

## Statute Of Limitations

By Bob Smith

Andrew's first reaction at seeing Gordon again on the first day of high school was a mild frisson of pleasure. He hadn't before thought about the fact kids from all over town would be bussed to the large composite secondary school. That reaction was quickly followed by a sharp mental recoil as he thought, *When did he get so weird?*

They had been best friends in Kindergarten and Grade One. For some reason, Gordon had latched on to Andrew, always stopping for him on his way to school, always walking him home afterwards. After First Grade though, Andrew had moved. Later, he understood that his father had been given a big promotion in his government job, one with a hefty pay increase that let them leave the working-class neighbourhood downwind of the slaughterhouse for the ritzier west end. Like many childhood friends, he and Gordon initially maintained contact with phone calls. There had even been one visit, Andrew's father picking Gordon up and taking him home afterwards. However, email, texting, and Skype were Science Fiction dreams and the long-distance relationship had withered and died. Other boys replaced Gordon in Andrew's life, and other interests grew, from bicycle tag with neighbourhood kids to baseball, hockey, and eventually girls.

Gordon wasn't entirely forgotten, but if for some reason something triggered his memory, Andrew pictured a tow-headed, roly-poly youngster with glasses. Now the straight blond hair was darker but Andrew wasn't sure it was simply the actual shade – it looked in need of a thorough washing. Worse yet, 'roly-poly' had become 'fat'. Andrew himself had been a little chubby, but his baby fat had turned to muscle thanks to his dedicated commitment to sports. That obviously hadn't happened with Gordon. He wasn't obese but he was headed in that direction. He reminded Andrew of the man he had seen on the local TV news who had had to be rescued from the revolving door at Deegan's Shoe Store when his weight caused the mechanism to jam.

And instead of stylish frames, Gordon's thick lenses had heavy black plastic rims that reminded Andrew of the pipes he had seen plumbers carrying into the houses under construction in the new subdivision. He briefly wondered about contact lenses, then realized that they wouldn't be a financial possibility. He was now aware of economic realities unlike when he was six when Gordon lived with his single-parent mother above Bud's Variety on Fraser Avenue.

When that hair, that physique, and those glasses were combined with non-descript beige trousers worn so high Gordon's white socks glared like a street light, 'weird-looking' was an understatement. Add the plastic pocket protector with four pens – red, green, blue, and black – and Gordon seemed like some cartoon character who everyone ridiculed.

He assumed Gordon would eventually recognize him but he seemed withdrawn as he huddled into his desk with downcast eyes, unlike the others who shared tentative smiles with new classmates. A few seemed to know one other person – in Andrew's case, a girl from his elementary school – and there was one group of four guys who insulted each other with raucous laughter. All of them seemed to have nicknames. Andrew couldn't imagine a parent actually naming a child Core or Dirty Ernie, much less Maggot. They called the other one Bull, Andrew assumed because he was the biggest, though not that much bigger than Andrew himself, and not terribly muscular-looking despite his size. But he was also louder, less funny, and more personal with his insults.

At lunch time in the cafeteria, Andrew sat with several other guys from his new class. The Four Stooges, as Andrew was starting to think of them, sat at the other end of the long table. Gordon sat by himself, two rows over.

Conversation was dominated by speculation about the girls in their class and the upcoming Phys. Ed. period. Talk about the girls was entirely hypothetical, though Andrew found it interesting to hear the comments about Emma Tompkins, the girl who had been in his class all through the junior grades. Now he saw her through others' eyes and realized there had been some major upgrades to the skinny, awkward girl he had always ignored.

Gym class was more real, or at least, more immediate. All of them were going back to their lockers after lunch to pick up sports bags with the T-shirts, shoes, and shorts that had been mandated. One fellow said his mother had an ironing mania so he expected his jock strap to be crisp and creased. Someone else commented, "As long as she didn't starch it too."

Changing in the locker room was awkward. However, unruly laughter covered the discomfort most of them felt. Andrew at least had had hockey change rooms to prepare him, though he had been with the same boys since parents accompanied their children to help them dress. This group included strangers, but everyone managed.

Except Gordon. He changed in a toilet cubicle. Beforehand when they were getting ready, Andrew thought he was the only one who saw that but afterwards, he watched Maggot notice Gordon emerge from the stall, then nudge Core and point. He in turn elbowed Dirty Ernie and Bull, directing their attention with a head nod. Bull's eyebrows went up but before he could say anything, Gordon was out the change-room door, along with several others.

Only history class remained. Afterwards, Andrew noticed The Four Stooges rush out and assumed they were the type who couldn't wait to get away from school. However, when he exited the classroom a few minutes later, they were in the hall, surrounding Gordon. Bull was facing him, the others beside or behind.

"What have you got to hide?" Bull sarcastically challenged. When Gordon didn't answer and continued looking at his feet, Bull continued. "Is it something you don't want to make the rest of us jealous with or are you embarrassed? Maybe we should call you Inch." He glanced at his henchmen for the expected laughter, then joined in with a derisive chuckle. He cut it off abruptly, shoving his face closer to Gordon, who was still looking at his feet.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," he ordered in a commanding voice.

By that time, the entire class was in the hall, watching. Andrew knew this could be a defining moment. First, it would establish Bull as the dominant person in the class. Second, Andrew could picture a future of misery for Gordon involving wedgies, locker-stuffing, stolen lunches, and constant humiliation. Perhaps Gordon had not turned into the person Andrew had

assumed he would. Perhaps he would not have even if Andrew hadn't moved. But although he wasn't a close friend any longer, he once had been. There was no Statute Of Limitations on friendship

Andrew decided.

"Problem?" he asked, stepping so close to Bull it could only be interpreted as aggressive.

Taken by surprise, Bull leaned the other way, which took him out of Gordon's personal space.

Andrew continued, without taking the scowl off his face or eyes away from Bull. "You other guys need to back off. I think me and Bull might have an issue."

He wanted to isolate Bull from the others and hoped this might do it. He had learned as a hockey player that the surest way to intimidate another team was by confronting their biggest player. Challenging a smaller one simply allowed them to assume you would cave to their team's toughest guy. Tackling their biggest one first left them no option but to feel daunted. This was only four guys, not a whole team, and Bull didn't seem all that tough. Normally Andrew wasn't aggressive but these four didn't know that, and hockey had taught him all about intimidation.

Bull resorted to talk. "He got changed in the toilet," he said, "not with the rest of us."

Andrew responded by shoving his face even closer to Bull. "So what? His choice. Why does that bother you? You want to check him out? Or maybe compare your PeeWee?"

He heard several chuckles from the surrounding students. Then someone said, "Here comes a teacher."

Andrew raised one eyebrow while lowering the other. Bull said to his comrades, "C'mon, we'll miss the bus."

"Hey Gordon," Andrew said loudly enough for them to hear as they left. "Let me know if they hassle you again." He sensed Gordon wanted out of the spotlight so he turned and walked through the students who were still standing around.

"Nice one, Andrew," said Emma Tompkins as he passed her.

# Writing Raw

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The End

**Bob Smith bio:** Bob Smith has diverse life experience, from factory worker to children's camp director to Adult Education teacher. He lives in Central Ontario in Canada where he invents rich characters, detailed settings and plots that resonate. He has published stories in print, ebook, and on-line format.