

Get Him to the Reunion

David Lightfoot

“Sure hope you can get him to come, Jackie,” my wife Lynn says to me just before I board. “There’s just three months until the reunion. He should be just as excited as you are.” I nod, kiss her goodbye and head to the plane. As I sit in waiting and take off, I rehearse every persuasive thing I want to say. I have three days to convince my old friend to come to our twenty-five-year high school reunion.

I’m just glad I have my own business so I can take time off in an emergency. The reunion planning committee didn’t call this an emergency, but they *are* eager to get everyone in my graduating class there. Yet, one ex-classmate has emailed repeated refusals: David Rogerson. He’s pretty active on social media, but as I’m on the promotion team, I’ve been having a hard time getting him to the reunion website or their Facebook page.

I switch planes in Toronto. As I’m airborne for the second time, I think of all the reasons why David doesn’t want to come. I know he’s a professional caterer, in charge of the catering wing at a four-star restaurant in Miami, where he lives; he had such a talent for cooking and planning menus back in high school, insisting on being the head cook in Mrs. Labatt’s class. He always posts about the parties and events he successfully works on social media. So, I know he’s not a failure in any way. But the way he talks, it’s as if he can never return to where we grew up.

I know his parents are both very psychotic, known for going from happy and blissful one minute to screaming and beating the next, David being their most frequent target. Even worse, they would encourage his four older sisters to hit him as well. They would always complain to friends and teachers about what a screw-up and a “blockhead” he was, as my parents said with great concern. They always encouraged him to come to our house; they never let me go to his. His cooking skills were as much a curse as they were a blessing. His mother and sisters forever criticized him for it, claiming he was becoming just as womanly as them.

“You’ll never be a real man for anyone,” they’d hurl at him, and others things more hurtful and obscene.

But never mind the jocks beating him up, even the girls in our classes would criticize him. “Sorry, David,” they’d tell him, “But I can’t be your girlfriend if I have to be the breadwinner. I’ll be needing a man who can support me.”

Then there’s what happened over Christmas break in senior year.

It was New Year’s Eve and we were welcoming the New Year in Winnipeg when a big blizzard struck. I was dating Cindy Grant, the most popular girl at school, and both of us had drunk heavily while David had nothing but soda pop. After the party, David, as the designated driver, took us home in whiteout conditions, but the roads were slick with ice, and his car went sideways into a ditch. Shockingly, Cindy’s seatbelt snapped and broke, and she hit the rear passenger window, killing her and getting David arrested on manslaughter charges.

Needless to say, his reputation got worse when everyone found out he was driving the car that killed Cindy. The only times students would talk to him was to harangue or criticize him, or call him a cold-blooded killer. Even the teachers frowned at him, criticizing him even when he did things right. My parents encouraged me to stand by him, even though everyone judged me for it, including Cindy’s family. I expected his own family to turn on him. I remember at the trial, the judge asked his parents what punishment would be best, and both pointed at him and loudly shouted, “*Send him to hell!*” The judge was more shocked than I was. David got acquitted because he was a good Samaritan, but all this made him very disgraced in our small city.

In all this, David told me he had a rich uncle who gave him fifty thousand dollars and advised him to apply for colleges in a warmer climate. I knew what that meant: “*Leave Manitoba, go as far away as possible, and never come back.*”

This was twenty-five years ago. When I caught up with him on social media, I learned he’d become an American citizen and started his life over. He’s never been married or had children; he likely refuses to. I still talk to his sisters and still-living mother sometimes, but it’s as if David doesn’t exist.

It’s mid-evening when I arrive in Miami. At arrivals, I search the crowd of people waiting for friends and family who’ve returned from business trips and spring vacations. I know from David’s pictures that he has light brown hair and is five-foot-nine. I see people holding papers and cards with passenger’s names on them. I start looking for my name, Jackie Marsden, when I find it raised over someone’s head in the back. I point it out and call, “David? David Rogerson, is that you?”

He acknowledges me and calls me over. When I approach him, he only smiles and doesn't reach out to hug me. He bumps my fist instead. I should've known he's not a hugging person. I don't know what else to say, but his work comes to my mind. "So, you told your boss you had to leave early to meet me," I say.

"I told him you were visiting me," David replies. "I also told him I just may take a week's vacation this summer for a certain... reunion." His voice trails, and he looks in other directions except mine. I can tell he's nervous about this.

As I collect my luggage, David asks, "So, did you have any dinner on the flight here?"

"Macaroni and beef," I answer. "One of those cheap frozen dinners from the store."

He chuckles and searches for his charge card. "Let's dine in the food court before I take you to my place."

David has a small condo in Coconut Grove. Next morning, I awake in his guest bedroom, the sound of a shower running. It's getting on seven-thirty, so I change clothes and wait for him to come out of his bathroom. I feel so restful and refreshed. Thank heavens for foam mattresses.

David comes out all dressed as I'm doing some bending exercises. He grins and says, "Well, I see that foam mattress was some help."

"Lynn's been complaining about back problems lately," I say. "We're talking about getting a foam mattress for ourselves if that'd help."

David prepares some batter for pancakes and breaks open the sausages. Time to get to the point of my visit. "I suppose you're wondering why I came," I say. "I'm here on behalf of the McClung High School 25-year reunion committee. We've got responses from everyone saying they'll be there, and they're putting money aside for tickets. They're e-mailing with updates on their job and career statuses and personal lives for the reunion book. They're even talking about booking hotels and joking about making arrangements to stay with their still-crazy mothers." I give out a small chuckle, and I'm relieved when he gives a small laugh in return. "But we haven't

gotten anything from you, not even the fact that you've had the same home for what, fifteen years?"

He turns to me, frowning and feeling sickened, all our classmates' nasty looks in his head. "I'm pretty sure nobody wants me there," he says. "Especially those who used to be friends with Cindy." He sighs as he turns on the coffee maker. "I'm sure some of *them* will be planning memorial videos of her just for the event."

"Come on, that's what you would do for the prom," I remark. "For the reunion, the memorial video would commemorate those who passed in the time since graduation."

"Thanks for the difference. Still, I'm sure that a few of them will give some speeches about what would've become of her, especially Rhonda Salisbury and Colleen Antwerp." He flips the pancakes and turns the sausages. "I'm not forgetting how they would cry whenever they saw me, imagining you and Cindy there with me. I had English with Colleen in our last senior term, and she would stubbornly refuse to cooperate with me whenever Mr. McCarthy grouped us together for projects."

"I remember that," I say. "McCarthy would ask what was wrong with her, and wonder if she needed more grief counselling." More memories start returning. Cindy, Rhonda and Colleen were all on the same cheerleading squad. The three of them were pretty tight as friends.

"I do talk with them on social media," I tell him. "Every year on her birthday, Rhonda sends Cindy Grant a 'happy birthday in heaven' message with her high school picture. I always reply that if it weren't for you, neither of us would've made it home alive. The weather was just bad, and they declared a weather emergency when they found my car."

"How does she reply?"

"She tells me how hard it is to let go. Cindy was so beautiful and popular."

David puts two pancakes and three sausages on each plate. "Yeah, the prom queen who got killed *before* prom. I'm terrified that's what everyone's going to think when they see me there. You know how old memories like this resurface once they see certain people." He checks the time and sees it's getting on eight-thirty.

"Oh, I don't want to be late," he says, then packs his breakfast to go with two packets of syrup. Before he leaves, he hands me a transit card and a spare key for visitors. "Listen, let's continue this later tonight, shall we? I'm busy preparing for a charity function I'm catering

tomorrow. I'll add you to the list as a special guest. In the meantime, don't feel you have to stay here all day. You can use that card to go wherever you want."

"I'll try to be here when you get home," I say. "Meanwhile, is there anything you want to take out for tonight? I'm in a pretty helpful mood."

He thinks about it, then replies, "I'll do a little bit of quick shopping on the way home. Thanks for offering, though."

When he's gone, I unpack my laptop and plug in an outlet underneath one of David's end tables. I'm thankful he shared his wi-fi information when I got settled; I find his connection and type in the password. I connect to Facebook and go to the reunion page selecting "*Visiting Miami, Florida*" as an activity. I type, "*Visiting David Rogerson's place in Miami. To those in our graduating class who have confirmed, who would like to see David at our reunion in August?*"

I take David's advice and go out an hour later. I head to a shopping mall, finding an electrical outlet in the food court. I click on the wi-fi, go to Facebook, and among the new notifications are twenty likes and reactions, and nine new comments for my post.

From Andrea Holm Justman: "*What? David Rogerson? I thought he fell off the planet after high school... LOL. Jackie, you should invite him.*"

From Mike Swift: "*Sure, I'd be interested to see what's become of him. Is he still the cooking wizard of Mrs. Labatt's class? LOL.*"

From Jeff Danbury: "*OMG, you were able to reach out to him? Please tell him to come, and tell him I'm sorry for cruelly targeting him in gym class.*"

From Cheryl Amberson: "*Yes. What's he doing now? David, if you see this, I'm sorry for blowing you off when you asked me out.*" Followed by an embarrassed emoji with a blue forehead and a crying emoji.

From Diane Michelle Brucedale: "*Jackie, PLEASE insist that he come out. Tell him I'm sorry for what happened when Cindy died.*"

Of course, there are also the negative comments, three of them so far. They don't have the names Salisbury and Antwerp anymore, but I know it's Rhonda and Colleen, respectively. I can't reveal Rhonda's response because it's harsh and blasting, with notorious curse words, but Colleen's response is, *"No. Tell him to stay in Miami where he belongs. His presence will make everyone who loved Cindy uncomfortable. In fact, maybe he should have gone to Hawaii or Australia. But under no circumstances should he ever return to our hometown."* Tagging Rhonda, *"Rhonda Phelps and I will never forgive him."*

I show a bit of excitement. I can't wait to show David. I leave an update on him in my reply, saying he's now head caterer at a four-star restaurant that does "family dinner" type meals. I type, *"Please keep the support coming, he needs to see this."*

I get back an hour before David, still plugged into his connection, checking my Facebook obsessively. So far, my post has received close to forty likes and reactions. Eleven more messages have come up giving approval and apologies. I notice a few replies in Diane's message, and there's an argument between herself, Rhonda and Colleen, the other two accusing her of "getting over Cindy already," and saying, *"Some friend of hers you turned out to be."* Both their responses have two angry reactions each.

"Grow up, will you?" I say to the computer as if Rhonda and Colleen are here. "It's been twenty-five years."

David arrives home with a package of boneless chicken breasts and three packages of rice and sauce mix. Still on the reunion page, I take him to my computer and show him my post. He looks stunned as he reads through all the comments.

"Oh, I don't know what's going to happen if I see Rhonda and Colleen there," he moans.

"Yeah, I remember how upset they got when I told them I met Lynn," I reply. "They couldn't believe I was over Cindy already, like we were the ones destined to marry. And this was in my junior year of university."

"Yeah, I tried dating when I was in my twenties and starting my catering career," David says. "But I always broke it off with them after about six months or so. I never really trusted anyone well enough to get married. When a boy gets yelled at and hit mostly by women growing up, it affects his ability to relate to the opposite sex, and kills his desire to be a father."

"You don't even want to adopt?"

He shakes his head. “I could never provide a loving home for a child. Hitting my wife and kids seems to be my destiny. For God’s sake, Jackie, many of those beatings I got from Mom and my sisters, I still have nightmares about to this day.”

He goes to put some water in a big cooking pot. “I have nieces and nephews who don’t even know I exist,” he continues, “and if I were to have a relationship with them, my sisters would treat me like a sex offender. They and my mother likely don’t have any framed photos of me, and those poor kids probably aren’t even allowed to say my name.”

“How do you know about them?” I ask.

“I have some aunts, uncles and cousins in Ontario whom I visit at Christmas and summer holidays,” David answers. “I thank God they were able to open up to me after a few years. They’ve shown me pictures and cards my sisters sent.” He puts the chicken on a small grill and sighs. “I’ve gotten past my parents, but my sisters won’t even accept my friend requests on social media. They’ve likely blocked me. Belinda’s birthday was just last Saturday, and I couldn’t even wish her a happy day. I only heard about Dad’s death through his siblings, and this was weeks after the funeral. Mom and the sisters didn’t even want me there. I’m really scared about going back home.”

I go up and take his hands. “But everyone else is eager for you to come, and they’re really sorry for what they put you through back then. You’ll think about it, won’t you?”

He pauses, then checks the water, adding butter. “Yes, I will,” he says. “Perhaps if my boss gives me the time off, I can go. But I’m leaving when the reunion is done. Maybe if I tell some uncles, they’ll invite me to their cabin and I’ll take a road trip. I’m long done with my family and their drama.”

I try to help him think of happier things. During dinner, I tell David about all the reunion preparations done so far – the venue and the caterer already booked, the entertainment, the design of our website. I even take my cell phone and show him pictures of all the decorations and mementos, and David looks impressed by all the colours at least.

“It all looks very attractive,” he says. “If I didn’t have my doubts, it’d make me wish I could fly my catering team out for this. I’ve never catered a high school reunion before.”

After dinner, David goes to his laptop computer to update his charity event on Facebook. When he posts, I offer to take over for a bit, and he lets me. I go to the high school

reunion page and show it to him, adding him as a follower. Then I go to our reunion's website and add it to his Favourites list.

He notices some activity in the friend requests, fifteen new people requesting to friend him. These are names of our former classmates who've confirmed attendance – Mike Swift, Diane Brucedale, Jeff Danbury, Cheryl Amberson, and many others. More notices keep coming in, and I wonder if David can keep track.

But I don't think about this. I'm just happy that more people have come around. "See, David?" I say. "Everyone else wants to make it up to you. They decided their animosity is all in the past, and they're asking for forgiveness. I think you can give it to them by showing up at the reunion."

David is trying not to get emotional, but I can tell he's touched. "All right, you convinced me," he says. "I just hope I can save up enough money. I'd hate to disappoint you all." Then he points at the friend requests and chuckles. "I'll take care of all of these after my catering job is done, and after you leave."

We spend Saturday morning doing as much catching up as possible, me talking about my hardware shop, and my wife and family. He leaves for his work at eleven, but before he goes, he lends me some of his clothes to wear. It's a semi-formal event, he says, and I never thought to pack anything like it. He picks me up at five, and I stay beside him most of the night. When I mingle, I tell people, "I'm an old friend of the caterer." This is among the most memorable points of my visit.

As I prepare to leave Sunday morning, David tells me more about what he's been doing, the catering firms he's worked at before running the catering wing of the family restaurant.

"I'm proud of your success," I say as we wait for my plane. "I think everyone else would be, too. I just wonder how I can break this to your mother and sisters."

"Don't bother," he replies. "To them, I'm just a bad memory."

It's two months before the reunion, a Sunday afternoon. I quickly check my e-mail and I'm happy to see a message from David, the subject line reading, "Summer Reunion Update."

"Hi, Jackie," he writes. *"I'm writing to let you know that I've been awarded my paid vacation for the middle to the end of August, and my two weeks will start at the reunion weekend. So that's going to be my first stop. I've also had great pay outs from our charity fundraiser while you visited, and two other events I've catered last month, so I'm putting money away for airfare and hotel. We'll see about a rental car, though. Here's hoping the reunion doesn't turn into a disaster for me."* He includes his mailing address for an extra ticket and thanks me for visiting.

Feeling victorious, I call everyone on the promotion team, telling them, "Please take David Rogerson off the 'missing' list and see if there are any tickets left for him." I recite the address he gave me. When I hang up, I click to reply to David's message and open up another Internet window, copying the links for all the local hotels, pasting them in the e-mail.

In the message, I type an assurance: *"So glad you agree to come. You won't regret this and you'll have a great time, I promise."*