

Brennan O'Shea

THE BRA-MAKING CLASS

Marianne, shoulder length blonde curls, 37, five foot five, medium build, 12F, and Rosalind, short once auburn now grey curls, 57, five foot seven, slender build, 18DD, arrived together. The door of Needlecraft Cottage being open, they walked in; not stopping to admire the intricate quilts and embroidered blouses decorating the hallway because they were carrying their sewing machines. They went into what was once the main bedroom, where the overlocking class had already started. Helpful Renata took them into the former second bedroom, and told them to "plug in and set up" on one of the sewing tables, Shelley, their tutor, was running late but was expected "any minute now"; they could look at the patterns while waiting.

Janelle, long dark brown plaits, 16, six foot one, slim, 16C was sitting at one of the tables trying to plug in the "loan" machine. Marianne saw at once that she had all the leads in a muddle and went to help her.

"Thanks. It's nothing like the machines at school."

"Don't you have one at home?"

"No. I just started sewing at school this year. If there's homework I go over and use my Gran's old treadle."

"Oh they're the best, I wish I'd kept mine."

They introduced themselves and went across to the table to look at the patterns. Rosalind picked up the class list: "One more to come, another Rosalind, but with an E."

"Seem to be only two styles," said Marianne, "And I can't find my size in either."

"Oh, didn't you get a phone call asking you size and colour?"

"Weeks ago. I ordered black."

"Perhaps they were ordered and are in a cupboard somewhere. They're on the list here. White by my name and Rosalind with-an-e ordered pink if you please. Nothing for Janelle though."

"My teacher only booked me in last week." She picked up the patterns, "I guess I'll go for this one if they've got my size."

"That's why we hate you!" said Marianne, "We have to have the old granny style. You're lucky to be so small."

Janelle laughed, "Not small for my age, and my mum's like you two, so I'm here to learn to make for both of us. I guess I'd better look at that machine and try and work out how to thread it."

By the time Shelley, black cropped hair [dyed], 47, five foot five, stick thin, 10A, arrived the two older women were well into a discussion on breast reduction surgery.

"-and don't ever consider liposuction!"

"Ugh no, I saw the programme on that. If I have anything it'll be the knife, everyone tells me I should go and have it done."

"And soon. They say it's going to be taken off medical benefits soon and called cosmetic!"

Shelley coughed heartily for about a minute. Another bunch of great lolloping things expecting to make something light and delicate and a perfect fit and all on the cheap and I'm supposed to be the fairy-godmother and make it all happen.

Maliciously she said, "Did you see the program on breast enlargement? Where they took flesh from the girl's inner thigh and put it into her boobs." Rosalind had missed that. Marianne said, "Yes. My husband said if I do have them reduced we could keep the bits and sell them."

Rosalinde, [tinted] ginger shoulder length crinkle curls, 59, four foot eleven, dumpy, 14C, came puffing in and heaved her sewing machine onto the only unoccupied table. During the inevitable round of introductions Shelley handed out patterns, kits and interfacing.

To Rosalinde she said, "This one's a young style, so you'd better have one of these."

To Janelle she said, "Through there and down there. Just how much sewing have you done?"

"Only at school this year."

"These courses are for experienced sewers, you're expected to know all the basics. What have you made at school?"

"A pillow and—"

"Huh! How exciting. Does anyone else smoke? I'm just going out for a ciggy so you can start tracing out your patterns and cutting them out. We'll have a half hour break for lunch and finish at three thirty. And if I get a call from my daughter that the baby's coming I'm out of here straightaway. Off you go."

"Well excuse me!" said Rosalind, "But I thought we were going to get instruction on how to do this. Or is that still basics!"

"You will be sat down and told to make a bra," intoned Marianne, "You will do it wizout any 'elp. You vill finish at three-thirty on the dot—"

"And it won't fit," said Rosalinde calmly, "My pattern is size 42 to 48."

"It's European sizing," explained Rosalind patiently.

"In that case I want 36, not 42 to 48."

"You're right, mine's 30 to 32!"

"And I've got 40 to 46! Janelle?"

"I don't know. What's European sizing?"

The three of them moved to Janelle's table, and had decided that she alone had the correct size pattern when Shelley returned, coughing again.

"I suppose you haven't got any scissors," she said to Janelle, "Here. And there are pencils here."

"What do we trace on?"

"The interfacing. Then cut it out. That will be your pattern. Got it?"

"My pattern's the wrong size," said Rosalinde.

"Oh? Well have this one."

"This is 32 to 34, I need 36."

"They don't come in that size. You can use the 34, cut the back as it is but do the D size cup, and it'll fit fine."

"Er, we seem to have the wrong size patterns too."

Shelley consulted the list: "You two can swap, cut out the back nearest to your size, make it longer or shorter as needed then adjust the cup size by adding here or taking off here. Simple. I'm going to get a coffee; any time you want a coffee break it's in the kitchen."

"Thirty dollars for a pattern that's the wrong size!"

"Surely the pattern's included in the lesson fee?"

"No. Thirty-five for the class, plus thirty for pattern and kit."

"I thought the thirty was just for the kit."

"In that case we'll have to pay for patterns on top."

"Either way I could have gone to Spotlight and bought a pattern and just followed the instructions and at least got the right size."

"I hear coughing. Better get to work ladies," said Janelle.

Marianne's kit was dark navy, not the black she had ordered, and did not have enough of the lycra backing material. Shelley found some black lycra and told her to cut everything again in the black material but keep the navy lace trim. Rosalind found the white kit far too "fancy" and swapped it for a nude kit of heavier grade lycra with no lace. Practical, but very unappealing in Shelley's opinion; she did not like working with such plain material and left Rosalind to work alone as much as she could. She spent time with Rosalinde, whose pink kit contained a wide piece of delicate lace: she guided her in cutting strips of leftover lace into a scalloped trim to be appliqued onto the front for extra decoration. Rosalinde, practical like her e-less namesake, was not enthusiastic but as the bra was obviously not going to fit decided she might as well learn a few new tricks for her sixty-five dollars. When they had all finished cutting out, Shelley announced that it was time for the half hour lunch break.

"There's a snack bar across the road. I'm going to have a cuppa-soup."

Janelle said she never ate lunch and wanted to practise on the machine before she started sewing the lace. Shelley coughed, then looked at the others and repeated the directions to the snack bar. They felt dismissed, and duly made their way there.

Choice at the snack bar being limited it was pasties [vegetarian for the Rosalind/es] and coffee all round.

"Let's eat here, at least it's warm."

"Yes, it's freezing there."

"Ye olde worlde cottage uncomforts."

"First and last time. I certainly won't be going to any more classes."

"Oh I've been to machine embroidery and some stretch sewing classes. Renata's very good, and so is Ann. You really learn a lot."

"Oh? Well no more classes with her."

"Right! My word but she's a candidatè for emphysema. My mother died of that."

"I think she's got flu."

"Great. We go home with bras that don't fit and with flu."

"We're never going to finish by three thirty."

"She doesn't want us to. She knows nothing will fit so if we don't finish it's not her fault. Like you don't want people coming out of the hairdressers streaming with tears because they don't like their hairstyle, it isn't good for business."

The pasties and coffees arrived and were consumed. An adolescent boy, paying for chips and "coke" stared pointedly at Marianne's bosom. She blushed. Rosalind moved her head so that she could survey the boy's buttocks. He blushed, and left. The women smiled.

"I should be used to it. My daughter—she's eleven—is always saying I won't be like you will I Mum?"

"Tell her not to have any children, that's what took me from 10B to this awful sight."

"The older you get the more obscene it looks."

"I signed up for three months at the gym once but they get in the way of the equipment and it's damn painful to do nearly all the exercises when you've got two great lumps thumping up and down and pulling on the underarm muscles. I kept asking them for exercises to reduce the bust but they just ignored me, I don't believe there are any."

"Did you wear a sports bra?"

"At great expense. They're no good if you're more than a b"

"That figures. Oh-oh, time we got back."

Mint, thyme, rosemary, lavender, borage, daisies, dog roses ... the cottage garden had been carefully cultivated by one who knew nothing about cottage gardening, but the varied shades of green were a pleasing, cheerful sight in the weak Autumn sun. A sight that had inspired Renata to start working a quilt with little pockets of dried leaves from all the aromatic plants in the garden set into panels embroidered with views of the garden in different seasons.

Shelley stood there, savouring the smell of cigarette smoke; she threw the butt into the lavender and lit up again. A third cigarette dispelled what was left of the desire to eat. She stroked her firm flat tummy with her spare hand. She would look really elegant in the soft flowing chiffon dress finished last night, the embroidered satin underset was next: brief, dainty, stylish; something those top-heavy freaks could never wear. She really ought to pity them. Calmed, she went back to the sewing room and showed Janelle how to draft patterns for jeans and T shirts.

"All ready to get to it," she said brightly when the three returned, "I'm just going to have a cuppa-soup." Ten minutes later she was back, coughing, to give them the semicircles of underwiring.

"No thanks," said Rosalinde, "I can't bear underwires, they always seem to dig in on one side, I've got a permanent scar on the left."

"You're uneven, that's no good."

"If I'm not having underwires I don't need to put in the channel for it surely."

"Oh yes, put it in. Gives more support, which you need, and makes it more comfortable. You know I bought the best bras I ever had at a warehouse in Sydney last year. Only ten dollars and so comfortable, and they wash and wash."

"Only small sizes I suppose," said Marianne through clenched teeth.

"Oh yes," gloating.

"Shall I use the navy elastic or do you have some black?"

"Use the navy. It matches the lace and it's more unusual. If you go to any of the shops you'll only get black, white or nude. Even the lass who makes up these sets in Sydney has a terrible time getting coloured elastic. Bra manufacturers put conditions on the wholesalers so that no one else can get the colours they're using on their current lines. Just like the deals fashion houses make with fabric wholesalers that the materials they use won't go to the shops until the next season."

"Can they really do that?" Janelle was astonished.

Shelley was gratified. "Yes. With patterns too. That's why it pays to be able to draft your own. You can go through all the pattern books and you'll never find one exactly like the dress in DJ's. You know I was in there yesterday and they had a beautiful cocktail dress: figured velvet in midnight blue, sequins and diamonds embroidered on the shoulder, it was an off-one-shoulder style, twelve hundred and fifty originally, reduced to nine hundred and seventy-five. Now I never buy anything I can make cheaper but they had six of them! Imagine! I'd only buy one on condition they sent the other five back. If anyone else bought one we'd be sure to be wearing it at the same party in a town the size of this. It might be alright in Sydney, but here! Just popping out for a smoke."

"Goodness but the pearls of wisdom are dropping thick and fast. Except the ones we want about how to do this!" Rosalind sounded frustrated. The others gathered round, trying to interpret the pattern's instruction sheet. Marianne solved the problem.

"Do you think this lass who makes these in Sydney is a friend of hers?"

"Or even the daughter about to give birth? She hasn't been mentioned since that first time."

Rosalinde was looking at the envelopes containing kits and patterns, "They're both the same make and it's one I'm glad to say I've never heard of: Boob-boobs." All grimaced and made noises of disgust.

The sound of coughing sent them back to their machines.

"Now that's beginning to look like a bra," Shelley said to Marianne.

"I don't seem to have nearly enough elastic though."

"I don't either, according to what's printed here," said Rosalinde, "But if I actually use all there is I'll have to stretch the bra and gather the elastic onto it."

Shelley examined their work, the lengths of elastic, and the pattern instructions. Then admitted that the lengths specified in the instructions were incorrect. Without revealing her method of calculation she cut a piece of elastic for each woman, "Now pin it at each end on this side and do one row of straight stitch right on the edge, then turn the elastic over to do the tricot stitching, and remember you need the longest stitch length and widest possible setting for your tricot." She pronounced tricot to rhyme with thicket. Marianne blinked; Rosalind covered her mouth to swallow a laugh; Rosalinde took a deep breath; Janelle did not know the word in any pronunciation and Shelley had to show her how to find that stitch on her machine. The others exchanged classic female knowing glances while she did this.

She came back to Rosalinde and lovingly pinned the small pink lace rosette in central position: "There."

"I wasn't going to bother with that, whenever I buy a bra I take that off as soon as I get home."

"Oh no!" Shelley was really shocked, "You must put the rosette on. When you've done it I'll show you how to fix the strap, you'll never work out how to get it through the rings, no one ever can. But I'm only doing it once so all of you must watch."

"Hm," said Rosalind, holding up her work, "Not the light skimpy thing my husband imagines I'm going to come home with."

Shelley looked across, "You know you can always get skimpy styles in large sizes at sex shops. I've got some very nice things there, just for myself, to wear around the house." The communal vision of Shelley parading around the

house in sex shop lingerie lasted about two seconds, to be replaced by each seeing herself similarly clad. Downcast, they worked on in silence. Shelley went for another cigarette. When she returned she informed them that a dress should have a slit on one side of the skirt only, "Just a hint at the goods within, don't be too obvious. Same with a neckline: not too low, or a sweater too tight. My uncle Quentin always says it's what you can't see that's interesting. You know I still haven't had my cuppa-soup, I'll get it now."

"Do you think she realises the only dress any of us could get would be a tent and you wouldn't see anything if it had six slits!" Rosalind was angry, "And as for necklines ... !"

"She's doing it deliberately. Don't give her the satisfaction of rising to the bait. Hold your tongue if you have to chew it in half." advised Marianne.

"Yes mum!"

At half past three Shelley said, "Right. Time to pack up, you can finish off at home. Just remember you can't expect anything to fit first time, you need several practice goes before you get it right. Now Janelle, come with me to the office to settle up."

"We ought to complain," Marianne said, "Demand our money back, threaten to go to Consumer Affairs, write to the newspaper—"

"But we won't." Rosalind was dour but definite. "We'd be too embarrassed."

"A bunch of wimps. Happy sewing ladies." Rosalinde picked up her sewing machine and left. It was dark already.

Steaming water poured into the bath while Shelley swayed and twisted in front of the mirror-tiled wall, admiring her slim body in the gold-embroidered pale green satin underset she had just finished. The show of her own talent pleased her far more than the body, the display prop. Equally important of course, for just think of any of those deformed women wearing this ... Ugh! She had done very well to get rid of them early: they were more persistent than usual, especially the old bag who didn't even tint her hair; but even she would not complain. Women who look like that never do. When the steam fogged the tiles she added violet-scented bubble bath oil to the water and went to the bedroom to remove carefully, lovingly, the delicate clothes. She returned carrying the silver trimmed lace nightdress, also newly finished, that she would wear while she smoked her last cigarette for the day. Relaxed in the hot foam, she turned the page of a magazine and admired the picture of a gold-tapped

spa bath in a large Italiante bathroom in a Sydney mansion, she read an article about new fashion warehouses in Sydney. Tomorrow, Sunday: she could embroider her initials on her new satin pillowcases, perhaps some roses on the matching satin sheets ... On Monday it was the lingerie making class; huge hips, big bums, but cheerful, easier to deal with. She preferred the bottom-heavy freaks.