

# BREAK WATER REVIEW

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## Roar!

Robyn Bradley

When Mrs. Sewell tells us the boys can pick their partners, I know it's a bad idea.

While the Dreamer Me has done nothing but fantasize about kissing Dan C. ever since he sat behind me in my seventh-grade English class last year, the Realistic Me can't help but recall a recent memory: Sharon N.'s bat mitzvah. Me in line at the buffet. Dan and his friend two or three people behind me, laughing while holding up imaginary plates and miming a mountain of food on top, as if the plates were too heavy to lift. I'm not entirely sure they were making fun of me, at what they expected the fat girl to put on her plate, or if they were just being silly boys. But the image has haunted me. Regardless, I know what is true: boys want thin girls, and eighth-grade chorus is not the place to encourage teenage males to make important life decisions, like who they'll choose to have on their arm during a performance of Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman." Unless, of course, you're a sadist, which apparently our chorus teacher is, despite her fifty-thousand-watt smile and blonde curls haloing her head.

"So, you ladies will sing 'I am strong! I am invincible! I am wooomaaaaan! I am wooomaaaaan! I am wooomooooooooooooomaaaaaaaannnnnnn!' And then the guys will come out from behind the curtain and stand behind the girls they picked."

Mrs. Sewell stops and considers us for a moment before turning to stage left, where the boys cluster together in a BO-and-cheap-aftershave miasma. "Guys, you'll sing, 'You are woman. I am man...'" She pauses, winks, clicks her tongue twice, and continues singing, "...Let's go."

After waiting for the requisite groans, snickers, and nervous laughter to fade, she explains how the rest of the number will play out. Our partners will offer us their arms, which we'll demurely accept, and lead us off stage while the audience chuckles at the sexually charged humor, which is rather risqué for middle school in 1987.

This is how Sadist-Sewell sees it, anyway.

"Any questions?" she asks.

"Yeah. What's the part about picking partners?" some schmuck in the back calls out.

"Oh, right. Guys, listen up. You get to pick the girl you want to be paired with. We've done this other years, and I know y'all have someone in mind."

Mrs. Sewell smiles, and even though she seems like a mild-mannered, middle-aged chorus teacher, she doesn't fool me.

Suddenly, the bell rings. Chorus is over.

My girlfriends and I gossip on our way to algebra. We know Dave will pick skinny, always-looks-tan Sharon. Even though Becca, a petite curly-haired brunette, and Tara, a redheaded gymnast, are best friends and want Jeff to pick them, they both predict he'll tap the fair-haired Hilary.

We don't discuss my prospects. Not that it matters, because I already know. I've stared into the mirror enough to understand that wishing doesn't make double chins disappear and that finally getting your braces off doesn't instantly turn you into Christie Brinkley, even if our smiles are similar. I study magazines, like Seventeen, on tips for looking slimmer and makeup tricks that disguise my chubby cheeks, but to no avail. And while my long blonde hair that I spend hours on every morning is the envy of my friends – and even some of the popular girls – it's not enough to win me favor with them – The Boys.

This knowledge should prepare me for the degrading selection process that'll occur in forty-eight hours, but it doesn't, only because what ultimately happens is beyond even my cynical woe-is-me imagination.

“Okay,” Mrs. Sewell says as we walk onto Walsh Middle School’s stage for our next chorus rehearsal. “Time to pair up. First – ladies, take your positions.”

Hot lights beat down on our heads, casting us in funky yellows and oranges, as we glide across the wooden floor. Mrs. Sewell stands near the orchestra pit, just below the stage, and taps the top of her upright piano. She’s choreographed us into seven rows of eight girls each. For some god-forsaken reason – like my ability to carry a tune – I’m in the front row, right next to Cindy Ebulient (okay, so it’s not her real last name, but it might as well be).

Who’s Cindy Ebulient? Let me put it this way: If I’m Shake ‘n Bake, Cindy is coq au vin. If Cindy is Cinderella, Snow White, and Belle rolled into one, I’m a cross between an ugly stepsister and Dopey with a little bit o’ beast mixed in. That’s how I feel while standing next to this tall, curvy, blonde-haired goddess who’ll end up writing in my eighth-grade yearbook, “I had fun getting to know you! You are really nice! I hope we stay friends forever!” Thing is we aren’t friends, never have been, and never will be.

“Good, good,” Mrs. Sewell purrs as we assume our positions. Then she barks, “Okay, guys! Have at it. Stand behind the girl you want.”

I attempt to conjure Dan – his pale face, mop of black hair, and the way he smiles with his lips pressed firmly together. Instead, shuffling Nike and Reebok sneakers interrupt my fantasies. Someone has turned the thermostat to Bermuda beach weather. Sweat trickles down my forehead, and my hair feels wet and sticky against my neck. I twist my head and spot Dave’s proud mug behind Sharon, who is standing diagonally behind me. Sharon holds my gaze and then rolls her doe-brown eyes, but I know she’s secretly pleased to Have Been Chosen. However, a quick survey of the bodies on the stage assures me that I’m not the only girl who stands alone. About twenty-five boys shift awkwardly from foot-to-foot just to my left, too shy or proud to approach anyone.

Mrs. Sewell starts on the opposite end of where I’m standing. “Paired, paired, paired,” she says, while pointing to each girl in my row and checking to see if a guy is standing behind her. Shoot! I think, because I don’t swear – even though this seems like a good time to start. What the heck is she doing? “Paired, paired, paired.” She pauses at Cindy, who has a popular jock at her back. “Paired,” Mrs. Sewell grins. Oh. My. God. I’m next. Mrs. Sewell turns to me. She cranes her neck to see behind my wide frame. The only thing there is air. “Okay,” she booms, turning to the partner-less boys. “We need someone behind Robyn.”

As if on cue – as if they’d rehearsed it for months – the boys howl like a pack of wolves and race en masse, thundering like a herd of wild elephants, to the opposite end of the stage. Like monkeys, they pretend to climb and clutch the velvet maroon curtains hanging in heavy folds from the ceiling.

Everyone laughs.

Everyone but me.

And Mrs. Sewell.

I blink back tears, feel my face burn, stare straight ahead, and imagine I’m somewhere less traumatizing, like my seventh-grade math class or the dentist’s chair when I’m getting a cavity filled. Cindy attempts to say, “That’s so mean,” to no one in particular, but it’s hard to make out her words between her giggles. Mrs. Sewell marches on stage and digs her heels in front of the horror-stricken hyenas, many of whom are so consumed with fright and laughter, they’re convulsing. I’m not close enough to hear what she says to them, although I’m sure it’s responsible grown-up fare: How would you feel if that were you? Put yourself in her shoes. What if that was your sister?

Finally, one brave soul emerges from the downtrodden soldiers and accepts his orders from Sergeant Sewell with grace and aplomb.

Frankie W. is as skinny as I am fat, with toothpick legs and a waist as thick as my right thumb. He’s tall with spiky red hair, honey brown eyes, and a peaches-and-cream complexion. He’s one of those kids on the cusp of cool – not fully immersed in the In Crowd but far removed from losers like me.

“Hey,” he says softly. I think he might smoke cigarettes, which makes him dangerous, risky, interesting. Everything I’m not.

“Hi,” I squeak, wondering how crimson my face is.

He’s a cute guy, and for a moment I picture us on the night of the performance, me in a flowing black gown, hair atop my head. Beautiful. Him in a top hat and tails. Handsome. Everyone remarks what a nice couple we make. A Couple.

Yeah. I wish.

I look up into his face, he offers a smile, and I’m grateful that it’s not full of pity. I smile back, as I always do, pretending that nothing hurts me.

~

My first time on a plane is later that year on the annual eighth-grade trip to Washington, D.C. – middle-school Mecca. My anxiety mounts as our departure date nears, since this will be the Sleepover of All Sleepovers: I’m sharing a one-bath hotel room with three other teenage girls for four days. I spend most of my worry time wondering how I can possibly go half a week without pooping, since I’m convinced it will be impossible to do it with three sets of ears listening on the other side of the wall.

We leave at the beginning of April vacation, and my parents promise cherry trees in full bloom when I land in D.C. But I’m too busy stressing over how much weight I’ll gain on this trip since my classmates and I will be dining in fast-food restaurants for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Fast food isn’t the source of my excess girth, actually, and what I eat is on par with most of my friends. As I get older, my taste buds for “real food” mature and develop, allowing me to enjoy items I hated when I was under five: turnips, spinach, even cauliflower. My appetite is healthy, my penchant for snacking no more and no less than that of my girlfriends, and Mum has always seen to it that I’m involved in some sort of huff-and-puff activity: soccer, aerobics, dancing. Despite all this, I always weigh in heavy at the school nurse’s yearly cattle call. In eighth grade, I’m around five foot four and one hundred and fifty pounds.

“You have a slow metabolism, that’s all,” Mum explains after years of “You’re just big-boned” fail to appease me. She loves me; this I know. She thinks I’m beautiful, and I believe that she believes this is true. But it’s hard to convince myself when the mirror – or other people – say otherwise.

There’s a chill in the air as we loiter on the budget hotel’s third-floor balcony overlooking the empty pool cordoned off until Memorial Day. I share a room with Britt and two others. Our friends are in adjacent rooms: Robin, Lisa, Beth, Bette, the two Sharons, Becca, Tara. It’s exciting to be on our own, the boys we lust for, like Dan and Chris and Jeff and Mark and Mav, only a floor or two below. And they’re not the only boys in town – eighth graders from across the country have made their pilgrimage to the nation’s capital, which means even more boys to flirt with, even more opportunities to reinvent ourselves, to show these boys a side of our personalities that the guys at home haven’t seen. Me, I’m going to be strong. Who cares that I’m a little bigger than the rest? My goal’s to get the boys to see my blue eyes, my long hair, my smile, my charming wit. In hoping all this, I push aside a nagging voice, the one that says that despite my efforts, the results could be the same: Rejection. Disappointment.

Britt is the closest I have to a fellow-fat friend, although she’s far from fat. In the early years of elementary school, we each had the same cute pudge. But Britt has grown out of hers while developing poise along the way. She knows how to move her long graceful neck and flip her golden locks to achieve a come-hither pose. The girl has style, which I sorely lack, because I hate to shop, despite the teenage commandment about loving malls. It depresses me every time I walk into a store like Banana Republic or The Limited and try to fit into the latest ’80s fashion – Guess jeans, miniskirts, spandex – and can’t. Or worse – shouldn’t.

Tonight, though, I feel different. Confident, even. I’m in my black jeans that give the illusion of slimness – or at least “not fat.” I’m wearing a top I got for Christmas, a black fitted sweater with deep fuchsia swirls knitted throughout. Voluptuous is a word I’ve heard used for sexy women, and I wonder if I qualify, even though I think you need to have big boobs, which I don’t have and wish I did. I’ve noticed that women with big boobs can get away with carrying a little extra weight, especially through their stomachs and butts. Maybe it’s because all eyes are on the woman’s chest that the rest of her doesn’t matter, or maybe people understand that if you’re big in one area of your body, you might be big in another. Still, even without the boobs, I’m feeling brave, giddy. Maybe it’s the fact we’re away from our parents, away from the routine world of Framingham, Massachusetts. Whatever the reason, I’m confident, reckless, vocal.

I stand next to Tara, who is sliding her leg along the black iron railing – the girl’s always doing some sort of gymnastics pose – and exchanging words with a band of boys below. The lighting’s bad, so I can’t tell if they’re cute or not, but I stand by and listen.

“So,” the ringleader shouts. “You and your friends. You meet us in the game room in, like, fifteen minutes. Okay?”

Tara glances sideways at me, her red curly hair bouncing. She flushes, giggles, and shrugs.

“Okay?” Ringleader presses, and the ones behind him snicker as they peer up in the darkness at Tara. They’re our Romeos, I think. And we’re their Juliets.

“Why should she?” I blurt before Tara can respond, trying my best to sound casually bitchy, like I imagine all the cool girls do when their guys whine about wanting them to do something they’re not so sure about. Electricity charges every cell of my body. I’m breathless, waiting for Ringleader to deliver his line. I feel in control. Alive. Predestined.

Ringleader steps into the nearby swath of lemon floodlight, which illuminates his features. His black eyes shimmer as they try to identify the voice and quickly narrow once they focus on me. He has a round face, mussed up wavy black hair, and a dark shadow – or poor attempt at a mustache – just below his broad nose. He’s about our age, maybe a year older, and muscular.

“Who the fuck was talking to you?” Ringleader spits.

Not the best comeback, I think, when suddenly I notice one of his underlings leaning into him and whispering. Clouds of white air emanate from their lips as snickers ripple throughout the pack.

“Yeah,” Ringleader continues. “Why don’t you go lose some weight and leave us the fuck alone?”

Laughter.

Tara quickly removes her leg from the railing and disappears into her room, pretending she didn’t hear. Seeing their prey has disappeared, the boys disperse, and soon it’s just me on the balcony, staring into the empty pool, willing myself not to cry, snorting snot up my nose, licking my chapped lips, hating myself for not being thin, beautiful, lovable. I take a few gulps of air, feel it as it goes into my chest. And, something surprising happens – as a smirk, not a smile – washes over my face.

I’m embarrassed, but...

Speaking out, of course, was a bad idea. Except for one tiny, nagging problem. The rush I felt when I delivered those words – Why should she? – was, well, kind of exhilarating. As much as Ringleader’s words stung, the fact that I spoke up, got stung, and am still standing strong, not crying, is kind of a thrill. I am woman! As much as putting my fat-ass on stage, in the spotlight, can only hurt me, a twisted knob of gnarled and confused brain cells tell me something else: it’s a thrill to speak – and be heard – in such a public setting. Hear me roar! Yeah. Just maybe.

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At the end of the year, Mrs. Sewell directs us in a musical called “Coming of Age.” I’m part of “The Club-House Gang,” which is a glorified name for the chorus. There’s also an “In-Crowd” and “Out-Crowd,” two other sections of the chorus. Mrs. Sewell, however, asks me to sing a solo during one of the musical numbers. In the first instant, I’m terrified at her request. But in the next, my mind, my heart, my whole being do something crazy – embrace her invitation. The D.C. balcony flashes before my eyes. The thrill of the audience watching, me belting out – roaring! – overtakes and squashes my fear, surprising the shit out of me.

“Really?” I say.

“Yes,” Mrs. Sewell says.

“Okay.”

Once, during rehearsals, it’s just me and Mrs. Sewell. She’s on the floor, I’m on the stage, and the auditorium is dark. A lone spotlight casts my larger-than-life shadow on the wooden floor. Mrs. Sewell accompanies me, and I sing and sing and sing.

“Yes!” she exclaims when we’re done. “You’re going to be great.”

“Really?”

“Yup. You sound wonderful. And besides, you look great, too.”

She smiles and readies herself for the person coming in after me to rehearse. For a moment, I stand dumbly on the stage. I look great?

Mrs. Sewell is a grown-up, I remind myself. What else is she going to say to my face? That I look fat and ugly? Still, I reason, she didn’t have to say anything. We’re rehearsing my singing, that’s all. The way I look shouldn’t have even come up.

But it did. It did.

Mrs. Sewell is backstage now. I hear voices, laughter. I’m alone on the stage, staring out at the empty auditorium. But in my mind, it’s full of people. Cheering. For me.

For all of me.

I feel the roar inside my chest.

And I’m liking the way it feels.