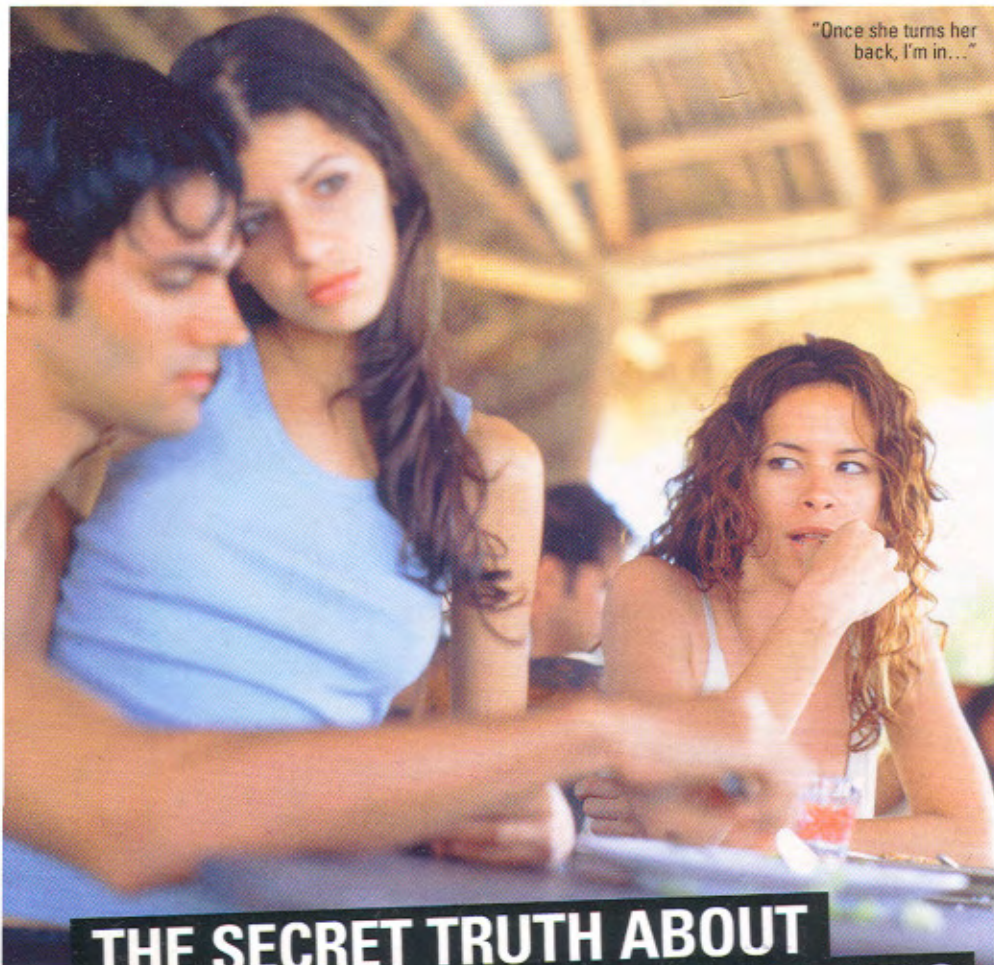


"Once she turns her back, I'm in..."



THE SECRET TRUTH ABOUT COMPETITIVE FRIENDS

Female rivalry

Let's see a show of hands. Who's ever been secretly pleased when their best friend put on weight? Or thought awful thoughts about a friend who'd just got promoted or engaged? Well, join the club, because we all do it, says Rachael Oakes-Ash, the author of a new book on the secret world of women competing with other women. Rachael argues that women should admit to being rivals and to envying each other because to acknowledge rivalry is to disempower it...

When presented with my ex's new girlfriend, I scan her body for stray cellulite, spare tyres and thick ankles, praying for flaws worse than my own and breathing a sigh of relief when I find her to be fatter, uglier or older than me. As a teen, I whispered with the cool gang about the

"sluts" in the class, convinced Arabella had "gone all the way" just because she was the first to wear a bra in our year. If my best friend bought a new dress, I bought one the same. When she got a new man, I sulked in silence. My obsession with the women in my life and how I compared to them kept me obsessing about my thighs,

hating myself, overcompensating with flowers and gifts for my guilt and lying to myself and others.

I know I am not alone in my envy, rivalry and competition with other women. I have girlfriends who have never spoken to each other again after one of them slept with the other's boyfriend. I have witnessed The Bride Monster in all her glory, bullying her bridesmaids with waterwave taffeta. I have been given the silent treatment, been excluded from invitations, looked up and down and joined the diet race even though I knew I could never win.

Competition is a natural part of life – without it we wouldn't survive – but it's the manner in which women compete with each other that makes it such a taboo topic. No woman openly admits she is competitive, nor speaks of her true rivalrous feelings towards other women, nor talks of her envy of another woman's lifestyle. To do so would be "unfeminine". To act upon these feelings would be "aggressive" and we all know good girls don't speak up.

It starts young, this sweeping under the carpet of our negative emotions. "Be a good girl and share your Barbie dolls," we're told in the play room after kindy. While the boys are wrestling for the Tonka Truck in the sandpit, we dutifully hand over our favourite Barbie for the other girl to play with. This, of course, accounts for why there are so many headless and mutilated Barbies in toy boxes around the globe.

At primary school, we learn that language and information is power and as the boys are playing footy down the back oval at lunchtime, learning to win and lose together as a team and learning to compete openly and be mates with the opposition after the game, we girls are playing elastics and jump rope. Imagine two girls standing still, so the third girl can jump around in the centre with the spotlight on her alone. The two girls twirling the rope or holding the elastic are secretly thinking, "Gee, I hope she hurries up and stuffs up so I can get a turn." A mantra repeated throughout life with other women.

Secret diaries are the only real outlet for young girls' normal and natural feelings of hatred and envy of other little girls. If we have conflict with fellow females, we are told to be nice and be liked. No-one tells us that there will always be people in this world who don't like us and that's OK. So, we write our feelings down in locked diaries and gossip with other little girls after school. Clubs are formed to exclude other girls, notes are exchanged in the classroom and the silent treatment is dished out daily.

Women are powerful, yet we struggle with our relationships with other women all the time. Is it any wonder when advertising pits us against each other to sell products? Print advertisements for blow-dryers "for

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famous-looking hair” sell their salon-style dryer by encouraging women to be known by other women as “that bitch with great hair”. Advertisers know women gaze on each other, that women constantly compare and despair and it’s that despair that has them running up debt on their credit cards.

Friendships for women are intense, like love affairs without the sex. When friends fall out, the other women in the group are asked to take sides and the women that are fighting feel like they’re going through a divorce. Yet women are also great supporters of each other. We’re there when our friends are down, we offer shoulders, ears and arms of comfort. Everything is OK as long as no-one steps out of their role. When a friend loses weight, she may lose friends. When a friend “marries up”, she may lose friends. When a friend gets an executive level job, she may lose friends. Envy can impact friendship greatly when it’s not talked about.

Yet there is hope. For women to realise

their full potential both individually and as a whole, we must accept that competition exists and bring it out into the open on a level playing field. We need to realise that we can have conflict in friendships and still remain friends. We need to realise that just as we are terrified of being exposed as the fraud we think we are, so are others. To not speak up about this topic is to give The Silent Treatment to women as en masse. To talk about it dis-empowers it and gives a name to those feelings that see us in the fridge at three in the morning, pounding the treadmill at 10 at night and cutting our bodies in the dark.

I chose to write my book, *Anything She Can Do I Can Do Better*, because my life had been impacted over and over again by competition between women. I was sick of people applauding men for competing and painting women in a bitchy light if they dared to do the same. I interviewed 50 high profile women around the globe for the book, because women are diverse

and have different voices and different experiences. But I found in the interviews that while the experiences may be different, the feelings are the same.

As author of *Girls’ Night In*, Jessica Adams said, “Nothing is more effective than a bunch of energetic women. Absolutely nothing. Faster and more practical than a man-woman combination, and loads better than just men together. The irony of female – fang – female behaviour is that it stymies any chance of girl power changing the world. And I’m not joking, that’s the kind of power which nobody should underestimate.”

Anything She Can Do I Can Do Better
by Rachael

Oakes-Ash (Random House, \$22.95) is available in book stores. Visit Rachael’s website at www.anythingshecando.com.

