

Hey Judith

Comedian Judith Lucy looks back at her Catholic upbringing, learning to kiss, and the Christmas from which her family never recovered.

IF I BUMPED into my 16-year-old self now I would be impressed by her optimism. I was a real goody-two-shoes. I could have not been more of a suck at school. I never did the wrong thing – never argued with my parents, I worked really hard at school and was a good student. I went to an all-girl's Catholic school so, apart from being in love with my best friend's brother, I knew *nothing* about men. I was so naive. I was also a practising Catholic. So some of the things I would probably say [to her] is ditch the Catholicism. You know how you're working really, really hard in school and not having any fun? You're not going to use any of that. In fact, you're only going to do two years of a BA then you're going to move to Melbourne and become a stand-up comedian, so you can really relax about chemistry and physics. I guess I would also say, pash some boys. Just pash some boys.

I was a go-to-mass-every-Sunday Catholic. My parents were Irish, so they were full-on Catholics. I went to a Catholic school for 12 years, it was the whole bonanza. I only really started getting a bit cynical about it when I was in my final year of school and that was probably fuelled by the fact that I had an older brother who stopped going to mass. And, like every angst-filled teenager, I read Sartre and thought I was a little existentialist. Then I did go to university and apart from majoring in theatre we also had to do a compulsory unit called literature, language and culture, which was all about how language is a construct, and we studied Marxism – and I just remember the wool being pulled from my eyes in terms of

the Catholic Church. And this was before all the shit that's gone down since then. I remember finally thinking the idea of religion full stop was a complete waste of my time. I felt pretty angry that I had been hoodwinked for so many years.

The first time I actually had an open-mouthed kiss was with a priest. And this is not an "I was abused" story. I look back and I think wow, he was clearly sleazy. He was a priest who managed to have one-on-ones with all the Year 12 girls. I remember having an argument with him about abortion. At the end of the session we got up – and we did get on well, he was a groovy priest if you could imagine such a thing – and my memory is that he gave me a big hug and a kiss on the lips. There was no tongue, but I remember at the time thinking, *That was friendly!* The next time I pashed a boy was slightly more embarrassing. It was when I was studying theatre at university. I was in a Terence Rattigan play called *The Browning Version*. It was set in a boarding school and I'm having an affair with one of the younger teachers and we had to kiss during rehearsals. So we kiss and when we finished I remember him turning to me and going, "Wow, that was realistic." I probably hadn't realised that you don't slip the tongue in when you're on stage.

After all that, I did pash my best friend from high school's brother. I loved Michelle and her whole family. She had told me once that when she had other close friends she knew they were only her friends because they actually fancied her brother, so I simply couldn't

tell her that I too fancied her brother. That was certainly not why I was her friend. She and I had one of those desperately close female friendships that some girls have when you're a teenager – you kind of fall in love with each other. I think if either of us had had the slightest idea of what a lesbian was we probably would have given it a crack. Thankfully she got a Rotary exchange to America, so that meant I was able to see her brother while she was out of the country and we did finally wind up kissing. That was my first real kiss.

We were a couple of weirdos; we were so not cool. Instead of going to pubs and seeing bands, Michelle and I would have picnics and eat cheese and my brother would give us a half bottle of wine and we just thought we were ridiculously sophisticated. My only other obsession was the football. This was before the AFL started and we followed local [WA] football team Claremont. My family didn't miss a match for 17 years. Mum and Dad were really quite ahead of their time – if I was sick they would still take me to the match but they would lock me in the car and check on me at half-time.

I still see Michelle today. That whole family is still very much in my life. I'm very happy to say. They were like my second family. My parents and brother are dead now so it's very nice to still have those guys around.

I loved my parents dearly, but that doesn't mean they weren't weirdos. The best thing about writing my first book, *The Lucy Family Alphabet*, was

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that I spent a year thinking about my childhood, my parents and everything about my upbringing, and I remember finishing the first draft of that book – boy was it shit, there was still a lot of work to do – and thinking, *Okay, even if this book never gets published, writing this book has really confirmed for me that as nutty as they were, I loved my parents and I have absolutely no doubt that they loved me.*

I know it's such a cliché, but I spent at least my twenties, if not my thirties, being attracted to men who are like my father. Unfortunately, my father was a funny, charming, womanising alcoholic. And yes, he did wear make-up. He was a very vain man and genuinely believed it made him look better. It started off with just a bit of foundation and eyebrow pencil. He would also put eyebrow pencil in his hair to darken it. I think there might have been a bit of powder as well. Part of me is glad that he died before he started wearing lipstick and blusher.

The time that I've been the most blindsided by was the breakup of my last relationship. But I'm not going to say what that was because it's part of the ending of my new show. I've never been so blindsided by anything, other than when I was 25 and found out I was adopted. So we're having Christmas at my brother and his wife's house, because by that stage we had realised that Mum and Dad were generally better once you got them out of their own home. It was your classic scorching hot day in Perth – certainly my brother, my father and I had had a lot to drink. Dad had done a lot of baiting Niall, Niall wouldn't take the bait, then Dad said something pretty hideous to me and that's when my brother said, "I want you to leave, I want you to get out of my house." And then Dad just went nuts and started screaming at my brother, "I want to kill you, you fucking c***." My mother, my sister-in-law and I had to hold him off and he actually tore a chunk of hair from my sister-in-law's head. That clearly freaked my brother out and he ran

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out of the house. Mum hadn't had a drop to drink, which was generally the way, so she took Dad home. That left my sister-in-law and I together. And in that classic way that most people do when something absolutely hideous has happened, I tried to say something lighthearted. So I said, "Well, you've clearly married into a fun family" and she said, "There's something else you don't know." And she told me. It was dreadful. Our family never really recovered from it, we never did.

My brother died nearly five years ago. He died of lung cancer. I still miss all of them. It never really goes away. It was my father who was the first to die and I remember someone saying to me, "You never stop being completely miserable about it, it's just the time you spend being completely miserable about it shrinks."

I've had some great career highlights and those things are very important to me. But when I think of things that are pure unbridled joy they generally are more to do with family and friends. I will never forget the euphoria I felt when my best friend, who unfortunately is now also dead, gave birth to her little boy.

I look back and wish I had an ounce of the confidence back then that I see some 16-year-olds have now. I wish I'd had a little more faith in myself. It took me a long time to work out. While writing this current show, I made myself – like an idiot – literally write out every single bad experience with a man. That wasn't easy and of course it made me angry in terms of what some of the guys had done. But what really made me angry is that I put up with so much shit and I think it was because I didn't think I was worthy of being treated better. So I guess I'd want to say to my 16-year-old self, "You're okay. People should treat you well."

interview by Anastasia Safioleas
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» Judith Lucy Vs Men is on at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival until 14 April.