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It Hurts to be Fifteen

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It's tough being a parent. However, it's even tougher being a fifteen-year-old kid. As much as things have changed, they've remained surprisingly the same. My son, Tyler, was even more sullen and morose than usual last Hallowe'en. He moped in front of the TV set watching Louis Jourdan as Dracula chomp down on the lily-white neck of a young damsel.

“Okay, Ty, what's the problem? Why aren't you at the big dance?”

“Didn't feel like goin',” he mumbled in that familiar inarticulation I've learned to decipher. “Just stupid kid's stuff anyway.”

“I thought you had a hot date.”

Tyler responded with silence, glowering into the television screen. Settling on the sofa next to the easy chair my son more surrounded than occupied, I suddenly knew it all. No other words were needed. We watched the suave and fatally attractive Dracula make another conquest.

Why is it that teenage angst never really goes away? The pain dulls until it finally fades into history but the trauma lives on, rearing its ugly face at the most unexpected of times. I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday – the cliché was intended. It was a long time ago, 1962 to be precise. But, it wasn't the Cuban Missile Crisis that wrenched

my soul asunder, or even the demise of Marilyn Monroe, although I did feel some adolescent pangs about that.

What it was – was Diane Morissette and a first date that never happened. In the greater scheme of things, this may not have been a significant event but my fifteen-year-old heart was about to be shattered for the first time.

It was back in those heady days before Canadian biculturalism and bilingualism. Cereal boxes offered prizes and special deals only in English. Quebec province was gearing up for secession. The French language was the tongue of subversives. An us against them mentality permeated the air. The country still stood beneath the flying Red Ensign. For those of you who don't remember that was the flag not a political party.

It had been folly to have even considered a culturally interactive relationship. She was Francophone, I an Anglophile. For high-schoolers living in the outer reaches of Northern Ontario, the French did not readily mix with the English, especially on the biological level.

Let me explain. I met Diane Morissette on the first day of high school at Chelmsford Valley District Collegiate. She sat two rows over and three seats down in our homeroom. I was immediately smitten by this brown-eyed beauty who wore a blonde Jackie Kennedy hairdo. Like the rift between the Montagues and the Capulets, her being French made it all the more wonderfully tragic.

Oh, I could have played it safe; CVDC was a cultural melting pot, bussing students in from Copper Cliff to Levack. There were plenty of other, more approachable girls like Lucie Costeroski, Perkko Koskineimi, or even Margie Anderson who was a year ahead and just as waspish as me. No, Diane was my choice, none of the others would do. The trouble was she scarcely knew I breathed. However, I moved into action, undaunted.

This was a slow, concerted onslaught, with all possibilities considered in minute detail. I bided my time through ninth grade, gaining her friendship. At last, the time was right. I summoned all the courage in me and asked her to the Hallowe'en Dance. Diane was genuinely surprised, perhaps flabbergasted. She blurted an "Okay..." without really thinking. I left before she had time to reconsider. Success at last!

After school, walking on air, I giddily recounted my good fortune to my best pal, Danny Callaghan. His face fell when I told him.

"Diane Morissette is going to the dance with you? – You're sure?"

"You bet," I grinned, thoroughly pleased with myself. "Guess you thought she'd turn me down flat, right?"

Danny shrugged. "Well, not exactly..."

"Well, *what* exactly?"

He fidgeted.

“Okay Callaghan, what’s up?”

“It’s just that, I uhhh, finally worked up enough jam to ask Patty Ellis to the dance. After she said “yes,” she told me the big buzz from the girls’ washroom; that Diane had landed the big date she’d been waiting for. I don’t know any other way to say it, mon frère. – Diane Morissette is going to the dance – but not with you.”

This was when all current hopes of romantic triumph dashed themselves against a brick wall named Gilbert Lafreniere. His name was pronounced with a soft G: Jil-ber, hers with a hard D: Dee-an. A semi-culture away, their names evoked images of continental worldliness. Mine was completely mundane, sounding exactly the way it spelled.

He was an older man, in grade thirteen. That was the same thing as first-year college! My insecurities rocketed skyward. He was good looking. His parents owned a chain of grocery stores. I should know; I was a Saturday box boy at their smallest outlet in Levack!

Worse yet, he had a car! And not just an old klunker either, but a 1960 Chrysler 300 hardtop with a “toilet seat” continental wheel in back. It was all glass and fins and red! I could envision them parked in the moonlight, his hands exploring what I wanted to explore first. I was short of breath. A hot wave of indignation started at the soles of my feet and exploded somewhere about my ears. My head swam. I couldn’t speak. The scenario played again and again in my mind. How could I ever compete?

Until then, I hadn’t much thought about Gilbert Lafreniere. Our social stratum were light years apart. However, such a potent adversary required closer scrutiny. As the fates would have it, my first good look at him was in the Phys-Ed change room.

The unapproachable grade thirteen’s had a temporary revision in their schedule. This week only, Physical Education for the upperclassmen was placed in the time slot prior to a class of lowly tenth graders, my class.

I removed my clothing tentatively, conscious of my body. Three years earlier, when my hormones kicked in, something had gone terribly wrong. I went from a short, stick-like child to a short, pear shaped adolescent. I was the Pillsbury doughboy and not at all amused.

Self-conscious, I quickly pulled on my navy blue gym shorts. They had all the panache of my granny’s bloomers. As I fought my way into a slightly smelly T-shirt left over from yesterday’s run of the gauntlet, Gilbert Lafreniere emerged from the showers au naturel, Adonis on the half shell.

Immodest, he made no attempt to cover himself. He rubbed his body dry with a thick, white bath sheet; the rest of us made do with mere towels. He continued, aloof, exuding confidence without effort.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away, fully aware it was a social felony to look, let alone stare in the locker room. I was caught, frozen by my own inadequacies. Given the choice and in Diane’s place, it was quite obvious to me who the preference would be.

He possessed a man's body, brawny arms, good pecs, muscular legs. Worst of all, he was handsome with a potential ruggedness I would never achieve. With shiny black hair and a curl that fell down the middle of his forehead, he was Superman. Blinded in the radiance of this god-like being, I was a dweeb, a doofus, a nerd, though the words had yet to be coined. I hated him. More so, I hated myself.

The next day, Diane found me in the cafeteria. Ever discreet, Danny made a fast exit as she approached. She sat beside me. "Hi." Only five minutes remained until the first warning bell and afternoon classes. The blow would come swift if not merciful. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" She put her hand on mine; it was smooth and soft and cool. She wore a new garnet pinky ring.

My responding "Sure" came in a chirp. I quickly realized I hadn't drawn breath since she'd started moving in my direction. For a moment a look of indecision crossed her face. "I tried to catch up with you after Geometry Class this morning." Her slight French accent softened the chiseled edges of the English she spoke.

"Oh?" I attempted nonchalance. "Something important?"

"Yes, it is." She drew herself up, sitting tall and correct. She was actually taller than me. "Neal, I'm sorry but I can't go to the Hallowe'en Dance with you after all."

My heart stopped. "I see." I lacked the courage to say more.

"Yeah, I'm really sorry, but you see, I got grounded for the weekend. I stayed out too late at Claudine's last night – 'til after ten. Papa was torqued-out in a big way. I really am sorry."

Well, that wasn't so bad. I hadn't been dumped after all. It wasn't a matter of me or Gilbert. She wasn't going to the dance with anyone. She wasn't going to the dance at all. It was merely a case of being grounded. It was my own experience that parents could often be unreasonable. My ego suddenly resurfaced.

"I'm sorry too." I felt warm inside. "But maybe we can go to a dance some other time." I mentally assailed myself for thinking all those horrible things I'd thought about her earlier.

"Yeah," she smiled that devastating smile. "Maybe some other time." The warning bell rang. She smiled again. "I have to go." I watched her walk away. A libidinous and completely improbable fantasy danced on the drive-in screen inside my head. I was late for French Class. Our tender moment was worth the resulting detention.

Hallowe'en and the night of the costume dance arrived. Dateless, I'd intended on staying home. I felt sorry for Diane having to miss such a special Saturday night. I considered calling her on the phone. Danny, true friend that he was, pointed out the lack of logic in my altruistic plan. Why should I not go to the dance? Diane was grounded, not me. She'd courted disaster and lost.

I made limp excuses. He countered with larger servings of sound reasoning. It didn't matter if I had a date or not. – A lot of guys would be going stag. Better yet, a lot of girls would be going stag too. Besides, he pointed out, my Mom had worked hard on my costume. I was always one to yield to justification. I tagged along with Danny and his date, Patty, a pudgy Zorro.

The stag lines were fantastic! I Watussi'd to the Orlons with Bette Aru. I did the Locomotion with Perkko Koskeneimi. Little Eva warbled. Andy Williams crooned "Can't Get Used to Losing You" during a mixer where dancers exchanged partners when the colored lights shifted.

The lights turned red. Not missing a step, I held a new partner. Her hands were cool. Zorro waltzed with a masked Juliette, draped in Renaissance finery. A vigilant and equally masked Romeo never looked away as he danced with someone dressed as Tinkerbell.

Juliette did not speak. She danced stiffly, holding her mask in place. Andy Williams sang on: *I'll find somebody, wait and see. Who am I kidding? Only me. 'Cause no one else could take your place....* I looked at the cool hand in mine and saw the garnet pinky ring. "Diane?"

She flinched and stopped moving. Her hand held mask slipped away. Her eyes never met mine.

I felt crushed, betrayed. We stood in the centre of the dance floor. "Aw, damn it!" Forever seemed to pass before I found the words to speak again. "Why couldn't you tell me the truth?" I felt my anger rising and stuffed it back down. "I knew, Diane." My voice shook as I fought for control. "I knew Gilbert asked you out after I did. Seems like half the school knew it. You could've just flat-out told me, you know. I didn't like the idea that you'd rather be with him but I do understand it."

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Yeah, sure."

"I didn't. I'm sorry."

"For what? Lying?" I went for the righteous kill. "Or getting caught?" I couldn't hurt her enough. "It's okay, Diane, have a real nice time with your dream date. I won't bother you again."

Her face flushed as though I'd slapped her. Maybe Gilbert thought I had. She bolted through the crowd.

I felt a heavy thump on my chest. Gilbert had the front of my costume clenched in his fist. I was surprised by his speed. "What did you say to her?" He demanded. "What did you do?" He tightened his grip. "What the hell did you do?"

"Relax, **Gilbert.**"

His jaw clenched as I used the Anglo pronunciation of his name. We were the axis of the universe. Stalled dancers backed off. I was aware of the thickening tension. I had to make my stand or be branded a chicken for the rest of my days. With an emphatic slap, I brushed his hand from my shiny black tunic. "I thought you knew – the best man won She thinks you're Mister Perfect."

Dramatically, head held high, I walked away. My heart rattled inside my chest. Gilbert could easily have pulverized me, instead he only stood there in his tights, gaping. The lights had shifted to blue. Andy Williams ended his lament and now, Leslie Gore wailed about her party. The dance went on.

After that, Diane and I never spoke again. She quickly transferred to a Commercial course and was reassigned to another homeroom. It was a large school and our junkets rarely intersected. She continued to date Gilbert for the remainder of that school year.

The wheels of time ground on; each of us was promoted up the scholastic ladder. Gilbert graduated and went on to study Law at McGill in Montreal. The next spring, Diane found herself another French boyfriend, this time a soccer player going into grade thirteen. Life changed for me as well.

My father got an unexpected job offer in British Columbia; one so good, he couldn't possibly refuse. A few weeks later, the house was sold. The family, including Claude, our cat, climbed into our almost new Studebaker wagonaire and drove west; an excursion that remains vividly etched in the minds of all who survived.

The new life began in Kelowna. That was my turning point. Grade eleven was a breeze. I was becoming less of a dweebazoid even in my own mind. I started approaching girls who showed signs of actually liking me for who I was. I even started liking me.

By my final year at Kelowna Secondary, I was firmly established in high school life. I wasn't exactly a member of the social big time but I had a pretty girlfriend named Wendy; my parents had helped bankroll a '57 Desoto ragtop; and I'd lost a lot of the baby fat. In two short years, I had come a grand distance.

But, I doubt I'll ever forget Diane Morissette or Gilbert Lafreniere, for that matter. Ours was a triangular moment frozen in time, an incident to be recalled from disparate and utterly singular points of view. It is likely for the best that the opportunity to compare notes never availed itself.

Years later, when Tyler was a newborn, I wrote Diane a letter but never mailed it. Where would I have sent it? Still, it felt satisfying, putting the words to paper. Somewhere along the way, I'd forgiven her. Best of all, I'd forgiven myself for allowing happenstance to shade my willingness to trust; a lesson a little late in the learning. I would have liked to put it all to rest. I suppose I had.

So last year, on that Hallowe'en night with my son, I contented myself just to sit and wisecrack about a suave Frenchman playing the evil Romanian Count. What I could not do was comfort him with the telling of this story. I couldn't say I was sorry or that I

knew how it felt, or that someday, all would be right. It wouldn't have been cool. But, in the flickering blue light of the TV room, we sat together and it was understood.

The End