

School Daze

We weren't allowed to even run at St. Hugh's. Walking fast but gracefully was all that was permitted, since it was "unladylike" and undignified to run like the mortals at those other schools. Mrs. Inez Carnegie, our Principal and Five-Star General was the epitome of dignity and decorum, and ensured that her charges walked in her firm, bow-legged footsteps as closely as possible.

I remember the visits of Bishop Swaby to our morning devotions (our patron saint was Anglican), and the solemn warnings issued from our principal for us to be attentive and to behave like ladies, regardless of how uncomfortable or bored we may feel. Yawning and fidgeting could land you in serious trouble on a Friday morning, when it was not uncommon to have a guest speaker or performer to add spice to the proceedings. Well, the visits of the good Bishop were always arranged for that day, when we were seated (instead of standing) in the gymnasium, and when we had the time (though sometimes not the inclination) to endure his lengthy homilies.

There was one story we knew by heart, all because Bishop Swaby (bless his soul) would forget he told it on his last visit, so he would tell it all over again. We would sigh and roll our eyes inwardly, outward expressions inscrutable. By the time he got to what he thought was the punch line, we would all belt it out with him: "He ain't heavy; he's my brother!?"

We knew a stern lecture would be on the menu after he left, since Mrs. Carnegie would throw the guilty ones "the look", that blistering, penetrating glare which spoke volumes and had the power to make us hang our heads in shame later on. Our Friday morning devotions were legendary.

There was the time an up-and coming singer performed during one of those prayerful sessions. His first name was Jackie (last name withheld to protect his identity), and his golden premolar sparkled at us from where we were sitting. Then the snickering began. In those days at St. Hugh's we frowned on such vulgarities as gold teeth.

So there was this Jackie, singing his heart out (could have been a number called Send Me the Pillow, can't be too sure), when in the middle of the act, he suddenly stopped mid-bar and placed his hand over his mouth. We held our breath. At the same moment a student in the third row shrieked and jumped up, for something had fallen into her lap! Pandemonium reigned in the gym for what seemed like an eternity, as the rest of her classmates in the vicinity followed suit, thinking that it was a rodent or an insect that had startled her. Chairs were overturned as the girls scattered, all decorum forsaken. Alas, not even firm directives from our horrified Principal could still the cacophonous din, nor calm the storm of activity.

Then, suddenly a first former was seen waving aloft a wad of tissue, and at last the gathering began to settle, the chattering subside. We watched her hand over with a flourish the wad (containing a shiny metallic bicuspid, no doubt) to the grateful performer, after which some semblance of order was restored to the meeting.

Although not a word was spoken by our Principal and Lady of Grace about the incident, we knew she was grossly disappointed by the behaviour of her girls, and many of us studiously avoided direct eye contact with her for the rest of the day. The first form student who had recovered the nugget enjoyed a brief notoriety, since all and sundry wanted the details. Our Friday morning devotions were indeed legendary.

Then there was the golden rule regarding the length of our skirts. These were not required to be as long as the habits worn by those sisters at certain convents, but we knew that if it was a fraction of an inch shorter than three inches below the middle of the knee, it would be deemed a "short skirt" and Ethel Kingdon would know immediately.

That woman had the peripheral vision of a bald eagle and could spot a short skirt a hundred yards off, in any direction. She was the Drill Sergeant of the faculty, and executed her duties rigorously. She would whip out her trusty twelve-inch ruler when some unfortunate (or daring) student was suspected to be in breach of the rules, and upon confirmation, the hem of the offending garment

would be ceremoniously undone, and by the student too.

In Ethel Kingdon's general knowledge class a.k.a Library Studies, we were required to know the name of every single Norse, Greek and Roman deity. We would sit in rapt attention as she recounted inter alia, the legends of Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece, of Narcissus who fell in love with himself, of Prometheus who stole sacred fire from the gods and of King Arthur and his Knights in their quest for the Holy Grail.

By the end of the first form, we could have given Alex Trebec a real run for his money. This librarian was a walking encyclopedia and was determined that her charges become her clones. Most of the Jeopardy questions we hear today were answered years ago by Ethel Kingdon, librarian extraordinaire.

My most unforgettable punishment in all the years I spent at this venerable institution was one meted out to me by Miss McIntosh of hockey fame. Please don't ask me after all this time exactly how I had transgressed; all I knew was that I was to spend the entire detention hour in solitary confinement listening to Ravel's Bolero. After hearing the first few repetitions, I swore Miss Mac was a sadist and was out to torture me, so I tuned both her and her music out, getting lost in my own private reverie.

But Ravel and his Bolero were not to be ignored. The music was so hypnotic that I was simply drawn into it, and began to listen intently after a while. Before the hour was up, I was sold. Today, it is still one of my favourite pieces of classical music, all 16 minutes and 58 haunting seconds. Torture it may have seemed in the beginning, but years later, I grew to understand and appreciate the wisdom behind this creative punishment.