

THE
FILM CLUB

A TRUE STORY OF
A FATHER AND SON

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I know nothing about education except this: that the greatest and most important difficulty known to human beings seems to lie in that area which deals with how to bring up children and how to educate them.

— MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (1533–92)

I was stopped at a red light the other day when I saw my son coming out of a movie theatre. He was with his new girlfriend. She was holding his coat sleeve at the very end with her fingertips, whispering something into his ear. I didn't catch what film they'd just seen—the marquee was blocked by a tree in full flower—but I found myself remembering with a gust of almost painful nostalgia those three years that he and I spent, just the two of us, watching movies, talking on the porch, a magic time that a father doesn't usually get to have so late in a teenage boy's life. I don't see him now as much as I used to (that's as it should be) but that was a gorgeous time. A lucky break for both of us.

When I was a teenager, I believed that there was a place where bad boys went when they dropped out of school. It was somewhere off the edge of the earth, like that

graveyard for elephants, only this one was full of the delicate white bones of little boys. I'm sure it's why, to this day, I still have nightmares about studying for a physics exam; about flipping, with escalating worry, through page after page of my textbook—vectors and parabolas—because *I've never seen any of this stuff before!*

Thirty-five years later, when my son's marks began to wobble in grade nine and toppled over entirely in grade ten, I experienced a kind of double horror, first at what was actually happening, second from this remembered sensation, still very alive in my body. I switched homes with my ex-wife ("He needs to live with a man," she said). I moved into her house, she moved into my loft, which was too small to accommodate the full-time presence of a six-foot-four, heavy-footed teenager. That way, I assumed privately, *I* could do his homework for him, instead of her.

But it didn't help. To my nightly question "Is that all your homework?" my son, Jesse, responded with a cheerful "Absolutely!" When he went to stay with his mother for a week that summer, I found a hundred different homework assignments shoved into every conceivable hiding place in his bedroom. School, in a word, was making him a liar and a slippery customer.

We sent him to a private school; some mornings, a bewildered secretary would call us. "Where is he?" Later that day, my long-limbed son would materialize on the

porch. Where had he been? Maybe to a rap competition in some shopping mall in the suburbs or someplace less savoury, but not school. We'd give him hell, he'd apologize solemnly, be good for a few days and then it would all happen again.

He was a sweet-natured boy, very proud, who seemed incapable of doing anything he wasn't interested in, no matter how much the consequences worried him. And they worried him a great deal. His report cards were dismaying except for the comments. People liked him, all sorts of people, even the police who arrested him for spray-painting the walls of his former grade school. (Incredulous neighbours recognized him.) When the officer dropped him off at the house, he said, "I'd forget about a life of crime, if I were you, Jesse. You just don't have it."

Finally in the course of tutoring him in Latin one afternoon, I noticed that he had no notes, no textbook, nothing, just a wrinkled-up piece of paper with a few sentences about Roman consuls he was supposed to translate. I remember him sitting head down on the other side of the kitchen table, a boy with a white, untannable face in which you could see the arrival of even the smallest upset with the clarity of a slammed door. It was Sunday, the kind you hate when you're a teenager, the weekend all but over, homework undone, the city grey like the ocean on a sunless day. Damp leaves on the street; Monday looming from the mist.

After a few moments I said, "Where are your notes, Jesse?"

"I left them at school."

He was a natural at languages, understood their internal logic, had an actor's ear, this should have been a breeze, but watching him flip back and forth through the textbook, you could see he didn't know where anything was.

I said, "I don't understand why you didn't bring your notes home. This is going to make things much harder."

He recognized a tone of impatience in my voice; it made him nervous, which, in turn, made me slightly queasy. He was scared of me. I hated that. I never knew if it was a father-and-son thing or whether I, in particular, with my short temper, my inherited impatience, was the source of his anxiety. "Never mind," I said. "This'll be fun anyway. I love Latin."

"You do?" he asked eagerly (anything to get the focus off the missing notes). I watched him work for a while; his nicotine-stained fingers curled around the pen. His bad handwriting.

"How exactly do you seize and carry off a Sabine woman, Dad?" he asked me.

"I'll tell you later."

Pause. "Is 'helmet' a verb?" he said.

On and on it went, the afternoon shadows spreading across the kitchen tiles. Pencil tip bouncing on the vinyl tabletop. Gradually, I became aware of a kind of hum in

the room. Where was it coming from? From him? But what was it? My eyes settled on him. It was a kind of boredom, yes, but a rarefied kind, an exquisite, almost cellular conviction of the irrelevance of the task at hand. And for some odd reason, for those few seconds, I was experiencing it as if it were occurring *in my own body*.

Oh, I thought, so this is how he's going through his school day. Against *this*, you cannot win. And suddenly—it was as unmistakable as the sound of a breaking window—I understood that we had lost the school battle.

I also knew in that same instant—knew it in my blood—that I was going to lose him over this stuff, that one of these days he was going to stand up across the table and say, "Where are my notes? I'll tell you where my notes are. I shoved them up my ass. And if you don't lay the fuck off me, I'm going to shove them up yours." And then he'd be gone, slam, and that'd be that.

"Jesse," I said softly. He knew I was watching him and it made him anxious, as if he was on the verge of getting in trouble (again), and this activity, this flipping through the textbook, back and forth, back and forth, was a way of diverting it.

"Jesse, put down your pen. Stop for a second, please."

"What?" he said. He's so pale, I thought. Those cigarettes are leaching the life out of him.

I said, "I want you to do me a favour. I want you to think about whether or not you want to go to school."

"Dad, the notes are at my—"

"Never mind about the notes. I want you to think about whether or not you want to keep going to school."

"Why?"

I could feel my heart speeding up, the blood moving into my face. This was a place I'd never been to before, never even imagined before. "Because if you don't, it's all right."

"What's all right?"

Just say it, spit it out.

"If you don't want to go to school anymore, then you don't have to."

He cleared his throat. "You're going to let me quit school?"

"If you want. But please, take a few days to think about it. It's a monu—"

He got to his feet. He always got to his feet when he was excited; his long limbs couldn't endure the agitation of keeping still. Leaning his frame over the table, he lowered his voice as if afraid of being overheard. "I don't need a few days."

"Take them anyway. I insist."

Later that same evening, I braced myself with a couple of glasses of wine and called his mother at my loft (it was in an old candy factory) to break the news. She was a lanky, lovely actress, the kindest woman I've ever known. An "unactressy" actress, if you know what I mean. But a

worst-case scenarist of the first order and within only a few moments she saw him living in a cardboard box in Los Angeles.

"Do you think this has happened because he has low self-esteem?" Maggie asked.

"No," I said, "I think it's happened because he hates school."

"There has to be something wrong with him if he hates school."

"I hated school," I said.

"Maybe that's where he's getting it from." We went on in this vein for a while until she was in tears and I was spouting rash, sweeping generalizations that would have done Che Guevara proud.

"He's got to get a job then," Maggie said.

"Is there any point, do you think, in substituting one activity he loathes for another?"

"What's he going to do then?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe he could do some volunteer work," she sniffed.

I woke up in the middle of the night, my wife, Tina, stirring beside me, and wandered over to the window. The moon hung disproportionately low in the sky; it had lost its way and was waiting to be called home. What if I'm wrong? I thought. What if I'm being hip at the expense of my son and letting him ruin his life?

It's true, I thought. He's got to do something. But what? What can I get him to do that won't be a repetition of the whole school debacle? He doesn't read; he loathes sports. What does he like to do? He likes to watch movies. So did I. In fact, for a few years in my late thirties, I had been the rather glib film critic for a television show. What could we do with that?

Three days later he turned up for dinner at Le Paradis, a French restaurant with white tablecloths and heavy silverware. He was waiting for me outside, sitting on a stone balustrade, smoking a cigarette. He never liked to sit in a restaurant by himself. It made him self-conscious, everybody writing him off as a loser with no friends.

I gave him a hug, you could feel the strength in his young body, its vitality. "Let's order the wine and then have a chat."

We went in. Handshakes. Adult rituals which flattered him. Even a joke between him and the bartender about John-Boy from *The Waltons*. We sat in a slightly distracted silence waiting for the waiter. We were both waiting on something crucial; there was nothing else to talk about till then. I let him order the wine.

"Corbière," he whispered. "That's southern France, right?"

"Right."

"A bit of barnyard?"

"That's the one."

"The Corbière, please," this to the waitress with a smile which said, I know I'm playing monkey-see, monkey-do here but I'm having fun anyway. *God, he has a beautiful smile.*

We waited till the wine arrived. "You do the honours," I said. He smelled the cork, gave the wine a clumsy whirl in his glass, and rather like a cat at an unfamiliar dish of milk, took a sip. "I can't tell," he said, his nerve abandoning him at the last moment.

"Yes, you can," I said. "Just relax. If you think it's off, it's off."

"I get nervous."

"Just smell it. You'll know. First impression is always right."

He took another smell.

"Get your nose right in there."

"It's fine," he said.

The waitress sniffed the top of the bottle. "Nice to see you again, Jesse. We see your dad here all the time."

We looked around the restaurant. The elderly couple from Etobicoke was there. A dentist and his wife, their son finishing up a business degree at some university in Boston. They waved. We waved back. *What if I'm wrong?*

"So," I said, "have you been thinking about what we talked about?"

I could see he wanted to get to his feet but he couldn't. He looked around as though irritated by the constraint.

Then drew his pale face close to mine as if he was divulging a secret. "The truth is," he whispered, "I don't ever want to see the inside of a school again."

My stomach fluttered. "Okay then."

He looked at me, speechless. He was waiting for the *quo* in the *quid pro quo*.

I said, "One thing, though. You don't have to work, you don't have to pay rent. You can sleep till five every day. But no drugs. Any drugs and the deal's off."

"Okay," he said.

"I mean it. I'll drop a fucking *house* on you if you start in with that stuff."

"Okay."

"But," I said, "there's something else." (I felt like the detective in *Columbo*.)

"What?" he said.

"I want you to watch three movies a week with me. I pick them. It's the only education you're going to get."

"You're kidding," he said after a moment.

I didn't waste any time. The next afternoon, I sat him down on the blue couch in the living room, me on the right, him on the left, pulled the curtains and showed him François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959). I figured it was a good way to slide into European art films which I knew were going to bore him until he learned how to watch them. It's like learning a variation on regular grammar.

Truffaut, I explained (I wanted to keep it brief), came to filmmaking through the back door; he was a high-school dropout (like you), a draft dodger, a small-time thief; but he adored movies and spent his childhood sneaking into the cinema houses that were all over post-war Paris in those days.

When he was twenty years old, a sympathetic editor offered Truffaut a job writing film criticism—which led, a half-dozen years later, to making his first film. *The 400 Blows* (which means literally "sowing your wild oats") was an autobiographical look at Truffaut's troubled early years of truancy.

To find an actor to play a teenage version of himself, the twenty-seven-year-old novice director put an ad in the newspaper. A few weeks later a dark-haired kid who'd run away from a boarding school in central France and hitchhiked to Paris turned up to audition for the role of Antoine.

His name was Jean-Pierre Léaud. (By now, I had Jesse's attention.) I mention that with the exception of one scene in a psychiatrist's office, the film was shot entirely without sound—that was added later—because Truffaut didn't have the money for recording equipment. I ask Jesse to watch for a famous scene where a whole class of kids disappears behind their teacher's back during a field trip through Paris; I touch lightly on a marvellous moment when the young boy, Antoine, is talking to a woman psychiatrist.

"Watch for the smile he gives when she asks him about sex," I say. "Remember, there was no script; this was totally improvised."

Just in time I caught myself starting to sound like a dandruffy high-school teacher. So I put on the movie. We went all the way to the end, that long scene where Antoine runs away from reform school; he runs through fields, past farmhouses, through apple groves until he arrives at the dazzling ocean. It's as if he's never seen it before. Such *immensity*! It seems to stretch out forever. He goes down a bank of wooden steps; he advances across the sand and there, just where the waves start in, he pulls back slightly and looks into the camera; the film freezes; the movie's over.

After a few moments, I said, "What did you think?"

"A bit boring."

I recouped. "Do you see any parallels between Antoine's situation and yours?"

He thought about that for a second. "No."

I said, "Why do you think he has that funny expression on his face at the end of the movie, the last shot?"

"I don't know."

"How does he look?"

"He looks worried," Jesse said.

"What could he be worried about?"

"I don't know."

I said, "Look at his situation. He's run away from reform school and from his family; he's free."

"Maybe he's worried about what he's going to do now."

I said, "What do you mean?"

"Maybe he's saying, 'Okay, I've made it this far. But what's next?'"

"Okay, let me ask you again," I said. "Do you see anything in common between his situation and yours?"

He grinned. "You mean what am I going to do now that I don't have to go to school?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"Well, maybe that's why the kid looks worried. He doesn't know either," I said.

After a moment he said, "When I was in school, I worried about getting bad marks and getting in trouble. Now that I'm not in school, I worry that maybe I've ruined my life."

"That's good," I said.

"How is it good?"

"It means you're not going to relax into a bad life."

"I wish I could stop worrying though. Do you worry?"

I found myself taking an involuntary breath. "Yes."

"So it never stops, no matter how well you do?"

"It's about the *quality* of the worry," I said. "I have happier worries now than I used to."

He stared out the window. "This is all making me feel like having a cigarette. Then I can worry about getting lung cancer."

For dessert I gave him *Basic Instinct* (1992) with Sharon Stone the next day. Again, I offered up a little intro to the film, nothing fancy. Simple rule of thumb: Keep it bare bones. If he wants to know more, he'll ask.

I said, "Paul Verhoeven. Dutch director; came to Hollywood after a few hits in Europe. Great visual attack; exquisite lighting. Made a couple of excellent films, ultra-violent but watchable. *Robocop* is the best of the bunch." (I was starting to sound like a Morse code machine but I didn't want to lose him.)

I went on, "He also made one of the worst films ever, a camp classic called *Showgirls*."

We started in, a tawny-skinned blond butchering a man with an ice pick while engaged in sexual intercourse with him. Nice opening volley. After fifteen minutes it's difficult not to make the assumption that *Basic Instinct* is not just *about* sleazy people, it's *by* sleazy people. There's a dirty-eared, schoolboy's fascination with cocaine and lesbian "decadence." But it's a marvellously watchable film, you have to say that. It evokes a kind of agreeable dread. Something important or nasty always seems to be happening, even when it isn't.

And then there's the dialogue. I mention to Jesse that the writer Joe Esterhas, a former journalist, was paid three million dollars for this kind of stuff:

Detective: How long were you dating him?

Sharon Stone: I wasn't dating him. I was fucking him.

Detective: Are you sorry he's dead?

Sharon Stone: Yes. I liked fucking him.

Jesse couldn't take his eyes off the screen. He may have appreciated *The 400 Blows* but this was something else.

"Can we pause it for a moment?" he said and raced to the toilet for a pee; from the couch I heard the clank of the toilet seat, then a gush, as if a horse was standing in there. "Close the door, Jesse, for Pete's sake!" (We were learning all sorts of things today.) Bang, door closed. Then he hurried back, stocking feet thumping the floor; holding his pants by the waist, he vaulted back onto the couch. "You have to admit it, Dad, this is a *great* film."

Get out of here!

She was a pretty woman (243)

Wakes for him (237-238)

have ~~to~~ Thinning dust behind her 252-257

^{beats} ~~them~~ - Seafloor her forehead (263-264)

Pillar ~~travel~~ blanket
| She wants him to sleep
outside

Wasn't he here for what?

Good
Spent leave
after pondering - high heels, dress, make-up

bad person,

(75)

150

150

150

400

(75)