

Rye Bred – By Hinde Ena Burstin

A gorgeous November day. Blue sky. Gentle breeze. Sun warm on my skin. The barbie's¹ sizzling, the drinks are being poured and the air is alight with the talk and touch of laughing lezzos² in singlets and sunnies³. Peaceful.

I hear the rumble of blunnies⁴ on the gravel. Marg plonks a loaf of white bread on the table. She pulls a slice from the packet and her smoke-stained voice says to no-one in particular, "Don't you just love white bread. It takes me right back to me childhood. It's what we all grew up on, after all."

I'm taken aback and back to my childhood. Sitting in the playground on hard wooden benches, two halves of an uneaten sandwich in my lap. The bread is not white. It's rye. A sandwich of colour in sea of white sangas⁵. In front of me, kids are trading vegemite sangas for ones with peanut butter, nuttella for jam. One kid's got chips in his sanga. Everyone wants his lunch. But he isn't trading.

A blonde, freckled girl turns to me. "What's in your lunch?"

I hold out my rye bread sandwich.

"What is that?" she asks.

I can feel the blush spreading. "Umm, it's called rye bread," I say.

"No," her eyes bore into me. "That smell. What's that smell."

She grabs the sandwich and peers down on my mother's home-made spread - cottage cheese, paprika, radish and spring onions.

"Aw, your lunch smells," she announces.

The boy next to her passes it on, "Yeah, her lunch stinks."

"Oh, ppee-yew, her lunch pong⁶."

"It's not even real bread."

They are a chorus now, one voice on top of the other. Over and over and over. I turn away, take a tiny bite. It sticks in my throat. I force it down, but do not take another bite. All I can hear is their taunts echoing in my ears. But I will not let them see me cry.

At last the bell rings. The kids run off. My face burns with guilt and shame as I drop the sandwich into the bin and shuffle into class.

After that, I hassle my parents to let my lunch be like everybody else's.

"But *shepsele*⁷," my father says, "only sheep do what everyone else does. *Oyb ale voltn zikh opgeshnitn dem noz, volstu oykh?* If everybody cut off their nose, would you cut yours off too?"

¹ barbecue (Australian)

² lesbians (Australian)

³ sunglasses (Australian)

⁴ Blundstone boots – popular Aussie dyke footwear (Australian)

⁵ sandwich (Australian)

⁶ smells real bad (Australian)

⁷ little sheep (endearing) (Yiddish)

“On the other hand,” my mother responds. “Choice is good. You want some choice. If you prefer *shmaltz*⁸ or herring to cottage cheese, by all means. And if you don’t want rye bread, you can have *shvartsbroyt*⁹.”

“But, I don’t want to eat black bread,” I say. “I want white bread.”

“Vite bread?” My grandma in the corner snorts. “Who eatink vite bread?”
Not me.

There’s a rustle of plastic wrapping as someone reaches for a slice of white bread and I’m back at the barbie. I look across at Marg, notice for the first time how much she looks like that freckle-faced kid from school.

“You know, Marg,” I say. “We didn’t all grow up on white bread.”

She screws up her nose, tosses me the barest of shrugs and says, “Oh. I don’t mean you. I know you’re different. I mean the rest of us.”

I look around and realise she’s right. Everyone else is a white bread girl.

I should have known that women like Marg like their friends to match their bread. I realised that I needed to find some dykes who weren’t afraid to be wry and who hadn’t been bred white.

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⁸ spread made from onions and chicken fat (Yiddish)

⁹ black bread (Yiddish)