

## Miss Everett and the postprandial paunches

'Which brings us to the final segment of your essay, the apophthegm.'

The board marker squeaked like a rubber duck as Miss Rachel Everett snaked an arrow from the bottom left to somewhere near the top right.

'A-poph-thegm,' she repeated, scrawling the word in tall jagged letters and wondering if it was possible for a teacher to write on the board without speaking each syllable out loud.

Underlining the word twice, Rachel stepped back and admired her masterpiece. The nine-part classical Greek argument structure, beautifully rendered in a maze of multi-coloured boxes, arrows and text. 'The apophthegm is your sting in the tail,' she said, still scanning the board proudly. 'Usually it's a single sentence that sums everything up and links back to the problem outlined in the exordium. But it should do more than that. It should make the reader sit up. Leave them with something to ponder. Something surprising, or even shocking.'

Rachel considered adding a note asking for the board not to be wiped clean. If nothing else, it would mean that her head of department would have to teach her next class in front of a load of words she couldn't even pronounce. Rachel smiled at the thought of pompous Melinda Mortimer squirming in her fifty-inch French knickers as one of the smartarse pupils (Amelia Richardson was odds on) asked her to explain what a 'peroratio' was, and why it came after a 'refutatio'.

But no. Putting a note at the top of the board asking for it not to be wiped clean would only make the boys even more likely to deface it with sexual innuendos, and that simply wouldn't do.

Miss Mortimer would know what all *those* meant.

Rachel sighed to herself. Thirteen independent schools in Cheshire and she'd had to end up at the one where promotion was based solely on your willingness to give head to the Head. Melinda was probably up there now, guzzling her way to an even easier timetable or some extra holidays.

Erasing the repulsive image from her mind, Rachel capped her marker and pirouetted sharply in a way she knew the girls imitated during break.

'So. Who can give me an apophthegm for our essay?'

She allowed the tumbleweed five seconds to cross the classroom and then tapped her desk with the board marker impatiently.

'Come on, girls! Surely one of -'

*guh-HUUURRRRRP!*

'Thank you *so* much Louisa,' Rachel said flatly, raising her eyebrows to subdue the hum of tittering. 'But I was looking for an apt conclusion to our essay, not an ode to the dinner ladies.'

'Sorry - *uhrp* - Miss.' Louisa Porter's cheeks and eyeballs bulged as she managed to swallow a secondary belch. 'My stomach *oorp*, isn't too happy, Miss.'

Eight years in education had cultivated in Rachel Everett a deep and proper suspicion of such remarks. But for once the evidence suggested that her student was being sincere. Exposed beneath a top that had been pushed up well above the navel, the stomach which Louisa had personified (almost certainly without meaning to, for she was not the brightest pupil) sagged into her lap like a water balloon that had been pumped to bursting point with cream, burying the lip of her jeans entirely. Louisa's slim fingers traced delicate circles across

its tanned but turgid surface, their pink-tipped nails bent carefully away from the vulnerably taut skin.

Rachel's sigh was almost motherly. 'I'm not surprised Louisa,' she said, 'the way piled your plate up in the canteen. A double cheese and bacon steakburger, a stack of chips to rival Chichen Itza. All that cream you poured onto your syrup pudding. It was almost spilling over the rim of the bowl! How did you expect your stomach to feel?'

'Can't help it Miss,' Louisa quickly clamped a hand over her cherry lips to forestall another belch - doubtless brought on by this untimely reminder of her oversized lunch. She stroked her plump belly gently. 'They don't feed me properly at home.'

Laughter erupted from the class, and even Rachel felt the corners of her mouth twitch. The owner and proprietor of *Le Bistro de Bon Viande*, Louisa's father was the region's most esteemed celebrity chef and a frequent guest on Saturday Kitchen. Her glamorous mother was famed for the extravagance of the food at her lavish garden parties - and, not incidentally, needed almost as many Xs in her bespoke dresses as Melinda Mortimer.

'You poor girl,' said Rachel in a tone of suppressed bemusement. 'Now, seeing as you're so full of clever remarks, you can come up here and write an apophthegm for our essay.' She held out the board marker. 'Come on. I'll help you.'

Louisa's eyes bugged in horror. 'Oh miss, I'd like to, but I don't think I can get up. I might-'

'Now, Louisa.' Rachel's tone was soft but menacing, like the whisper of leaves preceding a hurricane. 'And perhaps this will teach you a thing or two about moderation,' she added as the reluctant essayist rose with a groan that was only slightly exaggerated. Rachel couldn't help shaking her head as Louisa staggered towards the front of the class, her drooping abdomen cradled in both hands. 'Honestly Louisa, it's no use feeling sorry for yourself. Jam on toast at first break, all that lunch, and don't think I missed the pack of skittles you and Charlotte have been passing between your desks.' Rachel arched an acidic eyebrow at Louisa's partner in calorific crime, whose sweet and innocent smile was betrayed by the bumpy bulge of her cheeks. 'If the two of you were as dedicated to your studies as you are to your stomachs, you'd be the brains of Britain.'

This was sailing a touch close to the wind, perhaps, but Rachel knew her class. Their murmured laughter was good-natured. Not that Louisa Porter would have cared if it wasn't. Tall, rich and popular, the leggy brunette combined an uncommonly pretty face with a wit and self-confidence that had enabled her to bewitch Kevin Argent, the most handsome boy in school, despite the frankly comical paunch that had taken up residence on her otherwise slender figure. As she watched Louisa's laboured approach to the front of the class, Rachel spared a thought for poor Kevin, sinking into the bed beneath his girlfriend's weight; her sloshing, sweaty cement sack of a gut slapping against his abs as she bounced up and down, wheezing awfully from being so out of shape and having eaten too many helpings of her father's famous plum pudding for dinner. It was a miracle the poor lad didn't have back problems. Rachel supposed Louisa's perfect skin and pretty face made up for it. But still... surely such a clever, eligible young man would prefer someone a little slimmer, wouldn't he? Someone with a little more self-control.

A little more experience.

Feeling the heat reach her cheeks, Rachel blinked the guilty thought away. She handed the marker to Louisa, who took it with an air of deathly resignation, like a pirate accepting the black spot.

Rachel felt little sympathy. *Firm from the first*, her mentor at Oxford had said, and the advice had served her well. In her two years at Breton College, young Miss Everett's crisp Queen's English and even crisper dress sense had swiftly earned her a reputation as one of those stern, formidable teachers who was not to be trifled with. Yes, she was mocked in the

corridors as a dominatrix (how very original), but obedience and respect reigned in her classrooms.

'Miss... er Miss...'

'What is it, Samantha?' Rachel said curtly, refusing to turn from the board on which Louisa had finally begun to write (albeit very slowly and with frequent glances at the clock). The last thing they needed was another interruption.

'I think Jennifer needs to go to the toilet, Miss.'

Keeping her back still to the class, Rachel closed her eyes in frustration. 'I am sure, Samantha, that if Jennifer, who is after all eighteen years old, does need to go to the toilet, she is quite capable of informing me of this herself.' She drew in a long breath. The gibberish Louisa had begun to scrawl on the board was not improving her mood. 'Goodness me, this isn't kindergarten. You're adult women. I'

'Ooohhhh! *Gleaehheuuurp!*'

The noise was so guttural, so *sewagey* that for a moment Rachel thought that one of the pipes running over the roof of the classroom must have burst. She turned round quickly - and what she saw caused her stumble backwards, almost tripping over the bin.

Upon Jennifer Lawson's desk, where sheets of paper and an anthology of war poems should have been, there was what appeared at first sight to be some unshorn but expensively shampooed troll. On closer inspection Rachel identified it as Jennifer's hair: a massed pile of luxurious red and gold, mounding up from the desk and cascading over its front and sides. It rippled as another greasy belch emanated from beneath.

'It's Craig Swain's fault Miss,' Samantha explained, giving the groaning Jennifer's back a soothing rub. 'He fancies our Jenny, you see, and when he saw how much she was enjoying her chocolate cake at lunch he, er, persuaded two year sevens to give her theirs as well and... Miss I *really* think she needs to go to the toilet.'

Again, Rachel found herself unable to doubt the truth of this tale, however ridiculous it sounded. Those belches were just too visceral to be fake. 'Yes, all right then -' she waved a hand towards the door impatiently. '- you'd better go with her.'

With a grateful nod, tiny bespectacled Samantha rose and stroked back the abundance of her friend's glorious locks tenderly, revealing a face almost elven in the beauty of its angles and roughly the colour of a swamp. Rachel goggled at the bizarre contradiction. It was as if a child had opened his colouring book and mistakenly coloured in the beautiful princess with the green intended for the ogre.

Meanwhile Samantha continued in the role of fairy godmother, gently hoisting her buxom bestie's arm over her shoulder. *Her grammar won't win any prizes, but that girl will make a wonderful nurse.* Rachel felt a twinge of pride as the mousy brunette grimaced with the effort of levering her much larger friend to her feet. *Which is handy, because if Jennifer keeps gaining weight at this rate she'll need one full time before long.* Rachel watched the overfed redhead's long, pale thighs leave the room, quivering chubbily and rubbing together below a skirt that was surely far shorter and frillier than school regulations permitted. Rachel couldn't decide what was the greater crime: extorting cake from junior students, or the fact that such a rare, almost ethereal beauty could allow herself to become so appallingly plump.

She turned a level glare on the rest of the class.

'Any more victims of gluttony?'

But before she'd even finished the question, Rachel saw that there were. Though no one else, thankfully, was in the sickly state of Louisa or Jennifer, an aura of sleepy, bloated contentment pervaded her period five A-level English class. Heads lolled and lashes flickered

as if fighting against the lullaby of some unseen enchantress who was soothing the roomful of well-nourished young ladies to sleep.

In fact, Rachel now noticed, Olivia Bailey *had* fallen asleep: her pink-powdered eyelids fully closed, her lips curved in a dreamy smile and both hands clasped atop a broad, doming stomach that seemed itself to be smiling wanly out of the generous gap between the bottom of her stylish autumnal jumper and the smartly buckled brown belt around her skirt. The girl looked far more like a portly young duchess digesting a big dinner in her drawing room than student in an A-level English class.

Elsewhere, the situation was little better. Eyelids drooped and hands flopped limply beside chair arms. Backs slouched and legs were stretched out under desks with shoes kicked off and toes pointed upwards. Pudgy postprandial potbellies were everywhere, wrapped snug in jumpers or peeking out beneath crop tops, resting beneath the rise and fall of lazy bosoms.

Silently Rachel cursed the school governors. This was all their fault. Following an otherwise triumphant inspection two years ago, Breton College had poured mountains of money into the one area in which the school had failed to achieve that coveted 'outstanding' rating: culinary standards. In fairness, the transformation had been astounding. Once staff and students had lined up at serving hatches, trying not to barf as surly dinner ladies slopped odorous dollops of mush onto their plates, and then joined another queue a few minutes later in order to scrape most of it into the bins. Now a team of experienced chefs clinked and bustled through expensively refurbished kitchens. By morning break, aromas spicy and delicious were wafting through the ventilation system and into the classrooms below the dining hall, causing many a teacher to end their pre-lunch lesson prematurely in eagerness to be first to the feast.

Naturally Melinda Mortimer was the worst culprit for this. Rachel had it on good authority that her hefty head of department had once set her GCSE class writing an essay and spent the entire period in the canteen, single handedly besieging the roast beef and gravy until the container had to be refilled and two buttons had popped off her overworked pink cardigan. But it wasn't just her. The moment the bell rang, staff and students alike were bounding through the canteen doors, inhaling the fresh scents and surveying the decadent spread of culinary delights on offer with joyful grins and moist lips, mounding up their plates and moaning delightedly as they ate and chattered and ate and ate. Many students still found themselves struggling not to barf in the canteen, but nowadays it was due to the sheer quantity of delicious goodness they'd packed into their greedy tummies.

Thus Breton College relentlessly pursued an 'outstanding' gold star for matters culinary. The side effect - that the first period after lunch was now universally a write-off - was apparently a price worth paying.

And looking at her class now, Rachel wondered if that had been the *only* side effect. For in addition to looking very full and sleepy, her pupils were looking... well, frankly they were looking just a little bit pudgy too. If not rather porky. If not downright fat.

Rachel pursed her lips. In fact, her were getting so fat that recently she had, somewhat guiltily, invented a little game for herself.

Yes, to pass the time during tests or essays, Miss Everett would (while ostensibly scanning the classroom for cheating) amuse herself by fitting famous literary descriptions of obesity to her increasingly corpulent students. She had even devised a few corks of her own.

Louisa's disproportionate potbelly, for instance, marked her out as a true *slave to her stomach*, its round and constantly gorged state a reflection of her inability to resist its greedy fondness for carbs, fats and sugary treats. Molly Roberts, another one who had fallen asleep, was an even easier target. Wedged tightly between desk and chair at the back corner of the

class, the massive corn-blond lump was surely the most spherical student in school history, the owner of a tummy so vast and porcine that with each snore it pushed her boisterous bosom up almost to her dimpled chin. Her deceptively small mouth rarely opened to speak but lolled cavernously whenever food came into range, and the expression of sleepy boredom that seemed permanently etched on her round face came, Rachel suspected, partly from her constant overeating, but mostly from dating that promising goalkeeper and perennial sports bore Jack Livingston. Rachel had once had the misfortune of overhearing Molly's friends ask her if young Jack performed as well between the sheets as he did between the posts. The big blonde had shrugged her shoulders with a flabby ripple and taken another huge bite of Mars Bar, leaving Rachel with a revolting though mildly humorous image of the pair of them in bed: lanky Jack bulling away uselessly while reciting football stats; massive Molly lying beneath him, deep-throating a Mars Bar and staring dully at the ceiling like a beached seal, her layers of blubber vibrating with every thrust, her thoughts totally occupied by the prospect of her next meal.

Never had the Shakespearean epithet *as fat as butter* been more appropriate.

Then there was Alexa Davidson, *flabbily fat with bulbous pink cheeks*, to swipe a phrase from the Maltese Falcon. And Denise Pope, she of spindly legs and swollen tummy, so that *in outline she resembled a well-fed sparrow*. Also *in fair round belly* was Anna Squires, pale-skinned captain of the school quiz team, while that cheerful, budding butterball Georgia Patterson was in danger of becoming *as goodly in girth* as her elder sister.

It wasn't just her current class, of course. Throughout Breton College, there was definitely more heave and wobble in the corridors these days. Especially amongst female students. Where the boys tended to work off their meals with plenty of football and PE, most of the girls did very little physical activity, especially as they rose through the year groups. The improved lunches had only compounded the problem. After all, with a large and agreeable meal creating a comfortable bulge in the tummy, what young lady, however self-assured, would want to don the revealing outfits required for swimming or athletics? Let alone wobble her way sweatily through a PE class with boys watching. No - far better to trot sleepily to a warm and cosy classroom where all that lunch could be digested in peace, and to spend breaks and free periods loafing on the common room sofas, gossiping about boys and celebrities.

And so a school that had a few years ago produced athletic wonder-women like Angelica Clay and Jasmine Lang now had its corridors crammed with the increasingly portly hips and plump thighs of physically lethargic young ladies whose idea of a good after-lunch workout was a short walk to the idyllic local park for a smooch and cuddle with their boyfriends. How delicious the irony would be, Rachel thought suddenly, if the school were to gain its outstanding rating for food standards only to be downgraded for health and safety when a chair collapsed beneath one of the girls after one too many scoops of creme brulee.

The smart money was on Molly Roberts, but Louisa chose the moment to restate her own credentials with another handsome belch.

'Ohhh Miss. I think that cream must've been off.'

Blinking, Rachel felt a sudden surge of panic. How long had she been away with her thoughts? She looked at the board. Louisa's efforts were reassuringly feeble.

'We shall probably never know, Louisa,' Rachel held out her hand for the marker with a sigh partly of relief and partly of frustration at the lost cause of an apothegm on the board, 'seeing as you didn't leave enough for anyone else. Go and sit down.'

The wispy softness of the laughter that ensued indicated that the girls of period five English had drifted even closer to slumber. But just as Louisa's chubby backside creaked

gratefully into her chair, another noise - this one far more welcome to all concerned - saved Rachel the trouble of invigorating her class. The bell began to ring.

'Right, does anyone have any questions?' Rachel raised her voice over the bell, but noticed that aside from the zip of a few pencil cases, her class remained quiet and seated. Any pride she felt was quickly wiped out by the realisation that this probably owed less to her iron discipline and more to their being simply too stuffed and sleepy to do anything at speed.

She also realised, somewhat to her surprise, that Charlotte Weston's hand was raised.

'Miss, there is *one* thing.'

The cheeky murmur of tittering that spread across the back row put Rachel on guard. She raised an eyebrow.

'Well Miss,' said Charlotte, taking this as a prompt to continue. 'It's only... We just wanted to know...'

*Get on with it Charlotte,* thought Rachel. *You've gone too far to back out now.*

A pause. 'Like... how do you get your ass so firm, Miss?'

Rachel's face clenched aggressively. Sensing a dangerous change in her demeanour, a couple of girls feigned coughs to hide their giggles.

'It's called exercise, Charlotte,' Rachel found the words emerging more calmly than she'd expected. 'And to familiarise yourself with the concept, you can stay behind after school and do two laps of the field.' Feeling rather pleased with this quick reply, not to mention the look of abject horror that it brought to Charlotte's face, Rachel added: 'A little self-discipline doesn't hurt either.'

'Yeah, but it was easier for you - *brrrp* - Miss.' Here was Louisa, trying to come to her friend's aid. Grimacing and holding her turgid tummy, the brunette pushed back her chair. 'I mean, there weren't the same - *ummf* - temptations in your time.'

Rachel's eyebrows went up like rockets. 'What do you mean, *my* time?!'

For once Louisa's bulging eyes and awkward grimace had nothing to do with her bellyache. 'Uhhh. I just mean. I meant-'

'I'm thirty three!' Rachel blurted, entirely without meaning to. 'Oh shut up! Quiet! All of you!' she snapped as a moan of genuine horror swept through the class at this apparently inconceivably decrepit number of years. 'Class dismissed! And I'll have those analysis papers in tomorrow morning, first thing!' At last Rachel's pupils did start to move quickly. Her eyes narrowed as they departed. 'Not you, Charlotte - and not you, Louisa. I don't care if you're in sixth form. I don't care if you don't have gym kit. I don't care if you call your lawyers. It's *three* laps of the field for the pair of you. Each. *Immediately!*'

Humming to the click-clock of her own heels across the polished corridor, Miss Rachel Everett turned towards the English department.

All in all, it had been a very agreeable start to the afternoon. Her lesson on essay structure had, on the whole, been satisfactory, despite the postprandial sleepiness of her pupils. And the 'lesson' that followed it had been the most fun she'd had in ages.

Rachel smiled - in fact, she grinned. Yes, the sight of Louisa Porter and Charlotte Weston struggling clumsily and laboriously around the school field was one she'd treasure for years to come. Particularly the moment when they passed a small cluster of boys, Kevin Argent amongst them, who had stopped to watch. Eager to impress the observing males, the pair of unlikely athletes had lifted their chins, extended their stride and arched their backs to push out their bosoms. The immediate effect of this was that their chubby, lunch-laden tummies popped out, jiggling all the more liberally thanks to their vaguely increased pace. A few

seconds later, the pair paid an even greater price. Louisa, wobbling from side to side, collapsed flat onto her back, her hands upturned and splayed to her sides, her bulging food belly pulsing as she gulped in oxygen. Charlotte courageously managed three or four more paces before staggering to a halt herself, whereupon she immediately bent forward and reached for her calf, feigning injury. Her top shot up her back like elastic, freeing her hitherto restrained lovehandles, which flapped out like an elephant's ears, and presenting her pudgy bum crack to the watching boys, who, perhaps thanks to Miss Everett's presence, refrained from anything beyond a couple of wolf whistles.

Perhaps the crimson blushes made the two girls seem in even worse condition than they really were, but Rachel nevertheless allowed them to stop after finishing that one lap. They'd surely learnt their lesson. And besides, break was almost over.

*I may be 'old', but I could trounce those two tubsters in any test of fitness.*

Passing the room she'd just taught in, Rachel glanced in and noticed with satisfaction that her masterpiece remained on the board in all its multicoloured splendour. Smiling and wishing she could be there to see Miss Mortimer's face when she entered the room, Rachel pushed open the door to the English department office.

And then pulled up even more abruptly than Charlotte had a few minutes earlier.

'What the-?!'

Rachel Everett took off her glasses, cleaned them, replaced them, and blinked several times. Then she stared again across the short, narrow room - made narrower by the long desk against one wall and the boxes of exercise books and exam papers stacked up against the other. Her eyes scanned over the large glass coffee table, littered with the usual paraphernalia - poetry anthologies, textbooks, pens, and a large and conspicuously empty box of chocolates. Next to the table, an identical empty box stuck out from under the settee, upon which there reclined a figure with the elegant poise and luxurious golden hair of a resting American beauty queen, and the neck and abdomen of Jabba the Hutt.

'Ohhhh Rachey, is that you?' The fleshy lump on the settee-throne shifted with a ripple of belly and an ominously loud bubbling of digestive juices. With a bunching of jowls, a heart-shaped face lolled in Rachel's general direction, two pained but heavenly brown eyes flickering open beneath a weight of eyeliner and false lashes. A handful of thick, almost rubbery fingers, adorned with several expensive-looking rings that were much too tight, rose suddenly to plump lips, only to be immediately bent backwards by the force of a belch that made Louisa's earlier efforts sound positively dainty. The other hand, equally plump and bejewelled, clenched a flabby handful of sprawling stomach.

'You're going - *urp* - to have to take my A-level girls, Rachey,' Melinda Mortimer whimpered with a self-pitying grimace. 'It's that cream. I think - *urrfff* - it must've been off.'

\*

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