



ZOOM LESSONS

by Monique Polak

My English teacher is reviewing the course outline. I can't think about readings, assignments or due dates. All I can think about is Laurence Tessier. I nearly hyperventilated when I saw those brown curls, those sparkling dark eyes in a box at the top corner of my Zoom screen. Just to be sure I wasn't hallucinating, I checked the name at the bottom of the box. Laurence. I've had a super-sized crush on Laurence Tessier since Sec. 1. Me and every other guy at Labelle High School.

I didn't know Laurence was coming to Collège St-Joseph. My parents pushed me to apply. They warned me there'd be a ton of work, but that there was no better preparation for university. They're both St. Joseph graduates. That's where they met. If I'd known Laurence was coming to Collège-St-Joseph, I wouldn't have needed convincing.

I hope she doesn't turn off her video. Because she's not using one of those Zoom backgrounds, I can study not only her face, but also her bedroom. Imagine some nerd like me getting to see inside Laurence Tessier's bedroom!

Laurence is sitting at a white desk. In the background, I see a bookcase and a neatly made bed. For a second, I feel bad for not having straightened my duvet. But then again chances are slim Laurence has even noticed we're in the same class.

Because here's the thing: I've never said a single word to Laurence Tessier.

I've never been much of a talker. Not with anyone, but especially with smart, good-looking girls like her. It's not that I don't have things to say to them, it's that I don't think of those things at the right time. It's a problem that is sometimes associated with being on the spectrum.

One to two per cent of teenagers are on the spectrum, but I'm lucky because I'm what's called *high functioning*. Which basically means I'm good at school, but terrible at making friends -- and meeting girls.

"Geoffrey Mendes," a voice says.

It takes me a minute to realize the teacher is taking attendance.

Luckily, it doesn't take me that long to unmute. "Uh here," I say.

The teacher smiles into the screen. "Welcome, Geoffrey," she says.

"Uh..."

Luckily, I don't have to worry about coming up with something else to say because she's moved on to the next name. I'm starting to think there's an upside to Zooming. Until everyone gets vaccinated for COVID-19, all our classes are going to be Zooms.

I get a message in the chat box on my Zoom screen. Laurence is messaging me.

HEY DUDE, THIS IS A CWOT. BUT I'M GLAD 2C I'M NOT THE ONLY 1 FROM LABELLE

I can figure out what 2C means, but I've never heard of a CWOT. I open a new window to Google it. It's an abbreviation for Complete Waste of Time.

I think I'm supposed to send a message back to Laurence. My palms get sweaty as I try to come up with something.

I LIKE YOUR HAIR

I hit send. Maybe I shouldn't have said that.

The teacher is explaining how she wants each student to find a buddy. In case we miss a class or need notes. "You can choose a buddy. If you prefer, I can match you with someone," she says.

I'm about to ask the teacher to find me a buddy when I get a second message from Laurence.

LET'S BE BUDDIES!

I guess she didn't mind what I said about her hair.

This time, I message right back. I keep my answer short. And I don't mention anything personal.

OK

Week four of the semester. I'm actually hoping Laurence will miss a class. If she does, she'll have to message me for the notes.

Laurence doesn't miss a class. She doesn't message me on Zoom.

She texts me on my cell.

WAZZUP?

I don't tell her what's up. Instead I write

HOW DO YOU KNOW MY NUMBER?

I ASKED JEREMY FOR IT

Jeremy and I were friends in elementary school. Mostly I think because our moms were friends.

...

Three dots means Laurence is writing something else.

WANNA HANG OUT?

Laurence wants to hang out with me?

WE CAN'T. THERE'S A PANDEMIC.

Why did I press Send? Because I'm thinking that hanging out with Laurence would've been worth catching COVID-19. Even if I end up on a respirator.

WE CAN MEET UP OUTSIDE. WE CAN BOTH WEAR MASKS.

Why didn't I think of that?

So that's what I write –

WHY DIDN'T I THINK OF THAT?

Laurence writes back –

YOU CRACK ME UP

I crack her up?

We meet at the park across from Collège St-Joseph. Even with a mask covering her nose and mouth, Laurence is beautiful.

We are sitting at opposite ends of a grey wood bench, respecting the two meters distance rule. Laurence lifts her head towards the college. "Can you believe it's almost mid-term and we haven't stepped inside? Not even once?"

"I know," I say, "it's weird. So, do you want me to help you with homework? Is that why you wanted to meet up?"

Laurence's brown sparkly eyes look surprised. "No, that isn't why. I don't need help with my homework, thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

Laurence laughs. I don't admit I wasn't trying to be funny. I'm just glad she thinks I'm funny.

Then another thought occurs to me. Maybe Laurence knows something I don't. Maybe I *am* funny.

"I've been super lonely," she says.

Because I don't know what to say to that, I just nod.

She keeps talking. "All I do is homework."

“Don’t you watch Netflix?” I ask her.

I love the sound of Laurence’s laugh. “You have a great laugh,” I tell her.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you can be very charming?” Laurence asks me.

“Nope.” This time, I laugh.

That’s how our friendship begins. I don’t say anything to Laurence about how much I’d like to have a girlfriend. And not just any girlfriend. What I’d like is to have *her* for a girlfriend.

But maybe friends is a good place to start.

COVID-19 sucks big time. Like everyone else, I want the pandemic to end.

But whatever happens, hanging out with Laurence will never be a CWOT.