

# PHiDelity

a novel

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illustrated by  
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# **PHiDelity**

**by**

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# 1 Steven

CBC Radio Studios/Portage Avenue, Winnipeg/ April 4, 2014

*"Good evening and welcome to Sunday Night Comedy Canada. I'm your host Steven Hill and I'm delighted you could join us. Tonight we have a line-up of fabulous comic sketches, recorded live at Pantages Theatre in Winnipeg. A warning: you're likely to be subject to frequent fits of uncontrollable laughter - either that, or we'll all be out of a job. But in that case, don't feel too sorry for us; we've all been assured that positions are available at Canada Post, designing genuinely Canadian signage for the new multi-mailboxes. But back to our show tonight. We've asked a very simple question: What's so funny about marriage? Tonight we gladly offer a number of answers to this question. Our first comedian is from Lower Sackville, Nova Scotia...."*

**I**rony, thought Steven, listening uneasily to the playback. Iron knee. Sitting by himself in the tiny editing room, already halfway through the package of black licorice on his desk, Steven smiled at the play on words that jumped out at him. It was a twisted smile, a battered smile. Iron Knee: it could well be the name of a legendary First Nations warrior, he thought, like Stone Face or Silver Eye or Thunder Foot. But then again, it could also be the name given to the first-ever recipient of knee-replacement surgery, some plucky old guy who smoked 30 homemade rollies a day and who gamely laughed off his fame when he left the hospital, unsure if the surgery had increased or decreased his pain.

Steven shook his head sharply. Doesn't true irony have to possess at least a small measure of subtlety? he thought. Or a certain breadth of interpretation? Because there was nothing subtle in this. There was absolutely no expanse of meaning to cross, no thoughtful perspective to examine. Here he was, doing the final editing on next Sunday's comedy hour, carefully inching his way through the skits. Marriage. Infidelity. Divorce. And here he was, face to face with real infidelity, in his own life, in his own marriage, deeply anxious about confronting his wife but knowing that he must.

One stand-up after another did his shtick. Six of them in all on the final recording. Four of the original ten hadn't made it. He really wasn't pleased with most of the choices, but it wasn't his call. All were different takes on the same things. Why almost no marriages last any more; why some rare ones do. Demanding wives, numbskull husbands. Spouses cheating on one another. Sex and the lack of it. Some were more vulgar than others. But public broadcasters were allowed swearing now, within specified limits, so editing was somewhat simplified. Very few beeps or blurs were required.

Steven thought back to the time the sketches were recorded, live at Pantages Theatre, three months earlier. He and Rae were in the audience that night. At the time, they had all seemed rather clever and certainly funny enough, but not so much now. Stopping and starting through the set-ups and punch-lines, his impressions ranged back and forth between weary indifference and outright dismay.

Unshaven, Steven was wearing the same crumpled shirt and old blue jeans for the third consecutive day. He was a picture of a troubled man: randomly pausing the playback, taking the headphones off, fidgeting in his chair, walking out into the hall and pacing. Then back into the office, headphones on again and another crack at the sketches. Over and over again, he went through the same questions and the same possibilities in his head. Like he had been for days. How would he bring the subject up? What, exactly, would he say to Rae? It was just impossible to picture himself, to prepare himself. But he had made up his mind. He was going to talk to her. Tonight.

*"...I remember my grandparents fifty-fifth anniversary. My parents threw a big party for them. I was talking to my grandpa and at one point I asked him about married life. 'Everyone talks about how long you and Grandma have been together. And how you two have always gotten along so well and*

*how you never fight, never argue. What's the secret to such a successful marriage?' My grandpa took a big puff on his cigar and said 'Well, it started the day we got married, on the way home from our wedding. We'd only gone a mile or so when the horse started giving us some trouble, slowing down and stopping. After I gave him a little nudge, he got going again. That's when I heard your grandma say, in a low voice: 'That's strike one.' A bit later, the horse stopped again. 'That's strike two' she said. The third time the horse stopped, we were darn near home. Grandma grabbed the shotgun that was lying at my feet and shot the horse in the head. I couldn't believe it! It was a good old horse, the only one we owned. So I protested about it. 'What in the world did you do that for?' I said to your grandma. 'That's strike one' she said to me, all calm and cool. 'We never had a problem after that.' People don't believe me when I tell them that story. But it's true. Everyone's horrified about the horse. Hey, me too. I love horses. I surely do. We keep a nice palomino at our place back home, a beautiful animal. I take great care of that horse. One day I was brushing him down and my neighbour walks over. He's a poker-faced, religious old bugger. He says to me 'You treat your horse better than you treat your wife. How do you think that makes her feel?' I says 'Who? My wife or the horse?'... "*

Steven bristled at the horse skit, which he'd vigorously lobbied against. Why in the world would anyone think it was funny? Amazingly, none of the programming staff had said a word about laughing themselves hoarse. A small token of restraint, which he greatly appreciated. They all knew how vile he considered these sketches...especially the horse. It was nothing more than a salaried exercise in masochism. Every time he played it back, his core hostility to the maritimer increased. He hit pause and got up and paced again. Maybe it wasn't just Rae. Maybe he'd been at this job for too long.

His mind wandered haphazardly... Another brilliant idea. The Wright Brothers. A three-man rock band. With Orville on lead, Wilbur on bass and the youngest brother Wingo on drums... Ridiculous. How could he be so ridiculous? How could thoughts like these just randomly elbow themselves into the front of his mind? It wasn't the first time he'd asked himself this. His stock answer was that he was entirely blameless, an unwitting victim of his own internal nonsense. But he had to admit he usually provided himself with decent entertainment. And, on second thought, this latest idea wasn't that bad. Most jokes about the Wright Brothers were about flying, or some kind of pun on 'right'. At least this one had Ringo in there. And at least it was new... Maybe he could sneak it on to the Gord Wames Show, his other weekly program. He'd better do it soon though, that show was getting the axe.

Maybe he should wait until tomorrow morning. Saturday morning. Lots of time, they'd both be calm. While they were reading the newspapers over coffee. That would be a perfect time to bring it up. To do it tonight? The more he thought about it, the more he backed off. She'd get home late from her committee meeting, she'd be tired, she'd be blabbing on about the meeting. She'd want to fix something to eat...

He could just say 'Rae, I have to ask you something...' he thought, and then go from there. If she said 'what is it?' he could just come out and say it: 'have you been having an affair?' Or maybe, 'are you cheating on me?' For days, over and over again, Steven had composed and recomposed versions of this terse speech. While he worked on programs. Over meals and coffee breaks. Walking to the car. At night in bed, anxiously flipping over from side to side in a futile attempt to shut it all out. While Rae, unable to sleep, wandered around the house or sat in her study reading. And immediately after every version came re-evaluation, followed either by broad edits or by his backing off the idea entirely, defeated by fear and worry. It was the same today. Instead of openly accusing her, he thought, and humiliating both of them, why not give her a chance to come clean, to lay it all out there? To see just what she would say...

It was three weeks since he'd found out. For the first week, he'd walked around in a daze, not knowing what to do or what to say. Terrified. Waiting for Rae to say something, to explain. As the days went by, he started staying later at work, minimizing contact, trying to figure out how to approach her. Waiting for her to say something. And then she left for San Diego. Another conference. She must have met the guy down there. She must have. There was no other way to explain the timing of it. In all her years at the university, she had never travelled at the end of March, so close to final exams. And now, more than a week had passed since she'd returned. He was sure she'd say something. But she hadn't. She must have noticed that he was avoiding her; that their conversations were ridiculously short and unengaging. How could she not have noticed?

No. He had to do it tonight. It had been long enough. Too long. There was *no* good time. No matter how it came out, it was going to be difficult and humiliating and horrible. But he was going to talk to her tonight.

## 2 Rae

Department of Sociology/ Review Committee Meeting/  
Tier Building/University of Manitoba/ April 4, 2014

At 5:45 pm on a Friday, the old limestone building was virtually abandoned, the echoes of hallway conversations and classroom lectures having disappeared for another day. Outside a small seminar room, at the very far end of the third floor hall, sat Rae Millikan, waiting to be called into the committee meeting. She sat on a lacquered wooden bench, under the south-facing window. Her eyes shifted from the worn stone floor to the peeling paint on the walls, to the high, dimly lit ceiling, and then back again. Of medium build and wearing large-rimmed glasses, Rae looked much as she did on any other day at university, modestly dressed in slacks, a cotton shirt and flat black shoes. Her hazel-coloured eyes looked serious and intense. She wore no makeup. Beside her on the bench lay her handbag, her leather jacket and her briefcase. After trying a number of positions on the hard bench, she had finally settled her five-foot-six frame as comfortably as she could, with her legs crossed and her hands clasped together on top of them.

Fifty-two years of age, Rae had been on the faculty of the Sociology department for more than twenty years. This building, these halls, these lecture rooms, were very familiar. As recently as last year, she'd given one of her courses here, one floor above, a graduate course in research methods. On this day, her thoughts were restless and led in many directions. Her prepared statement for the committee. Images of her just-completed day's work. Mental preparation for the work directly ahead; students, exams, papers. Personal things she had to attend to: shopping for food, filing her tax return, taking her car in for service. And Steven, her husband. What would she tell him? When would she tell him?

As far as her testimony to the committee was concerned, Rae was well-prepared and felt no stress or anxiety. Despite her strong personal interest, anticipation of this meeting had carried with it little more than a mild feeling of annoyance, of wanting it to be done, over with, in the past. One less appointment to remember.

Such a lack of emotion was hardly surprising. Rae was well-used to meetings like these, having suffered through her fair share over the years, including a number of times as chair. Indeed, her own progress through the ranks, from Lecturer to Full Professor, was due in no small part to her deliberate participation in committees like this one. Review-committee meetings were less narcoleptic than most other committees. Like promotion-and-tenure committees and grant-funding committees.

Usually there was something significant at stake for an individual. Someone whose personal history and academic record were laid bare, for the committee's inquiring eyes to pick apart and judge.

Today, the matter before the Sociology department committee was disciplinary in nature. And Rae Millikan was present not as a member of the committee, but as an invited witness. A department colleague and personal friend of Rae, a professor named Michelle Riker, had been accused of academic misconduct. Rae's interview was the last to be conducted by the committee.

Fully a year had gone by since the committee first learned of the case. The complainant was a student in Riker's fourth-year honours course *The Modern Sociological History of Sexuality*. She alleged that Professor Riker had had a close personal relationship with one of the students in the course, a woman who was subsequently awarded a grade of A+. The complainant had received a grade of B+ in the course. She claimed that her term papers and other course work were demonstrably as good as the A+ student. Initially she'd gone to Professor Riker with the complaint. The matter eventually reached the consideration of the review committee.

Across the disciplines, virtually all grades and all grading schemes were subject to some degree of latitude. In Michelle Riker's grading scheme, the weight assigned to classroom participation was one highly subjective element. Another was the physical appearance and formatting of term papers. Such latitude could easily affect an assigned grade by a half-point. With a gentle nudge one way or the other, a grade of A might well be a B+ or an A+.

Complaints and appeals regarding grades were usually resolved in a straightforward manner. Grades and grading schemes could be examined, explained and defended in a satisfactory manner. If necessary, neutral third-party assessments were employed. Under normal circumstances, the judgement and integrity of the professor would be supported. In this case however, the issue was more complex. Had the professor created or placed herself in a conflict-of-interest situation? If so, had this affected any grades awarded? If the answer to the first question was yes, the committee would have to consider the second question. A second affirmative answer would lead to a recommendation on disciplinary action. If the answer to the first question was no, then the complaint could be readily decided, with the grades upheld. So the primary question was whether Professor Riker had had a 'close personal relationship' with one of her students.

How was the committee to establish whether a 'close personal relationship' existed? What exactly did this mean and what evidence would they accept in establishing it? Did it imply a *sexual* relationship? How much time spent together, outside of course work and classes, was deemed to have crossed the line?

There was another approach to the matter. But this waded into murkier waters. A student-professor relationship could be entirely appropriate; a private matter between consenting adults. If all grades in the class had been awarded fairly, the nature and extent of the relationship would be irrelevant. But to some people, this would totally overlook a critical question: Was the student's part in the relationship - her consent - a result of the professor's position of power and authority?

These were all sticky questions, questions that the committee hoped to avoid. And so, faced with a highly subjective allegation about an assignment of grades, and the claim of a close relationship between a professor and student, the committee hoped to be rescued by the testimony of Rae Millikan.

For her part, Rae certainly had the information the committee needed. Not only did she know about the relationship between Michelle Riker and her student, she'd been in on it from the very beginning. But she would rather have chewed off her own leg than betray her friend. And furthermore, as far as Rae was concerned, a faculty member's private life was outside the purview of any university committee. It was one thing whether any standard of academic integrity had been breached. Rae firmly believed that this had not been the case. But this did not seem to be the committee's main focus. What was really under investigation, what everyone on the committee really wanted to know,

was whether Michelle Riker had been involved with her student. Two dikes, muddying the halls, for everyone to gleefully examine and inspect.

Waiting to be called in by the committee, Rae was absolutely resolved. She did not intend to lie. She would simply refuse to share any personal information about her friend. This was not a court of law, after all. And even if it had been, she could have found any number of reasons to avoid sharing such personal confidences.

Staring down the hallway, Rae's thoughts kept coming back to Steven. The conversation that loomed. Because she *had* to tell him. She was *going to* tell him. She had to. Now that she'd found out about Jeremy, there was no excuse for putting it off..

As the reality hit her, a sharp jolt of fear shot down her spine. How would Steven react? He'd be so hurt and feel so let down. What would he say? What would he do? So many times she had imagined the look on his face when she told him. It was horrible. Horrible. *She* was horrible.

How much did she really need to tell him? Did it make any difference? When was the right time?