

27 January 1987

There are moments in life that change you.

I don't mean graduations or weddings or the birth of a child. Those are obvious Big Moments – the ones that are foreseen, planned, thought out.

I mean the other kind – the moments that sneak up on you. Sometimes they change you in subtle ways, and you don't know it until much later. And sometimes they change you indelibly and forever, right then and there.

On a Tuesday afternoon in January 1987, I walked into a school auditorium and stuck my finger in a proverbial light socket.

Frankly, I could use the jolt. The transition from French high-school to English CEGEP had been very smooth, and the initial anxiety of the fall semester – new environment, minus old friends – had given way to complacency. Things always came easily to me.

Among my compulsory math, social science and humanities, the only tingle of excitement this winter was bound to come from the course I had chosen as a complementary: Film Language & Analysis. A few years back, at the ripe old age of 14, I had vowed to become a screenwriter, but this would be my first foray in cinema studies.

I didn't notice her at first. She strolled in casually, amidst a few other students, carrying a couple of folders. It was only when she sat at the edge of the stage, crossed her leg and put down her coffee mug that I realized she was, in fact, the teacher.

From that point on, I lived for Tuesday afternoons.

She talked about the history of cinema – Méliès, the Lumière Brothers, the advent of talking pictures.

She introduced us to film language – camera angles, editing, Citizen Kane.

She made a point to learn how to pronounce students' names correctly, no matter how challenging that might be in a multicultural environment.

Within a couple of weeks, she already knew where to look up in the auditorium when she called a name to take attendance. I was third row, on the aisle.

She made me think about movies in a whole new way.

I was a sponge. I wanted to learn everything she had to give. I wanted her carefully prepared lectures never to end. I savoured every clever pun.

I did extra research. I wrote assignments even when they were optional. Any excuse, any at all, to have a reason to show up for her office hours and have something to discuss. I wanted to be around her, near her, with her, and Tuesday afternoons were not enough.

I was a star pupil. I craved her attention. And lo and behold, I got it. Things always came easily to me.

I didn't know exactly what I wanted, or why, but I desperately wanted it. So desperately, it makes me cringe to this day when I look back. Nothing you feel as a grown-up is ever as intense as what you felt at 17.

But I was only as desperate as I was transparent and she figured me out long before I did. When she sat me down to state the obvious – “I am a teacher and you are a student” – the room started spinning.

By definition, it seems impossible that the obvious should be so crushing, as though it were a shocking revelation. It was.

I didn't take it well.

But over the next several months, spanning two more semesters, I signed up for more of her film classes. Third row, on the aisle.

Things were tense and awkward. In fact, I made sure of it. I lurked in hallways when I knew she'd be walking by. My essays were laced with subtext. I stared her down in class. If I was to suffer, she would suffer along with me.

Things had always come easily to me. You learn the truth at 17.

I was astounded that this ugly side of me surfaced so effortlessly and was so adept at playing mind games. If I could not have the pleasure of her company, I could at least revel in her discomfort, like the sadistic pleasure of watching the heroine squirm in a Hitchcock movie.

In a melodrama, this is where I would hit rock-bottom, realize how far I'd fallen, vow to change, make amends, apologize. We would reconcile and she would welcome me with open arms. From then on, I would be a better person.

That didn't happen.

But I was still a stellar pupil. One day in class, she read one of my papers out loud, from beginning to end, as an example to the other students of the kind of work she expected. It is a very odd feeling to experience pride and embarrassment at the same time.

In my other classes, I was mostly on auto-pilot. But one day, an English teacher asked me to give an oral presentation comparing the film adaptation of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf with the play version we were studying. I must have romped through a discussion of the semiotics and camera work, because a student came up to me afterwards – he was also in my film class – and stated quite simply: “You sounded just like her”.

Best. Compliment. Ever.

In a rom-com, this is where I'd wake up and realize I had outgrown her and there was nothing I needed from her anymore – and, of course, that my best friend was my true love all along.

That didn't happen.

I wish there was a better story arc. I did not sink to the depths of despair, fail all my other classes, cut myself off from my family, or derail a promising academic career. I did not have to triumph over impossible odds or overcome hardship of any kind, if not for the perfectly mundane teenage angst of unrequited love.

I finished CEGEP and moved on. On the advice of a school counselor, I wrote her a tale as a means of defusing tension when I left, but it was more a truce than a closure.

In a coming-of-age story, I would leave town, never to see her again, but taking away a precious life lesson that I would carry with me always.

That didn't happen.

Well, not quite.

For a long time, I merely stewed in a complicated mess of shame, guilt and anger. I tried to forget. Every day.

Eventually, time did its thing. Friendships and relationships filled the void.

You don't forget. You just live with it.

FLASH FORWARD.

It took nearly ten years before a chance meeting at a concert brought us together again. It was a moment I had been waiting for – and apprehended – for an eternity. And yet I was strangely calm. Here I was. There she was. Neither of us ran the other way. It was time.

After the show, we sat together and talked. And talked. And talked. I literally felt a weight lifting off my shoulders. A decade's worth of ruminations – hers and mine – evaporated. This was Closure with a capital C.

When the staff at the Spectrum finally kicked us out, long after Jann Arden had finished signing autographs and left the building, we walked out into the cool November night and things felt right with the world.

Even if I were to never see her again, I knew that we'd recaptured something lost. We'd always have Paris. So to speak.

In the grand scheme of things, sometimes I can't help but feel like I failed her or, more importantly, myself. I did not become a film scholar to carry on her legacy. I even turned down the chance to teach that very same film class that started it all for me. I couldn't imagine filling those shoes.

My screenplays haven't gone anywhere. She will never hear her name in my Oscar speech.

I'm not carrying around a profound life lesson – just the Felix the Cat keychain she sent me for my birthday, always tucked in my pocket.

Not a melodrama. Not a rom-com.

Perhaps what I had all along was just a McGuffin with a fuzzy plot.

No wonder my screenplays are collecting dust. Who ever heard of a McGuffin in a coming-of-age story?

FADE IN.

INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM. 1987.

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