

The Games We Played

Tamara Lazaroff remembers her first gender training camp.

DURING THE SCHOOL holidays, when I was nine, my mother finally let me go for my first sleepover – to my cousins' house. On her way to work, she dropped me off. My cousins' parents were already at the factory, and so us kids had the whole house to ourselves.

"What are we going to play?" was the first thing I asked.

"Play?" My oldest cousin Zora cackled confidently. "I don't play. I'm 13."

Suza, who was 11, did play. And so did Billie, who was eight. But all I wanted to know was what it was that Zora did instead of being a child. Reluctantly, Zora let us tag along behind her.

First, in front of the mirror, she sandpapered the pimples on her face. She plucked her eyebrows until they were just thin lines. She rubbed peroxide into her hair, and then she followed a 20-minute exercise routine that was supposed to slim her thighs. She promised she would make us a chocolate cake with icing straight after, and she did.

While we ate, she herself had only a level teaspoon of low-fat cottage cheese smeared on a brown cracker that looked like a piece of cardboard. But she kept saying to us, "Eat, eat!" She kept slicing and piling our plates until all that was left of the cake were a few crumbs.

Then, using her kilojoule counter, she calculated just how much energy Suza and I – but not Billie, because he was a boy – had consumed in relation to our daily quota. Quota? We were way over. Clearly, I had a lot to learn.

Things that later, when I was grown, I would have to unlearn.

After our cake lunch and the kilojoule bad news, I sat on the grass in the backyard reflecting. Suza and Billie were there, too. Zora was lazily flicking through the pages of a magazine when the phone rang. Zora ran for it. All three of us ran after her. I didn't know why. It was because it was her boyfriend, Suza told me, panting. She could tell from the soft voice Zora used when she picked up. That voice definitely wasn't for us.

Zora put her hand gently over the receiver. "Get out!" she screeched and then, in her silky voice again, she said, "Sorry. The kids were being annoying," as she pulled the cord to a more private place.

Now who was going to be the leader? I didn't know anything. Billie probably knew less. The space was wide open for Suza, the second oldest, to take power. She did.

She told Billie and me that we were going to play *Charlie's Angels*. Billie would be Bosley. She'd be Cheryl Ladd – because she was blonde. And I'd be Jaclyn Smith – because my hair was dark. This was the story: Bosley would have to wait outside the laundry door and not even think about opening it until he was called. Then the door closed.

With my back on the washing machine, I waited for more instructions. What was the crime we were going to solve? What ninja skills were we going to unleash? And onto which baddies?

There were none, Suza told me. Because we – as Kris Munroe and Kelly Garrett – were on a double-date at a restaurant in the city. With our boyfriends. And, well, I shouldn't just sit there. I should ask my boyfriend if he wanted some more meat and potatoes – which, of course, he did. I had to serve him. "Like this," Suza mimed the actions and I copied. I had to call the empty space beside me darling.

"Now you have to kiss."

I really didn't want to. I didn't know how and I must have looked at a loss, too, because Suza rolled her eyes as if I were an idiot and told me to watch. She pressed her lips against the back of her hand and twisted her neck from side to side, making strange, muffled noises.

At the same time, Bosley started to bang on the other side of the door, squealing to be let in. Suza came up for air, told him to "just wait", and then she got back to her hand-kissing business.

She didn't realise that things had gone very quiet, that the laundry door knob had slowly turned, that the door had opened a crack, that there was a pair of eyes peering in. They belonged to Zora, who had a real boyfriend, who was now laughing her head off. Suza was humiliated, but I was saved.

I do my best to save myself these days. I don't count kilojoules. I kiss only who I want to. I rarely eat meat and potatoes.

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