Little Roasts

A collection of stories

Published by Roastbooks

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Brian, McMurphy & Sally Too

Rowena Macdonald

'Brian's sort of classically ugly,' Sally pointed out, not long after she had met him. Though McMurphy had never really thought about it before, he could see she was right. Like Disney's version of the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Brian's ugliness was so cartoonish it was almost cute – he was short and fat; his face was round and chinless; he had jug ears, a banana nose, and a buck-toothed grin. The finishing touch was a large, port wine stain splashed across his left cheek.

McMurphy meanwhile was handsome; tall and blond with sexily brutal Germanic features that belied his Irish roots. He wasn't conceited about his appearance and maintained (mainly to himself) that such things didn't matter, but equally he never looked in a mirror without feeling pretty pleased. He

could not imagine how it felt to be disappointed by your reflection; indeed, he had never tried.

Brian & McMurphy were a ubiquitous and inseparable fixture on Montreal's underground scene. They lived together in an 8,000 square foot loft on the seventh floor of a decrepit warehouse on Rue Ontario, round the corner from the red light district. There they made art, ran life drawing classes, held huge parties and plotted their eventual conquest of New York City. Brian painted portraits of local waitresses, bar tenders, shop girls and pizza delivery drivers. McMurphy focussed on traffic signs, telegraph poles, road markings and street lamps. They wanted to show the beauty in everyday life, though they never explained this as such. If you collared them at a vernissage they would simply mumble, 'Uh…yeah…it's Jimmy from the dépanneur on Clark' or 'That stop sign is on Sherbrooke. I liked the look of it.'

People often remarked on what an odd pair they made, implying that McMurphy ought to hang out with someone better looking. In fact McMurphy was loyally bonded to Brian by a long shared history. They had grown up together in Gimli, a deadbeat town on the outskirts of Winnipeg where the biggest thrills were shooting up horse tranquilisers and playing chicken on the railroad track that ran across the main street. The only shops were Jake's Bait Shack, which did a brisk trade in lugworms, a hardware store where you could get your ice skates sharpened along with your knives, and the Food Mart, which sold every kind of Kraft dinner but no vegetables.

The first time McMurphy saw Brian he was drawing a penis on the Gents sign outside the boys' toilet block at Gimli Junior High. When McMurphy suggested amending the Ladies

sign too, Brian scrawled breasts, a vagina and a pair of devil's horns to it with casual haste. Though Brian was an obvious bullies' target and McMurphy was an obvious bully, McMurphy liked Brian's disregard for authority. They became firm friends, sitting next to each other throughout school, nursing secret artistic ambitions and dreams of escape. At eighteen they vanished to Montreal together to pursue the same painting degree at Concordia University, both discarding the embarrassing parts of their names. Consequently, no one in Montreal knew that Brian's surname was Smellie or that McMurphy was known to his mother as Nigel. Admittedly, the name Brian was not exactly suave but it had a retro charm and of course, the name McMurphy had thrilling overtones of insanity.

They decided to wear matching outfits at all times. Their look was classic clean-cut Americana: blue Levi's, Converse sneakers and bright t-shirts emblazoned with logos for Coca-Cola, Budweiser and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

Their one-word names and co-ordinated clothes were calculated to create charisma, as was the mystery surrounding their sexuality. In truth, McMurphy was vigorously straight while Brian was hopelessly gay. They slept in separate cubbyholes partitioned off from the rest of their loft by curtains.

The loft itself was part of their mythology. They ate, slept, washed and watched TV surrounded by half-finished canvases and the smell of paint and turps. The kitchen was denoted by a two ring camping stove and a yellow chrome-trimmed fridge, the size of an upended Cadillac. It led into the silver-painted bathroom, which featured a makeshift shower and Brian's collection of Action Men. The living room was separated from the studio by walls made from old books bought

in a job lot from a garage sale. These walls were often toppled during parties and had to be re-built the next morning.

The studio dominated the loft. By night it was lit by four arc lamps stolen from a theatre. By day the sun spilled through the giant windows across the paint-spattered floorboards. A jumble of easels and donkey benches faced towards a four-by-four, raised wooden block where the life models did their thing. Brian & McMurphy kept a long list of models' phone numbers stuck to the fridge with a magnet shaped like a banana. At one time the models' photographs had been stuck there too until Barb, one of the drawing students, complained it was infringing on their privacy.

'But we all get to see them in the nude anyway,' Brian pointed out.

'Yes, but that is a within a designated space and time as part of an agreed contract. Sticking them up on the fridge is a breach of this contract and turns them into mere objects of public consumption.'

Barb also protested against the calendar of life drawings Brian & McMurphy produced for sale one Christmas because it was entitled *A Year of Pin Ups*: 'It's totally pandering to the male gaze.'

'We've got men in there as well,' said Brian. 'Look: February is a man, so is June…September *looks* like a man…'

Life modelling was a lucrative business in Montreal. There were dozens of drawing classes in colleges, galleries and studios across the city. Brian & McMurphy's class was a particularly sought-after gig because Brian played records on his DJ decks and McMurphy handed out beer during breaks. They did wacky