



Gorden Schweers

THE FIRST AND LAST TIME

'They told me love was a four letter word'
--Lyrics by Gordon Lightfoot

Sister Joseph had judiciously placed the smartest of the class in the front rows. As with the other grades, all the way to St. Aquinas High School, the girls sat segregated on one side of the room and boys like Thomas Cunningham and his buddies sat on the other side. The line between the two groups was more like an abyss where the girls lived and played on one side of the school yard; and the boys fought and played soccer on the other side of the building. There was a problem however with Rebecca Ingram, seated as she was at the very front of the class and getting straight A's. Mrs. Ingram, dressed in one of her expensive outfits, came to discuss and have the situation resolved. It seemed that the sun shone in to the room at a certain angle during our first class, hitting Rebecca directly in the face as she sat in the very front seat. First, Sister had suggested that the blind be pulled down for that time of the morning, but Rebecca had complained that by that time she already had a headache. Well, said Sister Joseph, you can't miss religion class if that's what you are suggesting. No, said Rebecca, I love learning about the apostles and the sacraments. Can't I just move to a different desk, perhaps trade desks for that one hour in the morning with Trisha Phillips? She can sit in my place in the morning and then we can go back to our right seats for the rest of

the classes? Rebecca had turned to her mother for support who said, That sounds like a reasonable request, don't you think? Perhaps, replied our Grade Six teacher, but if your marks are effected, then we'll have to see.

So that was how Rebecca Ingram ended up sitting across the aisle from Thomas Cunningham during religion classes, with the blue dress of her school uniform flashing up above her knees when she took her place. At first not much changed. In Rome however, the church was undergoing an enormous transformation under the tutelage of the elderly Pope John XXIII. All of the great and progressive minds of the Church had convened at the 2nd Vatican Council to discuss the radical reforms of an outdated church. It was slated as a new dialogue with the contemporary Church. Sister Joseph embraced the announcements from Rome, introducing her students to such changes as the ending of the Latin mass, the new fellowship in the congregation, and the turning of the altar towards the faithful so that Father Angelo would be clearly visible as he consecrated the water and wine in to the Body and Blood of Our Savior. Every religion class charted these changes, lead by Sister's careful instruction. On this one day in early Spring, Sister had asked the class to do homework on the Council for the previous week, and now, testing them, she challenged any student to stand in class (after raising their hands first of course) to spell out the word 'Ecumenical'. Even from the centre of the room, Rebecca's hand shot up almost instantaneously. A few hands were also in the air but

Sister knew which students merely wanted attention and which were authentically intelligent. She pointed to Rebecca and said, You, first, Miss Ingram. Rebecca stood smartly next to her desk and with her hands clasped in her lap as was appropriate for the young ladies in the school, she ran through a dizzying list of letters in one breath. Ecumenical, she said, E-C-U-M-E-N-I-C-A-L. Sister praised her effort, saying, Well done, young lady. Sister then turned to the black board and with a new stick of chalk in her hand, began to scratch out the same word in large letters for the rest of the class. Thomas was sitting across from Rebecca, looking amazed that she could reel off those letters with such confidence. But when she turned to sit down again, sliding her hand under her dress, her lips pronounced the letters S-E-X-Y to him directly. And when her lips pouted out the letter Y, she said, almost aloud, Y Not? She hadn't spoken those four letters out loud and yet to Thomas, (and Billy Balinhoffer who sat behind him) some magic perhaps allowed him to simultaneously read her lips. He was smitten though at the same time perplexed and a little confused, wondering if he had actually seen the beauty, Rebecca Ingram, spell out a somewhat dirty word in Religion Class. No matter, the seed had been imbedded in Thomas' mind and heart. Billy Balinhoffer pumped Thomas in the back gleefully, saying, Hot stuff, Hot stuff, Tommy Boy! From that moment onwards, Thomas began to watch Rebecca more than ever before, noticing when she was at the black board or taking communion in the church ahead of the boys.

The next time Thomas got in trouble for not paying attention during math class, he was told to remain in for recess, writing out over and over again, I will pay attention, I will pay attention, I will pay attention. Over and over again, he wrote it out in his wire bound booklet, sitting alone in the room with the sounds of his class mates reaching his ears from outside in the school yard. Finally, Thomas had gotten up and stood at the window of the empty room, staring down to the girl's side of the school grounds. All eight grades were scattered over the asphalt, playing tag, hop scotch, and skipping rope. In amongst the pandemonium, one of the nuns in her black robes and stiff white coif patrolled the girls, walking in a complete circle around the school, first through the boy's area and then in a clockwise direction through the girls frenzied activities. Thomas searched around the faces of the girls until he found the long red hair of Rebecca, the girl prodigy. Finally he found her amongst those waiting to leap in to the two spinning ropes that rotated from the hands of two girls while a third leapt in to the centre of the two revolving ropes with the speed and grace of a young gazelle. From his window, with the nun's back to him, he watched, waiting to see Rebecca take her turn. She was poised at all times, it seemed, even when she walked or just stood in class reciting poetry or solving complex equations in her quick mind. Somehow he had heard she took ballet and gymnastic lessons, always with the objective of improving on the development of her young body. Then, as if by telepathy, Rebecca turned and looked back, directly towards where

Thomas was peering down in to the mayhem. She held his gaze for several long seconds, staring intently back at him, before she turned and, incredible as it seemed, she bent over to adjust the strap on her brown oxfords. At the same moment, her dress flicked up exposing a flash of white cotton. Thomas was stunned. It had all happened so quickly that he was uncertain once again if she, his would be Valentine, had performed her exposure deliberately. Her turn to skip rope came up next and she leapt forward, in to the centre of the game, leaping precisely in time with the passage over and under her of the skip ropes. Her red hair flashed in the sunlight as if on fire. She was beautiful! Thomas was smitten.

After recess, Thomas had to approach Sister Joseph with his written detention. His interlude had derailed his attempt to fill up his loose leaf binder, page after page, with 'I will pay attention'. Sister was less than impressed with the paucity of his effort and said so, to the whole class, telling Thomas he would be staying after class to continue with his punishment. At the same moment as others were snickering at his misfortune, Rebecca looked back from her front desk and winked at him, at Thomas! What did that mean? he wondered. When the arms of the clock on the wall stood at twelve and at three, Thomas tried to slip out of class with the others but Sister grabbed him by the arm and told him, Not so fast, Mr. Cunningham. Back to his desk he went. The dozen or so of his lines were put back in front of him and he continued adding one line after another, writing out the senseless insensitive words over and over

again. *Even though I'm in love* I will pay attention; *Even though I am smitten and in love*, I will pay attention; *Even though Rebecca Ingram is the most beautiful woman in the world*, I will pay attention. And so on and so on, Thomas was forced to write down not what he felt and yearned to express in some way, but rather that which was senseless. Yet he had no sooner commenced forcing himself through his ordeal when, at the front of the empty class, he was distracted by the lovely music of her voice. Rebecca had volunteered to remain after school to clean the brushes and help Sister sort out a few papers for tomorrow's lessons. His punishment turned in to a scrawl on paper as he scribbled frantically page after page, looking up as if begging for even the slightest glance from her eyes. But none came. It was as if he was invisible to the two women. Minutes after Rebecca left, Thomas presented his work to Sister who refused to accept it and gave him a detention the following day again. He did not care.

Running out of the school yard, Thomas turned up Forty Second Street rather than down the street to where his destination and home sat at the end of several blocks of houses and apartment blocks. Rebecca lived in the other direction and he was determined to follow her home, watch her from a safe distance. He was being driven wild by all of her innuendos and wanted to know for certain if she knew he was alive and in love with her. In a short while he caught sight of her, walking alone a short block away from him. Her school dress swayed just a few millimeters above the backs of her knees. Her

walk was poised, exquisite. Even the city workers digging a trench along the roadway stopped for a moment to look at the attractive school girl. Then she turned at the end of the block, leaving Thomas to run with his ruck sack beating on his back. He didn't want to lose sight of her, not even for a second. But it was too late. When he got to the corner she was gone! Thomas stood devastated, angry and at the same time close to tears. From a nearby willow tree, under the fall of its weeping branches, he heard his name called and turned. There under the tree stood Rebecca, slightly hidden from view. Thomas, she said, come under the tree for a moment. Intrigued, he pushed the branches aside and stepped in to their private retreat. Rebecca was there, smiling at him. Well, she said, aren't you going to say hello? Yes, thought Thomas, say Hello. Instead he pronounced her name, Rebecca...but could say nothing else.

She reached down for his hand and squeezed it, so that he stood shivering before her. She smiled and said, Lets kiss. Thomas shook his head. No, he said...I'm scared. Of course, she said. But don't be. She placed her other hand on his shoulder and moving forward, she reached across the chasm that was deliberately put between them, and she pressed her delicate lips on to his lips. Her eyes were closed as in a deep mediation as he stared at her, until he closed his eyes too. It was magic. As if in a whirlpool her kiss sent him tumbling down deeper and deeper in to a chasm. After Forever, she withdrew her lips and he came back to the surface with a gasp. She laughed quietly. You're so vulnerable, she said, I love you for that.

Thomas stuttered out the words he could barely believe he could speak – I love you too Rebecca. We're star crossed lovers now, she said. Let me walk you home, okay, he begged. No, she said to his amazement. Explaining she said, My father is very possessive. He wants to keep me and my mother all to himself. We'll have to keep this a secret to ourselves. More kisses, if you promise! Yes, yes, he told her. Then she was gone again. Thomas went back home now, tripping the light fantastic until he saw her again.

In the morning when he got to school, her desk was empty. All that morning he waited, hoping she would step inside the classroom at any second. That never happened. Instead Sister Joseph was called out of the room while the class sat waiting, the boys shooting spit balls around the room while the girls continued to read and a few to talk amongst themselves. Sister's face was graven and pale when she returned to the class. Rather than continue, she appointed Mary Holmes to lead the class in to their next assignment. At his desk, Sister stood glaring at him, and said, Thomas – come with me.

Something was wrong. Down the empty hallways of the school they marched in single file. Thomas was behind the nun but she acted as if she didn't care if he followed her or not. Who, he thought, is not paying attention now? At the door of the staff room, she turned on him and said, I have to go back. Whatever you've done, Mr. Cunningham, you'd best tell the truth for your own good. The door to the staff room was opened and with Thomas pushed inside, the door was shut tightly again. Inside around the staff room table sat

many distraught adults. As soon as Mr. Ingram saw Thomas enter the roof, he leapt up from the table and with blood shot eyes shook his fist in the boy's face, screaming, What have you done with my daughter? Where is she? I want my daughter back again! Behind Mr. Ingram, Rebecca's mother had come after her husband, begging him not to hurt the boy. Thomas was stunned and shocked, shaking his head as if to deny everything. Mr. Ingram withdrew, falling aside but still in a state of shock. Meanwhile a detective in plain clothes had approached Thomas, asking Sister Superior, Is this the kid? She called back, Yes, Thomas Cunningham. Well, Tommy Boy, said one of two detectives, how about you tell us what you were doing following Rebecca Ingram home from school last night, huh? It was as if the words were reaching him from a long distance, delayed by several seconds once spoken. He asked, Rebecca?

Don't play stupid, okay kid, the other detective said. I'm not playing stupid, Thomas said. What's wrong with Rebecca? The detectives looked cynically at each other. Mr. Ingram had joined them again, peering down at Thomas with a wild expression. If you've hurt my daughter, he said, you'll live to regret it. One of the detectives turned to him and said, Look, this won't get us anywhere. Then to Sister Superior, they asked, Is there a place where we can interview this little bugger alone? Sister replied, In my office. Marching the boy before them, they crowded in to the cramped head office. One of the detectives sat down in the chair behind the principal's desk and the other detective sat with one hip balanced on

the desk, tapping his foot as he grilled Thomas with one question after another. Thomas was left sitting in the chair, alone and terrified.

Okay, said the detective behind the desk, Lets start with the consequences first. If you don't tell us the truth the first time around, kid, and we catch you in a lie (and we will!) things will go very badly for you. You may never see your mother and father again. You want that? No, said Thomas in a whisper. What have I done wrong? The other detective tapped his foot, as if listening to music of some type. Why did you follow Rebecca Ingram home last night? Why? repeated Thomas. Look, kid, Tommy Boy, we haven't got the time to play games with you. You read the comic books? Good. Then you've read about Dick Tracy and what happens to criminals who do bad things to other people. Thomas asked again what was wrong. Normally he would have been in tears but he was so frightened and uncertain that tears were his last option. The one detective looked back at the other detective and said, This little bugger is going to be a hard nut to crack. I don't know what you're talking about, said Thomas.

Let's start from the very beginning, okay. You happen to be sitting next to Rebecca Ingram in your classroom, correct. Just in the morning for religion class. She is really smart... And you didn't like that one bit, did you, said the detective. Is that why you chased her home with a snake in your hand?

I never did that, denied Thomas. The detectives looked at each other and then back at Thomas. One of neighbors said she saw you chasing Rebecca with a live snake just last week. She said you were laughing and having yourself a good time. Girls are afraid of snakes. So you thought it smart to scare her by chasing her? Even if we don't get you for her disappearance, we'll throw the book at you for the snake thing, you can bet on that!

I'm afraid of snakes too, said Thomas. In his next breath he added, Has Rebecca disappeared?

Oh for Kriss sakes, said the detective sitting on the desk, You're playing this real well for a two bit amateur. The other detective added, Sociopath. I learned all about them when I took criminology.

The image of the empty desk appeared again in Thomas' mind and he asked for a second time, Where...where's Rebecca?

You tell us, kid. What did you do with her? The other detective repeated the fact that he had been seen following her home yesterday and she was never seen again after that. What did you do with her body? he asked. Look, we'll make a deal with you. You lead us to where you hid the body and we'll get you off with a lighter sentence. Both of the men sat there waiting for Thomas, the terrified sociopath, to come clean. Finally he confessed, I didn't do anything. She wanted me to kiss her but I was too scared. So she did it for me. Thomas looked at the two men who didn't swallow a word he was saying. He continued in the silence that followed, I wanted to go all the way home with her but she said that her dad was really jealous

and wanted to keep her and her mother all to himself. The detective on the desk stopped tapping his foot for a moment and then asked, Where was that? Thomas told him, Under the willow tree.

The man behind the desk had a map of the area with markers placed on it. The willow tree was one hundred feet beyond where the city workers had reported seeing the attractive school girl walking home with the kid following behind her. Could the city dudes see the tree from where they were? asked the detective of the other man. No, he said, looking back at Thomas.

What else did you do under the tree? He asked of Thomas. You in to using force on little girls? Look at any porn back home? Tell us the truth, kid. We're searching your place right now.

Nothing, said Thomas, incredulous that the men were implying that he had filthy intentions towards Rebecca, *the most beautiful woman in the world*.

Why did you follow her home in the first place? The detective asked again.

I'm in love with her, Thomas said.

So she's still alive, said the detective. Where is she?

She was fine when she left me under the tree. She kissed me. We're both in love, she told me so.

And the snake? He asked.

I'm afraid of snakes, Thomas repeated.

When we searched your home, we found the rubber snake you had hidden under your bed. Time to come clean, Thomas. Where

did you stash Rebecca's body? You saw the state that Mr. and Mrs. Ingram are in. If you won't do it for us, have the decency to do it for her parents.

I never hurt Rebecca, ever, said Thomas.

A knock came to the door and one of the detectives stepped outside to talk to a police officer in uniform. After a few minutes, he came back in and said to the detective behind the desk, Well, that's it.

He looked at Thomas as did the other man who wasn't tapping his foot any longer. Then he told Thomas, They found her body inside the wood chip storage place down on Marine Drive.

That was miles away from where Thomas and his beautiful friend had kissed for the first and last time. It would have been impossible for Thomas to transport her body that distance. One of the workers dumping chips from the back of his truck had glimpsed an adult burying something under the landslide of chips and had stopped to look on his way back to the mill. It was a fluke but he had discovered the body of a beautiful young child with long red hair wrapped in a burlap sack. Unless Thomas had an accomplice, an older psychopath perhaps, their trail had gone cold. Still, they admired the kid's bravado in passing off one lie after another and wanting them to believe his alibi.

A month later, during a protracted investigation, Rebecca's Uncle James was arrested in connection with her murder after his

wife caught him masturbating in to one of the oxfords Rebecca had last worn on the day she was abducted.