

THE THIGHS OF ROSE TUDOR-CRUMP

An everyday story of university folk

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This volume is dedicated to all my colleagues, past and present

Since they will, of course, instantly recognize themselves in the characters that follow, I must begin by apologizing to them for having felt obliged - in the interests of public decency - to tone down slightly this otherwise entirely accurate record of their finest moments.

Part 1: Early Morning Physical

Chapter 1

The chair of the Department of Politics and Economics was in her office rather earlier than usual on this particular Monday morning. She had an important e-mail to write; and since the fate of her colleagues hung on little else, even she had come to realize – rather reluctantly, it should be said – that its drafting could be postponed no longer. It was not that she cared that much about the fate of her colleagues: far from it. They could all go hang as far as she was concerned; and they probably would. No, it was rather that, for her own protection, it was imperative that her letter reach the Dean's desk that morning before he did. It did not, of course: hence our story.

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It was not that this potentially disastrous breakdown in communication was in any primary way the chair's fault; but then in the world of D.O.P.E. nothing ever was. For it wasn't by chance that Dr. Rose Tudor-Crump held the Teflon Chair in Political Posturing. She held that chair because, both by temperament and by physique, she was especially suited to its unique terms of reference. The product of a temporary liaison between an American beauty queen and a visiting English lawyer, Rose brought to her elevated academic position the best of both her parents: from her mother, her physique, and from her father, her name. Rose certainly had both the strangest surname and the best legs, not to mention thighs, of any of the externally funded professorships in the faculty of social sciences. She, and the chair, were in that sense both wonderfully endowed. And of course, you cannot really hold a 'Teflon' chair. Its non-stick surfaces are designed to repel boarders, not to retain them: and ROTC, as she was affectionately known by her two remaining friends, was a past mistress at repelling boarders. She had been doing it all her life. For Rose possessed, to an unprecedented degree, that thickness of skin and imperviousness to criticism that is the monopoly of the totally self-focused; and Rose was totally self-focused. Nothing ever fazed her. No crisis was ever sufficiently threatening as even to ripple the surface of her magnificently manicured physique. And for that reason, and in the four years of hell that had accompanied her tenure as 'chief dope', those predisposed to like her – she was now down to her parents and to those two distant friends – had quickly come to marvel at her serenity under stress. Those who liked her less – and by this point that included everybody else's parents and certainly all her colleagues – had with equal speed come to other and less charitable observations on her famous unflappability.

'Nothing ever sticks to that woman,' was the general consensus within the department. 'The more the shit flies, the more Rose blooms.'

But then, that is the way with roses. To grow well, they need a lot of manure.

Her former husband, now the chair of the equally embattled Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, knew that better than most.

'If you stand as close to the fan as Rose always does,' he regularly announced to any of his colleagues who were prepared to listen, 'it's not surprising that the stuff flies right over your head, and lands on everybody else. What is surprising is that she never gets her fanny caught in the blades.'

Bertrand White was a man of few words, most of them vulgar and all of them sexist. He was also a master of the mixed metaphor and the tired cliché. In fact, he was famous for them. People had been known to travel miles simply to hear his latest verbal convolution; and in truth they would have done well to come again on this particular morning. For on this Monday, Bertrand White had all his metaphors and the entirety of his vocabulary out in force. For he too was in early, and under equal amounts of stress.

'She sails too close to the wind, that girl,' he was at that moment explaining to D.A.C.E.'s second-in-command, who for some reason had come to work dressed in battle fatigues and full camouflage. 'Just one of these days, she'll stick her brace of pistols too close to the machine. Then we'll see how good she is at political posturing. But until then, don't expect Rose to carry the can for anybody, and certainly not for that

crew of has-beens and maniacs that call themselves a department of politics and economics. The only person Rose carries a can for is Rose herself, and only then when she wants to pee.'

As the second-in-command knew from bitter personal experience, there wasn't much love lost between DOPE and DACE; and there was even less love lost between their chairs.

'A real war of the roses,' the Dean liked to call it.

But then, Dean Medici had been a medieval historian in his youth, and claimed to know about those kinds of things. For him, particularly when married, ROTC had been his unobtainable 'Tudor Rose'. Now, newly divorced, she had become his embattled 'Rapunzel' – and as such the subject of many hours of private lust and fantasy in the Dean's Office. However it wasn't her hair that the Dean fancied climbing. It was those amazing thighs.

In fact on one very famous occasion the Dean had tried to climb them, initially by sliding his left hand along her right thigh – unannounced and uninvited – in the middle of a shared lunch. The grope had been designed to move her, and it had certainly done that. In fact it had moved her mightily, and with considerable speed. Unfortunately for the Dean however, it had not moved her to passion as he had intended, but to a level of violence and public denunciation that he most definitely had not. To be more precise, the Dean's unsolicited attempt to 'establish a closer working relation between the Dean's Office and his favorite departmental chair', as he later put it, had moved Rose to stab his non-grope hand viciously with her fork. It had moved her, that is, to effect an equally unsolicited but extremely potent partial crucifixion of the Dean on the top of the dining room table. The Dean certainly established a new and closer working relationship with Rose that day. It was just not the one that he had intended. It was one built on the premise – as she told him at such volume that everyone in the cafeteria was left in no doubt as to its central organizing principle – that 'if he would try not to grope her, she would try not to castrate him'. It was not a premise for which the Dean cared much, or a relationship of which he was very proud.

For some reason, ever since that particular encounter the Dean had taken to eating his lunch alone and in his room. For some reason too, and again only since that particular encounter, whenever at faculty meetings he called for a vote to be taken 'by a show of hands', ripples of hysteria invariably followed.

So too did the inevitable torrent of jokes: terrible, terrible jokes. There were so many of them in fact that Associate Dean Quisling eventually organized a faculty-wide competition, with categories. In fact, for weeks and weeks after Rose skewered the Dean, the faculty did virtually nothing but send each other jokes: jokes about being caught red handed, open handed, glad handing, with hands trapped in tills and in cutlery drawers, or with hands whose private habits sent you blind. 'His eyesight will be fine from now on' was a particularly sophisticated version of that one. And after the pure hand jokes came the 'cutlery jokes'. 'Is this a dagger that I see before me? No, a fork!' won the prize in week 2. And the ethnic cutlery jokes, about speaking with forked tongues; and the spaghetti jokes – the Associate Dean particularly liked the one about his boss now finding it much easier to drain pasta than before – and of course the crucifixion jokes, the ones in really bad taste!

'She scored a real hole in one' was the opening shot of the Athletics department's collective offering in this category, 'well, more like three holes actually!'

'Jesus Christ!'

'Yes, something like that.'

So it went on. 'It is ironic,' the final word came from the Associate Dean himself, 'that Rose was the first to see right through him. Now we all can! He used to think he could walk on water. Now he can't even hold the stuff in his right hand without dripping. Pity she didn't stab him all over. Get all the piss out of him. He's full of it. He'd look quite good as a colander.'

Such faculty concern! Not to mention the endless discussion, for weeks afterwards, in all quarters of the faculty and not just in the Associate Dean's office, about whether the Dean was now able for the first time to wave at people and spy on them simultaneously. No one could be really sure, and no one thought it wise to ask. So they concentrated instead on the design of new nicknames for their beloved leader. For a while Rose even became 'Stalin' to the Dean's 'Trotsky'; until some pedant pointed out that Stalin had Trotsky killed with an ice pick, not a fork. People then immediately dropped the Stalin joke. They didn't want to give Rose any ideas. She was dangerous enough with a fork. They settled instead into more discrete forms of hero worship: transforming the table on which the Dean had been briefly impaled into a sort of shrine, and as such a place of pilgrimage for faculty and students alike. Even very senior figures in the university were seen taking photographs there: hands splayed, eating implements at the ready. First there was George Custer, they told each other, then Michael Dukakis; and now the Dean. And cautious as ever, Rose's colleagues began to use plastic cutlery and to move round the dining room in pairs.

'You can never be too careful,' they told each other, 'when wonder-thighs is on the rampage.'

All sexual fantasies were off. Everyone agreed on that. ROTC's thighs were definitely off-limits even to the imagination. It's amazing what a fork through a hand can do to the most rampant of male academic libidos. Colleagues took to reading books again, and to talking to their children. It was all very unnerving. They even came close to grading the occasional essay.

'Not unlike the original crucifixion,' the university chaplain explained in his next Sunday sermon. 'Nasty and unpleasant, but with some very interesting side effects. God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. Hallelujah!'

The chaplain was Southern Baptist, and so was heavily into Hallelujah's. More heavily into Hallelujah's in fact than were the faculty into grading. In this instance, the performance of God's wonders stopped just short of that.

Rose for her part had at first thought of her 'fork assault' as among her finest moments. It certainly remained among her most famous; but on this particular Monday it was also among the few moves in her life that she was now beginning to regret. She needed the Dean on her side in her battle with DACE, and she needed him to stay on her side. Forking him to the table had certainly kept him by her, and given them a very special relationship: but that was not quite the point.

'I should have laid the bastard while I had him,' she muttered to herself, remembering too late the adage about grabbing them by the balls so that their hearts and minds would follow. 'It's a pity about the fork. Bit excessive really. I should simply have broken the little turd's thumbs. Too bad: I shall have to grovel instead.'

So she began to grovel, stroking the outsides of her thighs for inspiration as she did so.

'My dear Lorenzo,' her e-mail began, 'it's such a shame that we couldn't have had lunch together to talk about this. I find it very hard to understand why lately you have been so reluctant to share food with me, and have taken to drinking soup through a straw in the privacy of your own office. I do hope that the stitches are healing well now, and that your wife is no longer disputing your claim that the fork fell from the cafeteria of a passing 747. Such an unfortunate misunderstanding! But take comfort from the strength of character you showed, in crying so little through the 25 minutes that it took to separate you from the table. Such courage is rare in...

Rose struggled for the right collective noun. She was tempted by '*bald-headed philandering gropers*' but on reflection decided that that would be unwise. After all, the Dean wasn't bald, and she attached high priority to accuracy in insults, so she typed instead her more normal all-encompassing category for men. She typed '*jerks*.' But after further thought and then only with great reluctance, the term '*jerks*' went the same way as '*bald-headed philandering gropers*', replaced in the end by the more satisfyingly enigmatic '*medieval historians in my experience*'.

'That should set him thinking,' she mused, 'about how many of his academic colleagues have been where his left-hand tried to go. Next time the little creep calls for a show of hands in his own department, let him calculate through how many other raised hands he can see broad daylight.'

Irritated by the very thought of him, ROTC picked up the therapeutic baseball bat that she kept in her office precisely for moments like this. Walking over to the punch-bag hanging from the ceiling, on which a picture of Mother Theresa of Calcutta in prayer had been pinned by a particularly evangelical student, she struck it violently seven or eight times. Feeling better, if strangely aroused, she then returned to the creation of her e-mail.

'I wanted to touch base with you early today,' she wrote, still momentarily in a baseball frame of mind, 'well ahead of your recommendation to the Planning Committee on which department is to be closed: DOPE or DACE. I realize that cut-backs are inevitable if the university is to balance its accounts, but I just wanted to remind you that it was not my department's initiative that killed the President's dog, or earned the university its fifteen minutes of fame on the Jerry Springer Show. I also wanted to remind you, by contrast...'

And she paused, struggling to find a contrast that was even vaguely favorable to the Department of Politics and Economics. It took her an alarmingly long time to find one. The truth kept intervening. Then she went on

'...of the high level of excellence in teaching and research, and the quiet scholasticism that is so characteristic of the department.'

Overcome by a moment of integrity – an entirely virginal moment in Rose's case – she began to beat the punch-bag again, harder still this time.

'Excellence in research,' she muttered to herself, 'what excellence? This pack couldn't research their way out of the building, and as for their teaching.... I've seen more dynamic interaction at a Quaker wake.'

She had just replaced *'high level of excellence in teaching and research'* with the less ambitious *'the record of teaching and research'* – and was pondering the wisdom of claiming anything as ludicrous about this department as its *'quiet scholasticism'* – when she heard the scream. The scream put paid to any claim about quietness; and in truth it put paid to much else as well. For it was quite a scream.