

OH, MON CHER PIERRE

Judy Millar

It's all true. Pierre Trudeau once pinned a rose on me. The very rose from his own lapel.

I got “pinned” by the PM at a Chamber of Commerce dinner in Kitchener’s Bingeman Park at the height of Trudeaumania – the pinning, his gallant response to my attempt to welcome him to Waterloo County Mennonite country using his native French. (Not that my pronunciation noticeably resembled his native French.) Smitten by his chivalry, I voted Liberal for decades. Not that he noticed. He’d moved on.

For a while I fantasized that I’d have been a better match for him than Margaret - not so flighty and all. But he’d had his chance at the local German schnitzel, and he’d opted for the B.C. filet. Eventually I moved on too.

Or so I thought. Until I happened by a display of John English’s official Trudeau biography while browsing in a bookstore. Sixty sets of Pierre’s piercing young eyes fixed on me from the covers of copies of *Citizen of the World* and its

newly released second-volume successor, *Just Watch Me*. My knees gave way and that 1968 day came flooding back.

Me, a nervous 19-year-old. Big bouffant hair from a night wearing rollers the size of coke cans. Looking fetching (I hoped) in my Jackie Kennedy A-line sleeveless knock-off. And intent on showing off my French by approaching the newly minted PM and wishing him “Bon Appétit” as he prepared to tuck into his rock cornish hen.

The moment is captured for posterity in the annals of the Kitchener Chamber of Commerce’s 100th Anniversary book *Builders and Boosters*, wherein it is documented that “the women were particularly enthralled by the guest speaker In fact, at one point, [Chamber] President Staebler had to ask them to sit down and let the Prime Minister eat his dinner, as they were crowding the head table.” Spoilsport President Staebler was no match for me.

Security would never allow such a scene today, but the bachelor PM relished every minute. He very deliberately made eye contact (oh, those penetrating blue eyes!) with each one of the gaggle of groupies who, until that moment, had been the very proper wives of the local chamber businessmen who were his hosts. Finally he fixed his gaze on the puffy-haired teenager who’d attended the event as the guest of her businessman father.

“Bon Appétit,” I mouthed in a whisper. His face lit up like a Laurentian sunrise, and he looked at me like I was the last girl on earth. Then, without ever taking his eyes from mine, he reached down, unpinned the rose from his lapel and handed it across the table to me.

President Staebler was saying something loudly into the microphone. I couldn't hear him for the pulse pounding in my ear.

And that's how I got pinned by the PM. Well, okay, so I pinned the rose on myself after wobbling my way back to my seat. A technicality. To my mind, on that May day in 1968, Pierre Trudeau and I were pinned.

I can still see him there – my handsome, devil-may-care Pierre – smiling at me across his rock cornish hen. I am shocked now to realize he was ready to cross the tracks toward the wrong side of 50 when he made my teenaged heart leap. *Mon Dieu!* That's where I live now! What if he could see me now?

Hair? Flatter, and thinner. My French is better – he'd notice that – but my neck is worse. Much worse. Crepey – and not as in suzettes. Pierre had a sister named Suzette, so perhaps he liked suzettes. I don't. Not on my neck. It is patently unfair that men age better than women. That an aging Pierre was to die for, and an aging me just looks deathly. Would he even look at me now?

Peut-être. Surely a gentleman like Pierre could see past the crepe in a woman to the loveliness within. He'd never let on that the years have taken their

toll. The Pierre who pinned me would be too much of a gentleman for that.

“Does this skirt make me look fat?” I might ask him – as I often ask my squirming husband. Pierre would know better than to reply, “Define fat.”

And the decisive man who said, “Just watch me!”, and voilà: we had the War Measures Act – a man like that could give a straight answer when asked whether the black one makes me look worse than the beige one. Pierre would never say, “Not worse. Just blacker.”

Or would he? Perhaps, in the marital mansion, Pierre too made the occasional masculine faux pas. Only Margaret would know. And she’s not talking. At least not to me, not since I called her flighty. Which is a shame, considering how much we have in common. She, who wanted to be “more than a rose in her husband’s lapel” – and me, who once wore his rose on mine. (For days. Until it was pretty much just a stem that his fingers had touched.) Both of us once besotted with Pierre. And both of us now “women of a certain age” (at least according to the definition proposed by poet Lord Byron wherein a lady of “a certain age” means a lady who has “Certainly aged”).

Has Margaret’s neck melted too? I never see photos of her anymore, so who can say? She had better bone structure, the Sinclairs always had great bones. I expect Father Time has trampled her more tenderly than yours truly. If Pierre

could see her now, he'd probably still see her as a hottie, compared to this lukewarm Waterloo County-bred schnitzel.

Still, Pierre is gone. And why am I obsessing over Margaret? All these years, I've seen her as my competition. Her marriage to my man ended Trudeaumania for me. I resolved to move on.

Not until the smoldering eyes on those book covers stopped me in my tracks, picked me up and hurled me back to 1968 did it hit me that I might not have moved on, well, all that far. I might, in fact, still be carrying a tiny torch. So I bought both volumes, dipped into the first, and it all came clear to me.

Margaret wasn't my competition. Nor was Camille, his first love – although she introduced him to Proust and to kissing. (And I would have so gladly dipped a petite madeleine into his tea, and kissed away the crumbs – but there I go, competing now with Camille.)

Citizen of the World reveals that Pierre's first love – and we all know the first cut is the deepest – was his adored (and adoring) mother, Grace. Who can compete with a son's love for a mother? Girlfriend number one, Camille, couldn't. Apparently Thérèse came along next – she was the cerebral type (more like me). She and Pierre would write long letters, corresponding about life and love, and carrying on intense philosophical discussions. But Thérèse couldn't compete with Pierre's maman either.

The biography spills it all: Maman Grace saved every word her brilliant baby ever wrote. She made the beginnings of his massive personal archive. Sent him money whenever he needed it. She was his close correspondent and sometimes intimate confidante. She let him bring his laundry back on weekends, even after his move to Ottawa! Apparently, until he moved into 24 Sussex as a middle-aged man, his official address was his mother's house. Well, Pierre was nobody's fool. Why leave the warm nest of such a mother's affections? You may think, had I known back when we were "pinned" that he was such a mamma's boy, I'd have called it off.

Probablement pas. I always liked a man who adores his mother. The hot-blooded French stick up for their mothers. Just ask soccer star Zinedine Zidane. Pierre had enough French blood that if someone had bad-mouthed Grace Elliott Trudeau, I'll bet he would have head-butted the offender too. Oh, for a man who would head-butt to protect my honour! Even if I'd known about Grace "*La Formidable*" (as Thérèse apparently considered her), I'd still have decided Pierre might have been that man for me.

Of course, over the years rumours abounded about all the other women in his post-Margaret period: Margot Kidder, Kim Cattrall, Leona Boyd, to name a few. Even the mother of all divas, "*La Streisand*" herself, was briefly bewitched, they say. *Et pourquoi pas?* I say.

I bear these women no grudge. (Why would I? I was so over him by then.) Anyway, they were never serious marital contenders. Apparently Margaret Trudeau has pointed out in her personal biography (which I have not read, since, as I said, we are not speaking) that Pierre considered these stars and glamour girls fit “only for flirtation.” Those who met the matrimonial mark needed to be – à la Grace - “dependent, at home and available.” (Where I would most gladly have been. Had I not moved on, of course.)

Still, Margaret’s summation of their situation seems a tad testy, don’t you think? But I find there are lots of testy types out there when you talk about Pierre Trudeau. Those economists who continue to scold him for saddling us with a national debt the size of Saskatchewan. Those Quebeckers who call him a “vendu.” (That’s a sell-out. I told you my French had improved.) And how about those alienated westerners who figure he just didn’t get it? Mostly jealous men, I’d say. Pierre was “getting it” all right, and probably getting lots more – if you get my drift – than his frustrated detractors. No wonder they’re cranky.

Instead of carrying on about him, his male detractors might be happier if they started carrying on *like* him.

You want your woman to be smitten with you? Take a page from Pierre’s book: Be adoring and open with her. Reveal your most complex inner emotions.

Write them down in long, involved letters. Then cuddle up and talk philosophy all night long.

If you're a politician (listen up, Messrs Harper and Mulcair!), try adding a little Pierrish panache before Justin beats you to it. Kiss women, not babies.

Boyishly slide down bannisters. Sprinkle in the odd obscenity. Wear buckskin.

Or a cape. Or both.

Gentlemen, here's the main thing: To weaken your woman's knees, look her deep, deep in the eyes. Then unpin, and hand to her, your own rose (or feed her that first morsel of your rock cornish hen) and simply stare at her in adoration. Soon a pulse will begin to pound in her ear. Oh, mon cher, cher Pierre. We would have been so good together.