

LADY BOUNTIFUL

Toula-Soula-Doula. That's what I call her, my wog-mate.

"Love you too, baby-doll," she blows me a kiss. "You're a beautiful girl and I want you to have my baby." She laughs and coughs and blows smoke out of her nostrils.

It cracks her up. It cracks me up. For a moment we are back in a chilly, scuffed lined TAFE room studying floristry, but paying scant attention to the teacher. The plumbing apprentices across the courtyard were always much more interesting.

"Floristry ... oh my GOD. I mean ... flowers. They're nice but... mother of God ... a CAREER?" Toula-Soula-Doula rakes up her puffed-up hair with stuck-on nails. "I mean it, babe. Like ... Me? A florist?"

She jabs me in the arm. Her fingers are crusted with crystalline bling. "This Westie wogkid has got standards you know..."

The Hellenic firebrand from the treeless west and me, the white-bread kid from the leafy eastern suburbs. It's strange that we should become such good friends. But there are stranger things in Heaven and earth ...

Mid-way through her studies she ran off with some Greek bloke. But he thrashed her too bad one night and she made it out the laundry window. Wrecked her nails doing it.

Then she started working for her brother who buys and bulldozes cheap old houses and puts up townhouses. Property development she calls it. She phones me and tells me he is making lots of money. She tells me she is also making lots of money. Certainly more than floristry. She has a nice car, a townhouse of her own and a new man every fortnight.

"A new man after every wax-session," she said. "Wax, new man, wax, new man." Even on the phone I can hear her flicking her long nails as she talks.

We mostly talk by phone these days since I moved to Gippsland. I left Melbourne with a wretchedly broken heart.

Toula-Soula-Doula reckons it was because I didn't wax. She thinks I'm too furry for blokes. She calls me a gorilla. And a coward. And possibly frigid. Sometimes she calls me all three in succession. In Greek. It sounds more effective that way. But usually, she calls me baby-doll.

Whenever I come into Melbourne I stay with her at her townhouse and we always ... always ... get drunk. We drink at her place and then we go to a pub and then we go to a nightclub and then I'm not sure where we go, but we always go there by taxi. Then I end up bent over her very stylish toilet bowl in her sleek and well-lit bathroom. Her brother got the fittings at trade price.

Tonight, however, is different. I'm not destined for a date with the porcelain pillow. Toula-Soula-Doula has an idea.

"Baby-doll, listen up, right? We're gonna go and see this woman. She tells you your fortune and ... I swear to God it's good what she tells you. Really spot-on. Amazing-like. OK? Oh my God this is gonna be AWESOME sweetheart."

You don't say no to Toula-Soula-Doula when she uses the word 'awesome' because - as experience has shown - she's usually right. Maybe not always a good experience, but it's assuredly awesome.

"Come on," she said. "We got to finish this bottle. Otherwise it will go flat."

"It's Chardie."

"Then it will go fizzy. What do I care? OK? What do I know? Let's just drink it before it goes off ..."

After that we catch the taxi.

And so I find myself in the kitchen of some Greek woman – in Pascoe Vale South, I think – dazzled by polished steel and bright lights in a kitchen filled with gadgetry.

"I swear she mainlines Harvey Norman catalogues," Toula-Soula-Doula hissed as we walked into the room. Every bit of bench space held something in polished steel, chrome, glass and plastic. Blender, toaster, juicer, can opener, ice-cream maker, pop-corn maker, slushy maker, bread maker, coffee maker, waffle grill, vertical grill, electric frypan, convection roaster and some other items I couldn't identify.

She motions us to the table and we sit uncomfortably as she explains the fee structure in an accent that I find difficult to follow.

Toula-Soula-Doula soon loses patience and slides a small pile of notes across the table. “Just do it,” she waves her elongated nails around and then turns to me. “My shout. I earn more than you. Just enjoy it. OK?”

I think Shakespeare said something about Greeks and gifts.

The woman is holding my hands, turning them over and back and making soft clucking noises.

“See, I told you she’d good. Look how hard she’s staring at your hands,” said Toula-Soula-Doula. “She really knows her shit.”

“But does she know mine?” I wondered.

After a theatrically long time the woman started to speak. “Three,” she said. “Your lucky number is three.”

I must admit, I was impressed. “Fluke,” I told myself.

“And you need to wax ...”

“Mug,” I told myself. I shot a sharp look at Toula-Soula-Doula. She looked down and flicked her nails.

“You will soon get man. Nice man. Rich. Good man.” She examined the inside of my wrist.

“No need wax. He ...” she gave a shrug. “No matter him.”

“How will I meet him? How will I know?”

The woman studied the base of my thumb, pushing into the flesh deeply and watching it slowly puff back.

“Flower.”

“Flower?”

“Flower. Giving flower.”

“Any particular sort of flower? I have a shop full of them. Roses, lillies, gysophila ... wallflower? Can you give me a hint?”

The palm-reader gave another shrug, this time accompanied by a grimace.

“No idea. Just flower.”

“That’s it? Flower?”

“A flower.”

“A single flower? Not even a decent bunch? He just gives me one flower?”

Toula-Soula-Doula flicked her hair back and clicked her nails angrily. “Tightarse,” she recrossed her legs tightly. “Oh my God I swear it’s always the same with rich guys.”

The palm-reader turned to her and spoke something in Greek at a rattling pace.

Toula-Soula-Doula answered back and it seemed the pair were in a full-frontal argument. Suddenly she broke away from the conversation. “She says it’s not him giving the flower. It’s you. You’re gonna give this rich dude a flower.”

“But I run a florist shop.”

“Yeh well, it’s only one flower. Won’t affect the profits none, will it?”

Some Cupids kill with arrows, some with traps ... and me? I’m supposed to savage them with a single sweet pea.

And how many men must I woo with a bloom? And for how long? And when do I know when I’ve found Mr Right? What’s to be the criteria? Got your own teeth and a penis? Have a tuberose. Can draw breath and stand to pee? Take a gerbera.

Looking for a woman and not using a walking frame? Take the whole bloody shop!

I promise myself to never go drinking with Toula-Soula-Doula again. I’d rather push a cactus up my left nostril for light entertainment.

I thought my move to Meeniyah those few years ago was the smartest marketing move I'd ever made. The ABC had screened the second season of *Bed of Roses*, filmed in the sleepy little tourist town. I saw the opportunity. However, opportunity is yet to find me.

It's an old-people place. It's mainly retirees who are old enough to have lived interesting lives and bombproof enough to talk about it – and then embroider it. I love the oldies but I love them more when they kark it. I make most of my income from funeral flowers. Stiffs are the backbone of my trade.

And as they die, I see the old people are being replaced by younger faces. The population is slowly switching over. The families come in for the lifestyle and cheap housing. But they're eco-friendly and everyone grows their own vegies ... and flowers. This is a problem for me.

My shop in the main street still picks up a little trade from people passing through to Wilsons Prom but the tourist trade is unpredictable. It's madness in summer and a mausoleum otherwise.

Sometimes when things are too quiet and no one has died, I phone Toula-Soula-Doula.

"Put in some chairs and tables and maybe, like, serve some coffees. Or open it up as a tattoo joint or a pizza joint. Sell dope under the counter. Marijuana with your Marguerita. Listen to me, babe. Dump the flowers! Pump up the disco!"

I laugh as I hang up. Then I recall her last bit of advice was to chuck free flowers at every man crossing my path like Lady-blooming-Bountiful. My laughing suddenly stops.

I head across the road to grab a coffee and sit in the window, stirring the cup a little too vigorously, watching the lack of traffic on the street.

I can see the approach of the small white van that means this week's orders are arriving. Something more to pay. I finish my coffee and head back to work.

The Vietnamese chap unloads the boxes by the back door as I tick them off. Every week he drops in my order and I never think to ask anything about him. Maybe he's

the one. He might be rich, after all. I give it a try. "Thank you Mr Lee. Would you like a drink? Tea? Coffee?"

He looked at me, surprised.

"No thanks. Got a lot of deliveries." He gives a faint smile and climbs back into the truck cabin. I quickly pull out a gladiola stem and give it to him.

"Tell me, what do you think about waxing?"

He couldn't drive the truck away fast enough.

My pricing pen is missing. Mr Lee must have nicked it. I sigh and head next door to the local supermarket which is also very, very empty.

Lonelyville. Singlesville. No-hopersville. Who'd come here for true love? There's only one other customer in the store and he's at the till ahead of me. Nice jeans worn tight around the bits that matter. He gathers up his groceries and moves away.

I notice the parcel he has left on the checkout counter. "Oh here," I call out. "Don't forget your flour!"

He turns. And he smiles. And I smile back. We both smile at each other.

"Your flour," I say. "Here is your flour." But what I'm really saying is: "I will live in your heart, die in your lap and be buried in your eyes."

And he smiles like he already knows it.

THE END