

Pierrot

I must look bored. Why else would my mother call her sister to send a boy down from Montreal for the summer? Maybe it's easier this way. My four sisters can look after and entertain each other. But one son, there's the wild card, the loose cannon, the terrible tease. I'm getting to that age where sometimes, it's not talking back exactly, not the full-blown boy rebelling against his mother stage, no I'm just entering the resistant phase, making things difficult for those who try to tell me what to do. Ten years old.

My mother puts out the call to her sister, 'Send me one of your boys down for the summer, my boy needs company'.

After not a lot of deliberation, it's a no-brainer, my aunt decides to send the most troublesome of her seven boys. He's not a bad kid, just really full of beans, her pest. If you ever meet Pierrot, you'll see what I mean. He's one of those hyper people with nervous energy to burn. If he's a light, he's flashing; if he's an amplifier, the volume button is up to ten, full treble; if he's a dog, he's a puppy chewing up your shoes.

'Come on, get ready. Your cousin's coming in on the train in half an hour.'

I have met Pierrot a couple of times at family gatherings and I'm not too sure about this. I might be a crazy monkey sometimes, but he's the whole darn zoo! Still, I'd better be there when he comes in.

The train rumbles into the station, whistle wailing, smoke blowing out the stack, a big old mechanical whale coming into shore. It's crowded with shoals of travellers, most on their way to visit Niagara Falls and environs. Here he comes. Running down the platform with a wide toothy grin, carrying a cardboard box, dressed in a loud Aloha shirt, yellow pants and cheap black sneakers, my cousin, the one, the only Pierrot!

What is it about cousins? They're not your brother or your sister, but there's a strong connection, like somehow you're part of the same thing. It's family I know, but something more than family. It's tribal. We are youth, knowing, adventure, frolic!

A punch on the arm, a punch back. He drops the box and starts chasing me. My mother yells, 'Hey, you two, slow down!' I stop my shenanigans and come back. When my mother calls out like that I listen, or else! Pierrot is savvy enough to follow my lead.

'Soar – reee ma tante. 'ow you like my hinglish? I bin pratsick'.

Wow! I didn't know he spoke English. This is good. I'll still be able to play with my friends and not have to translate into and out of *Quebecois* all the time.

Pierrot is given the small bedroom next to mine. Talk about a stranger in a strange land! Everything is new to him. It's clear that I'm to be his guide. But he's twelve and from the city, I'm ten and live on the outskirts of a village. So it's a push and a pull, a give and a take, eyes open, eyes closed. I can see it's going to be a summer like no other!

Next morning, I give Pierrot the neighbourhood tour. He's crazy about the grasshoppers, chasing them around like he's a big tall gangly spider, then rolling around in the long grass, smearing sticky yellow dandelion pollen on his face. You get the picture.

We sit down for lunch, parents, four sisters, Pierrot and I. Grace is said, food is dished up. Pierrot looks at my plate, he's disturbed.

'Mon oncle, 'e 'as four patates, and me I 'ave hon-lee treeee!'
'Hey Pierrot, in this house we don't count potatoes. There's plenty of food for everyone, as much as you want.'

That's true, in our family, no matter what, there was always plenty to eat, good wholesome freshly cooked food. You could see his ribs. If ever a kid needed filling out, it was him. Didn't he dig in! Meal after meal, we all sat back grinning as he worked his way through his second, third,

and sometimes fourth helping, with still plenty of room for the cakes, pies, and 'cooo-kies' my mother loved to bake. Amazingly, he never put on one pound over the summer; that furnace of twitchy nerves kept burning up the calories, day and night.

I had told my friends that my cousin was coming down from the city. Soon the kid from across the road came to check him out. Bobby Novakoski spent summers in our village. He was a chubby kid who liked to tell you about all the stuff they had back in Buffalo and how good he was at everything. He talked a big game, but he tended to hang back when it came time to really try something. Still, we had some good laughs and I enjoyed his stories. I valued his friendship.

So, we're sitting in the front room, when with a 'dat da da dat da da!' in comes Pierrot. It's the strangest entrance I've ever seen. Somehow he has scrunched his ears into their ear canals, creating a weird cauliflower effect. As well, he has turned his eyelids inside out so that both eyes are covered by this dark red veiny skin, and he's walking with both arms out stiffly before him like some robotic creature out of a horror film. Then this guttural roar starts oozing out of his throat, 'yehrrraah'. Bobby jumps up and goes screaming out of the house. I can't help myself, I hit the floor in a fit of laughter.

Word gets out about the crazy kid from Montreal. Soon we're a wandering pack of boys, with Pierrot in the lead, performing more and more of his amazing tricks. He can pop either shoulder out of the socket and set it back in. He can do the splits. He can touch his nose with this tongue. He can make farting sounds in his armpits. He's a one man band of body sounds. He's a bag of pretzel contortions.

One day things get serious. A box car challenge is announced by some American kids, the Winger brothers. They'll take anybody on, even hot shots from the big french city. They want to cut Pierrot down to size, he's getting way too popular. We all meet at the top of Ridge Road one Saturday morning, six teams. Pierrot and I have been working on our box car for a week. We've cobbled our rig together from some used baby buggy wheels, a large peach box from the orchards, a hardwood steering handle from my old red wagon, as well as various springs and rods that are attached to it, but really have no purpose. The whole thing is painted

white with bright blue fleur-de-lys. We test the hill the day before and do some tweaking: oiling up the wheels, tightening screws, throwing in a cushion for padding. Every other team's been working hard as well. There's a lot at stake, a framed and signed picture of Rocky Marciano in his most pugnacious pose. We line up. The count down: ten, nine, eight . . . three, two, off we go!

The Winger boys take an early lead, followed by Bobby and his dog Brandy. Pierrot and I are picking up speed. He's in front steering and our rig starts swaying. We bang into the back end of Bobby and Brandy and off they go, into the ditch. Nobody ever slams into the other guys in our races. This isn't bumper cars. Pierrot doesn't care. 'Tabernacle! Dis is way fun, cousin!' He's aiming for the Wingers now. Everybody's screaming. Fifty yards to the finish line, where Maple Street meets Ridge Road. We're catching up. Neck and neck.

'Whoa!' That's exactly what Helen Brunner yelled. 'Whoa!' Like in the cowboy movies. 'Whoa!' Right at that moment she's galloping towards us on her pride and joy, her new horse Ranger, full tilt down Maple Street. He rears. We freak. Spinning and turning and piling into the Wingers, all of us spilling out, boys and boxcars rolling over the finish line in a tangled heap. Helen doesn't stop. She can't. Ranger is out of control and off they careen down our lane, in a cloud of dust.

The argument lasted all summer. 'We won that race, fair and square.' 'No, we did!'

Next day, my parents had pity on us with a trip to the Amusement Park. This was the engine that drove the town, people coming from near and far for the rides and the beach. Pierrot was bouncing with delight. Like a fish to water, like a monkey to a tree, like butter to toast, this was his element. So, most days that summer we find our way to the Park.

'ey cousin, do whaat H'I do.'

How can I not? It's way fun. Pierrot's creativity is remarkable and rewarded. One example. He figures out what days the Park was host to large company picnics, and hatches a plan. We throw some dirt on our faces, mess up our hair and clothing, and generally make ourselves look

like street urchins. Then we stand on a busy corner, hands out. Before you know it some older gentleman or lady comes up to us.

‘Hey, could you young fellows do me a favour. I’ve got this roll of tickets and there’s no way I’m going on all these rides. Would you mind taking them? That would really help me out.’

‘Oh, tank you sir, if we can ‘elp you like dat, it would make us so ‘appy!’

Win win. The man feels good about doing something for these poor kids, and off we’d go with a huge roll of tickets for the rides. I remember one day going on the Comet roller coaster six times in a row. When I got off I couldn’t speak. Shell shocked from the fear and utter exhilaration that mixed like some kind of chemical soup in my brain.

The real star of the Park that summer was a new ride. It wasn’t just a ride, it was a marvel of modern engineering. Inside a very tall and large cylindrical building was a new invention from Germany, the ROTOR. Pierrot can’t wait to try it. I’m not so sure, but I follow his lead. We climb and climb a long turning staircase and come to a big green door. We enter a round room. People are standing against the wall, looking rather like deer in the headlights. The round room begins to turn. As the room reaches a whirring speed, the floor begins to drop. Magically, centrifugal force holds us to the wall. We are trapped in an endless time loop. After what seems an eternity, the room slows down and everyone abruptly slides back down to the floor. Being vulnerable to motion sickness, I’m feeling dizzy in the head. I head out the green door, careen down the stairs, and once outside head for the nearest bush, and retch my guts out. Pierrot comes up behind and he’s laughing his head off. For days after he’s miming out my unfortunate and rather epic vomiting attack and at the most inappropriate family moments he whispers out, “ey cousin, *hro.. hro.. hrotor!!*”

One of our favourite treats was to go and see a movie. We had no television in the house, and the only way you could see a movie was to go to the Beach Theatre, pay your twenty-five cents, and watch the matinee. We loved the cowboy movies, you could almost smell the horses and taste the dust. It was always a wild scene, kids throwing popcorn from the balcony and loudly booing the bad guy in the black hat on the black

horse and standing up crazy cheering for the good guy in the white hat on the white horse.

This one particular day, we got permission from my mother to go to the movies, just me and Pierrot. This was quite a privilege for two young fellows such as ourselves. The only word of warning from my mother involved something about making sure we came right home after the movie was over. We assured her we would.

Things did not go as planned. First of all, and it was not our fault, but there was a break in the reel and they couldn't show the cowboy movie 'Tall in the Saddle', but we were assured that we would enjoy the movie to replace it. We sure did, it was called 'The Rose Tattoo'. At one dramatic point in the show, the beautiful and vulnerable Italian heroine must raise her shirt just enough to show the hero the one thing that will break the code and save his life, the rose tattoo! Didn't we love that! Pierrot of course insisted that we hide in the balcony while they cleared the theatre and let in the next crowd.

We stayed for the second showing of 'The Rose Tattoo'. By the time we set off for home, we started to figure that maybe we were in trouble for being so late, probably late for supper even. As we turned the last corner for home, we KNEW we were in trouble, because here comes my mother up to meet us, and she is not happy.

She didn't say much, she didn't have to. It was the only time I ever got spanked. I had to pull down my pants and lie on my bed. She whacked me once with a plastic tennis racket, and I let out a blood-curdling scream. She stopped at five whacks. I'm sure the neighbours figured I was being either boiled in oil or roasted on a spit. Pierrot's turn, five whacks as well. He doesn't utter a peep. Not a word. Totally quiet.

We deserved it though. My mother proceeded to explain that she was very worried that something terrible had happened to us and she was responsible and we are old enough to know better. She was right.

I can still feel that cross-hatched pattern of that plastic tennis racket every time I think about it.

Last day, Pierrot is leaving, flying back to Montreal. We're having a party for him. Family and friends. We have cake and ice cream, cookies, pop, balloons and we're singing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. Up jumps Pierrot onto the patio wall. It runs under the big old chestnut tree. He grabs a large horse chestnut fruit. This isn't a plum or a peach or pear or apple, this is a big green hard spiky thing that is the outer shell for the hard unedible fruit inside. He takes the thing and plucks it into his mouth and begins to chew.

Gloriously, he yells out, 'Dis fruit is good to heat!!'

Doesn't blink an eye, keeps chewing, making faces. Shouted protests, 'Pierrot don't! You can't eat that. C'est pas bon! No, don't eat it!'

He stands there triumphant, king of the wall, chewing and gasping and finally swallowing the whole darn thing.

That was he, Pierrot, my cousin. Boy, was I proud!