

Fair Lady

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If you were to look closely at the yearbook photo of my high school senior band, you would notice that everyone is smartly and proudly decked out in the bright red jackets that made up our official uniform. Everyone, that is, except one small fellow on the end, who is standing sheepishly in his shirt sleeves. The fellow on the end had given *his* red band jacket to the serenely smiling young lady on his right; she had forgotten to bring hers to school that day.

I was the small jacketless wretch. The young lady's name was Sharon, and there was a time when if she had asked, I would have cheerfully laid my jacket—or even myself—down in the mud for her.

In the winter of 1966, when I was thirteen years old and in Grade Nine, the school music department put on *My Fair Lady*, and Sharon had been cast as Eliza Doolittle. Although I was still just a junior music student, I had been invited to play in the orchestra. The music teacher must have seen some nascent musical talent in me; also he needed someone to play the kettle drums, which no one else wanted to do. I sat in the middle of the orchestra pit, surrounded by my drums, right below centre stage. When I looked up, Sharon was there.

Sharon was a perfect Eliza: beautiful, charming, spirited. Every night I gazed adoringly up at her on the stage as she rained in Spain and danced all night. I was years away from knowing anything about singing, so to me her notes sounded flawless, high and clear and pure. The movie version of *My Fair Lady* had come out the year before, and one evening after our show I told Sharon that I far preferred her Eliza to Audrey Hepburn's. I said it so earnestly that tears came to my eyes and I had to look away. She was gracious as always.

“Oh how sweet. But didn't you hear my voice crack on that high note in Act One?”

Of course I hadn't.

Sharon Dale: the music of her name made me think of a hymn tune, or a peaceful village on a green hillside in Scotland. She had a smooth face with high cheekbones, perpetually wide blue eyes, and soft brown hair that fell over her forehead in even, perfect bangs. I was transported light years beyond my usual base adolescent desires and fantasies. I didn't even dare to imagine any specific anatomical details. In fact, if I had a physical image of her at all, it was of one expanse of smooth, featureless skin from the neckline to the ankles, like a department store mannequin or a Barbie doll.

It was more than a crush; it was an avalanche.

Each morning that winter I would try to time my walk to school so that I passed the street where she lived just at the moment she would be leaving her house; occasionally, if I plotted my course successfully, we would walk the rest of the way together. Once, I was late and ran after her, slipping and falling on the ice; my books and papers scattered across the frozen road. I watched her continue on ahead, disappearing into the snowfall, blissfully oblivious. No pain has ever felt more sublime.

When I was not pondering the impossibility of a future with Sharon, I sometimes wandered alone among the *My Fair Lady* sets after rehearsals, breathing in the smell of freshly cut wood and new paint. One day I walked to the edge of the stage and stood there quietly. Looking out over the orchestra pit, I could see every seat in the empty theatre with one glance. I wondered what it would be like if those seats were filled with people, all looking at me. During rehearsals I would sit at my drums, in the pools of red and blue and green light spilling from the stage, and I would mouth all the words along with the performers. By the time we opened I had memorized the whole show.

After *My Fair Lady* ended, Sharon played percussion with me in the school band. I would faithfully haul the big bass drum out to every football game to encourage her to show up and play it. Once, she did. I would have done anything for her. The lending of my red band jacket for the school year book photo wasn't just a favour, it was the Gift of the Magi.

Of course she never knew. She was at least two years older than I was—a lifetime by teenage measurement—so there was no hope of a romance. She was supposed to be dating her leading man from *My Fair Lady*, Ron, a friendly, simple fellow who was reported to be good looking. To Sharon I was just a friend, kind and sweet, and utterly harmless. I never gave her a reason to think otherwise.

But along with all the unrequited love pangs that stabbed me that winter, an insistent flame had sparked inside me that soon acquired a life of its own. In time, my thoughts of Sharon grew fainter while my dream of performing grew stronger and took form. The magical synergy of lights, music, and people performing for people was drawing me in and was destined to hold me tighter than any person ever could. Within ten years I was singing for a living and within twenty I was performing on stages all across the country.

I saw her once again after high school.

It was in St. Catharines many years later, when I was performing the *Bach B Minor Mass* with the symphony orchestra. Sharon had seen my name in the publicity and had come to the concert. Afterwards we sat for a while and chatted. She had been married shortly after school, had had four children, and was now divorced and living on a farm near Niagara-on-the-Lake. She had never gone back onto the stage after graduation, but she'd been saving her money and hoped to start taking singing lessons again, sometime. Bless her heart, she wasn't really Audrey Hepburn after all, but it was wonderful to see her. The shy, awkward kid who would have turned cartwheels over such a meeting years earlier was simply touched that she had made the effort to come to hear me sing. Those fires of teenage passion had mellowed into a soft glow, where they remain today.

I had once stood on the empty high school stage and created a fantasy image of me, singing and dancing with Sharon in my arms. Over the years she drifted softly out of my dream, and then there was just me, looking out towards the seats in the theatre, ready to sing.