

The Day Everything Changed

A -30C day in January of 2001 was not going to stop me on this Saturday night! I never complained about single parenthood but a full night out of adult fun with my best friend was rare. My son Jake, age nine, was safe at home with a favourite babysitter.

Susan and I had tickets to a Spiritus concert at the old, sandstone Knox United Church. We both loved chorale music and the blending of voices by this professional choir was fantastic. The acoustics in the old church were perfect. Although we needed to wear our jackets the whole time, we came out elated! And it was still early.

Susan was a beautiful singer, performed in a choir and played the Celtic bodhran drum. She knew there might be a kitchen party or 'session' at a small Irish pub, not far from the church. It would be all acoustic with no amplification or rehearsal – like being in someone's kitchen. Always an active, appreciative audience member, I looked forward to joining in on choruses plus clapping and stomping in time.

Breathing down the front of my jacket as the car warmed, I thought, "This whole evening is flowing like butter, already. Can it get any better?"

Then it did...

"Look! Someone's pulling out," thrilled Susan. A perfect downtown parking spot, in a city the size of Calgary, is always a good omen. I pulled in easily.

Our breath smoked up high and was whisked away into the frigid wind as we made quick time to the pub's entrance. We opened the large wooden door and welcome warm air blew into our cold faces. The pub's distinct smell of roast lamb, beer and fries greeted us like a hug. The soft, cozy lighting bathed the dark wood decor and it was unusually quiet for a weekend night. There were three patrons at the polished bar watching a game, two men seated at the far booth by the frosted windows and eight musicians setting up around the small stage.

Susan was all smiles and hugs as she greeted the musicians she knew.

"Hey David, Mike, Sandy. Great to see you! This is my friend Lynn."

These three in turn introduced us to five more friends. It was a lively group.

"Sue, we'd love it if you joined us for 'The Roads to Loch Lomond'," asked David with a raised eyebrow. "We need your soprano for the solo." He gestured with his head and continued, "You can borrow my drum over there."

"Yeah, for sure!" Susan replied, eyes shining. "I'll need to warm up with backgrounds before the solo," she laughed, clearly thrilled by David's invitation.

"Let me know what the first couple of songs are before, ok?"

"No problem. It's gonna be fun!" David winked at Susan, turning around to continue setting up. I didn't notice how much she sparkled at his attention until weeks later.

"I'm so glad everyone still came out." Susan remarked as we settled into a front table. A big smile stayed on her face as she watched David and the others.

"I'm so excited to see you sing!" I gushed, grabbing one of her hands.

A gorgeous, young male server came over. We ordered two craft beers and tried not to stare. "Excellent eye candy," I remarked under my breath when he finished. Susan nodded slowly in approval. We both watched him turn and walk away, doing our best not to cackle within earshot.

This night kept getting better.

As the musicians started to tune up, we noticed one of the men in the back booth get up and leave. Then the other tall, more handsome guy came right over to our table, carrying his jacket over his arm.

He asked me directly, "I know this is lame, but I think we've met before." Susan was quick to reply, "You're right. That IS SO LAME, it must be true." We all laughed. I did not remember him at all but did note his deep laugh, great teeth and longish, dark wavy hair.

"Would it be ok if I joined you two?" said the guy.

"Sure," we both chimed.

He directed his gaze at me. He had eyes, the colour of faded, dark denim behind stylish glasses.

He held out his hand and said, "Hi. My name's Bill."

Bill

He showed obvious interest and listened carefully to our names. We shuffled over to orientate towards the stage and he placed a chair at the table between us. Bill wore a smart black sweater, slim jeans and leather hiking boots. He spoke with perfect diction in a lovely low timbre and I wondered if there was a trace of English accent.

Bill asked interesting questions and gave concise answers. He listened carefully when someone else was speaking. He was 37, worked as a geologist and played cello in the Calgary Civic Symphony.. It took awhile, but we figured out we had met briefly through mutual geoscientist friends about two years previously. Her name was Sherri and she dated Bill's roommate Glen. I had picked her up from their place once and Glen had introduced Bill. I barely remembered the event.

Bill directed his conversation and attention towards Susan, for most of the evening, clearly interested in her.

'Who wouldn't be?' I mused lightly, "with her long curly black hair and blue eyes?" I heard her laugh often which is a good sign. I was happy for her. They were both trained classical musicians and in my opinion, well matched in looks.

We hung out comfortably during the music, clapping in time and laughing at the musicians' jokes in between songs. We gave Susan's solo performance a standing ovation and vigorous applause. I grinned widely at Bill when he shouted, "Bravo!"

We were joined by the musicians during a break and we bought them a round. Bill asked music questions that helped keep the conversation interesting and light. He bought pub snacks for the table and seemed to fit into the small friend group easily. I was relaxed and content to listen to the musicians banter and sip my beer slowly.

As the evening drew near the time I needed to get home, we rose, put on our heavy coats and said our goodbyes.

Bill walked us to the door and said, "I really enjoyed meeting you both," then with endearing, shy hesitation he asked, "Would it be ok if I gave you both a hug?"

We both consented and he hugged Susan first. She said, "I wonder if there's any upbeat Celtic music where we could use a cello?" Bill replied with a chuckle, "Not sure if I'd be any good in a 'session'. There is no conductor telling me what to do!"

We all laughed.

He then opened his arms to give me a hug. As he wrapped his long, lanky arms around me, I fit into his embrace perfectly. I thought, "God, he smells 'just right' too."

It was a memorable hug.

I stepped back and started to say, "It was great to meet y..." when Bill interrupted. He asked the most surprising question, "Lynn, could I get your phone number?"

"What?!?" I exclaimed, my eyes darting around quickly. I looked at Susan for help. She nodded and gave me a big smile – girlfriend code for 'go for it.'

Equally floored as flattered, I could barely look up at the man as my face reddened.

Confused, I stammered, "um, OK-K!" and dug in my purse for a business card.

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Bill Again...

I spent the rest of the weekend with Jake. We had fun swimming at the downtown Y on Sunday. We ordered pizza for dinner and watched a rented Pokemon movie. I loved easy going Sundays with him. It was a precious day to connect and regenerate.

Monday morning dawned cold and crisp as we walked to Jake's before and after school program. He chatted about his plans for a school project on simple machines. He was good

with his hands and what he had made so far by himself, out of cardboard, glue and a wood block, was remarkable. He was also excited about Tae Kwon Do practice this evening.. Twice a week, we both took classes as beginner yellow belts. He was more natural at it and I teased him that he would be able to 'kick my butt' if I did not improve. He thought that was pretty funny.

I was content in my life. I loved raising my son, I had a great friend group and my climb up the corporate ladder was fulfilling.

As I walked downtown, I had time to reflect on Bill and my dating life in general.

I was skeptical and a bit jaded about the whole business. Divorced for over seven years, I had dated a number of times. To complicate it, dating is a completely different animal as a single parent. A first date ends up being more of an 'interview' than just having fun with a man I find attractive. A lot of men 'run for the hills' too when they meet a Mom.

Bill did not.

This question swirls around my brain the whole first date, "Would ___(insert guy's name)___ be a good role model for Jake?" If the answer is no, I pull a lever and 'CLUNK!' The guy goes down a vaudeville-like trap door, never to be seen again. I had pulled that lever after many first 'interviews' in the past.

I wondered, "Would he call?"

I was not going to get my hopes up too high BUT I was attracted to the man.

I settled into a busy day at work and did not give Bill much more thought. Noon hours went quickly as I would sneak in a swim or exercise class at my downtown fitness club. At 2:40 pm my office phone rang with an outside number I didn't recognize.

I thought, "Could it be?"

I answered, "Lynn Jones."

"Hi Lynn. This is Bill. We met on Saturday night at Fionn's."

I couldn't believe it. He called on Monday, only two days after we met!

"Hi Bill. That was definitely a fun night." I said, delight in my voice as I leaned back in my office chair.

"I had fun too." he agreed. "Hey ... interested in getting together this week?"

"AAh, yeah," I said. "What do you have in mind?"

"There's a good movie out called Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Have you heard of it?" he asked.

"I've heard it's really good," I replied.

"There's one playing on Wednesday at Eau Claire. Want to go then?" he said, sounding excited.

"I'm sorry. Wednesday's not good. It's haard to go out on week nights as we get up so early. Could we go on Saturday night?" I asked, hoping he would understand.

"Well ok...if I have to wait that long," he remarked slowly.

"Hmmm." I said thinking out loud. "Do you like yoga?"

"Yeah, being a new age guy and all," he said with a quick chuckle and what sounded like his self-effacing humour.

I smiled.

"Well you could come to my club on Friday for a drop-in noon yoga class. We could go for a quick lunch after," I suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," he said. We discussed the details on where to meet and like always, I wished I had more time.

"Sorry, but I need to prepare for a 3:00 meeting...can't chat much longer," I replied feeling regret and looking at my watch.

"No prob," he said. "I'll check in with you closer to Friday." He didn't seem to mind the need for brevity.

"Talk soon." I said and hung up smiling.

On Thursday, I came back to my office from a morning meeting and there was a voicemail from Bill. "Just wanted to say...looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. I'll be at your gym right around 11:45. See you then."

No games. Just straight forward.

I liked that

He was waiting in front at 11:45. His office at Canadian Discovery was six blocks away and he had walked over in the cold.

He greeted me with a quick hug. I signed him in, pointed to the men's change room and to where the yoga class would be. He beat me to the studio and had two yoga mats set up at the back wall. The 40 minute class was good. He was fit, flexible and relaxed. On one of the mat poses, I was facing away from him with my arm out behind. He took the opportunity to grab my hand and squeeze it playfully.

I did not mind that at all.

Afterwards, we went to Sunterra Market to grab a quick, ready-made meal. We found an empty bench, just outside the doors of the Market.

Tucking into my hot Moroccan stew with rice, I said, "Sunterra's food is always fresh and nicely spiced."

“Good place to come after the class as you can get your food fast, “ he agreed, covering his mouth, clearly enjoying his large sandwich.

After we finished our meals and were sipping green tea, I felt brave enough to say. “Bill, I thought you were interested in Susan the whole night. I was absolutely stunned when you asked me for my number.”

I still wanted to feel him out to make sure I was not a consolation prize. Susan is truly beautiful, dated way more and was not a parent.

“No way!” he exclaimed. “I noticed YOU when you walked in right away. You were so bright! Your eyes sparkled and your skin glowed. And you were dressed so lovely - those black suede pants. Whoa! I’m basically a very shy guy. I knew I had to muster my courage to talk to you.”

His reaction was very genuine.

I believed him.

How could I not like someone who used the words ‘lovely’ and ‘muster’?

Susan remarked to me on the car ride home, Saturday night, that she felt Bill had ‘pushed her buttons’ too often on a few topics. She could like him as a friend but that was it. He had also asked her quite a few questions about me which she thought was weird.

In hindsight, I am glad that I thought he liked Susan. I was so relaxed and enjoyed Saturday night – nothing to distract me but beautiful music and great company.

Still curious and ever cautious, I asked, ““Why did you ask Susan so many questions about me when I was right there?”

“ I’m shy, ” he stated, looking down and pausing for a breath. “It was easier to ask Susan because I wasn’t attracted to her. I was pretty sure you were single but I wanted to make sure,” he answered then looked up at me with a sheepish grin.

I wasn’t quite finished.

“And...who’s the guy you were with and why did he leave so quickly before you came over to our table?” I asked.

“Oh. That’s Gordon. He’s a close friend and fellow cellist from the symphony. We’d gone to a movie and decided to stop at the pub after. I said to him,” continued Bill, “Hey Gord, I want to go talk to those women. Could you make your exit now?”

I liked the sound of his low, gentle voice as I listened to the rest of the story.

Bill clarified, “Gordon is an exuberant gay man and would dominate the entire conversation. He’s good fun in the right situation but not this time. He knew that his presence would make it more awkward for me. He’d been ready to call it a night anyway.”

“Wow, that’s great you can be so honest and straightforward with each other, ” I remarked, impressed with the friendship.

“Yeah, Gord’s one of the good ones. Though he can be ‘over the top’ at times, “ he said, then looked up and to the right, furrowed his brow, then held this endearing expression. It was just enough for the innuendo to shine through in a kind and funny way. I chuckled to signal I understood. .

He asked questions about Jake and my work. He was not pushy. He waited for me to tell him that Jake visited his father often and our relationship was strained. He listened to my answers carefully and didn’t dominate the conversation. He was good at situational humour and made me laugh often. Not once did he speak badly about another person.

I liked all of that.

I remarked, “Your diction is impeccable. In the noise of the pub I thought you were English.”

He replied, “I was born in Montreal but then Dad, a chemical engineer – now retired, took an ex-pat role in The Netherlands. I went to private school there until I was 12. I was taught ‘*The Queen’s English*,’” he said in an English accent while he mimed sipping tea from a tea cup, his small finger pointed out. The miming made me notice his engineer’s ring and grin at his antics.

Bill continued, “Then we moved to Toronto where I finished high school. I went to Queen’s for geological engineering but work as a P. Geol. I love the rocks!”

The conversation flowed easily.

I sneaked a peek at my watch. It was 2:00 already. We both needed to get back to work.

We talked briefly about spending time together on the weekend. He printed his home number on the back of one of his business cards. I did the same on one of mine. (What people did before smartphones)

He left me after one of his excellent hugs.

“No need for the lever here,” I smiled at my own inside joke and I walked back to the office.