

Summer of '69. That was the year of the movie. The announcement had come in the form of a letter handed out to all the girls in grades five and six. Were they in trouble? Had there been some girl fight that we hadn't heard about? We stole Cindy Pinn's letter on the way home from school. It said she was excused from classes on Wednesday afternoon to attend the screening of a film on "Women's Issues". At the Strand movie theatre. For free.

The boys in my grade five class appealed to our teacher Mr. Richards. "Sir!" we said, "No fair! Why can't we go?" He was uncharacteristically tongue-tied. "It's just - for the girls." We couldn't understand. We pleaded. "It's a movie!" He didn't budge.

On the day, at 1:30, the girls were told to take their jackets and proceed to the event. It was June, so they were making them walk. We wished it was raining. The movie was from 2:00 to 2:45, questions and answers (about what?) until 3:00, and they could have been back at the school by 3:15. But they didn't have to come back. They had the rest of the day off. Would they be upset by the movie? Gagged out? What were Women's Issues?

All the grade five and six girls in town would be watching the film together. Even the Catholic girls, so it couldn't be about sex. Maybe it was about burning brassieres. There was a lot of that on television. Most of our girls didn't wear them yet. Were they trying to convince them not to burn their bras before they even bought one?

The only person we knew who had done away with her bra was Mrs. Montella. She and her husband had just moved to Kirkland Lake from down south. Toronto, some people said, but they made it sound like Gomorrah. The Montellas were very mod. He was a teacher at the high school, had a moustache, and his hair was just a bit longer than it should have been. She was tall and slim, but had huge knockers, so they stood out all the more. She had long curly dark hair, and wore skimpy clothing. We'd never seen anything like her. My mother said she was dirty.

Tom Bolder was a private eye, and he was the mayor. He was also divorced, which made his being mayor even more surprising. He and his girlfriend - Hugette Foncier - French, also divorced - had their own talk show called What's Your Problem, Monday to Friday mornings on the town cable channel. They talked about Mrs. Montella every day.

Everyone knew about Tom and Hugette's affair. It had broken up both of their marriages. Now they were living together, which was scandalous. Hugette's name was pronounced "You get", and Tom used to say "As in Outta Here!" and they both would laugh and laugh. He had grey hair and a beard, and wore big black-framed glasses. She had a big brunette bouffant hair-do, and wore outrageous things on the show - mirrored mini skirts, or sequined boots - and sometimes he would make her get up and model for the camera. People mostly felt sorry for Hugette. As my mother's friends would say, "Without the ring, she's just giving it away."

Tom and Hugette would sit at a desk and have coffee and cigarettes, and argue about stuff going on around town. When Tom's coffee was empty, he would hold up his mug, and she would make a big show of grudgingly getting him a refill. People would phone in, and try to sell junk like baby carriages or bicycles, but mostly they would complain about Tom's treatment of Hugette, or voice their opinions about the problem of the day. Most of the problems were town-related, because Tom was mayor, but sometimes the callers would give him tips about people seen "stepping out" at all hours; information he might need for one of his private eye cases.

Tom was always getting tips about the Montella's. The callers never used their names, but everyone knew who they were talking about. They were called "Swingers". Or if they referred to her alone, it was usually by one of her nicknames: Tube Top was the most popular, after one of her more shocking outfits, but over time it morphed into Tube Tramp, Lube Top, and finally just The Tube.

Caller: Mornin' Tom.

Tom: Mornin' dear. What's your problem?

Caller: Oh no problem, but I thought you might want to know what I saw last night.

Tom: Oh do tell. Hugette always needs something to take to the hair salon.

(Hugette giggles, and hits Tom.)

Caller: Well, didn't I see The Tube trollin' the parkin' lot of the Fed last night. (The Federal Hotel Bar.) No one in there but Firemen. After a baseball game.

Tom: Well maybe she was looking for someone to put out her fire.

Hugette would scream at this point, and Tom would mumble something about falling into a burnin' ring of fire, which would make the caller and Hugette snort and cackle again.

The ratings for What's Your Problem were second only to Hockey Night in Canada. The Tube was great for business, and everyone was signing up for the cable. With it you got three channels: CBC, French CBC, and channel three, the town station. Their second most popular show was the clock radio. That was all it was: the camera pointed at a working clock radio, with muzac. It wasn't one of the new L.E.D. models, but the old type with the numbers on a roll, that slowly flipped the minutes away. If you ever wanted to know what time it was, you turned on channel three. Sometimes my brother and I would stare at it, just waiting for a good flip. Whenever we had visitors from out of town, they all wanted to watch the clock radio.

Mrs. Montella paid no attention to What's Your Problem, and pretended not to notice the whispers and furtive glances as she sashayed along Government Road. But no one was prepared for what happened the day Pierre Trudeau came to town.

Nineteen sixty-nine was the fiftieth anniversary of Kirkland Lake. They were pulling out all the stops to celebrate. Someone had contacted the Prime Minister's Office and extended an invitation. With great hoopla it was announced that the Right Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau himself would be visiting our town on July First, Dominion Day, as part of Kirkland's Gold Days Festival. My father said the only reason Pierre agreed to come was to piss off the local NDP member of Parliament, who had represented our riding for the past fourteen years.

He would be swinging through on a whirlwind tour that took him all over Ontario in an Armed Forces helicopter. It was decided that the only safe place to land such a beast would be at Culver Park, about five miles out of town on the outskirts of the village of Swastika. The people of Swastika wasted no time in announcing that His Honour would be actually missing Kirkland Lake, and visiting their fair hamlet instead.

Swastika was, and still is, proud of its name, and although Berlin may have become Kitchener, and Volgograd may have gone to Stalingrad and back again, the stubborn few townfolk of "Swas", as it was locally known, never lost the faith. Supposedly named after a design seen on a native canoe by an early prospector, there were many who believed that story to be apocryphal. However it was named, P.E.T. was coming to Swastika, and Kirkland Lake had very little time to prepare.

It was decided that due to the distance from the town to Culver Park, and the fact that the Swastika town council wouldn't wave the parking fee, a train would be made available for all those who didn't have cars. A vintage steam train was going to be in the area that weekend, and it was announced in the paper, on the radio, and of course on What's Your Problem that the free vintage steam train would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for all concerned. I had never been on a train, so I wasn't going to miss the chance to ride one they used in the old westerns, and get to see the P.M. to boot.

It was a very hot and sticky July First that year, and there were hundreds of us lined up at the train station. After half an hour waiting for everyone to board, then another listening to the griping and cursing from those turned away, we finally heard the "All Aboard" from the conductor, and the steam blew as the brakes released. Very slowly we crept out of the station. The black smoke billowed from the stack in the old engine, and everyone buzzed with excitement at the thought of how soon we'd be shaking His hand.

After about ten minutes in the old cars the heat became unbearable, and the novelty started to wear off. People tried to open the windows, but most of them seemed to be screwed shut. We got the doors at the ends of each car open, and many of the kids were basking in the cooling breezes. Then one of the conductors came along and yelled at us to get the hell back to our seats.

As we made the final turn into Swastika, one of my friends figured out how to open the sliding windows. A cheer went up, and as the information spread from car to car, the windows came down and the wind blew in. With it came the black cloud from that coal-burning smoke stack, and it was said that the screaming and coughing could be heard in Swastika before the train. When we finally screeched to a halt at the station, the smiling faces of the locals changed to shock and confusion as one after another black-faced rider stumbled through the doors.

Once we were all gathered in Culver Park, and had managed to wash the soot from our eyes, the crowd was enormous. Thousands had driven, and decided to splurge for the twenty-five cent parking fee after all. The town council of Swastika was beaming. Tom and Hugette, in all their finery, were there on the grandstand to greet the Prime Minister. The microphone system had been checked, and rechecked. The piped-in music had been killed, and the town band ordered to shut up so we could hear the helicopter as it approached. We all stood watching the sky for a sign.

Minutes dragged; the sun burned down on us. The ladies' makeup was running, and the smell of sweat was oppressive. Every once in a while someone would cry out "Here it comes!" We would all strain to listen, until someone would answer "Just a truck," and we'd all laugh and turn to watch the fifth-wheeler lumber by on the highway. Finally, about twenty-five minutes after his scheduled time of arrival, many of the kids wandered down to the beach and started to swim in their clothes. I remained near the grandstand because I wasn't very tall, and was determined to hold my spot. Mayor Tom and the Reeve of Swastika were arguing over which key to which town Pierre would be presented with first, when suddenly a woman screamed.

There in the distance was the helicopter. It was banking in over Culver Lake, and because it was downwind of us, was silent in its approach. None of us had ever seen a real Army helicopter before. It was huge and dark green, and had propellers at each end. As it touched down, the crowd was pulled toward it; then a blast of wind power hit us, and we fell back and parted to let it land. The Mayor and the Police Chief were yelling at people to get back and get down, but no one could hear a sound. The thunder of the Armed Forces had arrived.

The wind from the propellers was fierce, and the crowd formed a tight circle around the aircraft. My friends and I were at the front of the crowd, staring slack-jawed at the women's tops and dresses caught in the updraft. No sooner had the chopper touched down, when the side door blew open right in front of us, and a soldier in a helmet threw down a small set of stairs. A few men in dark suits scurried down, and before anyone had time to prepare, there he was.

He was shorter than he appeared on the news, and thinner. But so charismatic. I heard a few of the grown women gasp. I felt what everyone did; the need to move toward him. The crowd around me surged forward en masse, and he smiled and pushed his way into us. People were grabbing him and touching his clothes, and he was reaching and taking every hand he could. I was picked up by the crowd, and carried along. He was a movie star - a Beatle.

The town band kicked into their Tiajuana Brass medley, and the crowd was lifting and swirling around Pierre, and everyone was yelling and laughing, and calling out that they'd touched him, or crying for a pen for an autograph. He was giggling and waving at people, and holding babies high in the air for pictures, when who should push her way up to him - but Mrs. Montella. The Tube. As soon as she got in front of him, she looked right into his eyes, and started to dance. It wasn't a nice dance, but a dirty go-go dance. She was wearing one of her smallest tube tops, and her big knockers were flapping and slapping. The Prime Minister was laughing, and riveted by the performance. Then he started to dance with her! The crowd cheered at his gumption, and for the moment, forgot the shame of his partner. I was pressed close to them, frozen by the spectacle.

Now in full swing, Mrs. Montella grabbed a magic marker from an outstretched hand, and handed it with a wink to Pierre. He took it, and searched for her autograph paper. Without missing a beat, she turned her back to him, and lifted her curly hair. She was offering him her back to sign. And he did! "Pierre Elliot Trudeau", in the biggest, flashiest, most decadent scrawl you've ever seen - right across her bony shoulder blades, with her bouncing bum rubbing into him as he signed. It was daring - even for The Tube.

The branding completed, Pierre looked back at the helicopter, and the propellers kicked into gear. The service men cleared a path for him through the crowd, and before we knew what was happening, he was at the top of the stairs, waving and blowing kisses to us all. The door slammed shut, and he lifted off before any of us got to sing our over-rehearsed version of "Canada, One Little, Two Little, Three Canadians".

Tom and Hugette talked about the event for weeks on their show. The stories evolved with the telling, and eventually Tom confessed that he and Hugette had had a personal audience with Pierre. Everyone knew he had barely touched the ground, signed The Tube and left, but they humoured Tom. It was good television.

Over the next few months, a few women called in with reports of Tube sightings: she was seen sneaking out of so and so's house, or pressing her bosoms into someone's car window, and always the telling detail was the signature scrawled across her back. The fact that she hadn't washed in months only added veracity to the stories. Hugette added one morning that she had it on good authority that "dat woman never wash before. Why should she now?" Tom came in for the closer: "Once a month, whether she needs it or not!" Hugette screamed, and she and Tom laughed and laughed. When I asked my mother why they were laughing so hard, she just shook her head, and said, "That's a woman's issue."

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On the day the girls got the afternoon off to see the movie, we caught up to Cindy Pinn after school, and bribed her with smokes to tell us about it. She was being cryptic, as if she'd been sworn to secrecy, or we boys were too young to understand, but we got the gist of it. It had something to do with the special boxes of women's toilet paper in our bathrooms at home, and babies.

A few years later, Brenda Foller disappeared for a few months, and even though we were told she had mono, everyone knew she was off having a baby. One of the guys remembered that she had been sick the day of the movie. And she used to babysit for the Montella's. And she had been touched by Trudeau that day in Culver Park. We boys were putting it all together. Brenda was having the Prime Minister's baby. *That* was what they meant by a woman's issue.