I should toss you in a well!

And I'll snap back: *"Dull doesn't rhyme with well! Dull rhymes with hull and skull! You're slipping in your old age...!"*

And she'll sing back at me:

Heather-Bell, Feather-Bell
throwing a fit
Thinks she's informed,
but she's actually a twit!

And I'll snap: *"Grow up!"...*

And she'll sing:

Grow down, clown!

Hat doesn't like it when I speak of adults and children as though they're two separate categories of human and gets cross when I talk about growing-up in a way that makes it sound aspirational or important.

What's so great about growing up?
Does AGE make a person upgrade?
The world's full of 'adults' who THINK they've arrived
And look at the MESS that they've made!

Yes, well. Sometimes it's impossible to argue with her.

The second reason I mention Hat, is because this book will make a heckuva lot more sense once you understand the story behind the story. I talk a lot about Hat'ness, much'ness, muses, imaginary friends, head-trolls and other unseen things so it's probably best I explain the Hat-situation now - so you'll understand what I'm yabbering on about further down the line.

But there's also a deeper story to tell.

I want to explain how I came to believe that Hat was a problem - too damn distracting, too odd, too inconsistent, too unpredictable, too childish, too... *embarrassing...* and that she was hindering (if not deliberately sabotaging) all of my attempts to grow-up, settle-down and be...

NORMAL.

And, caught up in the need to be viewed (by others) as this thing called *"normal"*... I did something I'll always regret: in a traitorous act of self-sabotage, I locked Hat away in a cupboard full of skeletons. And I left her there. For a very long time.

And *that* decision had consequences: major screw-up-my-life-and-mental-health sorts of consequences.

Yes. Well...

Before we delve into the noxious swamp involving 'that' part of my story, it's probably best to start at the very beginning...

(A very good place to start)...