

The Three Breasts of Hilda Von Why

Ralph's mother had a lump; Ralph's mother had cancer. The doctors cut off one breast; the doctors threatened two. And Ralph became the third, a pasty, exogenous tit that she herself sucked.

Hilda still got up each morning, affixed her make-up and prosthesis, and sold the hell out of houses in Newport Coast, Big Canyon, Corona del Mar—in all the better villages of Newport Beach. Betty Saracen, her friend/slash/boss, got her courage featured in *Coast* magazine; then the *Orange County Register* picked it up, then the *Los Angeles Times*, Orange County edition. And now Hilda was a star of real estate.

She'd moved up to her agency's front rank, she reported as Ralph rubbed her feet. She sipped the cream of leek Ralph had scored from It's Delish, then pushed it away.

"Ralph, I've got news."

Ralph tensed but hid this, kept rubbing a corn.

"In the agency's new ad, I'm second row center. And..." Hilda breathed in with a smoker's pleasure; Ralph wished he had some smoke himself. "Ralph," said Hilda. "My Ralphie." She breathed in again. "Mama's first ten-million-dollar listing." She caressed her skull through her bleached platinum crew cut. "Betty says that my cancer's the best thing to hit this office since we killed that referendum for open space." She waited.

Huh? Oh. "Whoo!" said Ralph, using his old water polo yell, still rubbing. "Five million dollars—way to go, Mom! Whoo-hoo!"

After dinner, he cleaned up then watched TV while Hilda went over her lists for tomorrow and chanted for health and success. She didn't sleep much and called for him often, so he didn't sleep much either. He did most of his sleeping during the day, and he preferred his own bed, so he skipped school—a lot—and got high—a lot. His teachers, for the most part, saw his grades didn't suffer; Corona del Mar is a small community, and Ralph had been slated for USC or UCLA since he was a tyke. The coach of the Sea Kings pleaded, but Ralph was on Team Hilda now; he needed all his energy to make cheery pap. His girlfriend Vanessa wanted out early on, and Ralph knew it, and Vanessa knew that Ralph

knew it, and Cousin Jesse knew that Vee knew that Ralph knew it. Still, for several months, she came around.

Ralph looked at her eyes, her smile, her ass—Vanessa Vee—and went blank. He parried her requests that he “talk about it” and “seek help” with silence and TV. Ralph appreciated her efforts, and sometimes the ghost of their love thing floated through the plastic that sealed him airtight. But discussing his distress, much less seeking help, might upset Hilda, and not upsetting Hilda was Ralph’s biggest job.

His other jobs were to clean and aerate the house and himself before Hilda came home, fix dinner, be quiet as Hilda chanted, talk if she liked before bed, and if he had extra energy or ran out of weed, to maintain the sunken garden. That left zilch for Vee; near the end, she’d come over, suck him off, and storm out. It got weird—before she finally dumped him, he’d imagine he was a tit, his come some weird milk.

But maybe that was the pot.

What else? He decided not to cut his hair until Hilda got better.

What else? Oh his friends were pretty cool, and his bud Bud still brought him bud (*Huh-huh-huh-HA-huh!* Pretty funny back when?). Ralph was thankful for Bud, who showed his compassion through bulk discounts. But as Hilda’s cancer fomented, Bud’s smile shifted from man-we-can-talk to who-is-this-guy? And the rest of the Sea Kings: they felt bad, sure, but Ralph wasn’t on the team, didn’t want to hang out, always looked like shit, and was always smoked out. And this was senior year—senior year, dude! They’re cheering for *us*, man—*Sea Kings don’t take no (UH!) jive*—and Mrs. Von Why got sick last June, and now it’s October, February, May, and Ralph does not want to talk—and he’s lost all form, the fat motherfuck—and he always smells like smoke and shit—and—and *Sea Kings (HEY HEY HEY HEY), we are alive.*

And then it was time to graduate.

Which was when Hilda lost breast two. Ralph spent the day in the hospital, listening to his Aunt Caroline nag that he could still walk—but with whom? Cousin Jesse and Vee?

His old crew, off to college? No thanks. And as Ralph watched orderlies wheel his mother's gurney into the operating theater, and as he uh-huhed his Aunt Caroline and was gracious to the flack from the *Register* (*Your mother is so brave—and so selfless to serve the public by having me here!*), and as he accepted the dried apples that Betty Saracen offered him and the flack from a giant ziplock bag (*because I support this hospital—God knows I go to enough fund-raisers—but the food here is trash*), Ralph realized that he hated his mother, that he wanted her to die on the table, get wheeled out a corpse.

And when he realized this, he felt he should die as well.

But Hilda didn't die, and Ralph didn't die, and Ralph was not glad.

•

Ralph thought of his depression as three tumors, three walnuts of poison in his heart, his head, and his groin. That's why Ralph was plastic-wrapped—because his insides must stay covered, or the tumors might burst and kill all. But come September, the plastic slackened: the Sea Kings went off to college (except for Cousin Jesse, whose agency sent him to Japan, and Thack, who went to rehab in Utah), and though Ralph hadn't really hung out since he'd joined Team Hilda (except with Bud, on business), he had liked the option. At least Bud went only six miles away, to UC-Irvine. Ralph thought he'd take classes at a community college, maybe Orange Coast or Irvine Valley, but Hilda shut herself in her bedroom; Ralph heard the special prayer bells from Ojai. She went to work red-eyed, came home at lunch—could he wait?

She needed her Ralphie. She had cancer!

So Ralph's depression metastasized, spread through his body, and Ralph was hard-pressed.

He couldn't smoke for relief, as Bud was struggling to penetrate the college market, couldn't afford no more discount—and asking Hilda for more money might upset her, make her worse. And so he watched TV and when that palled walked along the empty, beautiful beach and when that palled scanned the empty, beautiful ocean and when that palled climbed

on the beautiful rocks and when that palled pissed on the beautiful foliage and when that palled beat off under the empty, beautiful sky, all of it spattered with the empty, beautiful, non-discriminate light that filled and covered Corona del Mar with clear blunt radiance for no good reason Ralph could tell.

And when everything palled, Ralph felt his mind begin to twist and quickly watched daytime TV or maybe a porno.

•

There were weeks when he spoke to no one but his mother, service people, and Fancy, the old lady next door. Fancy was cool, and Ralph liked her giant storkiness, the odd planes of her face. She advised him on the sunken garden when she wasn't busy with her swimming, her friends at the senior center, her crone power support group. Sometimes she drove him in her ancient Mercedes for gelato—she had hazelnut and Ralph had limone, the high point of his day.

When he started biting the inside of his cheek so much it never healed, he knew he had to take action. And when he started making shallow cuts in his wrist and the red dripped into the sink, and all he felt was *here's another dumb-ass drama made for daytime cable*, he decided to find a job, even if it might upset Hilda.

So without telling, he started working at the Diedrich's Coffeehouse in Costa Mesa, on the Seventeenth Street Strip. No one knew him in Costa Mesa, which was inland of Newport Beach; no one knew that Ralph's mom sold million-dollar homes, that Ralph was a rich Newport Beach fuck. Well Bud came by, and Bud knew, but he didn't count. Ralph would park his Chevy Malibu in back, as far from the owner's Rolls as possible. He'd wipe down tables, stock pastries, pass out samples of granitas and black forest lattes. He was happy.

Then Hilda stopped in.

She'd just closed on a 3bed/3bath Neo-Classic w/lap pool and dock in Dover Shores. Small change, but escrow was hell, and she needed coffee, but Haute Cakes was closed—and here was her Ralph. Why did she let his asshole father give him that car. And what if he

had to pick up prescriptions or take her to the doctor. She didn't CARE about his cell phone. What if—Ralph? RALPH! SHE HAD CANCER! And then all the tears, and Ralph lost his job.

Which sucked ass. But Ralph came back to Diedrich's, though he felt like a waste product just reading the paper and writing stories as his ex-co-workers worked. But at least he was out of Corona del Mar.

In Ralph's stories, the universe was different: Newport Beach was Porto Nuevo, and Corona del Mar was Crown-of-the-Sea, and moms didn't get cancer, and their sons didn't hope for a wildfire that jumped the coast highway and burned down to the ocean, a tsunami that swamped the smoking wreckage and drowned the survivors, a plague that killed those few humans left. No—Ralph's heroes had problems, sure, but these always worked out, usually after they went fishing with their dads in the backbay. Then they held their girlfriends' hands and marveled at each leaf; then they ollied ollied ollied until they and their boards flew out over the bay, passing blue egrets as they flew into space.

But when Ralph looked up from his work, he wasn't in the town of Coastal Table, sitting at Café Diedricho off Avenida Diecisiete—he was back in Costa Mesa, back in his bad time. His stories were dumb and bad, and would not get better; he himself would not improve. And there was never a moment when he didn't want his mom dead, when he didn't want to die.

•

After thirty months of illness, Hilda recovered. The idea for the party was Ralph's—*Hey, Mom!*—but Hilda arranged.

None of his nice clothes fit, so Ralph went to South Coast Plaza to suit himself out. He had to ask his mom for money. Hilda's eyes glittered, but when Ralph showed her his stomach, she let him charge.

The party was postponed till Easter week—until the evenings were warm, even with the sea air—really, until Hilda's hair grew out. She hired a cleaning service to scour;

a caterer who specialized in Provençale cuisine and vanilla-scented candles; and a gardener who, three days before the party, would replant the sunken garden in mustard and lavender and set them off with greens. Ralph told his mother the plants would die off—the sunken garden was shaded by a bougainvillea trellis, didn't get direct light—but Hilda waved him away; she had to coordinate the cake, the banner, the standing bouquet. She notified the press; she instructed Ralph in his job as host and made him practice. A week before the party, Hilda had her hair re-dyed to its natural color. She'd have it cut and styled on party day.

The night of the re-dying, Hilda asked Ralph to be especially quiet as she sat cross-legged on her tatami, chanting over the party. Then she called Ralph to her bed.

Could Ralph cut his hair?

Ralph grinned and shook his head: He liked his fucking hair. Besides, Hilda knew he wouldn't.

Hilda fiddled with her prayer bells; Ralph had to admit that she looked good. Ralph's chest glowed—his mom looked good!

“Ralph? Ralph!”

Ralph lost his grin and hunched his shoulders; he knew the game. What Hilda wanted came next.

Hilda put down the bells. Her party had no youth! Just Ralph and the wait staff. She wanted her party to have diversity and color; that's why she invited the Korean girl at the office, though they were not—not—friends. Couldn't Ralph invite some presentable people? *No, he could not.* What about Bud? *Bud was in Utah, with Thack.* But Ralph would look odd, standing alone! *He didn't care.*

But he did. He tried to do as Hilda wished, but the words would bend and twist; his larynx couldn't bear the invitation. Diedrich's was the only place Ralph felt real; the thought of the Diedricks watching him host made him ill. And when he tried to push words past his disgust, the world freaked out, and Ralph found himself on the floor, looking up at the red-

and-yellow sign for the coffee bar.

A fit! He'd had a fit. He'd spazzed for real. And AJ and Carlos babbled that Lorene had called 911, that Ralph had fallen straight to the floor and what drugs was he taking and did he have more. *And you pissed yourself, man!* When the ambulance came, Ralph hid in the bathroom, told Lorene to say he'd run off; he needed to think.

After several days of mulling, Ralph decided that (1) he couldn't invite the Diedrickers to the party because (2) the invitation made him pass out and piss himself good; that he couldn't do as Hilda wished because (3) he did not, in fact, want to die. So, to both his and his mom's surprise, Ralph resisted, though Hilda pressed and cried and then, from party-day-minus-five, would neither speak to nor look at nor listen to her son, but sent commands by note.

•

Come the party, Ralph complimented his mom (in writing) about her dress and hair, but she just turned her newly-styled head and tended arrangements. Come the party, Ralph gathered three bottled beers, swept as many crab puffs from Waiter Eddie's platter as he could carry, and skulked to the end of the sunken garden, to a rented wicker chair half-hidden by a giant smoldering vanilla-smoking candle.

"Janet! Dr. Crop! Glad you came." Hilda jerked her head Ralph's way, indicating hostwork, but as Waiter Eddie slipped him more crab puffs and beer, Ralph felt better about, and got better at, ignoring.

Six beers into the party, Viviane, one of Hilda's friends, sought Ralph out behind the giant candle. "Hey, Viviane," said bleary Ralph, taking in her blouse of crashed heraldic crests, her black velvet jodhpurs, her gelled black cap of hair.

Viviane sighed, sat on the rim of the garden, and said she was glad that Hilda's ordeal was over, but the party was—she flippy-flopped her wrists—de trop, de beaucoup trop, non?

By this time (beer nine point five), Ralph had slumped off the wicker chair to the patio floor.

Ralph smiled lazily and shifted so Viviane might see his erection. He stroked it. “I’m drunk.” Then he stroked more.

Viviane went away, but Ralph’s boner did not. He found he wanted to fuck the whole party, and not in a nice way, either; it was as though the bricks of the patio, Waiter Eddie’s silver tray, even the medley of Disney ballads that the congressman’s widow kept playing on the rented baby grand had curled into a circle and then plummeted, fell to an abyss that would suck Ralph up if he didn’t fuck it, destroy it, do something. And Ralph didn’t want to fall then drown; he did not—in fact—want to die. And so whenever anyone came over, he spoke as crudely as he could, even to the flack from the *Register*.

“How do I feel now that it’s over? That my mother’s cancer was the best thing to hit the office since they killed open space.” His head was pillowed on his arms, his feet were elevated on the sunken garden’s lip. Ralph was feeling fine.

The flack squatted down on her heels to get closer, and Ralph, without thinking, rubbed her hosed calf. “Hey Jeanine—you got a tumor? No tumor? That’s good.” He raised himself up, put his hand on her teased hair. “So why not suck my cock?”

He spoke thus to everyone but Fancy and Waiter Eddie. When Fancy came to cluck over the misplanted sunken garden, Ralph wept till she left, telling him to go to bed—and when Eddie came over, Ralph wept between whining and scarfing more crab puffs and sucking more beer. Then he fell asleep.