

Algernon Louis Simon

Dear Algernon,

It thrilled me to find you on Facebook. Otherwise we may never have reconnected after seventeen long years. Because you skipped our high school reunion, I missed learning about your affliction.

When you agreed to meet me last week at the City Café, I must confess initially I had mixed emotions. I don't know anyone in a wheelchair. I didn't know what to expect and then when you finally arrived in your three-wheel scooter, I felt stupid for not remembering that the café isn't accessible. But, you, my main squeeze from the old days, you kept your head up (literally, with the forehead strap) and met me halfway for a coffee, right there in the freaking parking lot. I'll have a word with the owners about installing a ramp.

Speaking of high school, do you remember that SOB? I always forget his name. He taught physics and math. When you joined our class midway through grade nine, he razed you from the get-go, always mispronouncing your name. Probably jealous you could grow a better beard despite your youth. I'm sure he did it on purpose. Eventually he morphed the Algernon Louis Simon listed on the class register to Als. That name stuck, too, didn't it? It was even listed that way in the grad program. God, I hated that guy. I heard from Bonita Schwartzentruber that he got taken into custody for Internet child porn. Figures!

That was the year I fell for you but hard. You, the super jock and now you have a jock's disease. Was this something in your family tree or what? First your mom and then her brother. Speaking of family, Algernon, I'm so sorry I spent our coffee shop reunion griping about the break-up of my marriage. You always were a great listener.

Despite the disease, you looked pretty good. I know that sounds strange coming from me, prom queen and all. Your hands never stopped shaking and you sputtered coffee a few times. What did you call that symptom? Bulgur or bulbar? I should have written it down. I was never the sharpest knife, was I?

Then, when I spouted on and on about my upcoming divorce, I sensed you might disapprove yet you were the strength I needed to have at that moment. Back when we were soul mates, I always viewed you as uber-strong, determined, focused, and capable. Never a withered flower on a boutonnière. When my mother had her breakdowns, you were like concrete supporting a flyover. Thank you for that.

I wish I could explain why we split up. I miss you—the loss of you, my friend, my squeeze, my beau, still stings—like the pain you described from sitting in one position too long. Before she passed my grandmother had those, too. Bed sores she called them. Your homecare nurse must turn you more often to provide respite.

Oh, look at me, harping about my anguish when you're the one who is dying.

I was so delighted to hear that you have acquired adaptive technology so you can keep in touch through Facebook. Did you know that the voice recognition software might not distinguish your speech patterns as the disease progresses? I learned that when my dad had a stroke. He used Dragon Naturally Speaking to dictate patient notes at the clinic but after his convalescence, he had to re-program the software to recognize his voice.

Anyway, I digress. I wanted to tell you that I ran into Neil. You remember him from the rugby team? I was at a rolled ribs competition and boy, between you and me, he looks frail. He's had testicular cancer. Found during a routine exam. He showed a twinge of guilt when I

pointed out he hadn't kept in touch. He asked about you but brushed off my explanation as overly dramatic. I think it's more that he thinks he's all that for surviving cancer so young.

I must confess. I was very jealous of your achievements in high school. Not only were you a jock, but you excelled in drama and music. When you played the lead in Jesus Christ Superstar, you got the attention of agents who helped you launch a successful career in the Shaw Festival. Don't fret that working all those summers making fibre glass insulation might have caused this. Anyway, likely your triumphs drove me away. I always lacked confidence and yet look at me now. Who knew I'd be a reality show host?

I'm not sure why I've written. I'm toppled with guilt. Like when Lennox Lewis used to go for the knock-out. I'll always cherish going to the fights with you. Anyway, reconnecting was as critical as tapping a cantaloupe before sliding it into a shopping cart. It's something I just needed to do.

I know that, honestly, what I am about to disclose probably won't help you. Frankly, you just don't have that much time left from what you told me. But, I promise you, that I'll sign myself up for every walk-a-thon, write letters to every politician, and rally everyone on my TV show to make sure that this disease finds a cure.

Trouble is it's not sexy like breast or prostate cancer. Drooling and flaccidity don't grab public intrigue. But sure enough, it's crappy through and through. I've already updated my Facebook page and added a link to alsont.ca.

As much as it hurts me to state this so bluntly, I must. I cannot meet with you anymore. Sure, we can chat on Facebook now and again. Call me selfish. I realize it's too late but I trust it makes more sense to you than it ever will to me.

With best wishes,

Your friend, Karin

P. S. Forever love you, ALS, forever more.