

One Percent Inspiration

Phyllis Rudin

It was hard to believe they were sisters, so little did they favour one another. You wouldn't peg them for the same species, let alone the same family. God was firing on all cylinders the day he moulded Sandrine, the elder of the two. She popped out of the womb pink and petite, all her features in perfect harmony. But three years later when the Creator was scheduled to run up the younger sister, Rosie, he was in a pissy mood. He rummaged around in the seconds drawer for parts and then clumped them together any which way. And to add insult to injury he decided to cast her in Cinerama. Rosie's parents were baffled. None of the ancestors on either side, as far back as they could trace them, was built as capaciously as their second child. Judging strictly on resemblance, you'd lay odds that she wasn't their daughter at all, but the result of a quickie between the chest freezer and the Buick in the family garage.

Whenever their parents took the girls to the park and watched them run off ahead to chase a ball, they couldn't help but compare the two retreating shapes, though they took care to stay out of earshot of their daughters. Their firstborn's bones were delicately wrought. But if Rosie had a skeleton it was a well-kept secret, so abundantly pillowed was her infrastructure. She was weighed down with enough tush to spread among three cheeks while their older daughter could barely fill out the normal complement. And then there was the way they moved. Sandrine flitted along the rose-bush lined paths like a peckish butterfly. As for Rosie? Well, to call her gait lumbering would be a kindness. Her Sasquatch feet were perfectly suited to stalking prey on the mossy forest floor but the school's anal dress code required that she bind them up in saddle shoes all the same.

The inequities in the looks department never came between the girls somehow. In fact a closer pair of siblings would be difficult to find. Their attachment was sealed by the sudden death of their mother before they were even out of elementary school. Papa didn't move in to fill the breach. It just wasn't in him. Not that he was a

man lacking in resources. He'd survived most of the war hiding out in the sewers of Lvov. He and the local rats were on a first name basis. And before he cast his lot with the slime and the shit, he'd done whatever it took. If he had to slit his girlfriend's throat to save his own hide, he slit it. If he had to fink on his brother, he finked. But when it came to handling two little girls all on his own, he was at a loss. So he left them to raise each other and in this endeavour they succeeded admirably. Until now.

Rosie was going through a rough patch. She'd often been teased at school but in the lower grades her teachers were able to keep a lid on the mockery. Knuckle-thumping wasn't verboten in those days. But now, in her first year of high school, she was left to her own devices. Trouble was, she didn't have any. At least any that were successful against Daniel, her chief tormentor. Other boys had followed his lead at first. After all, a double-wide target like Rosie didn't come along every day. But then they paused to weigh the pros and cons; being boys, their brains only kicked into gear a few ticks after their mouths. If they picked on Rosie they reasoned, any chances they might have with the delectable Sandrine, however remote, were dead in the water. One by one they dropped out of the pack till only Daniel was left standing.

Daniel was no quitter. Why would he leave off when he was possessed of the gift that kept on giving? Who else could boast a victim who blocked the sun? Monogamous by nature, Daniel harassed no other girls. It was his belief that casting a wide net diluted your creative juices. He kept his radar tuned to Rosie's coordinates alone and never failed to draw blood.

No one upbraided him for his loutish behaviour. His elders pooh-poohed it. Boys-will-be-boys and all that. "Oy such a punk this one is," the grizzled *daveners* at *shul* would mock-chide him at Saturday morning services, shaking their heads in affectionate dismissal and giving his cheek a bruiser of a pinch. So the Rosie-bashing continued unabated. Why ever not?

Rosie started to stay home from school. First for a few days at a time, then for a few weeks, until finally she stopped attending altogether. Female complaints she told her father, her eyes modestly downcast. He had a vague recollection from his aborted conjugal life that female complaints were matters of a week or so. Ten days tops. But he couldn't very well open up on such an intimate subject with his own daughter so he just let it go. Before he knew what was happening Sandrine was staying home too. He'd never realized till now that such ailments were contagious. While the sisters were thus indisposed they home-schooled themselves. Their teachers supported their efforts to keep up, such good girls, sending the requisite books and assignments to their house every Thursday after school with one or another of their fellow students.

It had to happen sometime. This week when they opened the front door, Daniel was standing on the welcome mat. He held the packet out in front of him to effect a quick getaway but neither girl reached out to relieve him of it. Instead they invited him in. All visitors to their home got the full treatment. That lesson from their mother had stuck. Hospitality extended even to turds. No exceptions. Daniel hadn't the least desire to cross their threshold, but he was trapped. He'd been charged to pick up a return package for their teachers so he couldn't leave until the sisters forked it over. More detentions he didn't need. That dance card was already overfull.

Sandrine and Rosie sat him down on the sofa in the parlor and prepared to serve tea. On the Spode of course. Rosie coerced her resistant lips into asking their guest if he preferred lapsang souchong or oolong. He goggled at her as if she were speaking in tongues. His silence discombobulated her. Never before today had she seen him at a loss for words. "Sugar?" Rosie offered next, slightly bolder, brandishing the container out in front of her as if it could sub for a chain of garlic.

Daniel peered into the sugar bowl. He'd never seen sugar congealed into squarish clumps like that before. Didn't that ding-a-ling Rosie know not to leave it standing around too long in the humidity? At his house, as was proper, sugar was a commodity that flowed. Daniel didn't much relish the idea of ingesting that stuff. The whitish nuggets put him in mind of teeth. But tea

without sweetener was too much of a deprivation for him to contemplate under these oppressive circumstances so he reached in and dug out four chunks which he plopped into his cup. His mental calculation of weight versus altitude was a tad off, and the resultant splash ended up landing amber droplets on the velvety ecru upholstery. His cheeks reddened slightly. The hostesses diplomatically held their tongues. They moved forward in the protocols of the tea party and helped themselves to the sugar now that their guest had been served. When Daniel observed them using the tongs to ferry the cubes to their cups he realized his gaffe. He'd noticed the tongs on the tray of course, but couldn't fathom their purpose. They seemed out of place in the context of tea. To him they had the look of persuaders, the kind Russian *shtarkers* would apply to noses or balls, not to innocuous sugar cubes. And they were conveniently pocket-sized. What a misapplication of materiel.

The reluctant visitor unfolded the linen napkin that was on the table in front of him to dab at the spots he'd been responsible for creating. At least he reckoned it was a napkin. Its generous dimensions confused him. And the fact that it had military creases, suggesting that it had been ironed. Daniel fancied himself something of an expert on creases. Or at least an expert at one remove as his mother spent eight hours every day behind a mangle at the dry cleaner. One thing he did know for certain was that his toothless bubbe would covet such a square of fabric, so fine-spun, so delicately flowered and stitched. She'd refold it triangular-wise into a chichi babushka for herself and tie it proudly under her wattles. And in this house they used it to wipe off their mouths? It was the world turned upside down.

Daniel's clumsy attempt at stain removal only served to embed the tea splotches more deeply into the sofa fibres. Why couldn't his mother have *kvetched* more eloquently about the cleaning than the creasing while she was hanging over the stove after work, heating up the Chef Boyardee for supper, her cigarette sprinkling in ashes like wannabe parmesan? He balled up the soiled napkin and chucked it back on the table where he'd found it. Too late. Again he'd goofed. The girls had theirs spread out protectively across their knees. How long did he have to endure this? He needed a drink and tea was all that was on tap.

The wee teacup handles challenged Daniel's panatela fingers. He couldn't manage to squeeze them through the gilt-edged aperture intended for digits. Proof positivo, as if he needed any additional evidence, that tea was a girly drink. His conclusion, however satisfying, did nothing to resolve the immediate problem of how to levitate the cup to his lips. For want of a better idea he took a reverse approach, placing the cup and saucer on his palm and ducking his head down to the rim to slurp. Despite herself, Rosie cringed to see the spoon still periscoping up from the cup while he drank. You could lose an eye that way.

Sandrine held out a doily-lined platter to him. Cookies they were passing him now? And just where was he supposed to put one? Was he meant to clutch it in his free hand, or put it on the tray or on his saucer or on his napkin or on his knee or on his head or behind his ear or up his nose? Those damned broads always served him first. Even his brutish brain was able to intuit that it was some kind of bizarre politeness thing. Maybe because the family was foreign? But it meant that he could never pick up on their cues. He should have just said no to her. Or maybe no thank you better. But those cookies looked too good to pass up; home made, not out of a supermarket value pack. Then Daniel had his aha moment. He helped himself to a cookie and dropped it into his tea. From lower down this time. No one could accuse him of being thick-headed. He stirred it all around and spooned up the resultant sludge. What was once a cup of limp-wristed tea he'd now transformed into a whole new animal. Daniel was rather satisfied with how he'd acquitted himself.

Rosie watched Daniel gripping the spoon in his fist and shovelling up his tea like it was a bowlful of kasha and something clicked. He couldn't help behaving towards her the way that he did. It was out of his control. She'd just finished studying the chapters in her biology textbook on heredity, and the way she now understood it, Daniel was genetically predetermined to be a thug. Refinement and courtesy were clearly recessive traits in his family. Nine months in advance of his birth, when the manners-challenged egg and sperm of his parents were first introduced they probably hadn't shaken hands, but instead bopped each other on the head. Was it any wonder that he'd grown up a savage? Decency and

fellow-feeling were completely alien to his make-up. Deep in her ample breast, Rosie felt an odd twinge. A kernel of sympathy was starting to sprout.

Rosie had always been an open book to her sister and just now Sandrine didn't like the way the plot was turning. After Rosie'd shed enough tears to make the desert bloom, after she'd been hounded out of school, cut off from her friends, imprisoned between her own four walls, robbed of any semblance of a normal life, and shorn of her dignity, now she was prepared to give the author of her discontent a pass? At last it made sense to Sandrine, why out of the sizable cast of nerds and dogs that cluttered the hallways of their school, Daniel had zeroed in on Rosie; he'd pegged her as the weakest of the herd.

This was Sandrine's senior year but she was missing out on everything. Sure she'd still graduate, but that was the least of it. All that Pomp and Circumstance hoo-hah was strictly for the parents. If she'd still been at school, she'd be going on the grad trip to New York City in the spring. The chaperones were notoriously lackadaisical. Sneaking out to clubs and bars after bed check was a breeze according to last year's class. As long as you showed up for breakfast, no matter what fumes you gave off, you were home free. Then there was the prom. She would have been elected queen on the first ballot. Everyone said so. Now the crown would go to that shrimp Laurel Glickstein who wasn't even fit to be her train bearer. Did Laurel have regal cheekbones? Did Laurel have noble posture? Did Laurel have a 3.87 GPA? But she'd be the one occupying the throne while Sandrine was home crunching on popcorn in front of *Saturday Night at the Movies*. And to top it all off, this was the year she was going to let Gordon go all the way. She had it all planned out. Enough tussling and resisting. It was so tiresome. She wanted all that messiness out of the way before she started college. But she'd had to give up on every last one of those dreams to stay home with her suffering sister. No Big Apple, no flowered tiara, no boink. Suddenly Sandrine was repelled by the way Rosie was pouring tea for her torturer as if they were at Buckingham Palace.

She jumped up from her seat next to Daniel clutching at her throat. She was choking, couldn't draw air. Sandrine coughed and coughed unprimly from deep

within her gut until out popped the stopper, and from behind it all her pent-up fury came spewing out in a virulent stream. She didn't attempt to dam the flow. If she didn't purge now she'd explode and what a mess on the sofa covers that would make.

Sandrine lit into Rosie for her monstrous selfishness. What perversion of a sister was Rosie that she would clutch Sandrine in a death grip and drag her under the waves to drown along with her? A truly loving sister would have sacrificed herself alone. But no, Rosie'd pleaded with Sandrine to stick by her side, had worn her down with her round-the-clock lamentations until like a sap she'd given in and agreed to entomb herself so that Rosie could enjoy company while she wallowed in her sorrows.

And who did Rosie think she was kidding anyway? Didn't she bring it all down on herself? If she looked like the side of a barn it was her own doing. Nobody ever stood over Rosie's head with a bullwhip and forced her to Hoover up everything on her plate as if it were the Last Supper.

Even their own father, who'd clung to life on a diet of slop and vermin for years on end, even he didn't stuff his face like a pig at the trough. Rosie set herself up to be bullied with her gluttony. She was asking for it. Because for all her caterwauling to the contrary, she got off on the taunts didn't she? Even warped attention was better than none.

Rosie belonged on the psycho ward, that's where. Then they could strap her down and pump her full of drugs to help figure out why she was so twisted. Of course they'd have to use the extra long zoo needles to penetrate those hippo thighs of hers. Wait. On second thought, maybe Papa didn't need to shell out for a shrink. Sandrine could diagnose Rosie, no sweat. It was jealousy. Seething envy over Sandrine's beauty that unlocked every door before her. That's what was at the root of it all, wasn't it? Well wasn't it?

Sandrine was just warming up. She spewed out a revisionist sibling history that cast poor Rosie as a meaty manipulator who willfully blighted every opportunity for happiness their childhood offered up just to have the pleasure of sticking it to her sister. All that was missing from Sandrine's outburst was for her to place Rosie behind the steering wheel of the rig that struck their mother down.

Daniel sat awestruck. He'd always fancied himself a bullying artiste, a Cliburn of the genre, but this babe could give master classes. Sandrine opened his eyes to what he was, a bullying pipsqueak whose taunts were covered in peach fuzz. His jibes of the *fatty-fatty* ilk belonged in the kiddie pool. Boy, he'd needed this wake-up call. He was inspired.

For the rest of his life Daniel carried a soft spot in his heart for Sandrine. If she hadn't lit the flame way back then, never would he have summoned up the oomph to better himself, to refine and perfect his technique. Early teachers have such an impact on impressionable youth, don't they? Thanks to the example she'd set, he had himself a great ride, tyrannizing wives, children, neighbours. Bosses even. In all due modesty, though he couldn't swear to it, he was probably responsible for a couple of suicides along the way. Pills one time, wrists the other. And then, when cyber-bullying came down the pipe, he was proud to count himself among its early adopters. Everyone said it wouldn't take off, but his instincts told him otherwise and he ran with it. He loved the freedom of being able to persecute complete strangers in the intimacy of their own bedrooms, thousands of miles away. The world was his oyster. It was bullying's Golden Age. Just let any of those up-and-comers try to claim otherwise.