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Opening extract from

Head Over Heart

Written by

Colette Victor

Published by

Chicken House

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HEAD OVER
HEART

From the Chicken House

To be honest, I'm sometimes still scared of other cultures. When people look different, believe in different things and eat food I've never heard of, I worry they might feel the same about me, and we won't have a good time. But Colette Victor's cool story shows how friends can be really good at making all kinds of differences fit together, even if everything starts out scary – in the end we don't have to be the same to get on really well!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

HEAD OVER HEART

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For my daughters Juliet and Stella,
Kristen and Jessie



1

I'm lying under the hydrangea bush at the bottom of our garden. My father mowed the lawn this morning and the smell of cut grass makes me think of the lazy summer afternoons to come. The huge leaves hang over me, shielding me from my mum's eyes and the sun. I can just see my old swing and part of the veranda, and the little purple-and-yellow viola in the window box by the kitchen. Even though they're too small to see from here, I know there'll be loads of bees buzzing around them.

I started coming here when I was a little kid and needed a place to hide away. I was playing with a tennis ball indoors one day and I knocked over my mum's favourite vase, the one she got from some aunt when she got married. I was only five, but I knew I was in big trouble, so I ran outside and hid here, under the hydrangea bush. It didn't save me, though – I was still sent to my room to think about what I'd done. I absolutely hated *thinking about what I'd done* when I was five, and I still do. But at least I found this place: my secret corner.

It's where I come when I need to think. Not about simple things like homework or friends or my mum moaning at me – those are for the bus or while I'm doing the chores or something. No, my secret corner is reserved for the important problems. Really, really serious ones.

I tug at a blade of grass. The part that's sheathed inside another layer is a yellowish colour. I nibble at it because I know it will be soft and sweet. And while I'm doing this, I'm thinking. I'm wondering why other people have these peaceful lives that flow along like big, fat easy rivers. *My* life is full of rapids and waterfalls and crocodiles and sharks. And yes, I do know sharks don't actually swim around in rivers, but that's how it feels – like there are these huge obstacles swimming all around me and I have to spend half my life dodging them.

So here's my shark-problem number one.

Today is Kelly's birthday party. Kelly moved here at the start of the school year and she's the first real best friend I've ever had. She's different from the other girls. She's smart, she says what she thinks and she's not into make-up and things like that. She's more interested in things that really matter, like not being a hypocrite and standing up to bullies. She's skinny, like me, but her hair's blonde and she wears it in a ponytail. Anyway, she's invited the whole class to a barbecue in the park. Of course, she expects me to be there and I really, really want to go. I can't *not* go.

But at the same time, and I mean at *exactly* the same

time – not yesterday, not last week, not tomorrow, but *today* – I'm expected to go shopping with my mum and all my female relatives to buy a dress for my cousin's wedding.

Which brings me to shark-problem number two: my mum wants to buy me a headscarf.

The thing is, I honestly have no idea if I want to wear one or not. I've never even thought about it. But yesterday I got my period for the first time, which kind of officially makes me a *woman* – in my mum's eyes at least. When I told her she screamed and hugged me, and then ran off to phone everyone in her address book. I couldn't believe she did that – I practically fainted with embarrassment. It was like I'd won the Nobel Prize and swum the English Channel all in one day: my mum had turned biology into personal achievement. Meantime it was just my body going from one phase to the next.

When she finally managed to tear her ear away from the phone, she remembered me sitting all by myself on the veranda. She came outside and offered me a glass of tea.

'When we go shopping tomorrow,' she said, 'I'd like to . . . you can choose a . . . your first headscarf . . .'

See what I mean about waterfalls and rapids and crocodiles and sharks?

I drop my chewed blade of grass and pull out a new one. I sigh as I pop it into my mouth. I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to do.

Weddings are a really big deal with us. I mean a really,

really big deal. OK, I know they're a big deal in all cultures but the bigness of this deal overshadows all others and makes them look pretty lame. I've been to weddings where there were over a thousand guests – as if anyone actually *knows* a thousand people. Basically, if you've ever passed someone on the street – not necessarily on the same side of the street – you're entitled to show up at their wedding.

Families save up for years for them. They don't go on holiday, they drive around in beat-up old cars and take out loans from the bank. And what do they spend this money on? Rented limousines, lavish dishes, dresses that shimmer and glitter with diamanté. And it's not only the bride that has to shimmer and glitter. No, it's the entire family. Now, I'm not big on glittering and shimmering, and I'm definitely not big on shopping trips with an endless row of aunts and cousins, but even I know there's no way I can turn up at a family wedding in my favourite jeans. For starters, my mum would probably have a heart attack on the spot.

I've known about Kelly's barbecue for ages but I didn't bother telling my parents about it. The shopping trip was already planned. It would be like going up to my mum and telling her I wanted to stay home and swat flies instead of going shopping – in her world, a friend's birthday party is just not important.

But I can't be the only one in the class who doesn't show up. Especially since I'm her best friend. What will I say to her on Monday? *Sorry, I had to go shopping?* She'll

never understand.

'Zeyneb? Where are you?'

I peep out from beneath the hydrangea leaves. My mum's standing on the veranda, wringing the dishcloth she always carries. She's wearing her ancient green apron with little white flowers over an ankle-length, dark-blue dress. She's got on black stockings, these disgusting butch shoes (practical, she calls them) and a beige headscarf with brown flowers covering her hair. Honestly, who still wears beige?

'Zeyne-e-e-b.' It's amazing how many syllables she can make out of my name.

'Coming, *Anne*.' I sigh and crawl out from underneath my shrub. (*Anne* is our word for 'mum'. But don't pronounce it *Anne*, like the girl's name. No, you're supposed to say the *e* at the end, the same *e* you hear in 'egg'.)

'What exactly do you do out there under those plants all day long?' she says, as I slowly make my way across the garden.

I drop my head to roll my eyes – I know if she sees me do it, I'll get an ear-bashing.

'And I said we were leaving thirty minutes ago, didn't I? Just look at you!' She plucks grass off my T-shirt.

I push her hand away. '*Anne*, stop it.'

'You're just like your father,' she goes on. 'Can't come inside without bringing half the garden with you. Now get upstairs and put on something decent. We have to be at your aunt's house in ten minutes.'