

NARRATIVE INQUIRY The Songs and Silences of Adolescent  
Alienation

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### ABSTRACT


This thesis is a narrative study. It examines, through interpretive story, expressed existential alienation where it occurs specifically in late adolescence and early adulthood. An examination is also undertaken of societally-induced racial, gender and class discriminatory factors which promote sensed alienation or separation from self and others in adolescents and young adults. Young people studied range in age from 16 to 20 years, and all but one either currently attend or were recently enrolled in a senior high-school institution. An examination is also undertaken in this thesis of exclusionary, negative or inhumane pedagogical high-school climates and practices which either initiate or exacerbate student alienation.

This thesis is a narrative study. It is not grounded in objective, scientific or quantitative research. It is phenomenologically hermeneutic in its orientation, and it seeks illuminative understanding of the human condition of adolescent existential alienation, rather than extrinsic, objective understanding. This thesis is grounded in a collection of short stories. It records real-life human experiences of adolescent alienation, and it does so through unequivocally interpretive and creative narrative. Its songs are those of the young people it features, and its silences are those left by the narratives which give those songs voice.

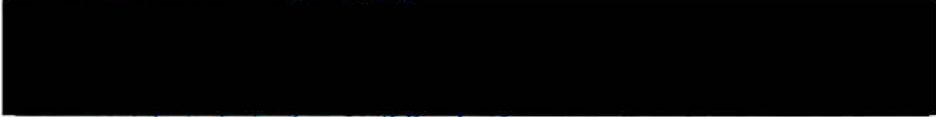
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## DEDICATION

To Neil for all his help and support throughout.

**Chapter I:**  
**The Roar Beyond the Silence**

## **Chapter I:**

### **The Roar Beyond the Silence**

*“This is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world - as if it were a structured narrative”  
(Kermode, 1979, p 145)*

This thesis draws its inspiration and its passion from the collection of short stories upon which it is founded. These are not any stories. Although wide-ranging and diverse in their sources, these stories share a common and intense focus. They are hinged and bound by a theme at once elusive yet immediate: they tell of human alienation. More specifically, they tell of the grinding and often inexorable alienation so common to adolescence.

This thesis examines specific societal injustices or pressures which may already have promoted sensed existential alienation in some adolescents as they enter high-school institutions, but more specifically, this thesis attempts to unmask the further astoundingly alienating practices which those students often encounter once within those institutions. Students featured in the narratives of this thesis are of both sexes and range in age from 16 to 20 years. They hail from widely diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and bring uniquely and provocatively diverse political, ethnic and societal attitudes and belief systems with them to their lived experiences. Those experiences are recounted in the narratives upon

which this thesis is founded, and are further examined and explored for the meanings inherent to each. The specific research methodology this study employs is reviewed at length in Appendix A.

Why alienation? And why adolescent alienation? Why examine a phenomenon so commonly observed by educators and scholars throughout centuries of pedagogical endeavour? What might we expect to illumine or discover or uncover from such a study? And why even bother at all? Van Manen (1990) has said that hermeneutic phenomenological research is often grounded in ethical and moral perspectives. Such is the case with this study and these stories. This thesis attempts to examine and illumine the pain of adolescent existential alienation, and thereby in an emancipatory manner, to bring about not only critical awareness of those alienating practices, but to bring about perhaps, too, potential change initiators within current pedagogical circles.

Teaching is an odd and unusually demanding profession. It asks more than the provisions of guidance, wise counsel, and informed instruction from its practitioners. It asks something more: it asks for a commitment, a joyful hope, and an embracing of others which transcends the constraints of mere pedagogy as we commonly define it today. Teaching is a powerfully caring act, and perhaps educational research is more powerfully caring yet. "In doing research we question the world's very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world. then

research is a caring act we want to know that which is most essential to being” (Van Manen, 1990, p 5)

However, perhaps nothing disturbs or intrigues the educational researcher more than the overt or suppressed alienation apparent in the behaviours of so many adolescents encountered in the educational field today. And such alienation only further confounds and unsettles the attentive pedagogical observer, as it appears not only to spring wilfully from within the troubled psyches of adolescents themselves, but it appears so often, too, to inspire only virulence and acrimony in the responding practices promoted by those very educational bureaucracies designed to support young people. An examination of this troubling educational phenomenon is undertaken here, and possible solutions or recommendations emerge both implicitly in the narratives which embody this thesis, and explicitly in the related literature review which is found in Appendix B

### A Phenomenological Orientation

*Quite often, a researcher’s first task, even before the formulation of the proposal is to convince doubters that the research will be useful” (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p 15)*

The research presented here is essentially phenomenologically hermeneutic in its orientation. This thesis is also grounded firmly in story. Its stories are hinged and held around a central theme of adolescent existential alienation - alienation often initially societally induced - but

alienation also frequently and further promoted by high-school bureaucratic and exclusionary pedagogical practices. Its stories are drawn from real-world, lived human experience encountered through everyday classroom praxis, and implicit analyses and interpretations of those lived experiences emerge in a somewhat unpredictable way as each narrative unfolds. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, herself a collector of stories both ancient or as yet untold - stories both spawned within the morass of human experience, but conceived, too, within the dark realms of dreams or nightmares - tells us that the teller of stories is herself often unsure of their eventual outcome, and is instead driven and bound by the power and poetry of the narratives themselves. And the power and poetry of this study's stories are, indeed, for me curiously spirited and always unruly things.

In this thesis I write about my students and I write about myself. I was part of the world I describe in the narratives of this thesis. Van Manen (1990, p. 18) writes that "Unlike other research approaches in other social sciences which may make use of experimental or artificially created test situations, human science wishes to meet human beings . . . there where they are naturally engaged in their world". I write as a teacher, a friend, and an equal to the students I describe. I write as an authentic, involved, integral part of their world, and I recognise that I, too, played a central and significant role in constructing the very realities of that world.

which I attempt to reveal and reflect upon in each story included here. I was engaged in the immediate and somewhat turbulent lived experiences of the young people I write about, and through reflective narrative I search not only for understanding gleaned from those described lived experiences, but I search, too, for self-understanding, drawn from the complexity of my own experiences within the vast, unfathomable and apparently random matrix of human interaction which I explore here. For this reason, phenomenological hermeneutics expressed through creative narrative presented itself as the most powerful and persuasive inquiry approach available to me, although throughout I recognised the somewhat self-revealing, unsettling, and even personally threatening aspects to such a study. The phenomenological observations presented are at once concrete yet idiosyncratic, and the passion of shared, lived, human experience which mutually bound me to my adolescent informants provided a well of evocative and often disturbing research material. For this study, for these adolescents, and for this researcher, no other research procedure appeared profitable, or, indeed, even feasible.

This study is subjective. It is personal. It is narrative. It illuminates, but in doing so it casts deeper shadows. It reveals, but it finds only further impenetrable and concealed layers. It has a voice, but its strongest voice is in the silence which stories so often leave behind. Van Manen (1990) views phenomenologically constructed research as evocative, archetypal,

and even poetic “Phenomenology, not unlike poetry is a poeticising project, it tries an incantive, evocative speaking, a primal telling” (p 13). And so with this study I, too, am driven by something of a primal telling, and the telling is at once a joyful and melancholic experience. And the telling is cradled in story. “Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up...” (Estés, 1992, p 20). Stories live in our imagination and our emotion: they instruct, inspire, and often challenge us.

Finally, I write as a woman, and I note with somewhat perverse surprise that this thesis is, in some elusive yet identifiable way, *the work of a woman*. I in no way regret the feminist flavour to some of my stories. It is less that I am unable to account for this flavour, than that I am astounded by its pervasive and insistent presence in so many of my narratives. The voices of alienated young women - plaintive but often angry voices - are heard in this thesis, and they speak of isolation, betrayal, and loss. Belenky, Clinchy, McVicker, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) are five researchers who sought, through intensive and lengthy interview procedures, to uncover not only “women’s ways of knowing” but to give voice, too, to the silenced voices of those women who as yet had not found a venue where their speech, their poetry, and the stories of

their lived experiences might unfold and find expression. These five researchers founded their conclusions on essentially phenomenological, qualitative data, relying with intuitive trust on their own subjective “knowing”, and although the stories they told were unlike those found in the myth and magic of folklore and fairy tales, they were, nevertheless, stories. Stories of women. And stories, Belenky et al. remind us, tell us always of “the roar which lies on the other side of silence” (p. 4). This thesis is founded in story. And like story, it finds the roar which lies beyond our silences.

*This is a book of women’s stories, held out as markers along the path. They are for you to read, contemplate, and follow...  
(Clarissa Pinkola Estés, p. 21)*

### Anticipated Outcomes

The vignettes and narratives presented in this study exemplify typically and frequently expressed existential alienation reported by adolescents and young adults, and they exemplify, too, the further alienating practices perpetrated by school systems designed to educate young people. Many, but not all, of the narratives imply that change is possible, and that where caring and innovative pedagogical approaches are employed, possible solutions to adolescent alienation may be found.

Anticipated outcomes are at once depressing and uplifting. At the outset, I anticipated that through evocative and poignant tales of the isolation, betrayal, and overt or sublimated violence experienced and

disclosed by the adolescents whose lives I shared, I might thereby reveal and illumine their adolescent experience of existential alienation, which appears at once societally and school driven. I anticipated, too, that practical solutions and sound recommendations might emerge from my study, and thereby prove encouraging or even enlightening to other educators in the field.

I write from an established pedagogical belief system, which is no doubt evident in all the narratives included in this study. I anticipate that my narratives will illumine those factors which promote existential alienation in young people, and I further anticipate that implicit solutions and suggestions will emerge from the stories themselves. However, I expect that concrete recommendations directed towards alleviating adolescent alienation will more specifically, although perhaps less provocatively, emerge in the extensive review of the related literature which stands as a substantial part of this thesis.

I caution the reader, however, that the soul or the essence of my research and my writing lie less within the extensive examination of the research methodologies found in Appendix A, and less yet within the controlled and documented constraints of Appendix B A Review of the Related Literature, than it does in the language and passion of the narratives which precede that review.

This thesis is found not in its introduction, nor in its thesis

statement, nor yet is it found in its lengthy and in-depth review of the related literature. This thesis is found in its stories

**Chapter II:**  
**The Narratives**

## A Girl With Beautiful Eyes

## A Girl With Beautiful Eyes

She's across the room and I'm watching her, although she's as yet unaware of my interest. It's not that she hasn't stood many times like this across the classroom from me - momentarily frozen and vacant somehow - with a heavy book-filled sack usually tossed at her feet or perhaps thrown on the old yellow sofa which stands adjacent to my desk. It's just that today she looks beautiful. Rosily, plumply beautiful. She's seventeen and she's wearing a white dress. It's more of a tunic than a dress, really - a sort of short, flared, girlish thing with white stretch leggings beneath it. A baby-doll, provocative affair. Her name is Myra, and there's always a softness about her - an exposed, transparent vulnerability to her somehow.

And the eyes. If I hadn't known how beautiful she was before, I think I'd always known how beautiful her eyes were. Big eyes. Pale, pretty, watchful eyes.

But it was the dress which arrested my attention. Sleeveless, that's why. It was, astoundingly, a sleeveless dress - and Myra is never without sleeves within which to shove the bandaged wrist stump she's always at such pains to keep from us. I only ever saw the wrist stump once - for one brief and dangerous second she inadvertently exposed it - and I remember how clinically white and sterile the bandages had been. I marvelled at their snowy freshness, and I speculated, somewhat unwillingly, how this might be so. Reapplied and carefully rewrapped each day? Or a phony, pre-

bound finishing touch to a crushed wrist stump too unbearably mangled to reveal?

Because Myra has been without a left hand for almost a year now. It was torn off - ground up to be more specific - in a meat grinder at a local butcher's stall. The wrist stump is always hidden and scrunched-up tight inside long sweater sleeves, or on other occasions it's concealed beneath jackets or articles of outer clothing which Myra drapes casually and strategically about her forearm.

We were told that Myra had been examined by a famous French doctor, but that he'd concluded that the mangled stump did not lend itself to reconstructive surgery. He'd suggested either an immovable, useless, but human-like prosthesis, or a hooked and clawed contraption with opposing finger-thumb capacities. Myra chose the pretty, useless thing. And I would, too. I'm female and afraid in all the ways that Myra is. It must be tough to have a chunk of you missing, when every fashion magazine and T.V. commercial promotes feminine ideals of flawless beauty. It gets tougher to be flawless when part of you is gone - and especially when the damaged remains seem somehow shameful. Anyway, the prosthesis isn't here yet, and none of us dares ask about it. Because Myra is stoically close-mouthed about her missing hand. She's never once mentioned it. Not ever. Not once. And we never expect that she will.

She's on the sofa now and she's alternately raising a can of soda pop

to her lips while reaching for a bag of potato chips which she's secured between her knees. She spends entire days on that sofa. Her attendance is sporadic, but when she does turn up, she always heads for that old sofa. It's a battered, acid-yellow, but inviting thing. An oddly sour odour assails you if you're ever foolish enough to rest your head upon it, and rearranging the top cushions reveals a gaping, burned-out hole within its saggy depths. Someone set a fire in it at one time, I guess. The upholstery is grubby but essentially intact - except one cushion boasts a large, inked-in emblem vaguely reminiscent of a motif sported by a currently popular rock group - and inscribed there much to my chagrin one day by one of my more recalcitrant students. Anyway, that's where she sits all day. Eating potato chips and drinking soda pop but not really doing much of anything else at all.

She's mine because she asked to be. She approached me one day in the hallway outside my classroom and asked if she might complete required course work within the support of my resource-room programme. She said she'd stopped attending regular classes and that school administrators were preparing to throw her out. And so she joined me, and still she stays. And my love for her grows ever more powerful and protective, although I often find it hard to meet her beautiful, guarded eyes. I know she likes me. She must do. She spends every moment that she's in our school sitting across from me on that battered, saggy old sofa.

And her eyes are soft and pleased when I tell her that I'll look out for her. Because there's no-one else looking out for Myra. Her mother lives up north somewhere - Vanderhoof I think - and within the last year her father moved out and in with his girlfriend.

Myra supports herself on the monthly allowance awarded her through the Workers' Compensation Plan. She's getting a raise, too, she told us recently. And that's the only reference, albeit oblique and tangential, that she has ever made to the lost and torn-up hand of one year ago. It was Consumer Ed. 12, and talk of budgets and tax forms had prompted this sudden and unexpected revelation. I responded in the most casual and inconsequential way imaginable. "Oh, yeah? Wow. A raise?" I say, my eyes down, while my fingers fumble with the pages of a tax return. Students around me fall suddenly silent.

"Yeah, well. More money. It's great." Smiles. "I'm gonna be O.K. For money, I mean." That's untrue. She was hard-up again at the end of the semester and I lent her eighty dollars for a few days' car insurance, in the hope that she'd get here and write her final exams. But, of course, she didn't turn up - for the exams, that is. Myra never turns up for anything any more, except perhaps for those long hours she spends on the sofa, curled up with her soda pop and bags of potato chips. Passive and uncommunicative and lost in private reflection, as life unfolds inexorably before her, while never quite managing to engage her within it.

But I never chastise or challenge her. She's not ready for challenges yet. My silence comforts her, as we both know that some things are best left unsaid. Like the day I asked her to take down the chairs. "Fast. I've got a guest speaker coming in at nine." Imagine asking a one-handed kid with a bandaged wrist stump to pull twenty-five chairs down from table tops and rearrange them. Fast, too. But she did. Because it was too late to say not to. She knew that, and I did, too, as our eyes met across the rattle and clatter of metal chair legs. And her eyes were tender and filled with forgiveness for me.

Or the day I asked her to pick up a loaded tray of doughnuts and carry them down to the foyer for me. I sell doughnuts every Friday, and the baker's trays when they arrive are large and weighted heavy with stacked loads. God knows how she carried that tray. Skill gained by the constraints and demands of her last miserable year, I'd say. And how did she ever manage to pick it up at all? But she did, and she managed, too, to conceal the bandaged wrist stump beneath the edge of the tray which she balanced precariously upon it. She deposited the tray eventually on the table before me, and when her eyes met mine, I found only compassion within them. She found sadness and lies in mine, however. But she needed those lies. Because her eyes told me to say nothing. Not a word. Not ever. Continue, her eyes tell me. Just continue. Please. For me, Ms H.

My colleagues and I have met often to discuss Myra's uncertain

future. Mostly there's embarrassed and uneasy talk of her inevitable expulsion. When you never attend classes, teachers figure you must go. But meanwhile Myra continues to turn up and head for that battered old sofa, and she continues to follow me about with those beautiful, troubled eyes. She always lugs a heavy school bag with her, filled promisingly with thick textbooks, but she only ever opens the bag to fish within its depths for coins for cola or Cheesies or chips. I'm unable to justify her presence to my more rational colleagues, and I sense with a cunning born of experience, that to do so would ensure her faster removal. Instead, I lie. "She'll make . . . Well, maybe two courses this semester. Yeah, maybe two."

"She's not attending. Attendance records are abysmal, Denny. And who the hell do we inform? Is she even living at home, do you think?"

"Yeah, well. She's on her own mostly. Her dad's some place else. She can't talk. She just can't. Not yet, anyway."

"Can't *talk*? Yeah, well. But she's gotta act responsibly. You know that, Denny. Myra, too."

I'm unsure of all of this. Unsure of acting responsibly. When you're seventeen and alone and your left hand was unexpectedly ripped from you, you may need to put aside your responsibilities and linger on a scruffy old sofa for a while. Myra got nowhere this semester. But I hope she returns in September. And I'll fool my wily colleagues with a smoke screen of lies and promises again. No doubt Myra will assist me, too. She promises often.

to "Clean up" or "Make it" or "Get there. Honest, Ms H "

But she needn't get further than the battered old sofa for me. However, I sense that she might not even get this far in September, and that she might, instead, choose to remain alone in an apartment somewhere, perhaps reasoning that Workers' Compensation affords a steady, if meagre income, and thereby precludes the need to endure the rigours of high-school graduation requirements. Because Myra has concluded that we don't want her, although she certainly doesn't blame us for this.

Meanwhile September approaches, and the start of a new year is only weeks away. I moved the old yellow sofa recently. It's at right angles to my desk now, and along with a table and a few chairs, it delineates and encircles a small, intimate area. I imagine the crush and confusion of those first September days, and I picture the laughter and embraces as friends reunite after the long days of summer. And I wonder if Myra will be among us. Lugging as always the book bag in one hand, while scrunching the stump of her other hand under long shirt or sweater sleeves. Reclaiming her spot on the sofa. Her fingers tracing the inked-in emblem on the cushion beside her, and her eyes, pale and beautiful, occasionally raised, with guarded indifference, to study the distant world unfolding always beyond her.

## Gardens And Dreams That Die

# Gardens And Dreams That Die

## Part 1:

It was a Friday and Anita and I were selling doughnuts. We sell doughnuts every Friday and this was a Friday just like any other. Friday the eleventh of October. The night Anita died.

We were at the end of the hallway in the school foyer and a happy, Friday melée crushed in and enveloped us. We sold fast and couldn't count change and the crowds pushed in to overwhelm us. Our sale was a success and we were happy. Excited. High. Kind of goofy. I made Anita go back and check in the staff room for forgotten trays of unsold doughnuts, which I irrationally imagined abandoned in a distant corner somewhere.

Honest, Ms H. I looked. We've sold them all."

"Go back. One more time. For me." I'm clutching her hands and earnestly searching the round face she's turned towards me. "I'm neurotic. Hopelessly. You know that." Her eyes are affectionate and she flashes me a sudden rush of a smile. She squeezes my fingers and turns then to push through the crowds which still throng the hallway. And I watch her go. Small but solid somehow. Shouldering her way on into the staff room to search for trays she knows aren't there. She's sixteen and tough. Loyal, too. Because the staff room is jammed with teaching staff and must seem a hostile and exclusive place to someone small and intrusive and clearly disenfranchised there.

I'm watching anxiously for her return And my heart is warmed when I find her pushing again through the crowds towards me. Small and aggressive Back again and squeezing my hands and reassuring me with words and laughter and love.

We were partners and friends, the two of us She tried to make me eat a doughnut.

"Go on, Ms H. Eat a doughnut You should You're so skinny. Honest, you are " I turned and embraced her suddenly at this I was taller than she was and I crushed her happily against my breasts. Her eyes looked pleased and she laughed some more. We turned to our emptied trays and gathered clumps of sticky white icing with our fingers from the wax paper linings We licked finger tips and regarded each other with warm, conspiratorial smiles. Embraced again A sort of carefree, finger-sticky hug.

But Anita died that night She died in a high-speed car crash in the early hours of a dark October morning, on a lonely stretch of highway just out of town She died instantly and was not in pain. Thrown like a rag doll from the back seat of a car. Crushed and broken and heaped-up on the hard black asphalt surface Soft cheeks and breasts bloodied and buried in gravel and rainwater.

And I sold doughnuts again one week later Same place Same time Same happy, cheeky, Friday throngs crowding and overwhelming me. But

my heart is hard and stilled within me. The clumps of sugar-sticky icing leap out at me and my throat is tight with pain. Her presence envelopes and threatens me. A palpable, demanding presence. Warm eyes and teasing laughter and sugar-sticky fingers on my shoulders. Small and solid and embracing me still. The crowd pushes and demands something more of me. But the smiles and banter I offer are phony, bitter things.

I didn't taste the icing this time. Didn't reach with my fingers for the sweet, white clumps. I simply gathered the trays as they emptied and dumped them near the fridge in the staff room. Then I walked down the hall into C Block.

Pushed open the classroom door, somehow unaccountably puzzled and afraid. C Block and Friday and Science 10 again. C Block with an empty seat across from me today. Because C Block this Friday was without Anita Levesque.

## **Part 2:**

Anita's death didn't go entirely unnoticed in our school. But you must remember that our school is a big one, with over one thousand students and at least sixty-five teaching and support staff. One small sixteen-year-old can get lost in the crowd. But a group of us rallied and clung to each other and cried. We attended her memorial service at a local funeral chapel downtown, gathering before the service in pairs or small

groups on the steps outside. It was a cold October night, and the sky was black and spattered with innumerable clusters of tiny stars, and I remember puzzling that the competing glow of street lamps on the wide street below seemed not to dim their brilliance at all.

We shuffled inside eventually. Heads down and no-one talking. A sort of hollow silence descended upon us once there, and a yellowy glow from low-hanging wall lights at once enveloped us. A profusion of flowers spilled from vases on the raised mock altar up front, but the blossoms, full and throaty and vivid, appeared frozen somehow in waxy and symmetrical perfection. We filed into wooden pews and stared at the coffin up front. Dark oak and brass. And covered with flowers. All yellow and violet and creamy white. Nestled in froths and ferns of greenery, and spilling from the oak lid to trail down upon the brass handles beneath.

The kids and I cried the moment the service began. But nothing that was said could penetrate the scrambled confusion within me, or communicate meaning in any rational way. That is, until I heard that we might view the body. That arrested my attention. The kids, too. Tears dried momentarily and someone audibly sucked in air on the rise of a sob, while we sat and contemplated this sudden and unexpected invitation and weighed it for its implication and intent. We were scared. Subdued and afraid but morbidly curious, too. Eventually we joined the silent file

moving slowly up front. Someone emerged from behind discreet and multi-folded drapes to the left of the raised altar, and suddenly the profusion of yellow and purple and creamy blossoms was gone. The lid was up and she was there. I guess the kids did what I did. Shuffle past, head down. *But looking*. Just for one brief, frozen, disquieting moment. Repulsed. Fascinated. Inexorably drawn.

A face powdered white to conceal bruising and blood. And an odd, frumpy, puffed-up looking wig. To conceal something else. Something too severed and crushed to contemplate.

We said good-bye huddled on the steps outside or upon the narrow, grass-tufted path just beyond. The warmth of the chapel lights glowed gold behind us, while the bitter cold of that black and starry October night lay before us. We embraced and cried, like actors in a movie, I thought. Some sort of magnificent, phony, Hollywood-style saga of a movie.

But one week later we planted a garden. A garden for Anita. She'd like that, we said. A garden with green and growing and living things. I took money from doughnut sales and set out with a few of her girlfriends for a nursery farm just out of town. It snowed that day, I remember. It was unseasonably cold for October, and a sleet-ice storm whipped and flattened us as we braced, flinching and frozen, against it. We struggled along the nursery's snow-cruled gravel paths and examined the trees which lined our way - leafless, stick-like trees, planted in pots or in peat-

packed sackcloth bags

But trees which would bud and blossom one day Blossom in spring  
We knew we wanted blossoming trees With tender, fragile, girlish  
blooms For Anita In spring When she wouldn't be there And we found  
pansies, too, along the way Winter pansies Golden yellow, deep purple,  
and creamy white pansies Clustered in pots under trees, or against the  
brick wall in the doorway - brilliant and luscious-green under the dust of  
sleet-ice already clinging to them.

But the sleet and the bitter wind inexorably hurried us on We  
picked fast, and later we huddled up close in a fast food outlet nearby.  
Frozen and silent and sad And I remember a few guys in work clothes  
and red chequered flannel shirts looked over and stared at us, flirting But  
then they didn't know about Anita and spring blossoming trees and winter  
pansies which come in bright yellow and deep purple and rich ivory-  
white.

We planted the garden the next day It was bitterly cold The dark  
earth was dusted with snow, and it was frozen rock-hard and impenetrable  
in some places Our fingers were soon raw and numbed with cold, and the  
thud of spade and shovel against our hands sent shock waves of frozen  
bone-pain throughout them We'd chosen a spot close to the school An  
ugly spot Close to the breezeway with the blue corrugated tin roof where  
kids hang out and grab a fast smoke between classes A scruffy, urine-

dank concrete stretch of a breezeway, enclosed on the one side by the gymnasium's outer walls, and on the other by gravel and scrub land, and incongruously, by our tiny garden now, too. An ugly spot, but I guess we figured we'd make it more beautiful

We'd ordered a commemorative brass plaque for Anita, and school board officials had agreed, upon its arrival, to mount it eventually on a large rock already placed strategically within the narrow confines of our small patch. Anita's friends had planned an inscription for the plaque, and our school principal had paled a little at this, as school funds were low, and each word on an inscribed brass plaque proves to be an astoundingly pricey item

But the plaque wasn't ready yet, and the rock remained bare. We knew that once our planting was done, we'd be unwilling to leave it at that. So we'd come prepared. We read poetry - our own poetry and other people's, too. We stood then for a while, resting our elbows on the handles of our shovels and studying our bruised knuckles and earth-packed fingernails. And the afternoon wore on and the sky grew black with the threat of snow. It was hard to pack up and go. The two trees we'd planted were young and twig-like and vulnerably bare. But the pansies beneath them were brave and luscious-green. Their soft blossoms brilliant yellow and blue-violet, and all with pale, creamy throats. Tiny and bright against the dark earth, and clustered tight against the dust of snow already

clinging to them.

But evening approached and the bitter cold was a cruel and punishing thing. We left eventually, with promises and tears and lingering regret. And I wondered if I wanted more. Something else. Some halt to the daily institutionalised grind which drives and constrains us. A public, ritualistic recognition of her life and her preciousness and her presence among us. Probably not. We had a garden, didn't we? And the trees would blossom in spring.

### **Part 3:**

And, incredibly, they did. Those trees didn't flourish exactly, but they survived and blossomed somehow, and the pansies beneath them multiplied and bloomed afresh. But then pansies are hardy and tenacious things, which somehow defeat not only the harsh rigours of winter, but which often defeat, also, indifferent neglect at the hands which plant them.

And so it was with our small garden of lost hope. Because it's never watered. Or weeded. Not that the weeds concern us much, as weeds, too, are selective, and wisely scorn dry scrubland strewn liberally with mounting layers of crushed cigarette butts.

The brass plaque was ripped from its moorings recently, and later tossed in low bushes nearby. But if weeds didn't concern us, a disappearing brass plaque did, as the latter was indeed a costly thing. The

janitor discovered and retrieved it, however, and bashed out the bumps and dents with a hammer and the handle of a heavy screwdriver. It's up again, scratched and beaten and somewhat worse for wear, but it's encased in impenetrable concrete now, in order to discourage and thwart those who might wish to dislodge or destroy it.

And who would want to, you're probably asking. Vandals, I'll bet. But the ancient Germanic tribes who plundered and ravaged throughout Europe and North Africa were probably a more focussed and passionate lot than the guys who hang out after dark in our breezeway. Our guys aren't driven by ideals or even senseless hate. They're just drinking a few six packs and sharing a few joints. Probably laughing a lot, too, I always conjecture. But I somehow imagine it's an empty laughter, largely befuddled by booze and perhaps veiling experiences of parental and societal neglect. Huddled against the cold in the urine-sour dark of a doorway, while keeping an eye out always for the cops who revel in moving you on. So what's in a brass plaque, for God's sake? When you're drunk or doped and somehow disenchanted with life, brass plaques might look like tempting playthings. Maybe more than playthings. Maybe downright annoying. Self-righteous, prissy, poetic sorts of things. Just begging to be ripped off and thumped up and tossed aside in a few bushes nearby.

Don't think I'm sure of any of this. I'm just looking for answers.

Because the questions plague and haunt me so. But when I look within, I find confusion, and incongruously, forgiveness, too.

Anita's best friend walked in my classroom recently. She's a bright, street-wise, articulate kid with long tangled-looking red hair and an oddly worn face for one so young. Her eyes were suspicious this day and I set about avoiding them. She asked about the plaque and the garden.

"Yeah, well. I'll come by in the summer," I lied. "Maybe get a hose pipe or something and water it sometime. You know." My lies often astound me as they issue forth. She relaxes a little at this but she's too smart to be fooled.

"Yeah, well. Maybe. Me, too. It might die. The garden and all that." We study each other then in wise and companionable silence. Sometimes there's an emptiness in my heart, and I guess she recognises something like it in her own. It's so much easier to make promises and tell lies. Because we both know, with a certainty born of experience and intuition, that gardens, like dreams, can die.

## The Story of Molly

## The Story of Molly

*We were in the changing room and she'd pulled off the wet swimsuit Her body was large and white and big-breasted I looked away But she was in no hurry to cover herself, and my eyes were drawn again to the plump, white breasts and pale thighs Something was wrong Scars all over - small, purple, circular scars like cigarette butt burns Mostly on the legs but up on the buttocks and thighs and forearms, too Scabs? Mosquito bites? BURNS?*

*I look and look quickly away Look surreptitiously again Shocked and disquieted and upset I contemplate the white tiled floor at my feet, compulsively searching each slick square for random faults or irregularities Kids yell and startle me Relieved, I rush to brush long hair, untangle knotted shoe laces, and hunt for missing socks or underwear, while pausing often to yell authoritatively that the school bus is here and is about to leave without us*

*The white body draws me back Fleshy, pale, pendulous contours And burns Definitely burns Something wrong here*

This is the story of Molly She was part of an inner-city resource room programme, and I was a teacher in that programme I had a team partner - Howie - and together we shared a group of twenty-four students Molly was one of our students

She was thirteen at the time of the telling of this story She was big and plump and unusually well-developed for her age, with large breasts and a provocative swagger to her well-rounded buttocks She always wore high-heeled white knee boots, scuffed and scratched and lopsided at the heels, and breast-hugging, shabby lace camisoles tucked into big-buckled belts A bra strap and maybe a safety pin often fell from her bare

shoulder. Her hair was multi-hued, although it was mainly a brave, bleached blonde, and she was unusually adventurous with eye-shadow, often sporting courageous shades of azure, turquoise, and violet, too. She chewed her fingernails to the quick, and she always looked worn and hard-up. All of this - but mostly the bra straps I think - made Howie uncomfortable.

I must tell you right away that I loved Howie. We were partners - and friends. Short and heavily-built, he had thick, boyish brown hair and he'd often pat or stroke recalcitrant curls into place at his brow or at the nape of his neck. I'd watch him touch the hair - self-conscious but unaware - and a rush of tenderness would always inevitably engulf me. Howie was earthy and quick-witted and funny. And he loved me, too. He glued my broken earrings and belt buckles, he got paint off the hem of my skirt, he opened my car doors with coat hangers, and he listened to poetry after school. (He hated poetry.)

But he never listened to Molly. He hated the visible bra straps, the exposed curve of her breast, the cheap, tarnished chain at her throat, and the aura of sex, of pain, of loss. But he pampered me. Fixing those earrings and belt buckles - each one a pretty, delicate, proper, and shiny thing. He never pampered Molly. He was afraid of cheap girls, soiled girls, used or abused girls, afraid of their pain, their eyes, and the irresistibly responding chord they struck deep within himself. We often

talked of Molly, the two of us, and I'd always place another Molly somewhere in his heart. A fragile image of pain and neglect and poverty and lies.

Conversations with Molly were always remarkable. They were confused, preposterous, rambling affairs.

"I'm getting married in three days. He's a lawyer. I only met him three weeks ago. He's big - real big and important, kinda, ya know? He's buying me a house in L.A. Like real soon. Like maybe in a coupla days." All this while swaying somewhat precariously on the high but unevenly worn heels, and alternately tugging long tendrils of chewed-looking hair, while compulsively twisting the chain at her throat.

"You're kidding", I say, but my eyes are direct and embrace her fully. "A lawyer? Wow. How come you met a lawyer?" Howie is shuffling papers - angrily, I think - at his desk, and he shoots me a sharp, brief look of disapproval. My love for him is powerful. I study his stomach straining at the shirt above his belt, and the thick, pale hair on his hands and arms as he rearranges and readjusts an already tidy desk. His mouth and eyes are unfriendly. And I know that there is so much more I want from him.

Molly is oblivious. "Yeah, well. This lawyer guy. Like, he's crazy about me. Ya know?" Nods of approval from me. "But, like, I might not marry him. Like, I was gonna marry this other guy. This other guy and me was gonna get married. Raised eyebrows and feigned astonishment.

from me "Yeah, well A lotta guys are crazy about me But like I said, I gotta get my education an' all." Howie momentarily pauses at this His eyes, pale and clear, level with mine Amused, cold eyes A gulf stretches suddenly between us, and a vast and obscure aloneness envelopes me Howie turns his shoulders from me and attends again to the papers in his hands His mouth, in profile now, is tight

And then there were Molly's weekends away Howie hated hearing about those weekends away, but he was often regaled with the remarkable and unsettling tales she had to tell Tales of guys, fifteen, twenty, thirty guys - she'd gain momentum with the telling - guys with motorcycles ("Harley's - they're the best, you know") and guys who promised party-wild camping trips at isolated lakes or beaches far out of town She once said someone burned her there With cigarettes And there really were odd-looking circular scabs upon her legs

I pressed her often about the burns, but she was wary and street-smart and cunning, and she'd close me out with oblique, tangential, wild ramblings of other things But she'd scratch sometimes at the purple, scabrous, half-moon abrasions on her legs - scratch with ineffectual, chewed finger ends - as her nails had almost disappeared

So I'd press Howie about the burns

"Howie, about these weekends and these guys..." He's sitting at his desk, leaning back upon the curved, wooden back support of his chair He

has one leg crossed upon the other, an ankle resting on his knee. He studies me thoughtfully, weighing his reply.

"Yeah, I know. This is the real world out there." But his eyes are not unkind, and he shifts uneasily within the confines of the wooden chair, clasping his hands reflectively at his mouth, while bringing his elbows to rest upon the wooden arms.

"Are they burns, Howie? Like with cigarettes maybe?" A long silence stretches between us. His mouth is in his hands and his eyes are down. "She said they were burns once. When I asked her." His head tilts now, his mouth partly free of his clasped hands, and his clear, steady eyes are on mine.

"Yeah, they could be burns. They're probably burns. But there's not much you can do about that." Still the steady eyes. My pain is real and his steady eyes are finding it. I study the foot he has crossed at his knee. The shoe is brown with odd leather lacings threaded through and around it from toe to heel. His gaze follows mine, as he adjusts now and shifts within the chair. Silence distances us and he wants to bridge this empty space between us. His love for me is tangible and his words are conciliatory.

"Social Services know about this. You know that." He touches my arm suddenly beneath my shoulder - an unlikely gesture as he never touches me - and his smile is wry, philosophical, resigned.

I left that school eventually and Molly left, too. I never see Howie much now, and I've rarely seen Molly at all. I saw her once, a few years later, in the downtown Eaton's Centre. I was standing on an upper level, wide skylights and streaming sunlight above me, and the sparkle and glitter of a fashionable dress store beckoned behind me. Suddenly Molly was there. Still plump, plain and somehow bruised-looking. Bleached, chewed-looking hair. Pendulous breasts pushing at a grubby camisole. A broken bra strap visible at her shoulder, and a tarnished chain soiling the skin at her neck.

"Wow, Molly. I don't believe this."

"I dress just like you now. Real pretty clothes, ya know? Long dresses an' all." A remarkable and astounding start to a conversation, but if you knew Molly like I do this wouldn't have fazed you one bit.

"Wow. Great. You look great the way you are." Lies - she looks hard-up and unwashed. "You had a baby, Molly. I heard you had a baby girl. Tell me about your baby."

"Oh, my little pushkin, mumpkin. My little pushkin, pussycat, pussy-coo, pussy-boo." Remember, if you knew Molly like I do, this wouldn't have surprised you, although I can see in the telling that some of this might perhaps amuse or even confound you.

"Oh, that's nice, Molly. What did you call her? Your baby girl?"

"Melissa, Amanda-Jane, Christabelle, eh... Star, Samantha, and

yeah, Tamara, an' - yeah - Genevieve, Rachel-Ann, Nicolette "

"Wow. Great " Remember - nothing Molly said ever surprised me. I knew we could never talk, she and I - never get beyond the madness and lies and hopelessness which had always separated us, but I knew, too, that we were enjoined in some unfathomable, female and inescapable way - that her history was my history, that her story was my story, and that her pain was my pain, too.

She's restless and disconnected from me, avoiding my eyes and shifting her gaze somewhere behind me.

"She got took away from me. My little munchkin pussy-boo. She lives with her dad. He's Mexican. He's married. He's a real bastard, too." It's hard to respond appropriately to information like this.

"A bastard, huh? I guess there's plenty of them out there. Bastards, I mean." But this gambit doesn't pique Molly's interest or strike any responsive chord within her. She's showing me a ring on her finger. Her hands are scarred and bruised and shaking uncontrollably. But her hands always trembled, I remember with a sudden, unaccountable rush of discomfort and guilt.

"Yeah, well. I'm getting married real soon. Like, but first I have to get my law degree an' all. Anyways, we're getting married real soon." Believe me, if you knew Molly, you'd expect her to tell you that she was studying law, or nuclear physics, or was about to be sworn in as a brain

surgeon or something preposterous like that "Anyways, I'm getting married real soon. He's rich, real rich. Like in construction or something. An' he went up north and he didn't fool around on me. He never fooled around on me. Like he went up north and he never fooled around on me." I reflect on this and my heart is touched. I know somehow that it's important that guys don't fool around on you.

"That's good, Molly. That's good the guy didn't fool around on you." But nothing I say arrests or reaches her.

"Yeah, well. We're getting married real soon because he's real crazy about me." Sunlight envelopes me from the skylight above. Strains of recorded music suddenly invade my thoughts, and I remember then the profusion of beautiful clothes behind me. I shuffle uneasily from one well-shod foot to the other, briefly contemplating my toe as it scrapes along a shiny floor tile edge, while streaming sunshine continues to bathe and dazzle me.

I reach clumsily for Molly's hand and she gives it freely. Still plump and scarred and bitten to the quick, the hand is limp and unresponsive within my awkward grasp.

"I hope he loves you, Molly. I hope he's a good guy. You deserve a good guy. I hope he loves you and that no-one ever fools around on you again." Her eyes are pale and uncomprehending. Her hand trembles but she allows me to retain it. Her knowledge of pain is far-reaching and

immeasurable, and she has closed herself to it.

## **Part 2: I Got a New Baby Now**

I only ever saw Molly once more. I was shopping that day - standing across a counter top from a cashier in a store at a downtown mall - and proffering a blouse or a sweater or some now long-since forgotten article of clothing across the glass-fronted counter between us. I had plastic bags and a brown paper carrier bag clustered at my feet, and I was struggling with purse and car keys and small hand-held parcels.

Suddenly she's there. To my right and beside me. Molly. Shabby and chewed-looking as ever. Gone is the ripe, sexual swagger of the pubescent thirteen-year-old. Instead before me stands a bloated, somewhat blotched, and oddly aged-looking girl. Scruffy, too. Clingy black leggings, worn and pilled about the thighs, sport clearly visible holes at the knees. Shabby, lop-sided runners at her feet. Heavy breasts pushing at a faded, oversized navy T shirt. Hair, bleached an odd, acidic yellow, and apparently hacked into incredibly random short lengths.

Same hands, though. Blunt, chewed, bloodied fingernails. And shaking. Trembling uncontrollably as they reach up to rest on the glass face of the counter top before us. "Hi, Ms H. Remember me? I seen you come in the store." How could I forget her? Although historically and socially distanced from me within the constraints of age and

socioeconomic delineators, she was nevertheless enjoined inextricably to me by the bonds of gender, sexual identity, and womanhood

“Wow, Molly Jeez. Nice to see you.” She’s playing briefly with my car keys upon the glass counter top, and her hands are trembling convulsively as she does so. The sales clerk eyes her curiously. The truth is, she eyed us both curiously. Me with my purse and credit cards and profusion of parcels - looking fixed-up and well-heeled and clad in soap-powder tennis whites. And Molly. Shabby and chewed-up and hard-up looking. Thick legs encased in torn leggings and massive breasts above them swinging and straining within worn, faded cotton.

“Your baby girl, Molly? How’s your little girl?”

“Oh, she died. Of S I D ’s. Yeah, she died. I got another baby now, though. A little boy. I got another one now.” She delivered this with nonchalant, although apparently guileless, indifference. She might have been telling me that she’d moved house, or re-scheduled her working hours, or purchased new shoes - the sort of casual and relatively insignificant life changes people inform you of when you haven’t seen them for a while.

Shock and disbelief overwhelm me. “Your baby died? Oh, my God. Jesus. Your baby died? Oh, my God. I’m sorry, Molly. Your baby died. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, well. I got another one now.” The cashier across from us is

transfixed at this. She's proffering a Visa slip in anticipation that I'll eventually sign it, but she herself appears to have long-since forgotten the slip, which remains clutched between her outstretched thumb and forefinger. Her eyes travel from Molly to myself and back again.

"You wanna see him, Ms H? I had him two weeks ago. He's right outside. You wanna see him?" I stir and fumble for the Visa slip and the cashier avoids my eyes. I gather my purse and parcels and carrier bag and we leave at this, pushing on through the crowds outside the store and on out into a vast fast-food fair beyond.

We find the baby in a small plastic carrier cot placed on the ground and up against a pillar, and a young man sits on a small wrought-iron chair near him. "This is my boyfriend," Molly announces. "He's the dad." She's pulled up another of the ornate wrought-iron chairs and is sitting now with the young man seated before me. I'm still standing, clutching my plastic bags and my purse and my car keys, and I'm momentarily lost for a response to this. Meanwhile the young man gazes up at me, grinning guilelessly. Most of his teeth are missing and the few which remain are broken and discoloured. I study him with some interest and search rapidly and inwardly to categorise and frame and place him in this perplexing scheme of events - and to place him somehow, too, with the delusive, bloated girl before me and the sleeping baby at his feet.

He's a small guy - and visibly thin - I can see that right away. Frail

shoulders protrude from a black cotton muscle shirt, and numerous tattoos cover his chest and back and arms. He has dark skin with black hair and eyes. The hair is oiled, and like Molly's, it appears to have been hacked at random into oddly incongruent lengths, the longest of which fall about his brow and eyes. But the eyes which he turns up my way are warm and trusting, and the toothless smile appears wide and untiring.

The baby stirs, and I turn then to study the tiny, still-sleeping infant at our feet. The baby is beautiful. You could see that at once. His skin was dark - very dark - and his tiny features appeared even and flawless. One small hand protruded from his blanket-wraps and momentarily opened and closed, and his mouth, I saw, opened and closed, too, in an unconscious and somehow vulnerable sucking motion. He was covered with an open-weave, blue blanket, and I pondered briefly on the blueness of this blanket. I knew intuitively, but somehow with certainty, that in Molly's scheme of things, gender delineation begins early, and manifests itself most specifically, perhaps, in the choice of traditional blue for baby boys.

"He's beautiful, Molly," I say. I fell silent after this. What else was there to say? The child was, indeed, beautiful. Tiny. Vulnerable. Fragile.

Sleeping and unaware. Lost in the unconscious, innocent sleep of the newborn. With no knowledge of self or of his certain tragic future. At least, I figured he faced a tragic future. It was incomprehensible to me.

that this bloated, impoverished, half-mad girl could ever comprehend the enormity - the ungraspable, miraculous enormity - of the arrival of this fragile and unique new life within the unlikely scheme of all things in this unfathomable universe of ours. Molly had a boy-doll wrapped in a blue blanket, and it was equally incomprehensible to me that she'd ever be able to mother him. And the boy-doll slept on, his tiny mouth opening and closing fractionally, and his one visible dark hand twitching briefly and spasmodically as we watched him. A boy-doll still lost in the sleep of the innocent, and as yet unaware that a delusive and damaged and maybe dangerous mother awaited him.

“My little munchkin pumpkin”, coos Molly, and I stir at this, shifting my eyes from the sleeping infant to Molly. She's pulled out a plastic feeding bottle and although she shakes the milk within it with apparently vigorous intent, she doesn't reach for the infant or attempt to feed him. Meanwhile, the baby sleeps on, one tiny hand still spasmodically opening and closing above the blanket from time to time, as though sudden laughter or the scrape of metal chair legs nearby momentarily startled him.

“He's very beautiful, Molly”, I offer again. “I'm glad for you.” But her gaze is glazed and distant and has already settled beyond me. Eyes lost somewhere in the morass of thronged crowds beyond us. And the hands within her lap grasp, trembling and uncontrollable, the now-forgotten

feeding bottle

“It was nice meeting you”, I offer finally, smiling down at the young man beneath me.

“Yeah, yeah. It was nice”, he says, his smile gummy and his few remaining broken teeth standing in his lower jaw like defiant, courageous things. I walked off at that, clutching my plastic bags and numerous parcels - on through the mall and out into the warm spring sunshine beyond. I needed that sunshine. Air-conditioned malls are curiously cold and chilly things, I remember thinking, as I walked away that day.

Take Me Golfing and You Can Take Me to  
Bed

## Take Me Golfing and You Can Take Me to Bed

It was late June and exams were over. It was hot that day - one of those brilliant, blazing, sun-drenched days of high summer - and we were celebrating. Celebrating summer and celebrating endings, but celebrating, too, the beginnings which the long months of summer now promised. We'd gathered at a student's home - out in a back yard - on a small, slatted, wooden sun-deck. A low wooden railing enclosed us in a clustered, somewhat intimate community. We were a small group - maybe fifteen or so in all - myself, my students, and, of course, Rahim. Rahim - a volunteer assistant sometimes in my classroom - but more, a valued friend to me.

Rahim and one male student crouched over a portable barbecue we'd brought along with us, and were engrossed in squishing fat and bloodied liquid from uncooked hamburger patties, while lining crisped and already browned patties to the outer, cooler edges of the grill. One group stood nearby, proffering open buns already piled high with scraps of torn lettuce, thick tomato slices, onion rings and heaped varieties of relishes. Others gathered, standing and clustered, about the deck, or sat in rows against the stuccoed house walls - eating, talking, and reminiscing. The school year was gone and we found ourselves at once regretful and enormously relieved.

But this story is less about school years and reminiscing than it is about two people. And on that day, in this story, those two people were

## Rahim and Melanie

Melanie is seventeen and beautiful. She's part Chinese, although to a casual observer this might not appear obvious. Her hair is black and corkscrew-permed, and she pulls it sharply from her brow and temples, snatching it up in a dramatic cascade of thick curls. She's tiny and slender and somehow fragile-looking. And beautiful. Delicately, wide-eyed beautiful. Her physical fragility, however, belies a tough, aggressive and often confrontational manner, and that tough exterior in turn belies remembered and insistent pain. Like loneliness and rejection and betrayal. Melanie is bitter and, at times, explosively violent, too. She regales us often with tales of her scraps and skirmishes with aggressive female rivals, or she casually recounts stories of the successfully vicious beatings she often administers to unfortunate female antagonists outside downtown nightclubs, or, more recently, within private apartments.

Melanie has lived independently since she was fifteen. It's important that you know this, and that you know, too, that she has struggled since early adolescence with alcohol and drug addiction. A brief spell at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation camp at the age of thirteen did little to cure her, and, indeed, quite perversely, it appeared to push her inexplicably closer to the numb euphoria of daily alcohol and drug-induced escape. Melanie is street smart and wary but always lonely. She tells us of men and of lovers, but she tells us, too, of the denouements, betrayals, and bitter disputes

which ultimately and always conclude her relationships. For one so young she is well aware of the inevitable dangers inherent to establishing a joint account with a male live-in lover, or of the foolhardy risks in sharing furniture and household items (only to dispute ownership later) with new and untrustworthy men. And she's certainly known plenty of untrustworthy men. Believe me, if you knew Melanie, you'd learn a lot. About men, that is. About life and lovers and cash transactions and sexual betrayal.

But today it's the barbecue, and the bright sunlight continues to warm and embrace our clustered group. Late June and summer awaits us. But Melanie is restless. She's between men and she's broke. She's lonely, too. It had been hard to persuade her to join us this day, and it was harder still to persuade her to stay. She threatens often to leave and talks of pressing engagements or urgent tasks which await her later that day.

She refuses to eat but she's watching Rahim with sly but speculative interest from across the billows of fat-spattered smoke issuing from the barbecue coals between them. Rahim, meanwhile, is oblivious to her attention and is chatting amiably and somewhat absently about his plans for that day. It transpires that he's meeting with male friends and plans a golf game in the late afternoon. "Yeah, well. We're playing out at Metchosin, man. Then we'll grab a coupla beers out at The Six Mile. Way to go, man."

“Golf?” Melanie asks suddenly and unexpectedly from across the smoke billowing between them. “You’re playing golf? I mean, like, you want company?” She draws closer to the barbecue grill, ignoring the sudden spurt of fat which appeared momentarily to sting her lips. “I mean, like, wanna take me golfing?” She giggles playfully before continuing. “You wanna take me for a few beers, too?” Rahim pauses at this, his spatula raised and momentarily frozen in mid-air, and his eyes, startled, curious, and maybe amused, meet hers. He’s twenty-five years old, and he’s not stupid, this man. He knows a good offer when he hears one, but perhaps he has already calculated that this offer, from this girl, heralds unwanted and maybe messy trouble. His eyes shift briefly and find mine. Smoke issues fitfully between us and his eyes, on mine, are somehow shy and maybe apologetic, I think. A sudden spurt of fat leaps and sizzles on the hairs upon the back of his hand, and he starts at this, relieved, I know, to turn then from me and to attend once more to the task of squeezing and reordering the sizzling patties before him.

Melanie is silent for a while. She looks down and studies the rounded toe of her running shoe which she nudges and scrapes within the narrow space between two wooden slats beneath her. She stirs eventually and shrugs her shoulders a little within the shoulder pads of her jacket. She’s wearing a thick blue sports jacket with a white team emblem embossed upon its glossy fabric, although the sun blazes on and the

temperature continues to soar. She left soon after that, suddenly and in apparently impulsive haste, her hands thrust before her and bunched at her stomach within the jacket's big pockets. And we continued with the barbecue and our easy, warm, inclusive chatter.

Eventually we drifted inside and gathered in one room. We lounged on sofas and armchairs, or sat cross-legged on the carpet or upon the raised tiled hearth before the fireplace. Two cats soon joined us and moved from one to the other of us, nudging and rubbing against elbows and ankles, and lingering occasionally to curl for a while within the fold of someone's lap. The late afternoon sun, soft and diffused now, shone through the windows, and the trees, which lined the street beyond, were touched with sunlight, too. And I sat on and thought of Melanie. Long-since gone but still with me somehow. Melanie. Beautiful and always lonely. And I marvelled again at that. Because beauty without, it seems, does not compensate for emptiness within.

Later, towards evening, Rahim drove me back to school. But when we entered the parking lot I remained, without attempting to alight, within his car. It was odd that I didn't want to leave, and odder still that Rahim appeared in no hurry for me to do so. He'd forgotten, perhaps, about his golf game in Metchosin and the promise of a few beers with male friends later. I'd opened the passenger door upon arrival and had one foot already lodged on the asphalt surface to my right, but I remained stilled and

frozen in that odd position and began to cry. Incredibly, Rahim was neither surprised nor fazed by my sudden tears. He found gentle words for me. He talked of summer and of the endings which always herald beginnings.

“And about Melanie,” he offered eventually. “I’m sorry About Melanie. You know that. Like, if she needs help moving an’ all - like, she said she was moving to another apartment - I’ll help cart stuff. You know that. Like, I don’t mind helping.”

I turned at this and smiled at him, and I thought his eyes were anxious as they found my own. His forearm spanned the steering wheel before him, and I wanted suddenly to touch the dark hairs upon the back of his hand. But I didn’t.

“You can’t fix things, Denny. Some things don’t ever get fixed. So forget about stuff. O K? Like, forget about stuff.”

I didn’t forget, though, and nor have I since. I never saw Melanie again. She didn’t return in September. She moved - I know that. And I know, too, with a somehow curiously female certainty, that she moved on then to find a new and perhaps more obliging lover. Obliging and always ready to use her. And betray her. And, of course, inevitably and always ready to desert her.

## Embracing Death: A Casual Encounter

## Embracing Death: A Casual Encounter

There's a bench outside my classroom, across the hallway from me. It's an old oak bench, varnished a glossy-dark, although many an ancient scratch and gouge remains still clearly visible beneath its laquered shine. It's a popular spot, this old bench of ours. All the trysts and love affairs and sexual denouements of adolescent life unfold there. I'm often there myself, too. I sit with students - often troubled students - when we need a quiet place to talk, and I sit there, too, with friends and colleagues when I myself am troubled, and seek some private place to talk. This bench is important to me. You can probably see that.

I suspect that I won't ever forget this bench, either. I've lived much of my life there, I sometimes think. At least, some of those unfathomable and often poignant life events which are somehow milestones in a teacher's life, have, for me, unfolded there. Events in my own life and in the sometimes tragic lives of my more troubled students.

Like Lynn and her life. You'd like Lynn. No, it's more than that you'd like her - it's that if you knew her well at all, you'd want often to enfold her in a warm and reassuring and somehow safe embrace. Because Lynn is never safe and never reassured.

Lynn was raped. Two years ago. Brutally and violently. And although persuaded to press charges, she lost her case in court. She never mentions the rape or any of its brutal details, although she often - indeed,

probably daily - alludes to an irrational but unshakeable fear of imminent attack from sly and furtive strangers whom she believes persistently and cleverly conspire to conceal themselves from her. Fear, a powerful and intrusive companion, inexorably shadows her. Fear - the gift and inevitable aftermath of rape.

Lynn is more than fearful, though. She's depressed. Endlessly and silently depressed. She sits on the sofa across from me in my classroom, her knees and feet drawn neatly together and always trimly aligned. Her shoulders hunched tight within a black leather jacket. A jacket which I have never seen her once remove. It's this grinding and ineffable depression which is the first thing that you'd notice about Lynn, and it's the frequent, sudden slide of tears that would prompt you often, if knew her at all, to enfold her in your warm and safe embrace.

If you saw her you'd understand this at once. She's tiny - short and compact and somehow neatly made. She's Polynesian: her skin is dark and her eyes are Oriental and beautiful and black. Her hair is magnificent. Waist-length, tangled, corkscrew curls, bleached a surprising burgundy-red here and there along a few tousled lengths. Thick, apparently uncombable curls, massed about her shoulders, face, and eyes, and shielding her always from the dangerous and intrusive world which threatens beyond.

Lynn and I talk sometimes, and you may well imagine that when we

do, we usually choose to do so curled together upon the bench outside. Rape is only one of Lynn's problems. Daily survival is another and perhaps more urgently pressing one. Lynn is twenty years old and is maintained on welfare. She shares a rooming house along with its owner and three other young women, but she is fearful of eviction, as she has repeatedly broken the house rules and has permitted a lover to remain overnight - concealed within her bedroom - but discovered, nevertheless, when daylight dawns. She's always hard-up (she mismanages her already meagre monthly allowance) and the threat of imminent eviction terrifies her.

One day - and it's the day I mean to tell you of - we're sitting out on the bench and talking of these and other pressing issues. Eviction, cash flow, men. Those sorts of things. "Like, I can't have a guy over. Not ever. Jason stayed over a few times, though, but I got caught. We were real quiet, too. But you can't have guys there. Not overnight. Not ever, Ms H." Her two hands are clasped within her lap, and she's twirling her thumbs in a perpetually circular motion, one about the other. Her eyes, perhaps avoiding mine, are down and studying the thumbs. "We can't use the phone, either. Not after eleven, anyways. An' I have to buy my own toilet paper." This statement momentarily distracts me. Intimate, perplexing life-story details like these always appear somehow significant to me.

"Jesus. You have to buy your own toilet paper?" I ask, implying

outraged disbelief, but already somehow unsure of the perceived unfairness to such a request “And Jason can’t stay over?” I’m more sure of this one. This strikes me as some sort of invasion of her human dignity.

She ignores this avenue of discussion, however, and instead astonishes me with “They’ve reduced my Prozac. The doctors did. For my depression. They’re cutting my Prozac.” *Prozac? The doctors reduced her Prozac?* Something dangerous and unsettling here. Something I’m unsure and certainly afraid of. I reached to touch her two hands, still clasped within her lap, and the two thumbs momentarily ceased their rapid rotation at this.

“They - the doctors - they reduced your Prozac?”

“Yeah. Like, I took a bunch of pills, see. In August. They gave me Prozac. Afterwards, like in the hospital, they gave me Prozac.” I’m stunned and briefly silenced at this, my head down and eyes focussed somewhere in her lap. Her voice is steady and largely without expression as she continues. “I took a bunch of pills, see, Ms H. Like, I took everything I could get my hands on. They took me to hospital and pumped my stomach. I was there two weeks and that’s when I got the Prozac. In August.”

“Jesus, Lynn. You were in hospital. I never knew. I never knew about the pills and the hospital and all.” My eyes are down, and my hand, within her lap, now lies palm up and opened on her knee.

“Yeah, well. Like, well, I never told you. Don’t worry, Ms H. I’ve done this stuff before. Like, slashed my wrists and stuff. They gave me Prozac, anyways. The doctors did. Except now I see a worker.” I stirred and reached up to touch her long tangled hair, and proceeded to move the thick curls about her shoulders and randomly rearrange them. She falls silent for a while, but when I touch her cheek with the back of my curled index finger, I inadvertently prompt her sudden tears. Her tears are profuse but oddly silent. I attempt to stem their tide with the fingers of one hand, but I succeed only in redistributing them, along with streaks of mucous, across her cheeks. Neither of us has a tissue and it seems unthinkable to me to break apart or move away from her at all. A few curious onlookers - three female students - wander by, and one hesitates briefly just before us and appears to contemplate approaching us, but she moves on instead and joins her two companions who are already hurrying on by.

I use thumb and forefinger to brush more tears and mucous across her cheeks, and I attempt again to rearrange the tangled hair, as though such busy rearranging were somehow a useful or constructive thing.

“Yeah, well. I might quit school, Ms H”, she offers eventually. Her eyes are down and her thumbs have resumed their rapid rotation at this. “Like, quit school and all. Get a job. Like, I might get evicted and all. Like, I need a job, Ms H.” The words I knew I needed were hard in

coming, but when they did arrive they spilled in rapid confusion from my tongue

“Don’t go, Lynn. Don’t leave school. Not yet. You need friends... and, I guess, someone. You need - something. You can’t go. You need - someone. Don’t leave. Don’t go. Not yet.” She greeted this outburst with silence, her eyes already distant and sliding from me. And the words and the promises continued to spill from me, and I remember the sense of perplexity and inadequacy which overwhelmed me. I remember how skillfully I toyed with the truth, and how stoically I managed to avoid it. Truth and truthful words, that is. Words like loneliness and desolation. And rape. And suicide.

These words frighten Lynn, and her fear in turn unnerves me. She never mentions rape, but instead she talks of “bad things” and “bad memories”, and on that day, huddled on the old oak bench with me, she scrupulously skirted the word “suicide”, and instead spoke casually of popping pills and slashing her wrists - as though such misadventures were relatively commonplace events in a young woman’s life, rather than the tragic unfolding of an unfathomable matrix of human misery.

And on that day I, too, found suicide one word hard to get my tongue around. The very sound of it - the sort of bald, undressed, and unpretentious quality to it - unnerved me. Lynn, too. Because on that day - and throughout the days of the few remaining months Lynn stayed with

me - we both intuitively recognized and understood that some words -  
bald words - are much too painful and too dangerous to be given voice  
Because you can't dress those words Or soften or diffuse them Rape, for  
Lynn, is one of those words And suicide, of course, is the other

## A Deadbeat Like Me

## A Deadbeat Like Me

I was recently part of a ministry-funded accreditation process. I teach in a large senior secondary school with approximately sixty-five teaching and clerical staff servicing more than one thousand students. I had never experienced a school accreditation before, and I was curious. Mostly I was curious because so many of my colleagues were so angry.

"Who the hell are they?"

"Bloody interference. And we've got a job to do meanwhile." Heads raised around the staffroom and nods of approval at this.

"What the hell do they know?" More nods behind suddenly lowered newspapers, as a murmur of agreement rippled through the staffroom. However, a few of my colleagues were anticipatory and supportive. Some sincerely believed in the accreditation process and thought something positive might eventually come of it. And as for me - I was curious - and hopeful, too. I thought it healthy for each of us to look inwards and to examine not only our own praxis, but to examine, too, the complexities of the interactions within the infrastructure of our school as a whole. I was pleased. Pleased with the look inwards, and pleased, too, with the anticipated look outwards following the team's arrival.

And when the team did finally make its much maligned appearance, (staff had been told to spruce up classrooms and students had been

instructed over the P A system to practice guarded awareness during the visit) I was even more pleased. Pleased because the team paid attention to me. Pleased because team members listened to me. Pleased because they were interested (enthralled, I thought) with everything I had to say. And especially pleased when they copiously recorded my views and suggestions. One team member happily informed me that even as I spoke I was drafting the team's written report, and that my very words would shape the final document. That last bit really pleased me.

So you can see I was impressed and that I was thoroughly enjoying myself. But something happened one day - something which at first only unnerved and unsettled me a little - but which later, in some insidious and inexorable way, began to cause me real discomfort and concern. What happened is that Trent spoke up. We were in English class one day and Trent decided to speak up.

"This team. These guys in suits running around the school. Who are these guys anyway?"

"They're the accreditation team you've heard about. They're doing their 'site' visit - you know, looking around and asking us about our school, our work, our relationships - that sort of thing."

"Oh, yeah? Then how come they don't wanna talk to me?" This took me aback.

"Talk to you? Sure they do. They'd be fascinated if they got a

chance to talk to you. Especially you." This latter I added with honesty and affection, and if you knew Trent like I do, you'd understand this.

It's important, I think, that you do know something of Trent. He's tall - well over six feet I'd guess - and painfully thin. His pants fall in empty pleats from bone-slender hips, and you suspect a body like a wire coat hanger supports the soft folds of his rayon shirts. They're expensive-looking shirts, too - bold and vivid and patterned - with impossibly big-shouldered jackets in fashionable shades of taupe and olive-brown tossed, with studied indifference, about them. He has pale, brownish hair which he slicks back and stiffens with gels and hairspray, and he has bad skin. He's always scratching and squeezing and plucking at cystic, filled-up pustules about his face and neck. But he's vain about his appearance, dressing flamboyantly and with meticulous attention to detail, and he always sports two unusually large gold hoops in one ear.

Most of the other kids don't like him. They tell me that he lies - lies about his law-breaking escapades (he's currently fighting an assault charge), lies about his incredibly vast previous business and employment experiences, and lies, too, about his extensive acquaintance with booze, drugs and sex. But Trent's lies (exaggerations I suspect) don't bother me at all. Rather the tragedy of his need bothers me. In class he's outrageous. He loves attention and his incessant chatter is at once funny and provocative. He means to shock, but mostly he means to offend. His

bigotry and prejudices appear impenetrable and are firmly rooted in both racial and gender discriminatory assumptions. He hates homosexuals and he refers to his dates as his bitches. His words often prompt sadness in me, and although he'll sometimes grip my two shoulders at this with sudden and apparent compassion - and maybe some apology, too - his eyes, I think, are pleased and proud to find and hold the sadness he knows he has created in my own.

You can see that he's a puzzle, at once spurning and embracing me. And I can promise you that English classes are always lively when Trent is around. On this day he was sitting across from me at the big blue table in our room, his long frame tilted back in a chair much too small for him, while he studied me with his usual patronising condescension. But his eyes had smiled when I'd said that he was fascinating.

"Oh, yeah? Well, I asked 'em. The chick in the blue suit - I asked her "

"Chick?" I'm unhappy at this. The affront offends me personally somehow. "Trent, that's the lady who's heading up the team. She's an administrator somewhere. She's a nice lady - bright and honest, I think. A nice lady, Trent." My discomfort only delights and further fuels him.

"Oh, yeah? Well, the chick didn't wanna talk to me, anyways." I pondered on this and briefly turned over the likelihood of his unexpected claim. I imagined him approaching the leader of the team. The chick in

the blue suit. He'd appear at once threatening (impressively tall with the slicked-back hair and big earrings and a pustule-encrusted face thrust up close to her), but he'd seem tempting - enticing even - too, as he probably swayed with exaggerated, confrontational conceit above her and promised her "a good time" or "a real eye-popping discussion" or "a bunch a' deadbeats with a lot to say." I marvelled that she could resist an offer like that.

"You mean you asked her? The lady in the blue suit? You asked if you could talk with her?"

"Yeah, sure did. Told her to come down to our English class sometime. Told her you've got a bunch a' deadbeats down here." He studies me with amusement and watches for my reaction. "Nah, I didn't. I didn't say deadbeats." His eyes are surprisingly gentle at this, and he sits suddenly upright, his elbows on the table before him and his bunched fists somehow clumsily pushed close to mine. "I didn't really say deadbeats. I said you had a bunch a' interesting kids down here. An' real interesting discussion. I said we talk all the time." A rueful, somewhat apologetic smile at this, as I shifted uneasily in my seat. "I said we talk in English. I said we'd tell her lots of stuff. About schools and stuff. About things. About school."

And he would, too, I reflected, as I adjusted my position in my seat, still facing him fully but with one arm clutching the hard chair back now.

He'd give her an earful. I smiled at this and suddenly I wanted him to Give her an earful

"Ask her again, Trent. I'll ask her, too. The team need to hear what you guys have to say."

"Oh, yeah?" Pale, cynical eyes on me now, as he leans back again, the small chair wedged beneath his shoulder blades. He stretches his long legs under the table and his toe nudges suddenly at my shoe. He moves uneasily at this, and readjusts his frame into a more upright position. "They ain't interested in listening to kids like me. Deadbeats and that. They wanna talk to student council. Them real geeky kids." I'm still half-turned in my small chair and my eyes are down as I play with paper and a pencil on the table top before me.

"They're not geeky kids, Trent. I worked with student council when I did the pancake breakfast." I studied the yellow pencil in my hands. It was short and blunt-ended. Someone's anxious teeth had chewed and chipped away the yellow paint. Trent watched me, his gaze unwavering while silence enveloped us. His hands were before him on the blue table top, and the fingernail of one index finger curled and tapped, playing briefly and surprisingly with my own outstretched fingernails. "Sure they were told to talk to student council. You think the admin would want them to talk to a deadbeat like me?" His pale eyes remained amused, but somehow they belied his tone of irony and resigned betrayal. He smiled

and his fingernail tapped my knuckle this time

The team never did find time for Trent and our English class. And it seemed to me he was especially eloquent all that week. Eloquent about alienation, exclusion, and loneliness. Eloquent about teachers who locked classroom doors in order to eliminate late arrivals, or, astonishingly, teachers who prohibited access if a student were unfortunately found with one foot within and one foot without the classroom threshold as the bell rang. Eloquent about the agony of enduring a podium-style lecture when really you were longing to play Haki-Sak outside in the sun. But mostly eloquent about being a deadbeat and feeling unwanted.

We had a small party - a wine and cheese - at the end of that week to bring the team's visit to a respectable and amicable close. It was hot and they'd opened both the door and windows to the staffroom to allow a breeze to flow through. I arrived late and stood by the open doorway as the team leader began her closing remarks. The chick in the blue suit, I mused as I watched her. Incredibly, she was wearing the blue suit that day, too. I leaned against the door jam and I longed to cross the crowded room and reach for the wine I saw displayed upon the counter top, but instead I remained trapped by the collection of briefcases and book-filled bags at my feet, knowing with certainty that any clumsy manoeuvring across the room would bring sudden and unwelcome attention my way. The words of closure continued - polite affirmation followed by mild reprisals. Fluent

and conspicuously inoffensive words somehow I thought briefly of Trent. Probably out there somewhere sneaking a sly smoke and crunching the butt on the gravel of the school parking lot. Maybe posturing about his bitches, his bigotry, his disillusionment. A sense of futility to all of this somehow. Deadbeats and dropouts and Trent in the school parking lot - and me in the staffroom as the monotone of restrained suggestions flowed endlessly on. The tone of the final closing comments shifted suddenly and predictably, peaking inevitably on a note of encouragement - even praise - for our multitudinous talents and accomplishments, and I propelled myself eventually and with unveiled haste for the wine upon the distant counter top.

*"Deadbeats like me gotta lot to say. 'Cept there ain't anyone out there that's listening " Trent S. 1992*

## A Born Loser

## A Born Loser

Marvin is fine-boned and darkly Oriental. His head is shaved fashionably bare at both back and sides, but he sports a long pony tail on top, which he secures with an elastic band into a high, popped-up looking clump. He has poor eyesight and wears thick, oddly visible contact lenses, which often appear to slide across his eyeballs. He has a way of looking at you directly, although he usually glances away quickly, smiling always, and the contacts appear to glide around as his head turns sideways. He has a gentle manner and is always softly spoken.

I liked him right away. There was something vulnerable about this kid standing one day before me and clutching a yellow course-transfer slip which he held in both hands. He looked down at me from across the far side of my desk, and his eyes were guileless and engaging.

"I got kicked out of English. But they thought I could finish it with you. Except it wouldn't be English 11. It'd be Communications. If that's O K with you." Brown, steady eyes. Watching me, and waiting. A frank but somehow hesitant gaze. Perhaps he anticipated rejection. Perhaps, like me, he hated asking. I took the yellow slip, initialing the box where my name appeared, but scanning the slip for his name, too.

"Marvin," I said, and I smiled at him, looking up at him and finding the lens-filmy eyes pleased to hear his name. His hands were on the edge of my desk - at least his fingers were - and he played briefly and

intermittently with papers there

"Mr. Davidson kicked me out."

"Mr. Davidson kicked you out? Wow " I sounded impressed and I was, too "What did you do - to get kicked out I mean?"

"Oh, Mr. Davidson hates me. That's why he chucked me out " My interest was piqued at this, and I anticipated at once a tale of confrontation and rejection.

"Mr. Davidson hates you?"

"Yeah, well. He hated me right away. Like, the first time he saw me " This seemed unlikely - astounding even - as I studied the dark, slender, harmless-looking kid before me. He was slightly built and had somewhat patchy, unusually dark Oriental skin. The eyes were trusting and were asking something of me, and his manner was uncertain as his fingers messed with the papers on my desk.

"He hated you? That couldn't be "

"Yeah. Like, he did. He said I was a loser. He said I was a born loser the first day of class. "

"He said you were a loser the first day of class? He called you a loser?" My incredulity was sincere, and I pushed away a sudden and unwelcome sadness which descended at his words.

"Yeah, well. Like, when I walked into class the first day he said, 'I know you. You're a loser'" I'd risen at this, leaving my seat to perch -

half sitting and half weighted on one foot - on the corner of my desk. I was close to him - maybe too close - and he edged imperceptibly back a little towards the wall. He was turned then towards me, but one hand continued to play with the papers before him.

I persisted.

"He called you a loser? Right out in class?"

"Yeah. He said he knew me from a Friday homeroom one time. When he'd seen me there. And he said he knew right away I was a loser." I reflected briefly on the man I knew as Bill Davidson. Acerbic and cruel and brilliant. Tall, with a heavy frame, he has dark, close-cropped hair and a clipped, somewhat patchy-looking beard, liberally streaked with grey. His voice is crisp and his speech is always spare but fluent. He occasionally corrects vocabulary misuse in others, apparently finding such errors sloppy and irritating in educated colleagues. He is not without humour, however, although his laughter is usually provoked by evident insincerity or conceit in others.

I sense that he likes me, but I'm a little afraid of him. His tongue is bitter and astute, and his height somehow threatens and overwhelms me as we stand at the staffroom sink together, rinsing our coffee cups and exchanging trivialities. He's patriarchal and cynical, and his eyes on mine are amused and pleased to find submission and maybe some anxiety in my own

That's probably what he likes about me, I'm thinking, as I watch Marvin reach again for the papers on my desk. We fall silent, the two of us, and Marvin messes with the papers and I study the dates and numbers and ink squiggles on the yellow transfer slip I'm still holding. I proffer the slip and soft, brown-filmy eyes meet mine. He stirs and his eyes hold mine briefly.

"That day. The first day in English class. I turned around to get a pencil. A pen or something. To borrow one. And he said, 'Stop looking around for approval.'" I'm without a response to this, and I'm saddened, too. Bill is still standing near me at the staffroom sink, we're still washing coffee cups together, and his power and cruelty still overwhelm and enthrall and pin me there.

Marvin draws closer and I slump a bit more now, sitting rather than half-standing, while still weighted on one foot. "Yeah, well. I got a pen anyways. And I wasn't looking for approval either." His fingers were stroking the edges of the papers on the desk before him, but he stopped briefly at this and smiled at me. A resigned sort of smile. And I knew at once that I'd learn to love this skinny, vulnerable kid with the unlikely-looking pony tail and the dark, fish-lens eyes.

"Yeah, well. Anyways, we had to write this paragraph. But he comes up and grabs mine and rips it up and throws it on the floor and says it's rubbish and I have to do another one." More gentle stroking with his

fingers along the edges of the papers strewn about the desk. "And he never even read it, either."

I remember thinking about Bill. I remember thinking about him right there as I sat slumped on the desk. I remember wanting to touch Marvin's hands and the slim, dark fingers messing with my papers. But mostly I remember thinking about Bill.

He'd told me once about his wife, Kathleen, and how she'd been repeatedly overlooked when seeking work as a nurses' aide. He'd seemed angry about that. And I'd seen him with his wife once, sitting in an auditorium somewhere, his grey metal chair jammed-up close to hers. And I remembered she'd looked tiny and compact and dark, and he'd sat large and sour and very close to her.

And I remembered the day he'd told me there was no time ever to talk, chatter, *gab* for God's sake with students in class, as there was only one Goddamn day to cover the entire Goddamn Renaissance for God's sake in Western Civ. I thought about these things and I thought about the anger and sadness balled-up tight within him. And Marvin's brown eyes found mine again. Compassionate, gentle eyes I thought.

I'm still afraid of Bill. He still stands at the sink, patriarchal and sarcastic, with an acid smile for me. And I still have Marvin. With me every day and next year, too. A skinny, sober, thoughtful kind of kid. Sad, too. I'm somehow sure of that. It's a wise, forgiving sort of sadness.

though, and one which, for Marvin, yields a vast, although resigned, understanding of life's many confounding and inexplicable injustices.

We none of us ever stops measuring, assessing and evaluating our world and our experience of it. We take the measure of each other every moment of every day of our lives. Being alive means being an evaluator - of ourselves, and others, too. But I reflect that teachers often do more than merely evaluate student progress. Teachers sometimes judge the being within. The very stuff, the very essence, of another.

Like the stuff of Marvin. Skinny and vulnerable and chucked out of English class. Standing there with the yellow transfer slip which I'd finally placed within his hands. Brown eyes and sliding contacts and a hesitant smile. And I reflected for a while, as he stood there, on this. On life and losers and Bill and his pain.

The Pedagogy of Indifference  
or  
May My Voice Be Heard

# The Pedagogy of Indifference

or

## May My Voice Be Heard

I sat propped up in bed that night - two pillows bunched at my back for support - and a second bedspread folded at my feet. I was watching T V while simultaneously thumbing through the pages of a magazine. It was late June and school was almost out. The triumphs and struggles of the academic year had drawn to a close, examination papers had been corrected and scored, and marks-gathering forms had been returned to our office clerk-typist. The only concerns left to fuss about were the inevitable gift-giving and speech-making ceremonies (which we always felt obliged to inflict upon those poor unfortunates who were leaving us) and the end-of-year staff barbecue and golf tournament. Life looked pretty good. I relaxed against the pillows and nudged the second bedspread a little closer with my right foot. My daughter, Rebecca, suddenly appeared at my door.

She's a sturdy, blonde fifteen-year-old, often given to the unreasonable tirades of the unpredictable adolescent, but given, too, to a certain empathic passion for the lives and circumstances of others. And tonight she had something interesting to share with me. She crawled on my bed, nudging me firmly aside so that we may both more equitably

share the two pillows at my back.

"Look, Mom. Bruce's annual. You should read this stuff." I feigned interest.

"Mm mm... Looks good."

"No, Mom. Read it. You should see this. Do you wanna read it?" T.V. gunshots and sudden screaming momentarily drowned my reply.

"Yeah. Looks good." Reaching absently for the annual. "Bruce's, huh?" But something arrests my attention. "An annual? Like an end-of-year annual? This is Bruce's *annual*?"

"Yeah." Proudly. "Read it, Mom. It's really interesting. You should read this stuff." I took the thick wad of roughly stapled pages from her. I turned it over and thumbed rapidly through it. An annual? Couldn't be. No hard-back. No glossy pages or colour prints. No ads. No professional printing job. Done on a school *photo-copier*? An *annual*?

"You sure this is an annual? I mean, it doesn't look like an annual", I offer suspiciously, although I'm already beginning to understand.

And it was, indeed, an annual - the product of a local alternative school - a well-established refuge for the unwanted and dispossessed within our system. Street kids. Alcoholics. And drug addicts.

Rebecca was thrilled with this clumsy, soft-covered, non-glossy product. And she had good reason to be. It made for some pretty interesting reading.

*"The loneliness is hard to live with  
Depression is only the first step of death  
You always wish they'll come back  
But they really can't come back  
There are several stages of death, but death is everywhere  
So we all have to accept it before your heart dies inside*

*Teresa*

"Pretty heavy stuff. You know these kids?" I ask, my interest piqued, although suspicion and sudden doubt assailed me, too. "Friends of yours?"

"Well, yeah. Jason, he's a skater. And Cindi, she's from downtown. Yeah... well, I guess I know her from downtown. And Bruce - you know Bruce, Mom." I remembered Bruce, vaguely. He'd once sat on the brown velvet sofa in our downstairs den, while I'd stood briefly nearby and attempted to engage him in friendly and reassuring chit-chat. I remember that I appeared to terrify him, and that he had remained silent. I'd hastened somewhat clumsily then to escape. Rebecca claims that he's made a number of suicide attempts. She says he once watched his best friend commit suicide - a few years ago - in some other city, a small place, somewhere up north...

All of this I'd heard before, but the images return suddenly - unwelcome and unsettling images. T.V. voices and more rapid gunfire

suddenly invade my thoughts

"Turn the T.V. off," I say, and Rebecca looks pleased at this. I thumb pages backwards, lingering randomly over smudgy, oval-shaped reproductions of students' photographs. The pictures are blurred and ink-blackened, and each face is imbued with something ugly and oddly threatening. I reflect wryly on the numerous glossy, coloured photo reproductions resplendent that year in my own senior high school's annual - pages and pages of tanned or rosy faces, each proudly poised above the squared-off shoulder pads of an academic gown (deep royal emblazoned with gold) - the guys grasping phony, leather-bound tomes to their chests, and the girls clutching blossoms of red roses beneath their chins. Even the caps ("mortar boards" I think) were set jauntily, almost cheekily, atop those robust young faces, and each blue-clad figure was tastefully poised at a careful angle to the camera, while each glowing face was cleverly turned more directly towards it.

But back to the smudge-blackened faces in my hands that night - and the words "My Philosophy" beneath each darkly indistinct print.

*"Shit happens." Kurt*

*"Life goes on." Stacy*

*"You live, you die." Ben and Dave*

*"Life's a bitch and then you die." Tammy*

*"Don't think about it. Just get through it." Erin*

*"Kill 'em all. Let God sort 'em."* Philippe

"Kill 'em all? My God. Pretty heavy stuff, Rebecca." My daughter is pleased at this. She has my attention and she knows it. She knows, too, with the unfaltering wisdom of the very young, that the pages of this book, which she has cleverly put before me, are powerful and authentic and filled with pain. And I'm at once enthralled and aghast.

*"Life is like a bowl of soup. So hold your nose and take it one sip at a time."* Christy

*"No money. No life."* Ovidio

*"Get baked and be happy."* Shawn

*"Don't think. Drink."* Merlin

*"My philosophy? Smoke it all."* Zack

"My God." Outraged incredulity and some righteous head-shaking. "These kids do a lot of dope?" My daughter shifts a little uneasily at this and turns to readjust the two pillows behind us.

"Yeah, well... Yeah, I guess so." More pillow adjusting and some nervous laughter.

*"If you can't sell it, leave it be."* Steven

*"We're here for a good time, not a long time."* Shawn

*"Life stinks."* Jake

*"Life sucks."* Lisa

*"You live, you die, you lie, you cry."* Tom

*"Revenge rules and what comes around goes around "*

*Nigel*

"My God Life stinks? These kids really believe this stuff?" Disbelief and confusion and sadness Rebecca, too, is momentarily assailed by the alienation and nihilism of the words before us She draws her knees upwards and angles them towards me, nudging closer, but distanced somehow by the silence between us We continue jointly to clutch the stapled wad within our laps, a world of unshared and little understood adolescent isolation stretching between us Rebecca starts, returning suddenly from some place of unsettling memories

"There's Phil And Ryan Oh, my God, Lindsay " Hoots of unexpected laughter as she draws my attention once again to the text before us

*"Deal with stress with a machete " Lindsay*

*"Drink, get drunk, and fall down " Bruce and Kurt*

Rebecca loved these last two And some really were rather funny Rebecca's stifled giggles inevitably seduced me "What about this gem?" I asked, a shriek of hysteria suddenly escaping me

*"He who stands on toilet seat high on pot " Chris*

We clutched the text in delighted convulsions at this But reading on, we were puzzled and soon sobered

*"Sex is bad " Ray*

"Sex is bad?" I ask Rebecca quizzically. She regards me warily, her eyes searching mine for the hidden agendas. I shrug, implying a sort of philosophical bewilderment, and we move on to safer turf.

*"Be mellow and hang with your brothers "* Ryan

*"Whatever happens, happens "* Todd

*"Live one day at a time "* Colin

*"To live is to die "* Jason

*"Know thyself "* Amian

A certain resigned wisdom here. I was really starting to like these kids. Meanwhile, my own sturdy, wise child nestled closer. Her long, thick blonde hair brushed my cheek, as she wrestled the pillows from me. Know thyself, I mused. Know thyself. I wondered, then, about the teachers who had put this powerful and poetic collection together - and I wondered, too, about the absolute and unjudging honesty with which it was presented - an honesty which was itself somehow a bitter indictment of the very world which spawned it.

I reflected suddenly on the rigours and climate of my own senior high school, and I pondered inevitably on the anomaly of my own position there - resource room teacher for the unwanted, the failures, and the under-achievers - within an institution historically devoted to promoting the academic potential of its predominantly white, upper and middle-class clientele. Ours is an exclusive society. We value our university-bound

honours students. We're proud of their heritage - a worthy history engraved yearly in heavy black print on varnished wooden shields. Decades of honour rolls gracing the walls of our gymnasium. Supervising a scholarship exam recently, I scrutinised those plaques. The ticking silence and mounting boredom prompted my interest. I guess I hoped that some familiar name would leap out to amuse and interest me. And indeed there were many names. But the foolish and wayward were not among them.

Honour roll lists appear also in our annual, as you may well imagine they might. But you may well imagine, too, that our annual is vastly different in both appearance and intent from the shabby but powerful book which Rebecca and I had examined that night. Our kids can't say "shit", or talk about dying, or promote illicit drugs in the respectable pages of our publication, funded as it is by local business interests, and widely distributed as it is throughout upper-class suburbia.

Street kids and dope addicts have no place in respectable society, you might well say - and no place in respectable schools - or respectable annuals for that matter. So what if a few street kids hang out on Government Street and do dope in dark and unseen places? So what if a few thirteen-year-old prostitutes support their habits with a few cheap tricks each night? So what? So keep them out of suburbia. And out of suburban schools. Please.

Know thyself, Amian said. Society is cradled and nourished within our schools. Schools are our past, they are our present and they are all the future that we will ever have. Exclusion and the maintenance of rigidly enforced economic class structures belie the very democracy we purport to promote throughout our pedagogical practices. Ethics is a component of our widely-acclaimed grade twelve law studies, but ethics were somehow tossed aside in the exclusive practices found in current pedagogical systems today. Programme funding and capital cost budgeting rarely favour alternative school systems. Street kids and junkies aren't worth it.

But I heard the voice of those street kids and junkies that night. And their black poetry was filled with pain.

*Yes, I know you well*

*I've seen this house*

*The dust has filled the cracks of years*

*And I search for words that must exist*

*To say that you mean nothing to me*

*And I clench my fist*

*Against your hands*

*And I know that I am weeping.*

*Kristal*

But there were other voices in this book, too. Vulnerable voices of fragile hope. Cindi has such a voice. May her voice, in this story, speak to

you with all the passion and poetry with which she spoke, that night, to me.

*In my fifteenth through seventeenth years I lived mainly on the streets. Unable to get a job through my lack of education and work experience, I began doing drugs and supporting myself through illegal and deprecating means.*

*I must tell you that one and a half years ago I was on the streets, and now I am in school and I am a published poet. There are many others like me on the streets today.*

*Please, don't shut us out.*

Know thyself, Amian said. Know thyself and know thy deepest heart. And know, too, if your heart or your doors are closed.

Dana's Story  
or  
The Kid We Soon Forgot

# Dana's Story

OR

## The Kid We Soon Forgot

It was early September when Dana walked into my life. He was seventeen and he looked like trouble at first. He was unusually tall - well over six feet - and painfully thin. An oversized T shirt hung about his sharp collar bones and shoulder blades, and his long, shoulder-length brown hair largely obscured his cautious and evasive eyes. He was part of a repeat English 10 class I had that year.

He always made the other kids laugh. They loved his disruptive behaviours - late arrivals with his walk-man blasting, constant tapping and banging and thumping in class, or sudden head-flopping and snoring routines whenever things seemed too settled or uneventful for him. Mostly kids hoped that something confrontational and exciting might explode as unwitting teachers encountered this remarkable and undisciplined student.

But it turned out that, for me at least, he was never much trouble at all. The other kids knew at once that I loved him, and they watched me, throughout the long ensuing months of fall, nurture this unruly and unresponsive weed. The group was small - sixteen of us in all - and I usually left the lonely enclave of my teacher's desk to join my students as they circled the two large blue and yellow tables we'd hastily thrust

together I'd sit next to Dana because it always worked better that way. When he'd start tapping and banging and shaking (we'd be reading poetry) I'd reach out with only the smallest movement and touch his shirt sleeve. He'd quit the thumping and rattling for a bit then. And when his head flopped defiantly into his folded arms on the table-top (we'd be discussing an essay topic or a story theme) I'd reach out gently and brush his shoulder, and he'd sit up for a while then, and a small ripple of laughter would briefly unite us all before we began again.

He never once completed a written homework assignment for me, although occasionally he tossed off a few hurried, empty lines in class. And he never participated in discussion, although in his own uniquely tragic and clumsy way he sought our attention each time his head flopped defiantly onto his bare forearm, long hair spread-eagled on the bright blue or yellow table top. And he'd wait then for my gentle, sleeping-beauty touch to signal his return to us. I think he listened to us, though. How could he not? The kids talked of drugs and alcohol and sex. And often - depression and loneliness, too. How could he not be listening to us?

But if he never spoke or wrote for me, nor did he for any other. He was failing - miserably. His teachers hated him. He was silent - inarticulate, uncommunicative, and unreachable. He arrived late, if at all, and always without pen or paper. And he was rude - rude in childish, unsophisticated and unexpected ways. In Socials 10 he rested his head on

his chair back and snored audibly, thereby at once ensuring his teacher's explosive fury and his own inevitable removal from the classroom. The students loved it (Dictation and B C's coastal rainfall patterns had failed to captivate them, but Dana's snores were, in contrast, almost inspiring )

But his math teacher hated him most. She sent him down one day, along with two other unruly and uncooperative classmates, to work with me in my resource room setting. I was often the recipient of the more defiant and incorrigible students among our otherwise well-disciplined ranks. It transpired, however, that Dana had no problem with this math.

"You can do this stuff. You know this stuff. So how come you failed Math 10?" I ask, curious and somehow displeased.

"Missed the exam. Turned up at the wrong time."

"You missed the exam? *You missed it?* But wouldn't the teachers have given you another chance?" Smiles from Dana at this foolish thought. I persist, indignant and genuinely puzzled. "But did you talk to the teachers? And how come you missed the exam, anyway?"

"I met the other kids walking back from school. They were walking back the other way. That's how I knew I had the time wrong. It was the morning - not the afternoon. I thought it was in the afternoon. The math exam, I mean."

"And they wouldn't give you a second chance?" More wry smiles. He perceives an innocence in my uninformed questions, and he regards me

now with amusement and some incredulity.

"You kidding? They hated me there." It was then that I suggested challenging the Math 10 course. This notion pleased him.

"You mean take the exam now? Yeah. Sure. Can I?" We needed two official rubber stamps - from the principal and the head of the math department - and having acquired both with surprisingly little opposition, we then approached Dana's math teacher. I hadn't forgotten that she hated him, and that undoubtedly she had good reason to. I imagined that persistent thumping, banging, shaking, and tapping might upset her, but I was pretty certain that audible snoring or head-flopping might infuriate her. And she was furious, too. Furious that Dana might challenge Math 10, but outraged, and perhaps fearful, that he might prove successful. We'd all agreed to an examination of some length and considerable difficulty, in order that Dana might thereby convincingly demonstrate his skills, and that having done so, he might set about at once using class-release time more profitably for other studies. And it was agreed, too, that his math teacher should prepare his examination.

But the exam was a long time in coming. Long enough that its arrival heralded only one remaining week before the semester and regular course completion drew to conclusion. Life is indeed a curious and troubling affair. And life has its ironies with which to torment and to test us. Dana eventually benefited not a whit from class release time - well,

O.K. , four days - but he was assailed, nevertheless, with an examination of considerably greater length and complexity than that which his classmates faced only one week later. And I raged inwardly, while Dana only shrugged - the resigned and wise shrug of someone who has been there before.

The truth is, Dana didn't care that much at all. He didn't appear to care much about anything really. I knew he smoked a lot of dope. And I knew he wanted me to know, in a curious, sly sort of way. There were always those covert innuendoes and anomalous hints, and that half-whispered double-talk he'd engage in whenever I was around. Was he testing me? Teasing me? Wanting something from me? The eyes were amused but wary behind the thick, long brown hair, and the sidelong glances weighed and watched me always.

In some ways he was a loner, although the other kids seemed to like him well enough. Girls liked him, but he rarely responded to their attentions with any interest or enthusiasm. He was shy and inarticulate and given to sudden and unexpected disappearances. The other kids said he was good with small children, and that he was kind and remarkably gentle with the two-year-old he often baby-sat. But he remained aloof and disconnected from most of us.

His school records were a revelation. A successful and perhaps even gifted student throughout his elementary and junior-secondary years, it

seemed that somewhere around grade nine he had suddenly fallen off a proverbial cliff. A total and abject record of failure had plagued both his remaining grade nine and his two grade ten semesters. I wondered why this was so. And I knew that I needed to ask him.

But we had no private place to meet and talk, Dana and I. My room was always teeming with kids and the incessant chatter which came with them. So we sat on the bench outside my classroom. For me this bench is a peculiarly intimate place - an oasis at once strangely private but quite public, set unaccountably amid the crowded and uncaring melée which throngs the school's main hallway. A worn and scarred old seat, veneered and glossy-hard, but safe somehow, and inviting, too. This is where we sat and talked.

He never looked at me directly. His eyes, cautious and troubled, remained hidden behind the thick, brown hair. I knew he might take off at any moment. He shifted uneasily on the hard seat and carefully avoided touching me.

"Dana, I know things are hard for you sometimes. I mean dope, drugs, stuff, you know. I mean it's O.K. I mean, no, it's not O.K. I mean it's O.K. to talk. To me, I mean." All this without eye-contact and without touching.

"Yeah, I screwed up. I know this. I'm a screw-up. I guess."

"So how come you screwed up in grade nine? I mean -you're not a

screw-up. Not to me you're not. A screw-up, I mean. But what happened in grade nine? Something happened in grade nine." He studies me for a moment with perplexed interest.

"Nothing happened in grade nine. I screwed up, that's all."

"But you went from good grades to straight D's and E's. Right across the board."

"Yeah. Well. My step-dad buggered off in grade nine." This astounding statement momentarily silenced me. Most guys his age hated their step-dads.

"Oh. You really liked your step-dad, I guess? I mean you hated when he left." Inexplicably, we seemed to have drawn a little closer. His left leg was shaking uncontrollably, but that wasn't unusual for Dana, and his left hand, big and strangely darkly-red, lay curled half open on his trembling knee.

"Yeah, he was O.K. I guess. My mom, she liked him. He told me one night. He gave me a beer and told me he was leaving. Gave me a beer outside and everything." I was clutching his left forearm now. I squeezed, implying shared pain, and he recognised my squeeze and drew imperceptibly closer.

"Yeah, well. My mom, she's gonna throw me out. She says I've gotta go live with my dad. My real dad that buggered off when I was four. Not my step-dad, my real dad in Prince George." We'd abandoned the

space between us now I alternately clutched his left forearm or grasped the hand on his knee

"My mom, she says I gotta clean up Like, do good in school, or get a job My dad, my real dad in Prince George, he's married now He's got kids " The hallway before us is suddenly crowded as kids spill unexpectedly from behind closed classroom doors, but the indifferent faces in the crushing throng around us only eye us with mild and somewhat distant curiosity

"Do you want to stay here, Dana? I mean here, at the school?"

"Yeah, I wanna stay " His eyes are down Mine, too We watch his knees continue their shaking

"I guess your mom's right, maybe You gotta clean up I mean clean up in lots of ways Do you want to stay, Dana?"

"I wanna stay " His shoulders jerk awkwardly and spasmodically as he tosses back the long, thick hair His eyes meet mine suddenly Wary, wanting eyes "I wanna stay Yeah I wanna stay "

But he didn't Stay, that is Within weeks he was gone - kicked out by our team of four administrators Staff who knew him were delighted with this decision - it had been a long time in coming most of them thought - and a general consensus prevailed that finally, thank God, the admin had shown some 'balls' The other kids said that he'd gone to Prince George - that very weekend - the moment that letter, or phone call,

or perhaps both, had arrived home from our administrative team

And we never heard from Dana again. Nor did we ever speak of him again - of his broken past and his uncertain future - of his tragic failure and our own disguised failure, too. He was no longer a problem. He was gone. Besides that, we had other kids, other problems, other failures to focus upon now. And we were busy preparing to kick them out, too.

But I've often thought of Dana over the years which have ensued. I remember the day that we sat on the old, oak bench. I remember his curled but open hand, palm upwards, the fingers big and clumsy and curved inwards. I remember his hands and his eyes and his words and, perhaps, his lies. I remember the crowd which suddenly thronged and crushed near us, the eyes of each within it curious but instinctively distanced from any public pain.

I've thought often of the brief coming together of Dana's life with mine. I am a teacher and teaching is filled with passion and hope. But it is fraught, too, with confusion and some regret. I operate always within the unyielding parameters of a relentlessly rigid, disciplined and linear pedagogical world, a world which can't or won't stop for the malcontents or the undisciplined or the broken few within its ranks.

I think we punished Dana because a disquieting sense of failure pervasively unsettled us, and we needed then to regain our suddenly

shifted sense of equilibrium. Does he ever look back with regret, I wonder? Does he still smoke dope and take care of little kids? And does he still shake and rattle and tap all day? Did he find a home with his real dad? Did he ever find a friend? A teacher who might love him? A belonging place to be? I wonder, did they want him in Prince George?

## The Story of Robin and Beryl

## The Story of Robin and Beryl

This is the story of Robin and Beryl. And it is a story with an unwelcome but oddly familiar ring for me. A story of hatred and isolation and mutual betrayal.

Beryl was part native Indian, and this was unusual for a teacher of science in a predominantly white, upper-class suburban high school. But let me tell you about Beryl. Beryl was short and heavily built. She always wore her hair in a rigid crescent of tightly permed curls, and her eyes - bright, narrow Oriental eyes - were almost entirely concealed beneath the unusually plump overhang of her eyelids. She had strong, muscular legs and she often wore sturdy tennis shoes with thick, white socks. Beryl was Robin's Chemistry 11 teacher and he hated her.

But let me tell you, too, about Robin. He was tall and well-made, with big shoulders and a powerful, chunky frame. He was eighteen years old and still a long way from graduating. He spent most of his school day with me in the somewhat intimate safety of my resource room setting. He smoked dope and drank beer, but he was clever and resourceful, too. Whenever someone inadvertently locked my filing cabinet Robin could always force the lock for me, wielding a cleverly stolen screwdriver and flashing me a warm and prideful smile. We became friends that year, Robin and I.

He'd always sit alongside me at the big yellow table in our room, a

Socials 11 text spread open before us, but we'd often ignore the text and talk of other things. He loved horses and dreamed of travelling abroad. He'd smile at me often - his eyes blue, amused, but trusting - and he'd jostle me with a big elbow and beg for a cigarette break. And I'd always let him go - for sly, forbidden smokes behind the outside double doors beyond our classroom - and he'd always rush back in, heading unaccountably for the window and thrusting it open.

"God, but you keep it hot in here", he'd say, sucking in cold air from outside. "It's my P M S , Ms H ", he'd say. And his smile would be warm and affectionate for me from across the room, as his head turned towards me from over his big shoulder.

You can see that I loved him and that I thought him innocent and harmless and always kind. So when he told me about Beryl he took me by surprise. He was failing Chemistry 11, and one day he talked about this and about Beryl.

"She's a bitch. A real ugly bitch. God, she's an ugly bitch. God, I hate that ugly bitch." My two hands were spread before me on the yellow table-top and maybe my mouth had fallen open. This from my gentle, beer-bellied Robin? This from the big, sturdy, sweet kid who begged for cigarette breaks and suffered from P M S and broke into filing cabinets with stolen screwdrivers?

"You don't mean that. That doesn't sound like you, Robin." Hesitant

and wanting something else from him

"Yes, I do. She's a real ugly fucking bitch " I look down, contemplating my two hands still spread before me on the table-top. My heart is stilled and I'm inexplicably afraid somehow. He draws closer then, cautiously but with intent. His arm moves behind my chair, encircling and enclosing me. Bridging maybe the sudden distance which stretches now between us.

"Maybe it's because she's Indian. I don't know " He offers this uneasily and we both recognise dangerous and uncharted waters here. "She's just an ugly, fucking bitch, that's all. "

"I heard she was sick once - a long time ago", I say, searching his face and his clear, steady eyes.

"Yeah, well. Maybe. But we boo her. Like we boo her down in class." I absorb this, turning it over slowly and with infinite care, and reaching, as though from some vast and impenetrable distance, for some meaning to his puzzling words.

"You boo her? Like boo? Like boo out loud in class?" His arm encircles me still. He's turned towards me. Intent, serious intent in the blue eyes now.

"Yeah, well. Like we wait for her to make a mistake. On the blackboard. Like she can't do math and she gets it wrong. Makes mistakes. And we yell and boo and hiss. Bang on desks and stuff. We all do." No

artifice, no guilt, no self-consciousness about him. Steady blue eyes regarding me with patience, and, I thought, some tenderness, too. His largeness is warm and envelopes me, but his words stretch long and irretrievable between us, and we fall silent for a while.

And I'm picturing Beryl, fat and tight-lipped and flustered - pinned and spread-eagled at a chalkboard - somewhere in this school, an upstairs hallway maybe, a classroom above me perhaps. Somewhere each day in B block. Facing the humiliation and derision and shame. And Robin draws closer, knowing with certainty that I'm betrayed.

"I can't believe you'd do it, Robin. Not you. I mean, boo. Boo someone down and everything."

"Yeah, well, I do. I like it." Stoic, dispassionate words. "I like it. You gotta believe it. I do it. I wait for her to make a mistake and then I go after her." He studies me critically, but with gentle and compassionate eyes. He wants something from me, and I want something so much more from him. His arm encloses me still, and I'm slumped now heavily against it. We remain in silence. A silence which at once distances but inexplicably unites us.

We never spoke of Beryl again. She'd sometimes sit near me in staff meetings, and I'd watch her correct papers there, busy and distant and inattentive to discussion around her. Her head would be down - her eyes in profile completely obliterated by the fatty overhang of eyelids - eyes

hidden, too, from my curious stares. She always seemed O.K. - on the outside. But I mused often on some private place within her heart. A place of memories and pain.

And as for Robin - he's gone now. He never graduated. He left and works now in a ski resort somewhere. But we were close, the two of us, in the months that he remained with me. And we'd often find the filing cabinet inexplicably locked, and Robin never failed then to please me with his strength and ingenuity - wielding always a cleverly acquired stolen screwdriver - while embracing me, too, with his quick and affectionate smile. Of course he failed Chemistry 11, but I never asked Beryl about him. I never asked Beryl about Beryl. Not ever. Not once. And nor could I ask her now.

Who Are You, Anyway, Henry?

## Who Are You, Anyway, Henry?

Lana is seventeen years old. She's tall and slender, with pale, pretty eyes behind an unruly frame of perm-crinkly hair which falls often about her brow and neck. She laughs a lot and has an oddly high-pitched, scratchy sort of voice. She's a boys' basketball groupie and she dogs the beleaguered team at every game. She's harmless and fun-loving and without guile. Basically a nice kid, you'd say.

So it took me by surprise the day she appeared at my desk in my classroom, pulled up a chair close to me, and without preamble or warning, burst into sudden, stifled tears. The room got quiet at once as idle chatter around us abruptly ceased. Kids working in scattered groups nearby were curious and studied us with sly and speculative, although not unkind, interest. I touched her knee and brushed mascara-black tears from under her eyes.

"What's wrong, Lana? Can you tell me? Tell me what's wrong?" She stems the flow of tears with the heels of both hands and sits suddenly upright and resolute.

"Mr. Ekstrom just told me to cancel my grad dress. He said I won't be needing one. He said I might as well forget it. 'Cos I'm gonna fail Consumer Ed 12." She straightens further at this and places her hands, flat and palms down, in her lap. "An' it's already half made," she adds, flexing and tensing her fingers, and scrutinising, with apparently puzzled

intensity, the backs of her hands

"Forget what? Your grad dress? What for?" Incredulity and a hint of sudden anger softening my voice

"He just said forget it I stood in the doorway an' he said I wouldn't be needing a dress. 'Cos I'm not gonna graduate." More tears. An abandoned, noisy flurry this time, while I sit in reflective silence and study the girl before me. She's plucking vainly at her fingernails through the blur of tears, and I offer her a battered roll of half-used toilet paper which, unaccountably, has been propped on my desk for weeks. She has the open-mouthed attention of every kid in the room, but she seems distant and somehow unaware of this, as she continues absently to mop the flow of mucous from her nose with a wad of bunched and soggy tissue. Tiny fragments of the white paper remain glued to the skin under her eyes. She shrugs and sighs, implying sudden resignation, I think.

"I asked him just now - just now before break I asked him if there was any way I could bring my percentage up. 'Cos I'm standing at forty-three percent. An' he said no. No way. Nothing. An' that I wouldn't be needing a dress and everything. So I went to Family Man an' I started crying an' Mrs. Miller said I could come down an' see you, 'cos I asked her." We all sit in puzzled silence at this.

"Family Man?" I manage eventually. "That was your next class?"

"Yeah. But I couldn't stay. 'Cos I was crying so much." I sat and

Who Are You, Anyway, Henry?

thought of all the things I might ask her, but I was already certain of her answers before I'd posed my first question.

"Did you offer to write an essay? Do an extra assignment? Did you say you'd do some research maybe? Something extra?"

"Yeah. But he said no. We don't do assignments and stuff. We just write tests."

"You just write tests? That's all you do? Just write tests?"

"Yeah. An' I've failed them all. I can't do tests, Ms H. You know that. We have a test on the chapters every Friday. On all the chapters. But I can't remember all that stuff. All the laws and everything. Even when Kareem helped me study an' we made index cards an' everything, I still only got eight out of twenty-five." Her eyes are puffed and bloodshot, and her gaze has settled briefly upon some distant and unfocused spot upon the wall. "So I guess I won't be needing a grad dress after all. And it's almost finished, too." We sit in silence for a while at this, while Lana alternately plucks at the fingernails in her lap and then raises her eyes to stare again at some distant spot upon the wall behind me.

"Like it's almost finished and it's taffeta an' all," she offers suddenly. "My mom sewed my sister's grad dress, too. But mine took ages 'cos it's got bones in the top. Like in the top - up here." Her hands travel briefly across her breasts and her rib-cage beneath them, but soon return to rest flat and palms down, but limp this time, in the cradle of her knees.

Who Are You, Anyway, Henry?

which she has thrust close to mine.

I knew she was in no position to fight back. Her youth, her gender, and the historic culture within which her educational experiences have been spawned constrain and silence her. She's subservient, disenfranchised and inevitably governed by both her own ignorance and the rigidity of an inherently rule-bound hierarchy of students and faculty which perpetuates that ignorance.

She'd said the dress was taffeta "Fuchsia," she added. "And it crinkles and rustles and it feels funny, too." I thought she'd cry again at this, but her gaze remained fixed on the wall beyond her, and it was I, instead, who fought to control a sudden rush of tears.

## **Part 2:**

Henry teaches Marketing and Consumer Ed. 12. But you'd have to know Henry to believe that he'd tell someone to forget about her grad dress. And just weeks before graduating, too. And you'd have to know him to believe that he'd evaluate student progress solely on the basis of accumulated test scores.

Not that I can lay claim to knowing Henry really. Others do. Men, mostly. Because Henry favours, I think, the society of men. He's taught at our school for well over twenty years now, but I imagine he's adjusted little, if at all, to the many and remarkable changes he must have witnessed.

Who Are You, Anyway, Henry?

unfolding about him during those lengthy and varied years

He's tall and he stands up straight. He was once an officer in the military, they say, and one day, I remember, he wore an officer's uniform to school. A dark, greenish uniform I recall, resplendent with brass buttons upon the epaulets and pockets and down the front closure, and with a hard, stiff-peaked cap to top it all off.

His hair is dark, although it's streaked grey about his temples and brow, and his eyebrows are unusually thick and coarse, and sprout long, curly white bristles which move about when he talks. He's intimidating, too. He's at once funny and outspoken and irreverent, but he's cruel and sharp-tongued, too, with both students and colleagues alike if it pleases him. And it often does please him. Because Henry is bad-tempered. Almost always bad-tempered.

And how Lana must ignite and fuel that temper, I reflected that day, as she bumped her chair across the linoleum towards me and moved closer, her knees nestled firmly then against my own. I tilted my head down towards my shoulder, and scrunched my lips up tight while raising my eyebrows somewhat as I studied her that day, imparting, I hoped, a look of warm compassion and tangible affection. Because I was certain that Henry imparted neither.

Shrill and unreliable and not too bright. That's what Henry would say of her. I was somehow sure of that. And Lana, I suspected, was sure

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of it, too

### **Part 3:**

June and grad dresses. Soon here and soon gone. And the grad dresses which bloomed and blossomed that summer were displayed, as always, but briefly and forgotten at once. But in this case one finely-boned and crinkly taffeta dress was unhappily discarded before it was forgotten.

And September was suddenly here. The days still Indian-summer hot, and the sun slanted lower and diffused softer now through the classroom windows behind me. Today I'm sitting in the school cafeteria - a vast and uninviting place - scattered as always about its perimeter with surprisingly few tables, and lined along one wall with a row of glass-fronted vending machines. But today its usually yawning space is thick with pushing, disorganised throngs, as staff and students alike mingle and crush and chatter. We're registering new students, but inevitably and unwillingly, we find ourselves rewriting the timetables of those who are returning, too. But I'm enjoying what might otherwise prove to be a stressful occasion, as happily, I find myself assigned to Station Six, where all that is expected of me is a smile and a scribbled initial on completed course forms.

And that's just what I'm doing - reaching with outstretched hands and with my face turned up and smiling - and proffering two yellow

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carbon-copied course forms to a young woman before me. She's smiling down at me, her eyes bright and unusually black I notice, and her hair is wild and bushy and dark about her neck and shoulders. But my eyes are drawn suddenly beyond her shoulders. Beyond them, where the fast food vending machines line the wall behind her. What I saw there astounded me. No, it stunned me more like.

It's Jody. Blond, solid, bouncing Jody - a returning student who plans to graduate in January. But she's touching - reaching up balanced on her toes - and *touching* Henry's eyebrows. She's standing before Henry near the slot machines, jostled and thronged by the apparently indifferent crowds which surround her, and she's smoothing and, yes, *stroking* his eyebrows. No - she's licking her fingers and using saliva and spittle to shape and define them. I think my mouth dropped all the way open, and I know my fingers froze about the yellow course forms which I'd momentarily proffered but now clutched and retained, because I remember that the young woman before me was eventually forced to wrestle the forms from my grasp, her smile now gone and her eyes puzzled and perhaps not a little afraid.

Not that I cared. Because I'm watching Jody who's fixing Henry's tie now. She's up and on her toes again and she's adjusting and shoving the knot around at his throat. He appeared briefly, I thought, to contemplate escape. I saw that he started back slightly, and that his two hands rose

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momentarily, although only fractionally, at his sides. But he probably figured, I thought, with that intuitive instinct which is borne of unexpected public exposure, that a mere shove to his tie was nothing compared with spittle-slick eyebrow stroking.

And I stared on. Transfixed and dumbfounded. But I learned something from those few brief and astonishing moments on that warm September day. I learned that I knew nothing of Henry. Except, perhaps, that his shell was as penetrable and as fragile as my own.

And I've thought often of Henry since that day. Henry with his acid and bitter-sharp tongue. Touched briefly and irrepressibly by a plump and freckled kid. And a female, too. Licking her fingers and smoothing the recalcitrant white whiskers which sprout on his brow. Touching the already neat knot in his dark, college-striped neck-tie, and smiling up guilelessly into the frightened and startled eyes which he turned down to meet hers.

Reaching thoughtlessly and joyfully beyond the separation of age and sex. Reaching where my heart and fingers are much too afraid to venture. Because like Lana, I'm afraid of Henry. Afraid and always distanced from him. Distanced by his cruelty, his wit, and his bushy, whiskered brows. But distanced most of all, perhaps, by his stubborn disregard for boned and crinkly taffeta gowns.

Who Are You, Anyway, Henry?

## Janice: Vignettes

## Janice: Vignettes

### Part 1:

Janice was eighteen when she arrived. Short and almost skinny, she had long, uneven hair which hung always about her face and neck and obscured her eyes, while shielding her, too, from the intrusive eyes of others. She'd often adjust the pale strands, in order that she might at least see something of the world before her, and thereby perhaps avoid those unexpected table and chair legs which appeared so frequently to trap her unwary feet.

It was amazing that Janice ever found her way to my classroom at all. Certainly the school didn't want her and said so.

*"She dropped out in grade eight for God's sake. Who's gonna get her through her grade ten essentials? Get rid of her now. She's someone else's problem. Let S J take her on. She doesn't belong here and you know that. You wanna make life harder for us? That it? Who's gonna take her on anyway? You?"*

But Janice stayed. Against all odds, this shy and skinny kid stayed. She was hard to get to know. She rarely spoke, and when she did, she expressed cynicism and distrust, and of course this distanced her from us. She was unyieldingly unkind in her appraisal of others, and she was often subversively cruel in her assessment of more dull-witted peers. She had a friend, Megan, and at lunch time I'd stand at my classroom window and

watch the two of them wander off across the back fields together, each with a curled hand held down to conceal the lighted cigarette within it.

But it must have been hard for Janice to be in our school - hard even to walk down our hallways - peopled as they were with tightly-knit, exclusive groups of well-off kids. But she did walk those hallways - although always in a sort of snotty, defiant way - and always with Megan in tow.

She never participated in school social events, and as far as I know, she never had a date with a guy from the school. She once had a perm and pulled her hair back just the tiniest fraction from her face, and a school counsellor and myself rushed at once into ecstasies of false assumptions.

*"There's a change. Don't you think? The hair - it's significant perhaps?"*

*"Absolutely. You've made some headway. I'm sure of it. She's learning to trust- reach out - you know."*

Together we purchased Jan an eight dollar ticket to a school dance. She was broke but had briefly mentioned Friday's dance. But she wisely thwarted us and ignored the school dance, no doubt spending Friday night in more socially equitable circumstances.

It's not that we didn't make progress. Jan completed three basic grade ten courses, and during her second semester with me she even acquired a few grade 11 credits. But she talked often of quitting. Although

evasive and secretive about her life outside the school, she occasionally revealed details of a home life bereft of order, and apparently rooted firmly in abuse or neglect borne of poverty and long-term parental alcoholism

She'd left school three years ago to earn five dollars an hour packing shelves at K Mart, and when she eventually returned to the institutionalised and indifferent climate of senior-high school, she felt threatened and inadequate. I was somehow sure of that. Meanwhile, nothing we ever did or said embraced the life experience and complex cynicism which she brought with her. Nothing shifted to make a place for her. Rigid course requirements, a content-driven curriculum, and competitive letter-grading practices are the foundations of a system which values above all others its university-bound honours students. Parental advisory groups seem always almost exclusively made up of well-heeled professionals, and it is the societal and ethical persuasions of these people which drives and perpetuates both the politics and philosophy of the school. Jan's mother works shifts at K Mart, and she's never once stepped through the doors of our school. And if she had, she probably wouldn't have ventured beyond the foyer. The trophies and plaques in polished display cases there would doubtlessly have overwhelmed and intimidated her. I think

June rolled around that first year. And as Jan waved good-bye and

set off across the back fields to the family's low-cost town-house complex, I reflected on an incorrigible pedagogical system which so relentlessly maintains rigid, exclusive, and socio-economically enforced class structures. Our honours students shone that year at our final assembly. Three male students were brought forward before the crowded assemblage and we heard of the scholarships which had been bestowed upon them. A number of well-groomed and professional-looking parents were on hand to join with the teaching staff in celebrating the school's glowing academic record. Jan wasn't there, though. And certainly no-one noticed. Or mourned her absence. Jan was already at the far end of the back fields, a wide expanse of scrubby, sun-yellowed grassland between herself and the still-resounding echoes of our self-congratulatory applause.

I thought at that time that she may not return. It's not that she hated her first year with us: she may even have viewed it as that first step in the proverbial journey of a thousand miles. It's more that she always knew there was no place - no authentic place - for her to be with us. And if there is no place for you, then K Mart at five bucks an hour might look less like a dead-end and more like a refuge.

But incredibly, she did return. There was something tenacious about this kid. She's twenty now, but she's closer, at least, to graduating.

**Part 2:**

It's Consumer Ed 12, and a group of ten of us is sitting squished up close in a small storage room upstairs. We're squished up close because the room is tiny and already jammed with two tables - one larger placed centrally and almost filling the available space, and one smaller shoved up against a wall. We spend seventy minutes every second day up here, as another teacher with a much larger group uses our classroom at that time.

I'm sitting at the larger table, surrounded by students, and I'm alternately nursing the cold coffee cup before me or playing with the papers and car keys I've carried upstairs with me. Jan and her sister, Mel, are sitting up on the smaller table to my left, both with bare knees drawn up against their breasts, and heels wedged firmly against the table edge for support. They're friends, these two - Jan now twenty and Mel just sixteen. They're inseparable, too. They have to be. Parental rage and neglect long since united them in bonds of mutual support against a common threat.

We'd been discussing B.C.'s Rental Act, and we'd moved on from this to talk of consumer protection in the event of landlord abuse or irresponsibility. And so Jan's unexpected comment shouldn't have stunned and silenced us in quite the way it did.

"Sluts. The sidewalk sluts. That's what he calls us." Moments before she'd been describing conditions of shabby disrepair at the low-cost townhouse complex where she and her family lived, but she'd mentioned,

too, with swift and sudden bitterness, a manager there

"Sluts? The manager calls you sluts?" I manage at last

"Yeah. Like, the sidewalk sluts. He doesn't like us hanging out on the sidewalk outside. He moves us on. Says we're sluts and that." The small storage room grew quiet at this, as we each turned over this disquieting disclosure and somehow sought to assess it. I'm turned in my chair, one elbow on the hard wooden back support, and my face is turned up and towards Jan. She's avoiding my eyes. All our eyes. She's clutching her feet and plucking at a bare toe nail. The open sandals she's wearing have thick brown straps encircling her ankles and feet, and she's chipping, with frowning concentration, at the peeling red polish on the bare toenails which peek through. Her head is down and the long, pale hair trails her knees in uneven strands.

Her sister, Mel, stirs then. "Yeah. And fuck-faces. He calls us fuck-faces, too."

"*Fuck-faces?*" This from Trent, who's sitting across from me, his long frame, as always, tilted back in a small wooden chair, and his legs, crossed at the ankles, spread beneath the table before him. He's usually impudent and cynical with his parodies and ridicule of those around him, but today he seems to have momentarily put aside the snickers and sarcasm which we might otherwise have expected from him, and instead his eyes are soft and his tongue is stilled as he looks up and studies Mel on the table.

above him. She's a plain girl really. A pinched, pale, hard-up looking kid. Sort of weasel-like, and always bad-tempered. But her eyes are beautiful. Blue and fringed black with thick and curling lashes.

"You want me an' a coupla guys to beat the livin' shit outta him for ya?" Trent asks, but the smile of amusement on his lips belies the compassion in his eyes.

"God, no. No." Jan's sitting upright suddenly, her arms now rigid at her sides and her two hands flat upon the table top. "God, no. We'd get kicked out. And we only pay a thousand a month." I reflect on this, and on the shabby structure which is the townhouse complex just beyond our school playing fields. A low-lying, olive-green building, with a weed-tufted path and a yellow, scrub-patch grass square before each unit.

Trent persists, though, and he's regarding the two girls with real intent now. "Listen, me an' a coupla guys. We'll beat the shit outta the bastard for ya. O.K.?" I shift uncomfortably within the confines of my seat at this, and I'm readying myself for some appropriately teacher-like intervention. And I sense that my students expect this of me, too, as although Trent's expletives are arresting and stimulating, they're not commonly employed in most senior-high school classrooms. But Rahim speaks up first. He's Kenyan and dark and a little older than the kids. A friend of mine and a guest speaker today. And wise in the ways of the world and rental acts and consumer rights, too, as he's just completed a

degree in economics at the university. He embarks upon a lengthy discussion of possible action which might not only wisely circumvent the manager, but might access, too, the townhouse owner's support through a formal written complaint. But if these sane words reassured me, his final ones didn't. "Mind you, beatin' the livin' shit outta this guy doesn't seem like such a bad idea, too." Thoughts of law suits and the loss of my job briefly assailed me, but I needn't have worried. Jan and Mel were not only unnerved at the notion of filing any formal complaint, they were positively appalled - no, terrified - at the prospect of Rahim and his buddies administering a livin'-shit beating.

Eventually, and perhaps predictably, we didn't do anything. The girls still live there and they're still moved on from the public sidewalk beyond their unit, and they remain, of course, the now-renowned fuck-face sluts of the entire complex. And I've reflected on this in the months that have ensued. Maybe because I am female, too. Sometimes I fantasise feeling threatened and disenfranchised, and I imagine some guy (unaccountably he's always dark and middle-aged and creased about the mouth) telling me with assured distaste that I'm a fuck-face. A slut. And I try to enter the experience and to get a sense of it somehow. But it's hard to delineate and identify the softness of my core with these raw and painful images, and I sense, too, a treacherous insanity somehow implicit in the attempt. Oddly, anger never surfaces. Only something sad and bone-

deep regretful For me and for Jan and for Mel And, I guess, for the townhouse manager, too For him and for women everywhere who spend their waking hours as fuck-faces, and sluts

And Jan's distance from us puzzles me less Twenty years old and still struggling to graduate Hard-up and resentful and often out-of-sorts Out in the hallways sometimes because she has to be Head down and avoiding eye contact as she shoulders her way through throngs of well-dressed rich kids At least, that's how she sees it Rich kids with expensive jeans and designer labels And T shirts with the names and motifs of currently popular, but inevitably pricey, clothing lines Jan's not wearing this stuff, though She's wearing the brown plastic sandals with the wide ankle straps and the big buckles Her denim shorts are fashionably frayed at the edges, but her T shirts rarely sport designer labels

The sidewalk slut The fuck-face Hiding always behind the thin, pale hair I'll bet she never forgets it, either Because if you hear it often enough then, of course, you know it for truth

### **Part 3:**

Jan again And still a puzzle to me really It's late June, and summer awaits us The classroom is hot and kids sit around in small, relaxed, chatty groups A few near the door are painting cardboard scenery for an English 12 play, and others thumb through magazines with two

Vietnamese students who speak little English. Odd singletons scattered around the room attempt math and science projects, but the heat and our desultory chatter frequently distract them.

And I'm reading a letter. A letter given to me just moments before by a student. Janelle. Shy, impulsive, blushy Janelle, who will graduate in only a few weeks, and who has rushed suddenly from the room after thrusting this letter in my hand. It's one of those ending letters, filled with affection and regret and personal disclosure. And it prompts sudden and unexpected tears in me. Kids around the room grow quiet at once, watching me and weighing this surprise event.

Trent again. He's up and on his feet and standing before me. Concern and some amusement in his eyes. But I sense that he'd like to reach across and touch me somehow. "You O K? Everything O K?" If you knew Trent, you'd understand that he's an odd kid really. The sort of kid who wouldn't be fazed at all if his teacher suddenly burst into tears at her desk on a beautiful sunny day when only moments before she'd been goofing around and stealing someone's Natcho chips. But he's wise and knowledgeable in the ways of women, this boy, and sudden tears on sunny days don't surprise him.

But then Janelle was back and I was up and on my feet and embracing her and squishing her hard against my breast. And crying, too. And she cried then, and said not to, and we both said we'd never forget,

and that letters are important, aren't they, too. And Trent smiled benignly on, revelling in the display before him.

But someone else was watching me. I saw that. From across Janelle's shoulder. Jan was watching me. Stilled and transfixed and wanting something. I knew that at once.

We packed up early that day, as the heat was stifling and relentless, and besides, it was Friday, too. I sat alone at my desk for a while after they'd all gone, and the hot June sun from the windows behind me blazed on and scorched my back. My coffee cup, discarded throughout the week, had grown a circular, green-black mould I saw, and the papers and memos before me appeared suddenly overwhelmingly numerous and disorganised. And I still held the letter in my hands.

Jan wrote a letter that weekend. And of course I knew she would. She made a scrap-book, too, replete with hand-written text and crooked, sliced-up photographs pasted onto lined foolscap. Clumsily stapled to a crayoned title page. A book of memories, she called it. Placed before me with watchful eyes. I turned the glued and stapled pages over, and expressed surprise and pleasure and gratitude. But of course that wouldn't do. "Read the letter. The letter I wrote you. I wrote you a letter. Read the letter, Ms H." It was on the desk before me and I knew it was a dangerous thing. A ticking time bomb, I thought. Because so much was riding upon it.

"I'll read it later, Jan. When I'm by myself. I like reading these kinds of letters by myself." I'm lying. The letter's leaping at me like a living thing.

"No. Read it now. I want you to. Read it now. It's O.K. To read it now I mean." I'm unwilling to open the letter, but it seems, inevitably, that I must. And I know what Jan wants from me. Tears. A spill of love and passion and pain at least equal to, but perhaps greater than, one spilled upon another student only days before. But isn't it odd how on so many occasions an unwanted and shameful flood of tears will overwhelm and defeat us, but that when we need them most, the treacherous tides elude us? The letter's in my hand and my eyes are down, and I'm murmuring words of gratitude and love, but her eyes on me are narrow, watchful, and betrayed.

It's odd that I never cried. I couldn't somehow, because my heart inside was leaping about in an agony of confused anxiety. And the sadness within me was balled-up, closed and tight and buried deep beneath my ribcage. Too deep for me to retrieve. Especially as those steady eyes stayed on me. The fuck-face slut, I remember thinking, with the waiting, wanting eyes. And my own eyes remained stoically down, as tears are random, traitorous things, and on that day defied me.

Men Who Love to Hate Women  
or  
The Alienation of Sex

# Men Who Love to Hate Women

OR

## The Alienation of Sex

### **Part 1: A Motel Room Out of Town**

It's a bleak and bitter November day, and the sky beyond the small window across from me is blotched white and empty-grey. It's Saturday morning - around eleven, I think - and I'm sitting on a corner of someone else's bed in a motel room somewhere out of town. It's a large room and the two double beds within it are unmade - the patterned brownish-grey bedspreads flung back and the sheets and brown woolly blankets heaped in abandoned disarray upon them. I'm perched small and tight, my knees and feet drawn closed, on just the tiniest corner of the bed, carefully avoiding encroaching upon the still-warm and sleep-wrinkled sheets behind me.

And I'm surrounded by men. Five of them. Three lounging on the other bed and one distanced from me on an armchair positioned in a far corner of the room. And then there's Kenny - standing close and before me.

This story - if it amounts to much of a story at all really - has haunted me for some time now, perhaps demanding some release in its eventual telling. It resurfaces often and always asks something of me.

But you'll need a little background first. I teach at a large senior

secondary school, and this year I agreed to sponsor the senior boys' basketball team. That's why I'm sitting in this odd position - perched on a crumpled bed in a motel room out of town, and surrounded by men who are coaches or assistant coaches or team managers or other such things.

Kenny - Big Kenny - who stands close and against an oak dresser before me, is indeed aptly named, as he stands a powerful and prideful six foot six, but my eyes are drawn more often to Eddy - Big Eddy - sitting in the distant corner and not so aptly named. He's small and frail of stature, with narrow shoulders and a crumpled, oddly aged face for one still young. He's gentle and soft-spoken and his eyes are warm as they turn my way. He's with us because he has a Class Four driver's license and often drives our team bus.

Kenny's lounging now, half sitting, upon the edge of the oak dresser against the wall, his long legs braced before him and the toes of his canvas sneakers nudging at my own patent leather shoes. And I'm watching myself in the oak-trimmed mirror hung on the wall above the dresser beneath it. I'm wan and pale, with creamy pale face make-up and mascara smudged eyes. Slender and shadow-haggard, with sharp collar bones hollowed and white against the black sweater I'm wearing. A big phony-gold necklace aglitter with plastic-glass at my throat. All turquoise and green and fiery red gems - and curiously inappropriate at eleven a.m. on this bleak November day.

But my eyes shift from my own unsettling image to the big and swaggering man to the right of it. Kenny. You'll need to know something of Kenny as my story unfolds, and I hope in the telling you'll learn to love him a little. Because, perversely, I do.

A big guy for sure. Straight, shiny brown hair with a visibly receding hairline. Soft, pretty blue eyes, but without contacts today and hidden behind heavy, black-framed spectacles. The black leather purse-pouch tied about his hips, and thrust, as always, provocatively out at his crotch. A bottle of beer in one hand while his other reaches down to rifle within an opened bag of potato chips on the dresser beneath him.

Beer bottles and half-eaten bags of potato chips, Cheesies, and pretzels litter the room. Large, oil-stained cardboard pizza boxes lie abandoned upon the dresser and the T V stand, and a pungent, although not unpleasant, odour of stale onions and garlic emanates persistently from them.

Kenny laughs and guzzles more beer. He's telling stories and anecdote-jokes and the others laugh frequently and explosively along with him. Meanwhile, I'm remarkably silent. And the woman in the mirror looks back, scrunched-up small and painted creamy-white. Female and vulnerable and alone. Out of place, too, I thought, and somehow wanting not to be.

Kenny giggles and hoots and even snorts a little in the back of his

throat, while occasionally waving the beer bottle about for added emphasis as his words and his laughter spill forth. But his eyes slide my way now and then. Is he posturing maybe for me? But this thought soon slips away, as his words, instead, arrest me.

"Yeah, well. This time, me an' a coupla guys - this place we had - it was a non-stop party, man. Like, man, I'm tellin' ya, a par-dee. Jeez, man, one time, this place we had. In Vancouver. Like it got real crazy every night." He laughs again, but it's more like a chuckle this time, and he raises the beer bottle for another fast gulp. But his eyes slide my way again from around the slender neck of the bottle, ensuring that I'm still watching, and listening, perhaps.

Behind me, and across the room from him, a T V screen spills bright images and rapid-gunfire commentary as a weekend sports event unfolds upon it. Basketball or football or soccer or some such action. Kenny's attention is drawn momentarily to a sudden flurry of activity upon the screen, and hoots of approval burst briefly from each of the men around the room. All of which eludes and puzzles and substantively excludes me. Because the sport means nothing to me, and the shared community of these men seems impenetrable, richly aggressive, and exclusively masculine. And the woman in the mirror stares back. Silent and with black and guarded eyes.

"Yeah, well. This chick, man." Kenny resumes his tale and his

words startle me and dislodge me from my own darkly introspective gaze "This chick, man, she was Miss Vancouver or Miss Kamloops or someplace A real nice-lookin' chick Blonde Jeez, man, stacked, too " A brief, reflective pause at this, and another, longer pull at the neck of the beer bottle A few grunts and murmurs of interest from the others around him, although heads are mostly turned towards the bright, moving images on the T V screen behind me

"Anyways, this chick, man, she comes up the stairs of this place we've got, and she goes right for my buddy Like right for my buddy, man, and pins him up against the wall " Interest is piqued at this and heads turn towards him, although, perversely, Kenny's eyes remain levelled on the T V screen across from him "*Up against the friggin' wall, man.* An' she'd walked in with this other guy, too Like, she came with this real nerdy guy an' she just dumps this fella and heads right for my buddy " More laughter and murmured grunts of approval from around the room at this Someone passes out bottles of beer, while Kenny reaches down and idly nudges open the lid of a cardboard pizza box on the dresser beneath him, vainly searching for discarded slices perhaps overlooked the night before Meanwhile I shift uneasily on my tiny patch of bedspread, but I'm leaning back now, one arm behind me and a rigid support for my tilted weight, while my splayed and open palm finds pizza and potato chip crumbs on the sheet beneath it.

"Yeah, well. This place we had. Guys, like anyone, wrote all over this one wall. Real funny stuff. Right at the top of the stairs. Everyone did. An' this chick, next day, she writes too. Jeez, some chick, man, I'm tellin' ya." His eyes turn with cool deliberation my way at this. Snorts of laughter in the back of his throat and his soft, pale eyes hold fast to mine. "Yeah, she'd written overnight I guess. 'Thanks, guys, for the Hungarian Cluster Fuck' " Hoots and shrieks of laughter from all of them at this, and Kenny's eyes are amused and pleased as they continue to hold fast to mine. "Yeah, a Hungarian Cluster Fuck, man " My face is up and maybe I manage a smile. But his head is back now and he's guzzling beer again, before lowering the bottle and resting its flat base on the belt buckle at his midriff, while leaning back against the dresser, and thrusting his pelvis and leather purse pouch before him. And I look away then because I see Big Eddy is watching me.

Big Eddy, sitting in the far corner across from me, his head down but his eyes up and levelled my way. He's slumped in an armchair up against the wall, his elbows out and resting on its wooden arm frames, and his two hands are drawn together at his chin, with the thumbs thrust back towards his throat. Closed and reflective and watching me. So I flash him what I imagine to be a wry and philosophical half-twist of a smile, but I'm unable to discern any responding recognition in the eyes he's turned my way. He just looks tight and embarrassed and maybe ashamed for me.

You're probably wondering why I'm making so much fuss about all of this. But I couldn't begin to describe to you the tumult of emotions which exploded and spilled and overwhelmed me as I sat there. Small and bunched-up tight on that tiny patch of bedspread, and feeling female and inadequate and somehow violated, too. And stupid. Very stupid. Because I had no idea what a Hungarian Cluster Fuck might entail, although I imagined it complex and athletic, and I marvelled, and perhaps I raged, at the mysterious talents of Miss Vancouver, or Miss Kamloops, or Miss Someplace Else.

But I was lonely, too. Lonely in the company of these men, and this somehow gripped and saddened me. Tears suddenly threatened somewhere deep beneath my throat and I floundered and fought fast to control the treacherous tide within me. And Big Eddy stared mutely on - silent, apologetic, and definitely ashamed.

Oddly, it was Kenny who revived me. "You're quiet today, chick," he smiles down at me, and I shift uncomfortably, avoiding his eyes. What is it I want from this man or any other? Recognition? Acceptance? Respect? I'm unsure. But the brutality which issues from his mouth astounds me. And I long for gentler words.

His maleness distances him from me. Because unwittingly, or perhaps joyfully, he renders me foolish and disenfranchised and ultimately separated from him.

## **Part 2: A Tongue Down My Throat**

Separated within the company of men. An odd concept really. Perhaps brought more vividly into focus for me within the confines of that strange motel room out of town - a shambles of beer bottles, pizza trays and heaped-up bedding about me - and without one single familial thing or person to ground or reassure me. To root and secure me in all that I'd known before.

The alienation of sex. Overwhelming and often tragic, too. Carried within me and perhaps visited upon me more often than I cared to know. And not always in strange motel rooms out of town, either.

Like the night we sat in The Toad in the Hole - a pub restaurant right here in town - and familiar turf indeed. We were celebrating a winning league game, and Kenny and myself were joined by the two coaches of the team we'd just defeated, but spirits were high all round that night, and an air of ribald joviality and teasing aggression pervaded the evening.

A pub patron soon joined us upon our arrival. He was someone's friend, I eventually gathered, although I never heard his name and I was never introduced to him. He was short and middle-aged, and the creases about his eyes and mouth evoked something warm and good-natured, I thought. He regaled us with a merry tale of his drunkenness the night before, and he proudly told us that in a vain attempt to break into his own

home, he'd fallen off the roof and had seriously injured both his back and his right leg. And he did, indeed, appear to shift often and uncomfortably within the confines of his wooden seat. His tale was greeted with loud laughter and general approval from all of us. Me included. It seemed appropriate to laugh along with these guys, especially as their world and their apparent perceptions of it largely confounded and puzzled me.

I'm sitting to the left of Kenny. We're on a wooden bench and up against a brick-faced wall. He's a big man, Kenny. You have to understand this. Big enough to shrink me somehow. So I'm lodged somewhere close and behind his left shoulder, and his forearm reaches across me to rest on the table top, while his fingers nurse and twirl a beer bottle placed before him. I'm fond of this guy, but if you'd seen me that night this might have surprised you. Squished tight as I was against the cement and rough bricks behind me, his shoulder and bulk and loud laughter pinning and excluding me. But then, that was in the company of men. On other, if rare, occasions, I'd seen another Kenny. Someone at least transiently vulnerable and troubled and sad.

But tonight he's jovial and in control. Drinking beer from a bottle and recalling numerous wild scrapes from his past. An astoundingly varied and lurid past, too, I remember thinking, for one still relatively young.

"Yeah, well, this chick. This chick I'm dating at this time." He's

leaning forward now with his elbow thrust out on the polished wooden table top before him, and his vastness has somehow managed to obliterate me. "A Mormon. This chick's a Mormon. Like a real nice chick an' all that, but I never even got to first base with her. Like a real religious type. An' man, I tried. I even took this chick to church. Everything, man. But, Jeez, I'm tellin' ya, the chick never let me do her." He shakes his head at this in what appears to be a gesture of resigned disgust tinged with wry amusement. The three men with us laugh along, too, and the chuckles in their throats impart a shared communion of empathic amusement and mutual regret.

"Anyways, this one time, this chick, she introduces me to her sister." Kenny leans back once more against the wall behind him as he resumes his tale, his shoulder crushing and pinning me there, although he appears unaware of my presence beneath him. The rough bricks and plastered mortar cling resolutely to my thin sweater and prick my back as I attempt to shift a little. Because I've already started longing to escape. Sensing suddenly and with intuitive certainty that there was no place for me here - here in this company of men. But his shoulder and size and his laughter have me trapped. And besides, whatever unnerved and threatened me lay within, rather than without - but within me too deep and resistant to retrieve somehow. An uneasy feeling, that's all. An irrational, unwelcome urge to escape.

"So anyways, this chick, she introduces me to her sister. A Mormon, too. Whole friggin' family's Mormon. An' the chick I'm dating, she says: 'It's my sister's birthday, so go give her a kiss!'" He pauses at this, a snort of laughter catching somewhere in his throat or nose, and he appears to revel momentarily in the implied sexuality of this remembered embrace. "So anyways, I give the sister a kiss. An' Jeez, man, this chick, she shoves her tongue right in my mouth. Right down my friggin' throat, man. I mean, Jeez, man, right down in there. *In my throat, man.*" He shakes his head at this, apparently overwhelmed by the astounding and unlikely luck he'd encountered that day. "Man, I loved it. Right down my throat, man. Her sister, too." Laughter all around at this. "So, anyways, I drop the first chick and start dating the second. An' Jeez, she's beggin' me to do her like the first one never would. An' both Mormons, man. Jeez." More head shaking in apparently renewed disbelief at this, but he's warmed to his tale and his memories, and maybe he's warmed to women everywhere. Because his head is turned towards me now, his face down, and his eyes are searching mine. I'm blank and a little frozen somehow. It's difficult to read the eyes he's levelled on mine. Proud and unkind, I fantasise. But then I'd been longing to escape him and this company of men for some time now...

Instead, I laugh, somewhat feebly, I thought. The truth is, I was out of my depth, and I knew it, too. Unable to grapple with the confused

melée which rushed up and gripped me. Clumsy, unsure and afraid in this treacherous and unfamiliar world of men. Social skills and ready chatter eluded me. I was lost for words, for a response, a defence of any kind at all. And I remember his heaviness crushed my shoulder beneath him, and I remember his smile as he looked down and held my gaze. A benign smile, although his eyes were enjoying something else. Something which invaded and plundered. And something which separated me from him. From him, from them, from the company, that night, of men anywhere.

### **Part 3: Some Girls Cry, Though**

I wonder often about the lives of other women. I wonder about them in the company of men. I wonder about the hearts of women everywhere. Invaded, plundered hearts, I sometimes think.

I'm a teacher and I spend much of my life in classrooms and in schools. But my identity as a teacher is fused inexorably with a powerful sense of femaleness which diffuses and delineates the self within me. I'm vulnerable and alienated sometimes. And I reflect on this and on the lives of the young women I teach. Often vulnerable and alienated, too. The bonds which inevitably unite us stretch beyond the constraints of mere pedagogy, and span, instead, centuries of female unity, and rage, and apathy, perhaps, too.

Like Jan and me. In English class together, and always egging each

other on. How I love this skinny, blonde, gutsy kid. Hiding always behind her hair but afraid of no-one. Especially guys. Especially not afraid of guys.

And there are plenty of guys she might be afraid of. Like Trent. Tall, bone-slender Trent. Swaggering above me and enjoying, I suspect, the power implicit in his height. But enjoying perhaps more the power of his tongue - acid and rapid and mean like a whip. He dresses well, Trent. Rayon jackets and soft silk shirts. Sleek, gelled-back hair and big, glitzy jewellery. But bad skin, too. Pustules and pimples and acned lesions like you wouldn't believe.

I should tell you right away that I love this kid. And this would astound you if you knew him, as he despises women. All chicks, hoes, sluts and bitches. Cunts, too, if he thinks I'm out of earshot. But he's not too worried if Jan's within earshot. He might enjoy it, even. Her response is always visibly cool disgust - except in English class. Jan loves English class, and I do, too. Because we read and talk a lot in English class. And we often talk of interesting things - like men, and sex, and betrayal, too.

Her discourse is often passionate and voluble - she talks of the exclusionary practices favoured by male teachers, who persistently ignore or overlook her, while instead seeking responses almost always from male students. She talks, too, of the sexually explicit innuendoes and insults with which male students daily denigrate their female peers, but perhaps her

most unsettling indictment rests with male teachers who passively ignore, or even slyly encourage, the unwelcome attention which their female students daily endure from male peers

And Trent loves all of this. Everything that she has to say delights and fuels him. She talks of homosexual and Lesbian rights and he shrieks with abandoned laughter (He despises homosexual men - all fruits, fags, and faggots - but Lesbian women he appears to view as at once alluring and repulsive.) Mostly he loves Jan's heated references to the overtly sexual language descriptors used to delineate and define women - descriptors spawned throughout centuries of our cultural heritage - but descriptors employed with astounding and remarkable viciousness by young people of both sexes today

Chicks, whores, and hoes. And bitches. Trent doesn't date girls. He dates bitches. "My bitch tonight..." he'll happily grin, his head turned sideways to engage a fellow male student in the launching of a new and preposterous tale, but his eyes slide my way at this, ensuring, perhaps, that he still has my unwilling attention

And I often wonder who his bitch might be that night, although it's largely inconceivable to me that one exists at all. A vacant, scraggy thing, I'd imagine - tough on the outside but pinched-up tight on the inside. But then I have a vast and vivid imagination...

Although I don't imagine the pain which haunts and torments Trent.

Trent who swaggers and postures and chatters endlessly above me, but who occasionally, and with swift, astute bitterness, tells of a father who at once rejects and despises him. An odd kid, really. Imparting conflicting need and hate. Often grasping and lightly shaking my two shoulders with a warm, flat-handed grip, his eyes amused and affectionate as they hold my own, but eyes pleased, too, with the words that spill from his mouth. Talk of bitches and the betrayals he perpetrates upon them. You can see that he wins but more often repels me.

And others, too. Like Natalie - she's one I've watched him win and repel. Embrace and flay. In telling of men and in telling of Trent, I should tell you of Natalie. They're friends, these two, Natalie and Trent, but their friendship is a complex and stormy affair, troubled always with denials and rejections and apologies and tears. Apologies from Trent, that is, because it's Trent who dishes out the rejections and denials, and it's Natalie who responds with the tears. Like the day I found them both in the ladies' staff bathroom.

And that was a surprise in itself, as female students are strictly forbidden to use the ladies' staff bathroom (vast and mostly deserted though it usually is) and it's therefore unthinkable that a male student would be foolhardy enough to enter this hallowed enclave. So you can imagine my astonishment to discover them both there - Natalie huddled and sobbing and gasping for air through mucous-clogged sinuses, and

Trent distraught and prancing about while anxiously eying the entrance with evident and mounting dismay.

Under normal circumstances Natalie is an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, but today her usually plump, rosy-brown radiance has given way to a now blotched and bloated complexion, and mascara-streaked mucous smears her across nose and lips and cheeks. She's wearing a long turquoise dress with wide straps which cross on her bare back, but the dress appears crushed and water stained across her breasts and stomach, and her two hands alternately fly between an attempt to stem the vast flow of tears and mucous on her face to smoothing the crushed stains at her breast. I embrace her at this, and her long brown hair sticks to my face and lips. I push the thick, tousled mass from her neck and push it behind her, and my eyes meet Trent's suddenly from across her bare shoulder. He's leaning now, half sitting, on the porcelain edge of a sink which stands against the wall. Triumph maybe in the eyes he has levelled on mine. But unaccountably, uncertainty, too.

"Jeez, man." His gaze shifts and he adjusts his position on the rim of the sink, focussing briefly but with studied intent upon his hand beneath him, his thumb apparently twisting and tightening an already secured and turned-off tap. "It's your fucking boyfriend, Natalie. Fucking illegal Mexican immigrant - and fucking around on you, man." Eyes raised to mine again now. Pleased and resolute eyes this time. "The guy's dating

other chicks. I'm doing her a favour, man. Chick's gotta know the truth, right?" But I sense he wants to embrace her, too, and maybe fold her within the long bone-sharp frame he has braced against the porcelain sink.

What is it about the bonds which at once unite and separate men from women? Complex and disquieting bonds indeed. And what is it that I want from Trent, from Trent or any man for that matter? What I wanted then as always eluded and defeated me, although it assailed and shook the girl I held within my arms. And I crushed her momentarily closer, sensing with sudden urgency the bonds of femaleness and longing and betrayal which joined us always. And which separated me from Trent.

Trent. Troubled and uncertain. But with those pleased, triumphant eyes still levelled, unwavering, on mine. Separating me from him. From him and the society of men everywhere. For a while, at least, from men everywhere.

## Freda and the Cougar Hockey Players

## Freda and the Cougar Hockey Players

Freda is one of my students. She was born in Vietnam and once had a Vietnamese name. She was abandoned on the steps of a church as a newborn but was subsequently brought to Canada as an infant.

Freda is fat. Very fat. Her fatness is such that it not only controls and directs her life, it creates and constrains her very experience of it. It delineates her view of herself and the censorious view of others regarding her. It shapes and measures and cruelly defines her. It eliminates opportunities and thwarts her chances. Because Freda is an adolescent. And the world of adolescence is complex and rigidly judgmental.

Would it help if I told you that her eyes -narrow, Oriental eyes - are beautiful? Or that her hair - thick, and glossy-black - is soft to the touch? It probably wouldn't help. Because the first thing that you'd see is that Freda is fat. Very short and very fat.

I struggle into school each day. Push with my backside through the door to my classroom. Saliva-wet lunch bag gripped in my teeth, purse and keys slipping inevitably from my grasp. The briefcase I've momentarily placed on the tiled linoleum topples discouragingly onto its flat-faced side. Its handle eludes me and I nudge it with my toe through the door.

But I'm in suddenly. And she's there. Freda. Always. Every day. Sitting and waiting for me. She's up and on her feet at once, squealing and

shrieking and rushing to see what I'm wearing

"Oh!"(Squeals) "You've got pants on today! You look so beautiful Turn around Let me see You look beautiful." How can I not love this child? She turns me and twirls me and squeals some more She admires me and circles me and embraces me with smiles

"Open the blinds and take down the chairs You wanna get me some coffee?" I ask But I briefly touch her hair with gentleness and love We're friends, the two of us And all that Freda is, she tells to me All the wanting, all the need I listen and I mostly offer lies

"I'm fat The other kids don't like me Guys don't like me I wish just one guy would like me Do you think a guy will ever like me?"

"Sure a guy will like you Lots of kids like you " Lies "Anne likes you Anne really likes you " Half lies Anne is Chinese and chooses to hang out with a tightly-knit, exclusive group of Oriental girls

Sometimes I take Freda out for lunch The two colleagues I'm usually with are often cool and perhaps resent her tag-along presence We sit in Boston Pizza and eat cheese bread, and I have Freda strategically placed at my right, so that she is distanced then from the other two, and thereby is hopefully perceived as less intrusive by them I talk almost exclusively to Freda and my two colleagues eye us disparagingly But the following day I don't ask her for lunch, and I walk out hurriedly, eyes down and furtive, fumbling with my keys and purse And I know her eyes

are on me The betrayer and the lonely, puzzled eyes behind me

Freda is lonely Lonely for a guy A date A lover all her own And she dreams of the Cougar hockey players The Cougar hockey players who attend classes at our school They're big, husky, handsome guys, too The stuff of fantasies And whenever we're alone, Freda talks incessantly about these guys These bold, aggressive but elusive guys

"Tim said hi to me yesterday Right outside the gym 'Cos you sent me up with the note for the peer tutor and Tim opened the door and I gave him the note and he remembered me and he said hi to me later Oh, God, he's so gorgeous " Hands clasped and elbows squeezing the ample breasts beneath her sweat-shirt "He's so gorgeous Don't you think he's gorgeous, Ms H?"

"Yeah, he's pretty cute, alright " I'm searching absently but with increasing urgency for English essays buried somewhere on my desk

"He'd never go for me I mean, would he? I mean me being so fat and all " Fingers plucking and rearranging the sweat-shirt "Do I look fat in this? My legs look fat, huh?" I stop, one hand still reaching but momentarily frozen, grasping an as yet unrifled stack of papers which I've somehow managed to unearth from the other precariously balanced piles Transfixed briefly by the legs she displays before me Thick trunks, incongruously encased in white stretch leggings Strips of fragile lace straining at each ankle

"Your legs are fine the way they are " Lies "You'll lose that weight " More lies "It's your age, that's all " Bigger, desperate lies now.

"I'm fat, Ms H You know I'm fat really " I fumble now, my hand dislodging and unbalancing another unruly paper stack. My reply is hard in coming. It falters and momentarily I choke upon it. Her eyes ask so much of me - honesty, hope, and the certainty of love. I'm searching now for words to shape those things she asks of me. To shape some certainty of love. But the words each day are hard in coming. They trip and confuse and often elude me.

School ended just recently. It was June and the annuals were out. The yearly ritual was once again under way. Kids everywhere were scribbling on the annuals of friends or foes alike. Scribbling furiously on every fly page and margin, on back pages and photo prints, on poetry and graphics. Funny words, kind words, obscene and obtuse words. Messages of hope and regret, of promises and love. And Freda's annual certainly boasted its proud share, too.

But she wanted something - some word - from Tim. "He's just next door, Ms H - in the art room. Will you ask him? To sign it? Write in it for me? Will you? Ask him? Don't tell him it's me. Not with all those kids around and stuff. But will you? Ask him?"

I take the book and go next door. He's a chunky, handsome guy. He's wearing a long overcoat although it's June. His face is big and open,

with wide, flat cheekbones. He regards me with interest, but smiles when I proffer the annual. Laughter and innuendo and teasing engulf us. He asks for her name, and although laughter again erupts suddenly around us, his asking touches me, and I look quickly away as he takes the book from me.

Freda is thrilled. "He signed it? He did? He knows me? He wrote my name? Oh my God. Does he know me do you think?"

"Yeah, I think maybe he does. I think maybe he noticed you. I think he knows you. And I think he likes you, too." And I have not betrayed my heart, although it is leaping suddenly into my throat.

And I watch Freda with the annual, closed now and clutched to her breast. And I ponder then on love and empty dreams. On luck. Or on the tragic lack of it. On some cosmic, random, unaccountably cruel selection process. On never, ever being lucky enough to have a Cougar hockey player tell you that he wants you.

# On Hairy Moles and the Vast Unfairness of Life

# On Hairy Moles and the Vast Unfairness of Life

Carol-Anne has been with me three years now. I couldn't tell you that I love her. I don't. But my heart is sad for her at times. If you saw Carol-Anne you'd understand this. That is, if you're female, you'd understand.

Because Carol-Anne is ugly. There is no other way that I can put this to you, and if you're to understand anything about Carol-Anne at all, it's important that you grasp this right away. Carol-Anne is nineteen years old and ugly.

She's short and heavily built, with a frame that's at once massively muscled and bloated with fat. Her shoulders and legs appear sturdy-thick, whereas her breasts and buttocks are swollen with fat. And her face is plain - its features are oddly unpleasing in their configuration - and numerous, pale, bumpy moles with protruding black whiskers are clustered low on her left cheek, just above her jaw-line. And then there's her hair. Coarse, black, impossibly unruly hair. Permed and unevenly trimmed, and randomly controlled here and there by an incredible assortment of headbands, clips, combs and elastic bands - all employed about her head in often quite remarkable and preposterous combinations.

You have to believe that I'm not exaggerating. And perhaps you'll

more readily do so when I add that her eyes, at least, are beautiful. Big, brown, limpid eyes, fringed black with thick lashes. But having said that, you can forget about the eyes right away. Because the lumpy, whiskered moles and the ever mucous-runny nose beneath them inevitably and inexorably defeat them.

And if you think things couldn't get worse - they can. Because Carol-Anne is far from bright, and her speech and expressed thought processes are painfully slow and always pedantic. She's fond of recounting small and insignificant details of her daily life (like "I got up too early because I forgot to reset the alarm", or "Mom made coffee this morning but - guess what - she forgot to plug in the pot") but she'll recount these events with much gasping, horse-like laughter, having assumed, I imagine, that such anecdotal recounting will confound and amuse those who are listening.

I spend a considerable amount of time with Carol-Anne at school, and I'm probably the closest thing she's got to a friend. I've pondered often about this. That is, I've pondered often about her conspicuous lack of peer-group friends. But I've understood, at last, that if an ugly face does not defeat her, and if pedantic, unimaginative conversation patterns do not, then her intense, expressed self-interest or exclusionary self-focus most certainly does. And this self-focus astounds me. Because Carol-Anne is deeply committed to the Christian faith and the untiring service of

others and faithfully attends church services and Christian youth organisations devoted to community work throughout the city. This doesn't mean, however, that Carol-Anne is able somehow to listen or engage herself in the recounted lived experiences of others, nor yet does it mean that she is able in any way to leap within those experiences and share with empathy or passion the lives of others. And this not only inevitably excludes her from the lived experiences of others, it in turn prompts others, once they have the measure of her, to exclude her - quite deliberately and systematically - from the passion and the promise of their human social intercourse.

It'll go something like this. Brad (one of my students and also nineteen) is standing across from me just beyond my desk. He's recounting for me the somewhat incredible and indeed unfortunate litany of events which have plagued his last week, in an effort not only to account for his week-long absences from class, but in a needy attempt, too, to win my sympathy and support. He's been evicted from his rooming house and is without shelter for the night, he's facing imminent drug and assault charges (he claims he's innocent of the drug charges and was unfairly provoked in the assault), he's down to his last ten bucks but is bravely resisting hunger, and he's sick with bronchitis, to boot. Students standing nearby are clearly impressed, and I am, too. I express incredulity, consternation and admiring support. Carol-Anne, across from me and

alongside Brad, is moved to comment, too.

“I’m sick, too. An’ my mom’s got a cold, too. And guess what - I woke my mom up again last night I coughed so much.” Snorts of laughter and some vigorous inhaling of mucous into the back of her throat accompany this unexpected disclosure. Meanwhile Brad turns and regards her in apparent disbelief, and maybe even my mouth drops open a little at this. He studies her with brief but astute interest. He’s clearly weighing homelessness, destitution, imminent starvation, assault and drug charges (and bronchitis) against this robust, hairy, pedantic girl’s apparent concern with a snotty nose. His eyes are confused, but he’s not at all unkind to this young man, and shaking his head in some perplexity, he shrugs and soon resumes his tale.

Carol-Anne is at once ignored. Inevitably forgotten and discarded by each and every one of us standing there. It wasn’t hard for me to ignore and discard her, too. Because Brad is swashbuckling-attractive, astutely charming, and always entertaining. But like Brad, I, too, am not unkind, and on other less diversionary occasions, Carol-Anne often has my focussed, although somewhat forced, attention.

There was the grad dress, for example. “It’s purple, Ms H. With a big white collar. Mom’s making it. Mom said after my perm we’ll get a purple head-band to go with it.” She’s standing across my desk from me, massive breasts and thighs straining within the constraints of a pink fleece.

jogging suit, which resembles, in some curious way, I think, an infant's sleeping suit. A brown, button-down knitted cardigan sweater, somewhat shrunken in appearance, has been forced about her shoulders and breasts, and gaps, which appear between each fastened button, threaten to burst open where sudden arm movements add further strain to the gaping closure.

"The dress sounds beautiful, Carol-Anne." I'm rearranging papers and memos on my desk and carefully avoiding her eyes. "I bet you'll look beautiful in it, too." A few students nearby glance idly my way at this, eyeing me with speculative and clearly amused interest. They perceive my lies, I think, as altruistic, although no doubt misguided.

"I want you to come round when I'm getting my next fitting, Ms H. Mom said it's O.K. for you to come. Mom's still got the gathers on the waist to do. It's gonna be down to about here but maybe a bit longer." She indicates a skirt length somewhere just above the knee, and I reflect with intuitive female wisdom that this choice, for Carol-Anne's frame, might prove unfortunate.

"Wow. Sounds good. And you suit purple, too. Let me know about the fitting. I wanna be there." I'm a well-meaning person - you have to understand this. But life overwhelms and confounds and always confuses me. It's the vast and inexplicable unfairness of life which unsettles me most. The sort of unfairness which favours some and randomly punishes

others. Unfairness like hairy moles and snot-crusting nostrils. Because in senior-high schools girls need to be beautiful. I've reflected often upon this and upon the focussed, intense, sort of boiled-down microcosm of the world at large which constitutes the socially interactive world of adolescence. I'm a woman. I understand these things. And I knew and understood long ago that women everywhere need to be beautiful. Beautiful and sexually desirable. Because a society which is inherently patriarchal inevitably weighs and measures and evaluates its women sexually. And if that's true of the world beyond the walls of the high school, it is even more true of the still-raw and powerfully patriarchal world of high-school adolescent social structures.

Imagine. Nineteen and ugly. Nineteen and without even one sexually redeeming feature. Nineteen and without any remote hope that you might ever flower into a sex object. I reflect on this and I reflect, too, on my own still-emerging womanhood and stymied sense of self. Raised and nurtured, complicit and passive, within the sexually controlling and overtly male-dominated world which spawned and shaped me. Overwhelmingly, and indeed admittedly, relieved that in the vast and incomprehensible complexity of things, snotty nostrils and lumpy, hairy moles did not select, and thereby afflict me.

Other things afflicted me, however, although these things appear not to afflict Carol-Anne. A sense of self-betrayal haunts me - a certain

knowingness of my own complicity in the constructing of my quick-sand, illusory sense of sexual identity. There's an innocence to Carol-Anne, although it isn't one I'd want. I often search her soft, vacant eyes, hungry for some echo - some hint or brief glimpse even - of astute self-knowledge. But I never find it. And I wonder then if her eyes, which maybe search my own, ever find the lies I hide so well within them.

She leaps before me as I write these words. Clumsy and swollen in the bright red plastic boiler suit she often dons for rainy bike rides home. It's a bibbed, buckled, incredible affair with an enormous red plastic cape which tops it off. I laugh warmly and conspiratorially with her whenever she dons this fantastic ensemble, but my gaze slides surreptitiously sideways to search and warn - and more desperately to plead with - the frankly amused and delighted eyes of my male students nearby.

Nevertheless, I find it hard to love this girl. She dogs and shadows my every footstep. Turning, often unexpectedly at times, within the narrow confines of my crowded classroom, my elbow will inadvertently find and nudge her plump breasts somewhere just behind me. Momentary irritation sometimes overwhelms me then, because love is an elusive and defiant thing, and appears never to respond when bidden, but more likely and indeed often quite perversely, it appears frequently to find its object in somewhat unworthy recipients.

I stood in the staffroom recently with a male colleague who knew

and taught Carol-Anne “She’s stupid, Denny. And Jesus, she’s ugly.” I smiled up at him at this, stunned but complicit as ever. And his eyes were conspiratorial and amused as they found my own. Teasing, flirtatious eyes. And my own, which I levelled up and on his, were as wide and as innocent and as false as ever.

I turned away at this. Reflecting wisely, although unhappily, that self-knowledge is perhaps a far greater affliction than hairy moles. And self-betrayal is perhaps the greatest affliction of all. Not, I might add, that I was willing to trade either for hairy moles or snot-crusted nostrils.

My male colleague-friend joins me at the staffroom sink. His arm reaches beyond and around me, embracing me, as he reaches for paper towels secured to the wall to my right. Bold, flirtatious eyes on mine. Studying me closely. And finding, thank God, no moles or snot with which to reject me. Some small comfort here, though. Small. Very small indeed.

## Freda and the Rose

## Freda and the Rose

Freda was with me two years. She graduated last year and moved on that June to find other worlds to conquer and, hopefully, other friends to love. Freda was my student - and much more. Freda was my friend.

She went with me everywhere. She'd even follow me into the ladies' staff bathroom and watch me apply lipstick there, although she was well aware that students were strictly excluded from sharing, and thereby invading, the private sanctuary of staff toilet facilities. But she was wise and astute, this kid, and not without some courage. She soon had it figured that where one teacher accompanied her, another was unlikely to kick her out. She'd carry my purse and my car keys, and she'd place these items on the counter-top which nestled in an alcove just inside the door. It was a small, boxy, almost-intimate alcove, afforded on one side by the outer wall, and on the other by the long, jutting line of toilet stalls beyond it. She'd stand behind me at the mirror, watching me apply lipstick there. Freda loved watching me apply lipstick. I'd lean forward towards the mirror, wielding the bright, exposed lipstick wand, and I'd purse and stretch my lips across my teeth. But I'd always pause at this, and search her eyes across my shoulders, because this was the moment she loved most. And her eyes were always warm and black and merry-looking, and I'd shrug and laugh a little then, imparting, I imagined, something conspiratorial, but vulnerable, too.

Mostly, though, she loved to follow me down to the staffroom. Students aren't permitted here either, I might add, although this never fazed Freda. She was cheeky and out-going, and she'd carry my purse and my coffee cup before her, and sail bravely on through the staffroom door as I opened and entered it. Once inside, she was studiously oblivious, I noted, to the mildly disapproving interest she drew from faculty members scattered in armchairs about the room. She'd stay close to me, near the sink or the cupboards or the counter-top, and she'd commence bustling about at once, with demonstrable and decisive intent. She'd drop my nickels and dimes into the staff coffee machine, studying carefully the black liquid which issued forth, but usually she deemed this substance too thick and unpalatable for my tastes - whereupon she'd commence busily then to press the button which emitted additional jets of hot water. She'd weigh earnestly the quality of the coffee collected in the mug before her, and once satisfied with the dark liquid's perceived strength or lack of it, she'd reach for the can of evaporated milk nearby, and add, with scrupulous care, minute and measured portions of the cream into the cup. And she'd turn then, with renewed and spirited intent, towards my staff drawer - the contents of which she'd proceed at once to unload and sort and arrange in appropriately manageable bundles. She'd categorise memos and pamphlets and computerised sheets according to weight and bulk, always placing the larger, heavier items beneath the smaller ones which

she balanced carefully on top. Meanwhile, a few older male colleagues scattered about the room might peek sourly from behind raised newspapers and study us with mild but perplexed disapproval.

You can probably guess that I loved her. And still do. She's long since gone now, but her presence continues often to invade my unwary thoughts. Leaping at me unexpectedly at times. Always as bright and cheeky, but as complex and needy as ever.

Freda is fat. Extraordinarily and unattractively fat. It's important that you know this, because Freda's entire adolescent life has been governed and shaped by this unfortunate and self-inflicted burden. Imagine: seventeen and fat. Potentially beautiful, though, I often suspect, as Freda is Vietnamese and exotically creamy-dark. But her frame is short and carries always its massive weight of flesh and fat.

She longed to be thin. She dreamed and schemed and fantasised and even talked to God. She talked to me, too, I might add, and although I listened, I always lied. Deceit spilled easily from my tongue, although it dragged more heavily at my heart.

"I'm fat, Ms H. Everyone thinks I'm fat. I wanna be thin, Ms H, real bad. I wanna be real thin. My first mom made me fat. She made me fat." (Freda has been in foster care since infancy, and she stoically attributes her excessive weight, accumulated throughout the years, to the generous feeding habits encouraged by her first foster mother.)

"Freda, you're still beautiful " I touch and rearrange her hair at this, which is, indeed, remarkably beautiful Thick, black, blunt hair "You'll handle the weight No problem Puppy fat - that's what they call it That's all " But as my lies rush forth, my eyes slide from her own, because if my tongue could lie, my eyes would not

But she kept one thing from me Until the last, she kept just one thing from me Two years of happy forays into the bathroom and staffroom together Two years of friendship and shared secrets Two years and then one hot and blistering day in June

She had a rose this day A long-stemmed, red rose A number of the kids had these roses, given to them by the Family Management teacher, with instructions to deliver them to different elementary schools that day Our grade twelve students, it transpired, had worked briefly as teaching assistants in selected kindergarten classrooms across the city, and the roses were tokens of appreciation for the teachers who had welcomed them there

But the rose which Freda waved about before me was a somewhat sad and sorry thing, I thought, its long prickled stem no longer stiff but, instead, now limp and bouncing curiously about, as though unable to support the weight of the drooping bloom bobbing at its end It was hot that day, and white, relentless sunlight blazed in through the window behind me in my classroom, and my clothes clung close and damp about

my back and breasts and rib cage. You can probably imagine the condition of Freda's rose - cut and beribboned upon its slender stem hours before in the early cool of morning - its blood-dark petals now curled and closed and dying.

Freda wanted a ride across town. "The rose'll die, Ms H. Look. See - it'll die real soon. An' it'll take me ages to catch the bus there. It's so hot, Ms H. Will ya give me a ride, Ms H ? Will ya?" Freda hates bus rides. You have to understand this, but perhaps even more than the rides themselves, she hates the walks that access those rides - the walks, albeit relatively short, from home or school to nearby bus stands. I glance about my classroom. Kids too heat-exhausted to take advantage of my absence, I wisely speculate. And besides - it's hot and it's the last school week of June. And the rose she's clutching and waving before me is indeed a sorry-looking thing.

So that's how it happened that I drove Freda across the city that day. It was unbearably hot in my car. The windows were down and the air which blew through was thick and heavy and brought us no relief. We drew up and stopped at traffic lights along the way, and the heat blazed in and assailed us then like a living, furious thing. She turned my way as we waited there, flashing me a warm rush of a smile, and I smiled back at her, suddenly and unaccountably touched to see the rose cradled gently in her lap, its closed head nudging downwards between her knees.

Eventually we found the school and parked on a gravelly patch of scrub land adjacent to its iron-fenced grounds. Oddly, she made no effort to disembark. And somehow, I didn't want her to - which was astounding, as the sun blazed on, its heat inexorably magnified, I knew, by the glass windshield before us, and its relentless fury then further intensified within the airless, claustrophobic interior of the car.

I knew she had something to tell me. "You're pretty, Ms H.," she offered suddenly and surprisingly, and I shifted in the sticky confines of my seat at this, suspicious and intuitively alert. My sweater was clinging to my back, and my eyes were fastened blankly on the steering wheel before me. "I wish I were you, Ms H. Honest. I wish I were you. I just wish I was."

There it was. The words were out. Puzzling, unsettling words. Words I needed to attend to. And closely, too. And I stared on out at the grey pebbles and the sand-gravel and the dust on the thin scrub land before me. All dazzling somehow under the white glare of the June sunlight. She wished she were me? *She wished she were someone else?*

We sat in silence for a while. I thought about this, and I thought about Freda, and I thought about me, too. I thought about the curious and impenetrable perplexity of identity, or that bewildering and unfathomable sense of separateness from others which descends at times when one encounters the unwary eyes or faces of others. Faces in bus windows

which flash by on the highway, each one leaving always an indelible brain-image behind. Or the eyes of others - the eyes of strangers - which search slyly for mine across sidewalks or theatre rows or shopping-mall walkways. Eyes which mirror but defend what's within. And something desolate and disquieting descends then. *So - what's it like to be you?*

I sat on, silent and reflective and as perplexed as ever, my eyes down and studying my two hands which gripped the steering wheel before me. I noticed suddenly, and for the first time, the encroaching suntan upon my wrists and forearms.

The truth is, I've never wanted to be anyone else. I'm curious, it's true, about the souls and selves of others, but I'm only transiently and philosophically engaged. I cling to the sense of self within me with a passion and tenacity which is at once exhilarating and ferocious. So it was hard to grasp and comprehend her words that day.

"I look Chinese." Her words startled me and I shifted my gaze and turned towards her then to find her head down and her eyes focussed in her lap. She was playing with the rose, caressing the bruised, purplish-black outer petals and toying idly with the soft, dark bud cradled within them. "I wanna be white. I wish I was white. Like you. I wanna be white, that's all."

How does one respond to words like this? My throat was suddenly tight, and my tongue was stilled and silent. I didn't touch her. Didn't reach

to console or comfort her. I just sat and studied the dark head turned down and away from me, the long, blunt sweep of her hair almost grazing the soft blossom beneath it. Her words spilled on, although my heart was floundering fast to close itself to them. "I look Chinese, see. And guys don't like that. Besides, I'm fat. And guys don't like that, either. I wish I was thin, like you. You're pretty, Ms H., because you're thin and you're white, too. I always wanted to be white. So's one guy would like me. Just so's one guy might like me."

It's a curious world, this world of ours. A world of dusty, gravelly parking lots, and hot June days. A world of sad kids with even sadder dreams. A world where young females learn early that men want white, Western, slender girls. Silence continued to envelop us for a while, and the white heat blazed inexorably on through the windshield before us.

Freda stirred eventually and reached down to gather the knapsack at her feet. She held the rose up and away in one hand, while she struggled with the other to raise the heavy book-filled bag into her lap. She turned and smiled at me. I touched her wrist with my index finger, and then I traced with my fingernail the bruised-blood petals of the blossom still bobbing on the limp and prickly stem before me.

"I hope the teacher likes it. Your rose, I mean. And about being white," I manage at last, "forget that stuff. You're beautiful the way you are." A wry smile from her at this, and the bright, black eyes she levelled

on mine were astute, but oddly forgiving, I thought, too.

"Yeah, well . . . We'll see . . . About the rose, I mean ." She left at this, struggling with the burden not only of her knapsack but with that of her own vast weight in her efforts to free herself from the narrow confines of the car, but she struggled, too, I saw, to protect the fragility of the now long-since wilted blossom still clutched in one hand. I sat on and watched her wander off across the dusty scrubland before me. She turned once, before disappearing finally from view, the heavy book-filled bag dragging at one shoulder, and brandishing the still-bobbing rose, she smiled and waved goodbye with it.

**Chapter III:**  
**The Conclusion**

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**The Conclusion**  
**Listen, Only Listen, Because This**  
**is a Story**

And this is, indeed, a story. A short story it's true, but one which tells of other stories - maybe all stories - told and retold everywhere throughout recorded time. Told in familial circle-huddles around fires which burn before shadowy rock-caverns under vast and star-spattered skies, but told, too, on subway trains and city buses on dark November evenings when the yellow street lamps have just begun to soften the gathering gloom beyond. Told in pubs and cafés where shaded wall lights and brass fixtures and rows of ceiling-stored glassware encircle and enclose the storytellers held within their warm embrace. Or told in parks and woodlands - on grassy slopes and under leaf-laden summer trees, where the words are rich and soft and slow in coming, and the storytellers lie among pebbles and wild clover-turf. But told, too, on white-iced snowbanks when laughter and falling about suddenly and unaccountably cease, and the storytellers, drawn close and momentarily silenced, rush then with steamy breath on the frozen air, and a tumble of words and memories and remembered tales fall from them. Stories, stories, each and all of them stories. So draw up close now and listen well. Because this, too, is a story.

Hornby Island is somewhere further north and off the coast of Vancouver Island, where I live. It's summer on Hornby and maybe ten or so years ago. Late August, but stormy and blustery and unseasonably cold that year. I'm with my daughters - twin girls - and they were still small and very young ten years or so ago. We're up on a high bluff of rocky outcrops, and an angry, tumultuous sea rages beneath us. Our path winds alternately within thin forest and scrubland to our left and then out onto the bare and rocky overhang above the pebble-black beach below. It's a well-travelled, and, I think, well-loved path, this one. But deserted and only ours today. No other adventurer appeared foolhardy enough to brave this storm and these bluffs on this day. Pine needles and soft, decaying mulch soften our footfalls, but numerous gnarled tree roots line our way, too, and reach often to trap and trip our feet wherever the path draws dangerously close to the vast drop below.

It's late afternoon and the storm engulfs us. Wind and rain whip and flatten us. Me in the middle with my two small daughters clinging resolutely to either side of me. Afternoon still, but an oddly early-evening dark seems somehow to have crept about us, stealing softly from the thin forest to our left. Heavy and ominous, too, where black clouds roll in above us. A fierce and white-frothed sea rages on beneath us, waves high and furious and crashing upon the rock-jagged shoreline which awaits them. Tree branches snap and threaten to our left, and the washed-out,

rock-loosened path glides and gives beneath our feet. Wind and rain whip relentlessly about our breasts and thighs and sting our cheeks and eyes.

It was no mistake that we were here. We'd planned this walk along the high bluffs and we'd set out in heavy rainfall. But we hadn't bargained for the venomous fury of this storm. That was an unexpected thrill.

"Tell us a story. Please. Oh, tell us a story," begged my two daughters, clinging to my waist and about my hips, and shrinking with a rush of sudden fear as the storm raged on about us and the path brought us suddenly within inches of the vast and giddy drop beneath. "A true story. A scary story. Oh, tell us a story. Please." So I did. I told them a story. A wild, black fantasy of a story, which hovered somewhere between myth and nightmare. A story of dark and lonely places. Of night and night's creatures. Of invisible, dangerous things. Of wild and wildish things. Of howling winds and the lash of black rain at night. Of mulchy paths soft with pine needles but strewn about with gnarled and treacherous tree roots - living, rain-black, malicious roots - all eager to ensnare any foolish and unwary feet which came their way.

I told of storms and terrors and the unknown. Because this story hovered without me, although it sprang so freely from within me. It lurked in the thin and shadowy forest to my left but it leapt with fury from the white waves beneath. And my daughters clung closer. Awash with terror and ecstasy and pleading for more.

And my tale gathered strength as the storm raged on And the afternoon drew towards evening and the sky was black and heavy-close above us And I told of mysteries and of sorcery and of things not human Of black buses with black windows which carried away small and unsuspecting children walking home from school Of a golden girl, golden all over, with golden fingernails - sharp and dangerous like those of a wild cat - but thick and curled inwards, too, like those of a crab Of dark, empty houses with dark, empty windows concealing the always-creaking rocking chairs behind them Of things unknown and unsolvable and unspeakable Of puzzles and frights and thrills and dizzyingly terrifying dreams And the wind howled more furiously about us, and my daughters clung faster to my waist and about my hips And the sea raged with renewed fury beneath us and the rain soaked us right through.

The story fell from me It lived in the wind and the rain and the agony about me But it sprang from ancient tales too Tales my father told me years ago Late at night when I was very small and had crusted, puss-filled styes upon my eyelids, and my mother, with unwitting but well-meaning cruelty, treated the clustered boils with washcloths soaked in boiling water And my father would quieten my tears and screams with stories Only hush Quiet now and hush And I'll tell you another one . . .

And the wind howled on and our feet slipped on the rain-loosened rocks on the path before us, and the sea churned angry and white-crested

beneath us. Hungry for us maybe. Eager to engulf us were we to slip. And my daughters clung closer and begged for more. "Tell us more. Please. Make up some more." And so I did. Because that day my story fell from me in a rush and a torrent like the very rain which struck and soaked us. It grew in my gut but it howled in the wind. It spat and flew like the branches which smashed and cracked about us. It was born on the bluffs and lived in the storm.

We never forgot that day or that story, my daughters and I. One day, somewhere, sometime, part of that story will spill from each of them, and the memories and the terror and the ecstasy of that day up on the high bluffs of Hornby will find voice and sing - or howl - again. They'll tell of the girl - golden all over - with the long golden fingernails which curl like claws, and they'll whisper a tale of a black and sinister bus with black and sinister windows concealing the small children already lured within it. They'll tell of storms and wind and rain and churning seas beneath them. Of rain-soaked hips and thighs and resolute clinging. Of mothers and love and wildish things.

Because all stories - gathered, heard, imagined and experienced - are the tapestry of our lives. Through the telling of our stories we search our meanings.

And our stories are found everywhere. Some, it's true, are borne on the wings of storms high up on rocky bluffs. But many are not. Many of

mine are fleeting, tender things, although I recall vividly their brief embrace. In eyes and faces and sometimes the briefest of encounters. And in memories, too.

Old and sun-dappled memories. Me in a public park in England years ago. Thirteen years old and stretched out on my stomach on a vast patch of tree-shaded turf. Big trees amassed with leaves and greenery and sunlight above me. The curved edge on each blade of grass beneath me sharp enough to slice my skin as my index finger strokes the length of each. Bugs brilliant and glossy-black and scurrying about within the untrimmed and luscious growth beneath my palms. Reading poetry. To my father. He's out of work but content to wile away the hours of indolence with me. Listening to poetry - my poetry - in a public park. Poetry and sunlight and something magical that day.

My father died in the years which followed, and as it happened his death and the curiously complex events which accompanied it, were themselves the stuff of a thousand tragic but paradoxically comic stories. Some I've already written. The others await my telling. And I'll tell them, too. Because they live both within and without me and are somehow spirited things. They wait only for me to give them the voice which is their own.

And so it is, perhaps, with all stories. Stories. The tapestry of life itself. A vast but elusive well of myth, dream, imagination, understanding.

and paradox. Found in ancient tales and the symbols of folklore. Found in the pale, plain face with empty eyes across from a supermarket checkout, but found, too, in the blotched and tenderly scrunched face of a newborn. Found in dead carnations dropping bitter-sweet leaf fragments on a table top, and in rain-wet pavement cracks sprouting fragile spring weeds. Found in the stink of decaying compost packed with slime and black earth beneath your fingernails - when your father dies and you reach for living roots to nurse. And found in the yellow glow of street lamps at night and in the damp creep of autumn's fogs which whisper always of lovers and promises of long ago. Found everywhere on every day of our lives. And found not only in our past but in our future too. Waiting only to be plundered and spilled by those of us who choose to give them voice.

Dangerous, too. In the early months of my marriage I wrote a poem - tender, pretty, simple words of love - for my husband. I found that poem years later, printed in a neat and wobbly-childish hand on the flyleaf of a pocket-sized paper-back. A miniature book of renowned and passionately romantic love poetry. One of those palm-sized texts you find displayed at a supermarket checkout. Mostly diets, astrology, or romance... All written and published specifically for the lonely and desolate and bereft among women. This one was love poetry, however, but perhaps it had not been misplaced along with the astrology and dreams and fantasies with which it had initially been stacked. I thought I

remembered purchasing that tiny text. I knew I remembered writing the poetry. I held the battered book within my hands, and my daughter, Rebecca, stood nearby - silent, intrigued but unsure. Examining me closely. She's unearthed this unexpected treasure from the dark recesses of hallway closet. And she's watching and weighing me. A few wobbly words upon a somewhat yellowed page. But a story, too. An uncompromising, disclosive sort of story. And I regretted that. Too much revealed. Too many memories and too much of me. Because poetry, like stories, tells secrets, and in the telling of each you'll spill your secrets quite despite yourself. So we stood in the downstairs hallway, the two of us, and I made light of the words, the poetry, the battered little book, and me. She wasn't fooled, though. She knows a story when she's holding one. And she knows that my story is her story and all our future stories, too.

In telling and recreating our stories we search our meanings. And search our past and future, too. Stephen Hawking once asked and perhaps still asks "Why, if we can remember the past, can we not remember the future?" In story, Stephen, perhaps we can. Because story defies the constraints of space and time. It rushes with a fury into the vortex of cosmic black holes, but it lives in the ancient and distant past as much as it does in the future which roars to engulf it. It soars with the storm-winds but it scuttles with the black beetles under sharp blades of grass. It howls with black rain on wind-scoured cliffs, but it is silenced to a whisper in

the hands of a sixteen-year-old in a dark hallway

And Rebecca held on to my tiny book of poetry. We stood barefoot on cool tile and it was dark about us. The closet stood ajar before us. Dark and laden with secrets. And stories, too. Stories buried in the past but found more in the future. And Rebecca knew this. She knew it with the unfaltering and intuitive wisdom of a gatherer of stories. Poetry and storied words. Found in wobbly and childlike print on the yellowed flyleaf of a tiny supermarket checkout text. But a story, nevertheless, and she knew it, too.

I still teach in a senior-high school. And I still tell stories. And I'm still so often overwhelmed by the complexity and curiosity and beauty and degradation and betrayal and sweetness of human experience. Life still presents itself wearing its many piebald, veiled and paradoxical faces. And only stories begin to unravel them. Stories in the eyes and faces across from me every day of my life. Brad with the pale eyes and the bright kerchief who's selling diet pills right now. Deanne with the Mexican boyfriend she met on a cruise ship. Natalie who sleeps curled on my classroom sofa all day, her cheeks damp and flushed and her palms open and thrust behind her. Or Tracy who leapt to her feet in fury one day and hurled a sugary doughnut at the life-size poster of Marilyn Monroe on the classroom wall. The white icing is still clinging, incongruously somehow, to the blue-tinged cleavage between Marilyn's breasts. Stories, stories, all

of them stories. And all waiting for the voice I'll one day give them, while I wait, too, for the understanding - fleeting, visceral and maybe unpalatable - which they'll in turn give me.

I still write poetry, too. Sometimes - and always impulsively - I tell an English class that I'll bring along some of my own poetry to read aloud in class, and occasionally a perplexed or curious student will remind me to do so. But usually I've regained my wits by then, because of course I know I never will. Because if stories tell some secrets, poetry tells all. I once took one of my stories and read it aloud to an English class. I sat on a soft tasselled cushion on a high wooden chair and my students were close - crushed tight on two shabby old sofas and clustered on small chairs encircling me. Oddly, incredibly, the words of the story touched me as they fell from me, and I found myself suddenly struggling to control a treacherous break to my voice which threatened unexpectedly to betray me. My students stared on, incredulous, intrigued, and in some cases, compassionate too. Because story telling, like poetry, is indeed a dangerous affair.

Something like writing this thesis, perhaps. Somewhat dangerous and inescapably self-revealing. I've thought often about all of this in the months which have ensued since I embarked upon this work. I've thought about all it asked of me and all that I found so difficult to surrender. Perhaps because I guard my secrets well and struggle always when I write.

to reach within myself and wrestle free the story or the demons or the truths which ball up hard and tight to elude me. And I wonder often about other story tellers. About their dreams and demons and balled-up, armoured truths.

Estés (p. 19) writes that the storytellers of today, like those of long ago are “the descendants of an immense and ancient community of holy people, troubadours, bards, *griots*, *cantadoras*, cantors, travelling poets, bums, hags, and crazy people.” Well, I’m one of them. I was always a storyteller, and before I wrote stories, I think I told them. When I was three or four and very small I stood on tall chairs so that my cousin could brush my long hair without bending to reach it. And I told her stories. And she listened and she brushed and I told some more. And later, in school, I wrote my stories then. In a ruled exercise book protected by a paper-back cover hardened with varnished and pigmented paste splodges. A book of stories. All mysteries, murders and evil things.

Today I write my stories fitfully, passionately and most certainly irrationally. And I find them everywhere. I find them, even as I write these words, in the tender, astoundingly brilliant tufts of grass, amassed in pockets and crusted about with crystallised snow, which lie beyond my kitchen window. And in the daffodil shoots - stalwart and invincible - against the dark hedge beyond. In the winter sunlight which finds the powdered wrinkles about my mother’s aged and bloodshot eyes, and in my

child's thick, pale hair which tumbles always about my face and clings to my lips when she embraces me while I sleep.

Because stories are found everywhere. They instruct and guide and enlighten. Stories, says Estés, are “medicine”

*I have been taken with stories since I heard my first. They have such power, they do not require that we do, be, act anything - we need only listen. (p. 15)*

The stories included in this work ask only that you listen. So hush now, draw up close, and only listen.

These stories tell of hunger. Raw, sad, invincible and insatiable hunger. Hunger for love, for others, for tenderness. They tell as much of my own hunger as they do of the hungers of those of whom I write, and maybe that is why some stories resist the telling and wrestle within me, guarding well, perhaps, their secrets, their meanings and their pith.

But stories heal. They shed light in dark places and rekindle snuffed soul-fires. They guide and instruct, and yes, where you ask and you listen, they will reveal and surrender their meanings.

And finally, the stories upon which this thesis is founded are the tales of a woman. I saw this as I wrote them. And oddly, I was amazed, and I rejoiced. These stories are wildly and passionately and unequivocally female, subjective and instinctual. They live in the girl, curled flushed and fetal, who sleeps on my sofa all day. Or in the flowers in a juice jar on my desk, long since dried and crusted all about with brittle leaves, but

somehow incongruously and astoundingly beautiful where the winter sunlight touches them. They live in sun-drenched trees all lined up in a row on a street and a girl who heaves sobbing in my arms as I study them.

These stories are wildish, gut-borne, earthy things. A woman's stories. Because women - all women everywhere - are the tellers and sorcerers and witches and birth-mothers of stories. Stories which weave the myriad fabric of our lives and link the understanding of our past to the meanings of our future. Stories which live in the wild and joyous and subjective instinct. Irrational, sure-footed, gentle things. Which tell of hunger, maybe, and the human search to ease it.

*She is the source, the light, the night, the dark, and daybreak  
She is the smell of good mud and the back leg of the fox. The  
birds which tell us secrets belong to her. She is the voice that  
says, "This way, this way." (Estés, p. 13)*

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**Appendix A:**  
**The Research Methodology**  
**Employed**

## **Appendix A:** **The Research Methodology** **Employed**

*“Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought” (Heidegger, 1962, p 25)*

Van Manen (1990) has suggested that research methodologies selected should not only reflect the nature and intent of the study undertaken, but should reflect, too, the “deep interest” of the researcher engaged in the work, rather than “the mere whim, preference, taste or fashion [of current methodologies]” (p 4). The narratives of this study were inspired and driven by my own interest, not only in the sometimes tragically alienated lived experiences of the young people I teach, but in pedagogical practices of exclusion which appear so often to promote and even to initiate experiences of alienation and separation from self and others in adolescent youth. Lather (1986), like Van Manen (1990), suggests that phenomenological hermeneutic research, or praxis-oriented research, is grounded often in a moral and ethical framework in this sense we not only reflect on the nature of our praxis, but we often aspire to effect positive change in both our own praxis and in that of others in our field. “For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process enables people to change...” (Lather, p 263).

I reflect inevitably on this within my own world of praxis - a

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turbulent, uncertain, and often alienated world of disaffected youth, and a bureaucratic, somewhat indifferent, and often exclusionary world of high-school institutions. Lather has said that we might “consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations” (p. 263). The young people I write about in the narratives of this thesis are relatively powerless when confronted with effecting positive change from within their institutionalised worlds, but the educational practitioners who operate within those institutionalised settings may indeed have the power, and hopefully the will, to bring about positive change.

The review of the related research methodologies is presented within the two subsections listed below:

### 1) Phenomenological Hermeneutics

- a) Grounded in Phenomenology
- b) Phenomenology and the Search for Meaning Begin in the Life World
- c) Lest We Forget Hermes

### 2) Narrative Inquiry

- a) Narrative and the Search for Meaning
- b) On Language, Linguistics, Metaphor and the Poetic Voice

*“Phenomenological research has as its ultimate aim, the fulfilment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12).*

## **1) Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

### **a) Grounded in Phenomenology**

*Inquiry itself is the behaviour of a questioner, and therefore of an entity, and as such has its own character of being ”*  
(Heidegger, 1962, p. 24)

The research methodology employed in this study is phenomenological and draws upon the shared and mutually-constructed lived human experiences of both the researcher and her adolescent students. This study is also unequivocally hermeneutic, as each of its narratives seeks interpretive understanding of those lived experiences. Each narrative is also unequivocally subjective, and draws always upon initial self-understanding, before reaching then for a more universal understanding of the human condition. Phenomenological hermeneutics has gained some recognition in academic circles in recent years, not only in North America, but more specifically in Canada (Pinar and Reynolds, 1992). Indeed, in some cases, doubt has been cast on the persistent employment of only quantitative, experimental methodologies in human or social science research.

However, the emergent, or subjectively interpretive, nature of phenomenological findings continues to disturb some analysts. “The danger of over emphasising the ‘emergent’ nature of the [qualitative] design is a looseness, lack of focus, and misplaced nonchalance about purpose, method, and procedure on the part of those who do qualitative

research” (Seidman, 1991, p 27). Spiegelberg (1982) concedes that there is, indeed, a widespread, although quite erroneous, belief that phenomenology is inevitably “a study of merely private phenomena and that it constitutes nothing but a return to a subjective psychology, if not a relapse into introspection” (p. 688). Schutz (1969) writes that, within more traditionally focussed research circles, phenomenology has often been widely misunderstood as “anti-scientific, not based upon analysis and description but originating in a kind of uncontrollable intuition or metaphysical revelation” (p. 25). Madison (1988) further suggests that perhaps only where hermeneutical phenomenology successfully demonstrates an adherence to identifiably rigorous methodologies will it gain recognition and status in research circles. “For only if it could be shown that phenomenological hermeneutics does *not* afford a licence for arbitrariness and does in fact provide for methodological rigour in interpretation could phenomenological hermeneutics be positively argued for and defended” (p. 26).

Lather (1986) notes, too, that qualitative studies, which reveal their value base, are, on occasion, discounted as invalid and even suspect. “Research programmes that disclose their value-base typically have been discounted, however, as overly subjective, and, hence, ‘non-scientific’” (p. 259). This remains a problem, Lather believes, for phenomenological researchers, who continue to feel the need to justify and validate the

trustworthiness of their subjective findings:

Thus a central test for praxis-oriented researchers becomes the confrontation of issues of empirical accountability - the need to offer grounds for accepting a researcher's description and analysis - and the search for workable ways of establishing the trustworthiness of data in new paradigm inquiry (p. 260)

Van Manen (1990), however, sees phenomenology as arguably scientific in the sense that it is a thorough, dialogical, and self-analytical examination of human interaction and experience. "Phenomenology claims to be scientific in a broad sense, since it is a systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience" (p. 11).

Spiegelberg (1982) further notes that all human experience, even that of analytical researchers reporting controlled, experimental findings, springs from essentially first-hand, subjective experience.

For all experience is basically "subjective" in the sense that it is our experience. Even a mere protocol of objective behaviour or a report about measurement is a "first-person experience". No empirical knowledge, however purged and objectified, can get away from the subjective matrix of all experience" (p. 690).

Packer (1985) has also questioned the notion that research studies, even the most scientific and objective, can ever be truly non-subjective or entirely free of the attitudes and discriminatory values of the researcher himself. "In recent years there has been increased questioning of the notion that research is, or can be, value free" (p. 1081). Gadamer (1979)

has further argued with research methodologies which are narrow in focus and constrained within objective, scientific thinking constructs. He proposes that pre-judgment and pre-understanding precede all understanding. In this view, understanding can never be truly objective. Lather (1986) also questions the widely-held belief that objective research studies are entirely value free, and instead suggests that values are only concealed or denied. "It is increasingly recognised that the fact/value dichotomy simply drives values underground" (p. 259).

Van Manen (1990) proposes that human experience can never be fully understood in "deadening abstract concepts, and in logical systems that flatten rather than deepen our understanding of human life" (p. 17). He suggests that, like quantitative methodologies, qualitative or phenomenological data may also be seen as "hard" or "strong", in specifically moral or ethically committed ways.

"Hard data" refers to knowledge that is captured best in quantitative units or observable measures. In contrast, human science research is rigorous when it is "strong" or "hard" in a moral and spiritual sense. A strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the consequences and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself (Van Manen, p. 18).

Van Manen further reminds us that phenomenology is not empiricist or analytical in approach, as it does not aspire to "empirical generalisations, the production of law-like statements, or the establishment of functional relationships" (p. 22). Nor did I, in the writing of this thesis, aspire to

empiricist, analytical assumptions indeed, quite the opposite was true I not only acquired my data experientially through lived experience, but the narratives which draw upon that experience find their meanings in subjective and even imaginative interpretation.

Van Manen disputes critics' claims that phenomenological research fails often to produce persuasively rational findings, reminding us that phenomenology is founded in the "power of thinking" and that it is, indeed, rational "To be a rationalist is to believe in the power of thinking, insight and dialogue. It is to believe in the possibility of understanding the world by maintaining a thoughtful and conversational relation to the world" (p. 16). Madison (1988) believes that good phenomenological hermeneutic research is founded not only on common sense and insightful thinking, but on dialogic reason and an identifiably "normative sense", which implies that the research undertaken is largely perceived by others to "conform to certain generally accepted criteria, norms or principles" (p. 28). Madison holds fast to the tenets of common sense, which aid and extend, he believes, the subjective judgment which hermeneutic researchers bring to their work "Method in this sense, far from supplanting personal, subjective judgment or eliminating the need for it, is meant as an aid to *good judgment*. It is what ensures that judgments or conclusions arrived at are not gratuitous or the result of subjective whim" (p. 28). Indeed, Schutz (1969) sees phenomenology as "a serious and

difficult endeavour”, which demands extensive self-interpretation and self-reflection of a researcher, through which a more universal understanding of the complex constructs of the real-life, everyday world of lived human experience may be sought

#### b) Phenomenology and the Search for Meaning Begin in the Life World

*“Phenomenology begins in silence. Only he who has experienced genuine perplexity and frustration in the face of the phenomena when trying to find the proper description for them knows what phenomenological seeing really means” (Spiegelberg, p. 693)*

The foundations of twentieth century phenomenology as we know it today were largely grounded in the thinking of Wilhelm Dilthey (Hodges, 1952). Dilthey believed that meaning, and our inevitable search for it, is found within conscious, lived, human experience, (*Erlebnis*), and like Ricoeur who came much later, Dilthey also believed that written language is pivotal to both phenomenological understanding, and our expression of that understanding.

Edmund Husserl, however, is the early twentieth century German philosopher to whom the very foundations of the phenomenological movement are most often ascribed. For Husserl, understanding of the human condition was drawn always from lived human experience, or from “a descriptive phenomenology of inner experience which forms the foundation of empirical psychology” (Spiegelberg, 1981, p. 28). Interest

in examining and exploring lived human experience for the meaning inherent to such experience - initiated by phenomenological thinkers at the beginning of this century - remains intact to this day, and is seen as a means of broadening and enriching human experience “The first objective of the phenomenological approach is the enlarging and deepening of the range of our immediate experience” (Spiegelberg, p 679)

Early phenomenologists, like those of today, rejected traditional “crystallised beliefs and theories”, and instead turned to the phenomena of lived experience for understanding “To the things themselves (zu den Sachen) has been the leitmotif of phenomenological research” (Spiegelberg, p 680) Spiegelberg suggests that attention to narrow, theoretical constraints only impedes understanding “The watchword ‘to the things themselves’ has primarily a positive objective, [and] bids us to turn towards phenomena which has been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them” (p 681).

Phenomenological observation and description, drawn always from real-world, lived human experience, are potentially rich sources of research data, and may serve as a sound basis for philosophical and interpretive sense-making of our everyday world as we experience it “Phenomenological descriptions if done well are compelling and insightful” (Van Manen, p 8) Van Manen suggests that as our only access to our world is through our consciousness “anything that presents itself to

the consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology”, and that phenomenological observations provide us with “plausible insights”, which in turn bring us into “more direct contact with the world” (p. 9). Van Manen suggests that phenomenological research is “always to question the way we experience the world” and that such research implies being within, and attaching ourselves to, the very world which we seek to know and understand.

And since to *know* the world is profoundly to *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of researching... is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to *become* more fully part of it, or better, to become the world (p. 5).

In the narratives of this thesis I write of the life world, the world of random and unpredictable human interaction where Van Manen tells us that all phenomenological research begins. “what first characterises phenomenological research is that it always begins in the life world” (p. 11). I explore in this study the existential meanings inherent to the lived experiences of alienated youth, and as I, too, was an integral and interactive participant in those lived experiences, phenomenological research presented itself as the most powerful and, indeed, the only feasible research approach to take. “Phenomenology is a human science... since the subject matter of phenomenological research is always the structures of meaning of the lived *human* experience” (Van Manen, p. 11). In our search for meaning to the human condition, we turn always to examining human acts, experiences, and consciousness, both of others and

of ourselves. Schutz (1969) explores concepts of meaning in “Do not the concepts of meaning, of motives, of ends, of acts, refer to a certain structure of consciousness, a certain arrangement of all the experiences in inner time . . . ?” (p. 39). Phenomenological research begins with everyday experience as we encounter it in real life, and from our own constructed realities of our conscious knowing of our world, we search always for layers of understanding. The phenomenologist’s drive to illumine the meaning-making inherent to lived everyday human experience is described by Schutz in “For phenomenology is above all a way of seeing, a way of grasping the world and of articulating experience. Rather than some esoteric or mystical realm of essences, it is the common everyday reality with which the phenomenologist is ultimately concerned” (p. 21).

And so with this thesis and this research. The narratives included here focus upon the real, everyday lived experiences of young people struggling with experiences of sensed existential separation from self and others within bureaucratic and often exclusionary pedagogical institutions. However, in writing these narratives and in illumining the sensed existential alienation inherent to the lives of the adolescents featured here, I recognise my own interactive and participatory role in those lived experiences, and I recognise, too, that my own search for self-meaning is central to my writing. Phenomenological observation and description, as we engage in it, serves as a guide to our understanding of our own human

lived experience “...the main function of a phenomenological description is to serve as a reliable guide to the listener’s own natural or potential experience” (Spiegelberg, 1982, p 694).

It is through self-understanding or meaning-making that we struggle towards a more universal understanding, but it is only through experience that we find and take our personal meanings “For it is in experience that the irreducible nature of personal meaning is disclosed and can be described” (Kidd and Kidd, p 1) In Being and Time Heidegger suggests that the act of interpreting experience reveals Being, or self-understanding and the meaning of what it is to be human “The phenomenology of Being (Dasein) is a hermeneutic in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting” (Heidegger, 1962) And through the inexorable and often painful struggle for self-understanding, or for some grasp of what it means to be human, we struggle always for a more universal, although inevitably elusive, understanding of the human experience

And so with this thesis and these stories. Each story is a microcosm of recorded human experience, often bitter and poignant, but each hinges to the other in search of a more universal and thematic understanding of the human condition, or more specifically, of the human condition of existential alienation “To be a phenomenologist is to see the world in its givenness as perpetually and repeatedly bearing the universal in its

slightest, most ephemeral aspects” (Schutz, 1969, p 21).

In its search for understanding - understanding drawn unabashedly from personal experience and a troubling search for self - and understanding expressed and embodied within the constraints of written language, this thesis finds itself grounded squarely in the philosophical traditions of Gadamer and Ricoeur. And as with the traditions of Gadamer and Ricoeur, it does not conceptually separate method from phenomena: method and phenomena are inextricably enjoined. Indeed, the phenomena, or real-world, lived, human experiences of disaffected youth, which are disclosed and examined in the narratives of this thesis, are *themselves* the very yielders or illuminators of understanding as each story unfolds.

Heidegger was the first philosopher seriously to challenge established philosophical concepts of method, when he disputed Dilthey’s process of method and proposed, instead, that method can never be separated from thinking itself. In this view one identifiable method cannot be applied universally, as the thinking of the observer is always inseparable from that which the observer is attempting to access. Smith (1991) writes that in the wake of Heidegger’s work “thereafter *method* could never attain a status independent of the project of thinking itself” (p. 192).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, was later to suggest that the only method possible for interpreting a phenomenon is revealed

and presented by the phenomenon itself (Truth and Method, 1979). Ricoeur, like Gadamer, saw understanding as grounded inextricably in the constraints and complexities of language, and like Gadamer, he, too, saw method and phenomena as inseparable, or as one. The research approach maintained in this thesis is aligned firmly with the thinking of Gadamer and Ricoeur: phenomena and method are inextricably fused, and meaning is embodied within the constructs of language. My stories, in this thesis, *are* my meanings.

I write and construct this research intersubjectively, dialogically, and creatively. And as I write, I turn always to the things themselves, to the life world which I both share and construct with the students I teach. Schon (1983) writes that we must recognise “the importance to actual practice of phenomena - complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict - which do not fit the model of Technical Rationality” (p. 39). And in the life world of which I write and explore, complexity, ambiguity, incongruence and uniqueness certainly prevail. Heidegger (1962) has said that “Every inquiry is a seeking [Suchen]” (p. 24). And so it is with this thesis: the narratives which embody this work are themselves engaged in a seeking - a seeking of meaning-making and understanding of the brutalities and isolation of adolescent existential alienation. But such meaning is hard to come by, although it somehow inevitably unveils itself as each narrative unfolds here. Perhaps this, for me, is the fusion of self

and meaning-making, embodied in language, that Ricoeur has written of

Finally, in any examination of phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions, it is instructive to distinguish one from the other. Van Manen (1990) attempts to define the differences for us in “Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life” (p. 4). Van Manen sees hermeneutics as personal and essentially human in nature and orientation. “Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science which studies persons. We might say that hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of the personal, the individual” (pp. 6-7). A closer and more specific look at hermeneutic inquiry and its significance to this study follows.

### c) Lest We Forget Hermes

*“The God Hermes is the patron of thieves, merchants and travellers. Hermes is cunning, and occasionally violent a trickster, a robber. So it is not surprising that he is also the patron of interpreters. The rules of their art, and its philosophy, are called ‘hermeneutics’” (Kermode, 1979, p. 1)*

Hermes is an astute, cunning and somewhat impudent character in Greek mythology, known not only as the conveyer and interpreter of messages from the Gods to mortal men, but known, too, as the spirited and cheeky patron of travellers, vagabonds, and thieves. Like Hermes, phenomenological hermeneutics concerns itself with interpretive meaning-making, and like the cunning prophecies and interpretations of Hermes himself, it is often ambiguous, layered, complex, and confused with the

tricks of the double entendre. The search for understanding or meaning-making regarding the human experience is indeed an unpredictable, shifting and often tricky affair.

The stories upon which this thesis is founded search implicit meanings, although they are often incongruously explicit as their narrative events unfold. The silences they leave behind impart more meaning than the words upon which they are built.

The search for meaning to the human experience has seduced, haunted, and indeed often defeated human beings since recorded time. Heidegger (1962) gave us the concept of interpretation as the search for meaning, or the search for what it is to think, and feel, and act as a human being within a meaningfully constructed world. In Being and Time Heidegger wrote “The phenomenology of Being (Dasein) is hermeneutic in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting” (1962, p. 65). Hermeneutic inquiry is grounded in the real, everyday life world of human experience, and it reaches always for practical understanding of human action: “...the hermeneutic approach seeks to elucidate and make explicit our practical understanding of human actions by providing an interpretation of them” (Packer, 1985, p. 1088). Gadamer (1979) sees interpretation as bound inextricably by linguistic constraints, and bound, too, in historical and temporal concepts of reality. It is the hunger for meaning and the subsequently imaginative,

creative *constructing* of meaning which ultimately intrigues and drives, and often eludes, the writer of this thesis.

Packer (1985) emphasises that hermeneutic inquiry and the search for meaning operate in a manner free of given theoretical understanding. “Hermeneutics involves an attempt to describe and study meaningful human phenomenon in a careful and detailed manner as free as possible from prior theoretical understanding” (p 1082) Early hermeneutic phenomenologists, like those of today, examined and explored real-world, lived experience and sought understanding *intuitively*, rather than under the constraints of objective, theoretical thinking. Phenomenological hermeneutics promotes “phenomenological intuiting”, or *Schau*, about which, and contrary to popular belief, Spiegelberg reminds us, “there is nothing mystical” (p 683) And like the hermeneutic phenomenologists of today, those of the early twentieth century sought “essential meanings”, or the connectedness of *Wesenzusammenhänge*, from their intuited meaning-making, which was drawn always from reflective examination of lived human experience.

Van Manen (1990) sees our search for understanding or intuited meaning-making as initially at once recollective and reflective, in the sense that we inevitably and inexorably find ourselves seeking and reflecting upon meaning from our already-lived, real-world experiences as we recall them. “Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is

reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through...” (p. 10)

The pain and bitterness of adolescent existential alienation, or that expressed sense of isolation from others and separation from self so often described by alienated adolescents or young adults, is explored in the interpretive narratives upon which this thesis is founded. I reflect, both as an observer and as a participant, upon those experiences of isolation, separation, exclusion, and at times, betrayal. I search, too, for some sense of self-understanding, which is revealed in the peculiarities of my own interpretive and constructed meanings, because hermeneutic narrative inquiry is as often and as demandingly reflexive as it is reflective.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, indeed, is rife with interpretive complexity: it at once searches for meanings drawn from lived experience, as it further reaches for deeper interpretive understanding *of those very meanings already understood*. Van Manen (1990) describes such phenomenological hermeneutics as “interpretation [which] applies when we confront something that is already an interpretation, such as in the case of a work of art” (p. 26).

The search for understanding is part of the human experience. Yet such understanding, in the hermeneutic sense, is elusive and complex. Hermeneutic understanding is disclosed from *preunderstanding*, or, in the words of Maxine Greene (1987), it is disclosed through an “engaging in reflective practice always with the intent to go beyond, to reach toward

imagined possibility” (p. 11). Hermeneutic inquiry involves first a reflective process, as one examines and explores and sifts through the complexities of lived experience, but ultimately such inquiry demands a reflexive process of reinterpreting and restructuring realities already understood. In this vein, Lather (1986) has suggested that “Our best tactic at present is to construct research designs that demand a vigorous self-reflexivity” (p. 271).

Ruby (1982) describes reflexivity as “consciousness about being conscious, thinking about thinking” (p. 1), and this very reflexive nature of interpretive inquiry, he suggests, leads to “a greater originality and responsibility than before, a deeper understanding at once of ourselves and of our subjects” (p. 2). Ruby suggests, as does Ricoeur, that in reflexive, hermeneutic meaning-making there is a fusion of the phenomena with subjective self, and that only thus is meaning, in all its layered complexities and ambiguities, momentarily revealed. “Reflexive describes the capacity of any system to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse” (p. 2). The narratives which embody this thesis are reflexive in the sense that while initial reflective understanding is sought in each story as it unfolds, a self-conscious search for further self-meaning is sought, too, as the writer herself explores her interpretive conclusions, and examines their implicit and disclosive significance for her own self-consciously understood or

perceived sense of self

Hermeneutic research does not apologise for its subjective bias. It operates within ethical, responsible constraints, and searches always for a deepened, collective understanding of our world and the realities we create within it. Babcock (1982) like Gadamer, sees interpretation as inextricably bound to an understanding of self, an understanding which in turn is itself inseparably fused with phenomena.

I do not believe that the process of interpretation really can or should be separated from the product. Neither do I believe that we can or should separate the understanding and interpretation of Others and their texts from an understanding of our Selves (p. 187)

Throughout this review of hermeneutic methodology, the role of the self in hermeneutic inquiry has repeatedly emerged as significant. I, too, find myself and my own search for meaning central to my own narrative inquiry. Greene (1987) has said that, indeed, we are all “condemned to create our lives as meaningful in the midst of our intersubjective worlds” (p. 12). I also am condemned to the intriguing and seductive but often illusionary search for self-meaning through my narrative writing.

In examining the self in hermeneutic inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that autobiographic writing may provide rich sources of phenomenological data. If, as Ricoeur has suggested, hermeneutics and language are inextricably bound, and if, too, self understanding must precede all human understanding, then the

autobiographical genre of narrative presents itself as a powerful tool in the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics. The stories at the heart of this thesis are at times autobiographical. They tell of others, but they tell of self, too. They search self-meaning, and they are vulnerable, because autobiographical interpretive inquiry, perhaps more than any other, is unsettling and dangerous to those who would choose to employ it.

Connelly and Clandinin suggest, too, that within our intersubjective worlds, we often imaginatively place or insert ourselves into the lives and experiences of others, both as a means of gaining understanding of others, and as a means, too, of giving others expression. These authors describe such a process as one of “self-insertion in the other’s story and as giving the other voice” (p. 4). In many of the storied lives of others which embody this thesis, I have inserted myself, and I invite my readers to find their place and insert themselves into each story. In this way I give voice not only to the songs, but more powerfully yet, to the silences of the alienated young people of whom I write.

But where, whether lodged in either an autobiographical or biographical genre, does narrative inquiry begin? And why, despite ourselves, are we committed and driven to make meaning of human existence at all? Gadamer (1987) poses similar questions in “Where does our effort to understand begin? Why are we interested in understanding a text or some experience of the world, including our doubts about patent

self-interpretation? Do we have a free choice about these things?” (p. 333) It appears that we do not human experience is driven always by an insatiable hunger both to derive and construct meaning from the complexities of lived human experience. We *are* our questions and in searching our answers we search only for ourselves. Gadamer writes that “Every question is itself an answer again... without an inner tension between our anticipations of meaning and the all-pervasive opinions, and without a critical interest in the generally prevailing opinions, there would be no question at all” (p. 333). Our questions shape our answers and in turn shape the constructs of our reality. Our questions leave us little, if anything at all, in the way of free choice.

Interpretive inquiry, then, is an inevitable, demanding, complex, and some would say, even dangerous affair “... understanding, like action, always remains a risk... Understanding means a growth in inner awareness, which is a new experience... Understanding is an adventure, and, like any other adventure, is dangerous” (Gadamer, 1987, p. 336). Risky though new understanding may be, it nevertheless widens our perceptions of our world and our knowledge of ourselves. Understanding, suggests Gadamer, is a “broadening of our human experiences, our self knowledge, and our horizon, for everything understanding mediates is mediated along with ourselves” (p. 336).

Kermode (1979) writes that, like Hermes, however, we interpret as

transients. “And we interpret as transients - of whom he [Hermes] is also the patron”(p. 145), as meanings shift inevitably within the perpetually unfolding interpretations we bring to the ever newly-created constructs of the realities of our life-world. The world, writes Kermode, “is our beloved codex”, and we reach always towards revealing the meanings implicit to human experience: we are forever “divining congruences, conjunctions, opposites, extracting secrets from its secrecy, making understood relations ” (p 145)

From this we begin to see that there is an elusive, ongoing perspective to hermeneutic research, or a sense of ever-unfolding, shifting meanings “... like understanding, textual meaning has a temporal mode of being... It is not something fully determinate, unchanging, timeless, eternally the selfsame” (Madison, 1988, p. 34). This sense of the endless, or the ever revolving aspects of hermeneutic research is echoed by Gadamer (1987) in “... the hermeneutic situation... has a unique element... The first guiding insight is to admit the endlessness of this task” (p. 334). As hermeneutic inquiry is never complete and is by its very nature ongoing and self-perpetuating, no interpretive meaning can ever be truly definitive. “The very idea of definitive interpretation seems to be intrinsically contradictory. Interpretation is always on the way” (Gadamer, p. 337). Packer (1985) also emphasises the incomplete and subjectively unfolding nature to hermeneutic inquiry in “Understanding is

not seen as a ‘searchlight’ that scans over a field of potential knowledge but rather as a kind of appreciation ... [which is] incomplete and with its own point of view” (p. 1089). And so, too, with this thesis. Its stories will remain always in some intriguing but oddly defiant sense incomplete, their meanings perpetually “on the way”, their answers only posing further questions within the vast, complex and beguiling matrix of human understanding.

This, one might say, is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics challenges the eighteenth century view of truth as absolute, or truth which is universal. From the hermeneutic perspective, truth cannot be logically and systematically fragmented, examined, grasped, and then placed before us for all of perpetuity. Truth is found only in the sum of the parts within the whole, and truth, like our own ever-changing constructs of reality, is a shifting, unreliable, and paradoxical thing.

Teaching is a complex and demanding endeavour, as is educational research. I write this thesis from within, rather than without, the world of lived human experience as it unfolds in school institutionalised settings. I write from the perspective of wholeness in the experience, rather than from the perspective of fragmented parts.

And finally, like all hermeneutic endeavour, this thesis was spawned and nourished within the darkly veiled ferment of human imagination. This thesis and its stories *create* meanings rather than *discover* them.

Madison (1988) suggests that hermeneutic methodology is grounded in “practical reason” rather than “theoretical reason”, and this is indeed fitting, he tells us, as hermeneutics is an inevitably creative activity. “...practical reason should be taken as the model for interpretation, for interpretation is always a creative business...” (p. 34). This thesis is unequivocally hermeneutic in its approach. It is also unequivocally creative, as is all hermeneutic inquiry.

This thesis is a collection of narratives, and through narrative it searches meaning. The later work of Paul Ricoeur is of particular significance to this review of related methodologies, as Ricoeur proposes that narrative writing is a powerful expression of phenomenological hermeneutics, and that linguistics and hermeneutics are inseparably bound. A closer look at narrative inquiry in hermeneutic research is undertaken in the following section of this review of the related methodologies.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

#### **a) Narrative and the Search for Meaning**

*“Only those who already know the mysteries - what the stories really mean - can discover what the stories really mean”*  
(Kermode, 1979).

Story telling is nothing new to human history. Throughout eons of recorded time, stories have been passed one from another, as gifts of both imparted meaning and shared human experience. Stories are our vehicle for making sense of our world. Seidman (1991) writes that through

narrative human beings have historically sought to make meaning of existence. "Recounting narratives of experience has been a major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 2).

Narrative inquiry has gained some recognition and validity as a viable research methodology in recent years. For obvious reasons, it is aligned firmly with qualitative research approaches. "Because of its focus on experience and the qualities of life and education, narrative is situated in a matrix of qualitative research" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1991, p. 121). "Narratology", they suggest, is appropriate to most fields of human science research. Van Manen (1990) suggests that interpretive, phenomenological research is inevitably a writing activity. "hermeneutic phenomenological research is fundamentally a writing activity. Research and writing are aspects of one process" (p. 7). Eisner (1988) not only recognises narrative inquiry as a valid research method, but he further links its application to such widely diverse fields of study as anthropology, psychology and philosophy.

In the tradition of Gadamer (1975), Connelly and Clandinin (1991) view narrative as both phenomenon and method. "It is equally correct to say 'inquiry into narrative' as it is 'narrative inquiry'. By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method" (p. 121). These authors also make a useful distinction between 'story' and 'narrative', suggesting

that 'story' may commonly be used as a descriptor of *phenomena*, whereas 'narrative' may more specifically be employed to define *inquiry*. They emphasise, too, that the narrative researcher may be distinguished from other story tellers. "Thus we may say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p. 2).

Connelly and Clandinin believe that narrative inquiry has potential and promising application in educational research. "The educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived" (p. 3). These authors remind us, too, that educational practitioners and educational researchers are often one and the same, or, at the very least, practitioners and researchers are often committed to each other within established and caring relationships. " . . . narrative inquiry occurs within relationships among researchers and practitioners, constructed as a caring community" (p. 4). Research, in this sense, emerges collaboratively and is nurtured within the bonds of trusting, disclosive friendship established between the practitioner and the researcher.

Collaborative research constitutes a relationship. In everyday life, the idea of friendship implies a sharing, an interpretation of two or more persons' spheres of experience. Mere contact is acquaintanceship, not friendship. The same may be said for collaborative research which requires a close relationship akin to friendship (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, p. 281)

These authors also make note of collaborative, trusting social interaction (the “believing game”) which may be established between researcher and practitioner, and the “connected knowing” which springs from such interaction. They make note, too, of the subsequent ability of one to insert himself or herself into the story of the other. “Distance or separation does not characterise connected knowing. The believing game is a way of knowing which involves a process of self-insertion in the other’s story as a way of coming to know the other’s story and as giving the other voice” (1991, p. 127). Narrative inquiry is grounded in knowing, and living within, both the stories of others and the stories of self. In this thesis I gather, and live within, the stories of others, but I search, too, the stories of self, as in this study the two are inextricably, and sometimes painfully, bound. Narrative researchers, Connelly and Clandinin tell us, are at once “living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others” (p. 128).

Narratives, however, have a life of their own. In writing each story, and indeed, in writing this entire thesis, I understood that beginnings fuse inexorably with their endings, and that each ending, in turn, heralds a new and uncharted beginning. Estés (1991) reminds us that stories, like language, are both the tools and the masters of their tellers. “The teller never knows how it will all come out, and that is at least half the moist

magic of story” (p. 20). Connelly and Clandinin have said “It is a helpful reminder to those who pursue narrative studies that they need to be prepared to ‘follow their nose’ [sic] and, after-the-fact, reconstruct their narrative inquiry” (p. 134). The beginning and the endings of narrative inquiry are inexorably enjoined—indeed, reaching an ending in any interpretive narrative inevitably reveals a new beginning, in the same ongoing sense of life itself. Beginnings and endings are fused in the whole. “Narrative explanation derives from the whole... it is this sense which needs to drive the writing (and reading) of narrative” (Connelly and Clandinin, p. 135). In an earlier text, these same authors suggest that as narrative explanation is found always in the wholeness of narrative, it follows that interpretive narrative can never be written according to logical perceptions of fragmented cause and effect. “Narrative explanation derives from the whole... Narratives are not adequately written according to a model of cause and effect but according to the explanations gleaned from the overall narrative (1990, p. 7).

Hermeneutic narrative and the phenomena of story are historically and temporally bound in our past, our present, and the promise of our future. In the hermeneutic sense we are always somewhere in the middle of our own life story and in the meaning we glean from it. Connelly and Clandinin suggest that this very temporal quality to interpretive narrative imbues the writing with “significance, value and intention”, in that “the

past conveys significance, the present conveys values, and the future conveys intention” (1991, p 134)

These authors also attempt to define specific criteria, which when applied to narrative inquiry lend it substance and validity as a viable research methodology, although they caution us that all such criteria are still very much the focus of debate and analysis “Like other qualitative methods, narrative relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, generalizability. The language and criteria for the conduct of narrative inquiry are under development in the research community” (p 134) Indeed, consensus has not yet been reached in current research circles regarding the validity of criteria, and each narrative inquirer must therefore construct his or her own unique criteria for validating and supporting the study undertaken “It is currently the case that each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work” (Connelly and Clandinin, p 134)

And so it is with this thesis and these stories. This work is unequivocally subjective, interpretive and creative. Each narrative is presented as a brief, elusive, open-ended, and, indeed, often inconclusive glimpse of the human experience of existential alienation. I search from these stories not only a deeper sense of self-understanding, but a more universal understanding, too, and I trust that in the telling not only may I impart understanding, but perhaps, too, I may inspire, in some small way,

positive change within the constraints of high-school bureaucracies

Connelly and Clandinin (1991) emphasise that although the researcher in a narrative study gives voice to others, the voice of the researcher must at times remain central “ narrative researchers are compelled to move beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story (p. 40). And so it is with the stories upon which this thesis is founded. I am engaged in more than recording chronological events and human action - tragic and arresting though such events often are - I am engaged in drawing conclusions about life and suggesting possible actions for the future.

Perhaps the strongest case for narrative educational research lies in its grounding in the real world of authentic lived experience borne of everyday classroom and school social interaction. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the way humans experience the world” (p. 2). Life’s narratives, these authors tell us, played out in classrooms and schools everywhere, “are the context for making meaning of school situations” (p. 3). Van Manen (1990) suggests that the phenomenological researcher is always a collector of stories acquired within the world of lived human experience. “The researcher who is involved in closely observing situations for their lived

meaning is a gatherer of anecdotes” (p. 69). I, too, am a gatherer of anecdotes, and from the nub of each I seek meaning. And the meaning I seek, as with any interpretive narrative, is the self-understanding which yields universal understanding. Van Manen has said that “We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (1990, p. 69).

Hermeneutic narrative is often reflexive in the sense that it searches further meaning-making from the initial interpretive meanings it at first discloses. Such is the case in some of the narratives included in this study, in which both the author and her adolescent informants re-examine their initial understandings of their lived, human, interactive experiences and reach, thereby, for some deepened sense of further self-understanding. This aspect of hermeneutic narrative is at times elusive, although it is its most powerful and disclosive characteristic. “The creation of further meaning, which might be called ‘the restorying quality of narrative’, is one of the most difficult of all to capture in writing” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1991, p. 139). Such meaning is found first in reflection upon stories recollected from past experience, and then in the more reflexive process of further meaning-making, which is wrestled from already gleaned and often intuitive understanding. New understanding only unveils further ambiguities and complexities, as endings and conclusions only reveal new beginnings and further interpretive meanings. Although, as

Connelly and Clandinin tell us, a narrative may appear finished, it is nevertheless true that “anyone who has written a narrative knows that it, like life, is a continual unfolding where the narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow” (p. 139). In hermeneutic narrative we perpetually uncover new meanings “We re-story earlier experiences as we reflect on later experiences so the stories and their meaning shift and change over time” (Connelly and Clandinin, p. 139). I make no apology for my own narrative “re-storying”. In the philosophical tradition of Gadamer, I see method and phenomena - or my stories and their interpretive meanings - as inexorably fused, and in the tradition of Ricoeur, I see subjective thinker and phenomena fused linguistically. I recreate, reconstruct and re-story the experiences I write of within the contexts of my own constructed and shifting realities. Through narrative we tell and relive and reflect upon life’s experiences, but in the discovery of new understanding derived from that reflection, we retell and relive those stories in search of further meanings implicit in them “... a person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling and reliving stories” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).

Seidman (1991) writes that “stories are a way of knowing [and] telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process” (p. 1). However, such interpretive meaning-making is inevitably as complex, elusive, and shifty as was Hermes himself. Stories veil yet illumine understanding,

implying often paradoxical truths in layered and ambiguous meanings

Parables are stories which at times convey implicit meanings through apparent contradiction and incongruency. Although we read that “He did not speak to them without a parable” (Mark, 4: 34), we know, too, that He allegedly spoke in parables rife with interpretive meanings, which were buried in veiled obscurities more often than they were expressed in explicit messages. “Parables are stories insofar as they *are* stories, which are not to be taken at face value, and bear various indications to make this condition plain to the interpreter, so the other scale is the measure of their darkness” (Kermode, 1979, p. 24). And not unlike parables, the narratives upon which this thesis is founded find their meanings more in their darkness than in the light shed by unfolding events, or more yet perhaps in their silences than in their songs. Kermode writes of the “radiant obscurity” of narrative (p. 47), which we may imagine, perhaps, as the light which is shed paradoxically by narrative’s very darkness. Kermode concludes that “... all narratives possess ‘hermeneutic potential’, which is another way of saying that they must be obscure” (p. 45). The narratives I include in this study at once reveal and conceal their inherent meanings. They are rife with ambiguity and complexity, often enjoining love to betrayal and bitterness to hope. However, the paradox of all narrative, Kermode tells us, is that narrative recalls or creates things other than those which are most obvious: “... a paradox applying to all narrative [is]

that although its function is mnemonic it always recalls different things”  
(p 45)

It is clear that hermeneutic narrative is a complex and multi-faceted venture. Kermode suggests that the interpretation of stories is a matter of “finding the right relations and complications consistent with one’s measure of the truth” (p 99). However, this may prove an elusive and demanding task, as one’s measure of the truth shifts inevitably as new understandings are forthcoming. Thus, hermeneutic narrative remains always an ongoing and incomplete venture, given to the vagaries of ever more complex interpretive conclusions. Our hunger for meaning constitutes the voice of interpretive narrative. Kermode defines such a voice as “our inquiries into what stories originally meant and what they originally mean, so far as our perhaps delusive sense of their perhaps delusive radiance gives us warrant to speak” ( p 99)

There is, perhaps, something of a delusive radiance to the narratives upon which this thesis is founded, or more specifically, a light which is shed by their darkness, or a voice which whispers in their silence. Kermode writes of the “unfollowable world”, which defies always our transient and inevitably delusive interpretive analyses: “We glimpse the secrecy [in narrative] . . . this is divination, but what is divined is what is visible from our angle. It is a momentary radiance, delusive or not. . .” (p 144). And so with these stories and this thesis. The narrative meanings and

the constructed realities presented here are transient, delusive, and only momentarily radiant. I wrote from my angle, but even as I wrote, my angle shifted.

Hermeneutic narrative is a creative act: it implies a constructing and a redescribing of reality within temporal constraints.

Narrative produces [an] impression of novelty and creativeness through the invention of a plot, a synthesis of the heterogeneous, that fuses a scattered, discordant multitude of facts, circumstances, unexpected happenings, purposes, causes and effects in the temporal unity of an action... something is said which was hitherto unknown... reality is redescribed” (Jervolino, 1990, pp. 115-116).

Jervolino suggests that both fictional and historically grounded narrative is creative in the sense that it reconstructs human action. “Mimesis, the central moment of mimetic activity as such, is the imitation of action through the ability to construct stories, whether they belong in the fictive or the historical genre” (p. 129). Hermeneutic narrative, however, whether engaged in imitating action or constructing and redescribing reality, searches always for the meanings inherent to lived human experience. Hermeneutic narrative is dialogic, constructive, and creative. It lives in imagination. It constructs reality rather than reproduces or mirrors it. Jervolino writes that the imagination is creative, productive and transcendental. “The imagination is not to be understood as a psychologising faculty but as a transcendental one, not the reproductive but the productive, creative imagination... The function of the imagination

is to mediate, between understanding and intuition” (p 130)

Imagination gives us story. Imagination constructs our realities. And story embodies that reality in language. Stories bind and unite us, enjoining us in mutually recognisable and identifiable meaning-making processes within our world. This thesis is grounded firmly in story. Its passion lies less in its defence of the research methodology which is presented here, and less yet in the extensive review of the literature related to its theme: its passion lies only in its stories. And its stories tell of the betrayals and the pain and the oddly random curiosity of human alienation. The telling is unabashedly ambiguous, complex, interpretive and inconclusive, too - because life is ambiguous and complex - and meaning-making is inevitably interpretive and inconclusive.

Finally, in examining research methodologies, we might do well to remember, as Estés (1992) urges us to do, that story is the oldest form of inquiry known to man. “Story is far older than the art of science and psychology, and will always be the elder in the equation . . .” (p 19). The stories upon which this thesis is founded struggle always for unique but universal meaning, and as their author, I struggle, too, with the ongoing complexities inherent to my own search for self-understanding and meaning-making to my world.

#### b) Language, Linguistics, Metaphor and the Poetic Voice

*“Through the voice of language in the poem, a world or new perspective on the world is heard (Ihde, 1986, p 40)*

This thesis is grounded in a resolute passion for language, and an ancient, archetypal knowing that through language we are rooted and grounded in the world and our understanding of it “Our language is itself perceptually situated, embodied in receptive and expressive senses and bound to this primordial attachment to the world” (Ihde, 1986, p 27).

Seidman (1991) suggests that our essential “humanness” is inextricably tied to our ability to impart meaning drawn from human experience through the use of language “At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolise their experience through language” (p 2) Ihde (1986) links language to our very sense of humanness. “In the beginning was voice and the voice was speech and speech was Language. That is the case with the realm we call human” (p 27)

However, language is persuasive and misleading, and remains seeped in linguistic perceptions which lie somewhere beyond our conscious understanding, and which defy our manipulation or control

But a perception seeped in Language poses a problem for us which we may not even recognise. For it is a perception which is always too quick to make familiar the most strange and other which we come upon in the world. Perhaps only for moments do we come face to face with that which is truly other, and then we give it a name, domesticating it into our constant interpretation which centres us in our world (Ihde, p 28)

All stories struggle for meaning within the constraints of the rich complexities afforded by language. And language is the coin of the story

teller “For, whatever else the voices of language may be in, at the centre where we are, they are rich, multidimensional and filled with as yet unexplored possibilities” (Ihde, p 38)

Ihde sees language as central to the human experience, and from this centre, he suggests, language in metaphorical perspective reaches outwards to grasp and capture and describe meaning in our world. “Voice is, for us humans, a very central phenomenon. Yet outward from this centre, voice may also be a perspective, a metaphor, by which we understand part of the world itself” (p 32) Ihde reminds us of the voices and metaphors embodied in all things in our world. “The metaphor is serious and not frivolous, for there is a deep sense in which all things, the things of the world, have voices” (p 32). And so it is that the language of metaphor and the voices of all things find their way inexorably into story, including those which embody this thesis, and thereby shade, weigh, confuse and illuminate the storied meanings therein

The stories in this thesis are expressed in written language - language at once spontaneous and calculated - and language which is both the tool and the possessor of the writer herself. It is through written language, impeded though we are by the linguistic perspectives and primordial meanings inherent to all language, that we seek often to make meaning of the human condition. “The discovery and invention of writing in all its variations, is like the coming into sight of the blind man” (Ihde,

p 46-47)

Language is pivotal to all hermeneutic inquiry. Language both embodies meaning and is fused with it. “the problem of interpretation became of central importance and, at the same time, of manifold complexity. when philosophy realised that language - this shifting, ambiguous, polymorphic and ineffable embodiment of meaning - was its proper element” (Jervolino, 1990, p. 1). However, language both reveals and conceals the very meanings it constructs. For Paul Ricoeur, language *is* meaning. Ricoeur defines hermeneutic phenomenology in linguistic rather than perceptualist terms. “Paul Ricoeur, by raising in a specific way the issue of language, opens the way for a questioning of the perceptualist emphasis by moving phenomenology toward a linguistic focus” (Ihde, 1971, p. 4). Ricoeur sees language and meaning as inseparably fused: language constructs and creates meaning, while meaning is the embodiment of language. “*Man is language*, Ricoeur says today, and the problem of language remains a problem of the human subject” (Ihde, p. 23). Language not only embodies our interpretations of our world: it embodies and constructs our self-knowledge and self-understanding, and it provides our only possible means of accessing the self within. “Language, in the symbolic, the mythological, is a function of self understanding” (Ihde, p. 24). Ricoeur developed a philosophy of language which he links to a hermeneutic understanding of human

existence. “Given a growing preoccupation with ‘word’, with language, and a project Ricoeur today terms ‘the hermeneutic philosophy of human existence’, the door gradually opens for the philosophy of language itself” (Ihde, p. 29). Ricoeur distinguishes between “thinking *in* a language and thinking *about* language” (Ihde, p. 25), examining how thought, through linguistic and perhaps mythical symbols, gives rise to understanding and meaning-making. Ihde tells us that what Ricoeur does is “invert the history of linguistic sciences and begin (phenomenologically) with what he calls the fullness of language” (p. 25).

Packer (1985) also sees hermeneutic inquiry, or meaning-making, as grounded firmly in semantic structures of thinking. “The hermeneutic approach... provides a way of understanding and studying action that is grounded in considering such action as having a semantic rather than a logical or causal organisation” (p. 1081). Gadamer (1987) suggests that hermeneutic understanding of existence is always historically and temporally grounded, and that our interpretive understanding or meaning-making is inevitably expressed linguistically.

Language is indeed the primordial expression of all human understanding. It is both the tool and the possessor of the writer who wields it. Language constructs rather than describes interpretive meaning: language *is* meaning. “And through hermeneutic phenomenology one may say: Whether or not with God, at least with men, in the beginning is the

word” (Ihde, p 181)

Jervolino (1990) sees literary prose and poetic language as living things, which reveal to us our very selfness and knowledge of being, and which provide, too, a deeper understanding of our constructed realities: “In the language of myth, literary prose or poetry, one gives up the description of reality as it appears to the empirical observer in favour of a description of its deeper essence” (p 81). Jervolino, like Ricoeur, suggests that language, rather than merely defining reality, embodies and creates it:

It is metaphor which ultimately allows hermeneutics to unveil the poetic, disclosive dimension of language, in the poetic dimension language effects a redescription of reality, a poetic transfiguration which, however, contains a link to the possibility of a practical transformation, a new creation “ (Jervolino, p 104)

This thesis and its narrative collection construct transient, elusive, and paradoxical realities. Those realities are inseparable from the language which embodies them. This thesis is found in story, poetry and words.

**Appendix B:**  
**A Review of the Related Literature**

## **Appendix B:** **A Review of the Related Literature**

This study and the stories it is founded upon examine the phenomenon of alienation in adolescent youth. Specifically, the related literature which is reviewed here examines the initial societal influences which alienate or isolate young people, and the high school bureaucratic practices endured by adolescents which further serve to alienate or isolate them.

An examination of schooling both at home and abroad is undertaken. more specifically, research studies conducted in Great Britain, Australia, and the United States are compared with similar studies undertaken here in Canada. Finally, some solutions and suggestions which emerged from the related literature are included in this review.

This examination of the research both at home and abroad is presented in three broad categories. First, the concept of alienation is explored and defined. Second, an extensive examination of literature related to high school dropout phenomena is examined, as underlying this review is an assumption that adolescents who drop out of high school institutions are more likely than others to have endured alienating or negative experiences while there. Third, the concluding section examines alienation in adolescent females and the gender-biased educational practices which perpetuate isolation and low self-esteem in young women.

## **1) Alienation: The Search for an Inclusive Definition**

### **a) The Theological or Philosophical View**

*“The alienated ... are aliens, estranged from persons and places they have known all their lives. They are exiles where they are at home.”*

*(Richard Schmitt, Alienation and Class)*

The concept of alienation is an elusive and complex one. Seldin (1989) writes that “Alienation is an over-used, vague and difficult to define concept” (p. 77). Tripp (1986) remarks that throughout his research work he avoided defining the term “alienation”, although he employed this term frequently with both students and teachers alike, and he adds, not surprisingly, that all respondents appeared comfortable with a mutual and assumed definition. He believed that in avoiding defining alienation he might thereby uncover its meaning more completely.

Throughout this century philosophers have written much regarding the concept of human alienation, but in recent decades the discussion has focussed specifically on the writings of existentialist thinkers. Johnson (1973) reminds us that theologians view alienation as inevitable to the human condition. The book of Genesis teaches of man’s expulsion from the gardens of paradise. “Not only was mortal man reminded of his degradation and estrangement of himself as a species, but his energies on Earth were continually turned toward reestablishment of union with his Creator and the hereafter” (p. 7). Johnson believes that theologians today

see man as further alienated, however, both from other men and from himself, too. “Modern theologians see alienation not simply as a cosmic theme... Man is seen as not only separated from God but as separated from meaningful experience with other men, Nature and himself” (p. 8)

Schmitt (1983) examines the existential concept that all human experience is inescapably meaningless but concludes that alienation is not inevitable to the human condition, as the possibility of “human action” always ensures that “Alienation is escapable for all human beings” (p. 209). He believes that existentialist thinking is flawed and “transparently inadequate”, and he holds fast to a faith in the power and potential of human intervention. “Existentialism established itself not by the logical force of its arguments but by encouraging alienated misunderstandings of our condition” (p. 210)

Seeman (1959), famous for his now classic five descriptors defining alienation, did, however, include “meaninglessness” as one of those delineators, although he perhaps did not view meaninglessness in existential terms. Seeman sees this form of alienation as the individual’s inability “to predict behavioural outcomes” or to understand “the events in which he is engaged” (p. 786). This sensed loss of meaning or purpose is a recurrent theme in many of the narratives upon which this study is based.

### b) Alienation - The Sociological View

Human alienation is often seen as a product of societal injustice. Schmitt (1983) sees alienation as the inevitable result of “the structures of our society ... insofar as they are unhappy” (p. 4). He writes of the “societal component” to our unhappiness, which he also views as “peculiarly modern” (p. 5), and he adds that societally-driven alienation is often manifested as a lack of community. “Building community and struggling to overcome alienation are two descriptors of one and the same process” (Schmitt, p. 121).

Seeman (1959) also defined alienation in terms of societal injustice, perceiving it as powerlessness experienced in the face of the inequities of human society. Seeman believes that this view of human alienation originated with Marx, who perceived workers as rendered powerless by the constraints imposed by ruling entrepreneurs. Seeman suggests that throughout the twentieth century man’s sense of powerlessness has increased, and that societally-driven alienation is an ever-growing sense of the likelihood that man’s “behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks” (p. 784). In Seeman’s view, societally induced alienation springs from a state of anomie, and may be defined as “normlessness”, which he sees as “a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviours are required to achieve given goals” (p. 788). Feuer (1963) also defines alienation as a societal or class inequity

issue. He sees alienation as the result of the pressures of competitive and industrial society, and as an issue of race and generations.

Johnson (1973) also views alienation in sociological or historical terms, but unlike Seeman and Schmitt, he cautions that alienation is not a mere twentieth century phenomenon, or a “post-technological disease” (p. 10). Alienation, he believes, has been part of the human condition since recorded time, and may be viewed as both an anthropological and ethnographical issue, rooted inevitably in matters of kinship, ritual, cultural habits and child raising customs. In this view, man’s connectedness to himself and to others is symbolical “At this level, all states of alienation become quests for value, significance, meaning and transcendence within a symbolical reality” (p 17)

Johnson sees alienation in terms of societally-inflicted injustice, which is often manifested as enforced economic inequity. Thus man’s alienation is seen as the absence of “the possession or control of capital, real estate, or objects of value uniformly connected with security, opportunity, and prestige” (p 19). This view is supported throughout the research reviewed here, in which socioeconomic status is often widely perceived as a contributing factor in adolescent alienation.

### c) Alienation - The Psychological View

Johnson (1973) reminds us that psychiatrists define alienation in

terms of psychological distress which may emerge as social or personal despair. Schmitt (1983) suggests that alienation may be defined as alienation from the self, or as a sensed lack of personal identity which appears to promote a sensed non-fusing of one's public and private identities. Schmitt believes that a lack of self-esteem or self-love creates "fragmentation" and loneliness. He writes poignantly of a few particularly lonely and alienating months in his own life:

Loneliness made me needy. The longing for warmth, for company, never satisfied for more than short periods, seemed to grow ever more intense. I wanted to belong somewhere, be accepted and be safe. Once I was accepted just as I was, I would be safe. No more fear of emptiness when I was home alone, no more fear of rejection when I was reaching out to others (p. 90-91)

Schmitt's compares his personal experience of psychological alienation to descriptions of alienation and loneliness commonly reported by adolescents, and he cautions us to look beyond the outwardly aggressive arrogance commonly displayed by unhappy adolescents. He suggests that outwardly negative or aggressive behaviours mask the "powerlessness, self-denigration, self-distrust and the typical fragmentation of the lonely..." (p. 93)

Seeman (1959) also sees alienation as psychological isolation, and he believes that such isolation manifests itself as not only a sense of separation from human warmth and contact, but as a sense of intellectual separation from the popular culture, too. Seeman echoes Schmitt's caution regarding

aggressive, but misleading, posturing in adolescent youth “But another adjustment pattern - that of ‘rebellion’ - more closely approximates what I have called ‘isolation’” (p. 789) Psychological isolation or “self-estrangement” is, for Seeman, an elusive concept and may perhaps only be readily understood through anecdotal descriptors. He writes of the self-estrangement of the housewife who cooks for her family “simply to get it over with” or of the person who engages in an activity “only for its effect on others” (p. 790)

Erich Fromm (1955) was another psychologist who employed the term self-estrangement “By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself” (p. 131). This view of alienation as psychological self-estrangement or as the endless search for personal identity is echoed in the writings of Okan (1973). Okan not only views alienation in terms of psychological isolation, but in terms of man’s perpetual and painful attempt to establish a sense of identity

The pursuit of further understanding of alienation can be helpfully accomplished by an examination of the concept that is, in effect, its mirror image: Identity. Having a sense of identity, knowing ‘who one is’, represents the polar opposite of felt estrangement from one’s self. Furthermore, identity, like alienation, is an inherently psychological concept (p. 86)

#### d) Alienation Defined in Terms of Adolescence

Much has been written regarding adolescence and its apparently

inherent and inevitable sense of alienation, and in recent years much has been written, too, regarding the alarming and debilitating sense of social alienation which afflicts so many North American young people today, and which, in many tragic instances, leads to adolescent suicide. Wynn (1989) warns that the alienation of North American youth is on the rise: "For a long period of time - 20 to 30 years - the alienation level of American youth has been steadily increasing" (p. 86). He adds that although this trend has slowed somewhat in recent years, there is every indication that it will, nevertheless, continue to increase. He writes of the staggering and alarming 210% increase in the suicide rate among adolescent white males between the years 1953 to 1982, and although he concedes that this climb in suicide deaths stabilised in the years which followed, he leaves us with the sobering thought that there is "no reason for comfortable optimism" (p. 90).

Seldin (1989), however, warns us that it is "common practice" not only to label all adolescents as "alienated", but that a vast and varied array of adolescent behaviours are routinely ascribed to alienation. "In magazines, newspapers, T V reports and certainly in textbooks on adolescent growth and development, alienation is held responsible for almost every negative adolescent behaviour" (p. 77). He does, however, recognise that alienation in young people manifests itself as a sense of isolation from community "a feeling of separateness from the

organisation...” (p. 81)

Atwater (1983) believes feelings of alienation in adolescents are an added burden to young people who are already struggling to secure a sense of personal identity. Other researchers and educators perceive alienation as not only predictable but, indeed, desirable and suggest that only through separation from others can adolescents secure their identities. “The consolidation of identity is the primary task of adolescence. Alienation plays a major role in this process” (Okan, 1973, p. 89). Okan sees the studied apathy displayed by many adolescents today as a healthy phenomenon which is designed to seduce and win the adults it appears to repel. “Yet this behaviour, as often as not, has an engaging, waif-like, elusive charm that is highly seductive - as it is intended to be” (p. 92). Further, Okan sees the anger so often expressed by alienated adolescents as life-affirming and wholesome. “[it] affirms the reality of their existence in the same way that pain does, and the angry reactions they successfully induce in others confirms this” (p. 92).

## **2) An Overview: Dropouts - Who and Why**

This section of the review of the related literature examines the phenomena of high school dropouts and addresses the following five questions:

a) Which high school students become dropouts and why?

- b) What societal pressures incur alienation in the high-school dropout population?
- c) Do high schools themselves incur alienation in the student dropout population?
- d) Is lack of self-esteem significant in the student dropout profile?
- e) What do educators and researchers suggest as possible solutions to the dropout problem?

a) Which High School Students Become Dropouts and Why?

A 1983 study entitled High School and Beyond, undertaken across the United States by the National Centre for Educational Statistics, provides an alarming, although perhaps not surprising, picture of the typical high-school dropout in the United States today (Ekstrom, Goertz, Polack, and Rock, 1986, p. 53). The authors report that “The two background characteristics that are most strongly related to dropping out are socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity” (p. 53). They describe typically alienated behaviour patterns in the dropout population, including truancy, delinquency, and expressed feelings of low self-esteem. This study found that adolescent dropouts frequently exhibit behavioural difficulties, and that they select peers with similar behavioural problems as friends and associates. “The dropouts appear to feel alienated from school life. The dropouts appear to have chosen friends who are also more

alienated from school than the friends of the stayers” (p. 56). The authors go on to report that alienated behaviour was the single most commonly observed variable in the dropout population studied. Alienated adolescents were characterised as “students who cut classes, had disciplinary problems, had been suspended, and/or had trouble with the police” (p. 63).

Similar findings were reported in a Canadian study undertaken only one year later (Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta, 1984), for the Northern Alberta Development Council. This study found that most dropouts were between 16 and 19 years of age, were poor attenders, had low academic achievement records, and had often been retained in earlier grades. Not surprisingly, dropouts interviewed in this study reported alienated, negative feelings regarding their relationships with their teachers. Dropouts were also found to have frequent discipline problems and some problems with the police.

Eitzen (1992) describes the typical dropout in particularly bleak terms: “Some children are angry, alienated, and apathetic. A few are uncooperative, rude, abrasive, threatening and even violent. Some abuse drugs. Some are sexually promiscuous. Some belong to gangs. Some are sociopaths” (p. 585). This pattern of alienated behaviours emerges as a factor common to all dropout populations examined in the literature reviewed here. B.C.’s 1988 Royal Commission report found a high degree of alienation in high-school dropouts throughout the province (Marx and

Grieve, 1988). From data collected in a Kamloops survey the authors describe an unfortunate cycle of typical dropout characteristics “... dislike of school, failure, family problems, incarceration, pregnancy, joining the work force, and financial problems” (p. 15). The authors of this study expressed concern regarding patterns of social inequity which inevitably seemed to create and perpetuate the dropout problem “What is of concern to the commission, then, is the common and apparently supportable claim that parental poverty, family instability, and low social status tend to lead children to fail at school .” (p. 17)

However, if life is difficult for potential dropouts while in school, it is often even more trying once they have left. One study which followed 30,000 U.S. high school sophomores from 1980 to 1986 looked specifically at personal, social and labour market experiences which result from dropping out, and only one main variable was found to relate to later negative consequences. “The primary independent variable in our study was dropout status” (McCaul et al., 1992, p. 200). The authors of this study also report finding considerably greater alcohol consumption in young males who dropped out as opposed to those who remained in high school, and in both sexes less involvement in political issues and organised sport and church activities was found in dropout populations rather than in graduating populations. The authors expressed concern regarding the apparently negative consequences dropping out incurs in later life “Our

findings did raise concerns about the negative personal and societal consequences that result from dropping out” (p 206) They called, too, for further research which might explore solutions to the problem and suggested that an increased dropout population may potentially contribute to greater alienation in society as a whole “Our findings lend support to the concern that dropping out may result both from an alienation from adult norms and values as well as contribute to an alienation from society at large” (p 204). This view is shared by Strange (1992) who suggests that not only are North American schools not doing well, but that failure contributes to overall societal distress. “Dropouts will not likely join a work force and become successful citizens. Indeed, precisely the opposite is the greater likelihood” (p 105)

#### b) What Societal Pressures Incur Alienation in the High School Dropout Population?

George and Louise Spindler (1989) compare the non-existence of a dropout phenomenon in traditional and highly structured societies like those of the Australian Arunta and the Hutterites of Europe and North America, with the now alarming dropout rate in North American schools. These authors point out that in both the Arunta and Hutterite societies all adolescents are guaranteed success in “schooling”, in order to ensure that they will go on to perform as successful and accepted members of society,

and that they will thereby perpetuate that society. The Spindlers describe Arunta initiation rites in which young males are taken forcibly from their mothers, “hazed”, have their teeth knocked out, and are even smoked over fires. One year later each young Arunta male must undergo a Corroboree - a ceremony in which he must first endure the apparently violent struggles between the men and the women of the tribe - and then later have the length of his penis sliced through to the urethra. Throughout the ceremony boys are cold, hungry, threatened, frightened and alone, *but they always succeed and become Arunta men*. The Spindlers point out that in this society, unlike our own, all adolescents succeed and proceed to a full adult role in their future world. No one fails. No one drops out.

The Spindlers draw comparisons between Arunta society and Hutterite society, in both of which dropping out is rare. Hutterite students attend regular school from the age of six, but must attend German classes during evening and weekend hours. At the age of sixteen young people enter the work force, and in their twenties young men and women are baptised and enter marriage. *There are no dropouts and no failures*. The Spindlers suggest that perhaps we might learn something from both the Hutterites and the more primitive Arunta, as our own school initiation rites appear not only to alienate many young people, but indeed further to eliminate or discriminate amongst them.

Mann (1986) believes that the societal pressures which create

alienation in youth are staggering in their scope and complexity. “Across all dropouts, the range of circumstances is impressive, even daunting” (p. 7). He lists, and not without a touch of wry humour, the numerous and diverse societal influences which may prompt adolescents to forgo formal education entirely. “Most students quit because of the compounded impact of, for example, being poor, growing up in a broken home, having been held back in the fourth grade, and finally having slugged ‘Mr Fairlee’, the school’s legendary vice-principal for enforcement” (p. 7).

O’Neil (1991) also writes of societal circumstances, often tragic and irreversible, which prompt young people to drop out. He lists poverty, hunger, drug dependency, abuse, and broken homes as some of the more significant factors. He believes that such societal problems not only promote learning disabilities and emotional disorders in young people, but also inevitably alienate adolescents. O’Neil focuses, too, on the growing drug dependency problems found in many North American high schools today. “Schools are just beginning to deal with the legacy of the crack cocaine epidemic, which began in earnest in 1985” (p. 5). O’Neil believes that multiple societal injustices alienate adolescents today. “[There is] the burden of having not one or several, but multiple stresses on children and their families” (p. 6).

Other researchers ask why some, although not all, adolescents succumb to negative societal influences. Eitzen (1992) asks “Why are some

children such problems to themselves, to their parents, to their teachers and to the community?” (p. 585). He suggests that economic inequity in North American society alienates many young people, and further, that downward economic mobility is far more common today than in previous generations: “This is the first generation in American history to have more downward mobility than upward” (p. 586). Eitzen adds that downward socioeconomic mobility often places unbearable stress on families, and that adolescents within such families are in greater danger of social alienation: “Some families... facing downward mobility experience stress, marital separation and divorce, depression, high levels of alcohol consumption, and spouse and child abuse” (p. 587). Extreme poverty, Eitzen believes, contributes to students’ problems in schools, and he concludes with the bleak reminder that today’s “new poor” has little chance of escaping poverty without either high-school diplomas or post-secondary education, as “hard physical labour [rather than technical skills] is rarely needed in a high-tech society” (p. 587). He reminds us that North America’s economic transformation means that more poor families are trapped forever without hope of escaping their unfortunate circumstances: “Consequently, poverty has become permanent, and we now have a relatively permanent category of the poor - the underclass... [and] their hopelessness and alienation helps us to understand their abuse of alcohol and drugs” (p. 587). It is for these reasons that Eitzen believes that North

American society is responsible for the vast and growing numbers of alienated adolescents: “My strong conviction is that children are *not* born with sociopathic tendencies, problem children are socially created” (p. 585)

Eitzen’s bitter indictment reaches across all levels of North American society. President Bush’s much publicised Head Start programme, claims Eitzen, excluded many of the nation’s desperately poor four-year-olds. He adds that the very victims of North American society, the poor and the alienated, are also always inevitably blamed for their own untenable conditions: “The bitter irony is that these disadvantaged young people will end up as society’s losers, and most Americans will blame them for their failure” (p. 588). Finally, Eitzen examines alienation in adolescents living in unstable or broken homes: “Rejection from one or both parents may lead some children to act out in especially hostile ways. Whatever the negative response of the children, I believe that we can conclude that the victims of family instability are not completely to blame for their misbehaviours” (p. 588).

### c) Do High Schools Themselves Incur Alienation in the Student Dropout Population?

George and Louise Spindler (1989) looked at successful initiation or schooling practices in both Arunta and Hutterite societies, and compared

these practices with the schooling disciplines inherent to our own culture. Their findings amounted to an indictment of North American and European initiation practices, which appear often to exclude specific minority groups.

The school experience early on defines them as potential failures or even learning disabled, and there is always the implication that even if they put up with such definitions and endure the school, they are not assured of a positive gain at the end. The long initiation ritual of the school is for many minorities a long drawn-out degradation ritual (p. 13).

These authors suggest that it may be more fortuitous to examine the reasons why students choose to remain in school, as the reasons for leaving, they claim, are more apparent. Grunsell (1978) sees things quite differently, and instead suggests that the reasons for remaining in school are transparently obvious and hardly worthy of in-depth study. Academic success ensures continued attendance, he claims, whereas persistent failure is often a miserable and humiliating experience for some students throughout their years of compulsory schooling. "Compulsory school attendance is a fact of our society... Yet the only other compulsory institution we have is prison" (p. 111). Grunsell goes on to emphasise that even where students are certain in earlier years of ultimate academic failure, they still must endure the ensuing years of humiliation and schooling which await them before their eventual escape.

However much they may insist to themselves and to one another that school values are meaningless, the awful fact remains that they must live each day in an institution based on standards which

label them losers. The more desperate they are for recognition and approval, the worse that humiliation becomes (p. 113).

Grunsell both initiated and managed an alternative school for adolescent dropouts in central London, England, and he viewed the institutionalised bureaucracies of secondary schools as largely responsible for alienation in dropout youth.

More and more children whose needs are not met within the main school system are labelled deviant and are isolated into categories of disturbance. It won't work. Schools will never be able to shrink the boundaries of 'normal' enough to solve the problem that lies inside the school itself (p. 116).

Mann (1986) writes that the high-school dropout rate in North America has now reached the "status of a scandal in education" (p. 3) - a scandal he holds schools responsible for - as schools, Mann believes, promote pushouts, rather than dropouts. "The way young people experience school is the single most frequently cited reason for quitting early. But what does that mean? Children who failed to learn? Or schools that failed to teach? The first are called dropouts, the second are called pushouts" (p. 5).

Throughout the literature reviewed here, negative school experiences were found repeatedly to account for alienated feelings in young people. Ekstrom (1983) reported the findings of a U.S. study entitled High School and Beyond which found that one third of high-school dropouts left school because of repeated academic failure and

feelings of alienation from school institutions (p. 60). Wehlage and Rutter (1986) believe that lack of teacher interest in students and unfair disciplinary measures exacerbate those feelings of alienation. "The process of becoming a dropout is complex" they suggest, because not only does this process imply the dropout's rejection of an institution fundamental to his society, but it "must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person" (p. 81). These authors hold schools as largely responsible for student alienation and eventual student failure, and they maintain that the marginal abilities of some students do not prompt failures, but rather such failures stem from "a fundamental problem with the perceived legitimacy of the institution... indicating institutional problems that go much deeper than dropouts" (p. 85). They go on to emphasise that young people who are encouraged to drop out of formal education systems often incur unfortunate life-long consequences. "For the adolescent who has dropped out of high school, the psychological effect is to drop out of all formal schooling... a decision that precludes many opportunities for personal and economic advancement in the future" (p. 81).

Fine (1986) writes that schools more often "throw out" rather than "push out" recalcitrant adolescents, and that school authoritarian controls repress and silence those who may challenge institutional demands. "Schooling is structured so that student opinions, voices and critical

thoughts remain silenced. Classrooms are organised more around controls than conversation, more around the authority of the teacher than the autonomy of students. (p. 99) Fine adds that students encouraged to leave post-secondary schools are often asked to do so for paltry misdemeanours or minor infractions of school rules. “Students are discharged for reasons ranging from continuously wearing a coat in the hall, ‘chronic cutting’, ‘mouthin’ off’, or having been absent for twenty, consecutive, inexcused days” (p. 99)

Fensham (1986) also sees schools as alienating and often negative institutions, and he concludes that poor teacher-pupil interactions promote much student isolation and eventual failure. He believes that many earlier studies have classified alienation “as a static phenomenon which can be measured empirically and is causally connected to other measures, e.g. of organisational structure and functioning” (p. 5). Instead, he claims, we might be wiser to view alienation in young people as more a matter of negative interactions between teachers and pupils within the constraints of institutionalised settings, or as “a process involving both teachers and students seeking to find meaning and purpose within an institutional context” (p. 5)

Many other studies reviewed in this examination of the related literature report similar findings regarding the role of the school in perpetuating student alienation. Hamby (1989) writes that alienated

students “perceive school as a threatening place and want to escape the aversiveness they feel there” (p. 23). Curwin and Mendler (1988) also see schools as threatening places, adding that disciplinary structures maintained there are guaranteed to alienate young people. However, these two authors concede that disciplinary problems are often initiated by negative student behaviours, which are at least in part societally driven, and then later exacerbated by negative in-school controls. Curwin and Mendler believe a number of school-initiated factors contribute to student alienation “boredom, a sense of powerlessness, unclear limits, no provisions for the outlet of feelings, and school attacks on student dignity and self-concept” (p. 10). These authors see attacks on human dignity or sensed self-worth as particularly alienating to adolescents already struggling to maintain secure identities. “When a student’s dignity is attacked, he will protect himself in whatever way he can, even at the cost of his relationship with the teacher and possibly his education” (p. 10).

The classic British study Fifteen Thousand Hours (Rutter, et al., 1979) chronicled daily life within inner city London secondary schools, and suggested in concluding chapters that although, indeed, many students are already alienated when they enter secondary schools, school practices within institutionalised settings often increase adolescent alienation. “... although schools differed in the proportion of behaviourally difficult or low achieving children they admitted, these differences did not wholly

account for the variation between schools in their pupils's later behaviour and attendance" (p. 177-178)

School practices were seen to isolate already alienated adolescents in a number of further studies reviewed in this examination of the related literature. Calabrese (1989) writes "Sometimes this sense of separation is created outside the school, but frequently, the school as a bureaucratic organisation nurtures conditions that exacerbate the growth of alienation" (p. 76). Calabrese believes that schools and the educators who work within them fail repeatedly to recognise that adolescent alienation is a serious problem in many high schools today. "Alienation is responsible for many youth problems such as suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, burnout and poor achievement" (p. 76). Seldin (1989) also holds high schools responsible for much student alienation. "Alienation ... is cited as the primary cause of adolescent discontent. The high school is held responsible." He supports this indictment with a reminder that alienated young people spend many of their waking hours within school settings. "Where do alienated youth spend six hours a day, five days a week? The answer is school" (p. 7).

Purkey and Novak (1984) write of teachers' "disinviting" behaviours: "... many students feel disinvited by educators who, either intentionally or unintentionally, behave in ways that result in student embarrassment, frustration, and failure" (p. 13). These authors believe that such "disinviting" teacher behaviours create feelings of worthlessness

in students, which in turn promote irresponsible responses from those students. Purkey and Novak further suggest that the verbal or non-verbal messages students receive from their teachers shape the ways those students view or evaluate themselves. “It seems clear that student success or failure is related to the ways in which students perceive themselves and their environments - and that these perceptions are influenced by the prevailing nature of the messages they receive in school” (p. 15).

#### d) Is Lack of Self-Esteem Significant in the Student Dropout Profile?

Many studies support the notion that sensed self-worthlessness in young people inevitably creates alienation and rejection of social institutions. Beane (1991) believes lack of self-esteem in students is the school's ultimate responsibility. “The issue is not *whether* the schools should try to enhance the self-esteem of young people, but *how*” (p. 26). He also perceives lack of self-esteem as both an individual and social problem. “I suggest we stop seeing self-esteem only in individualistic terms and move instead towards an integrated view of self and social relations” (p. 24). Beane believes self-esteem in young people must be linked to their wider view of themselves as valued and effective contributors within social groupings. “It is not enough that young people like themselves. They must also have a sense that what they say, and think,

and do counts for something” (p. 24). Beane suggests that self-esteem in an adolescent must be linked to the individual’s perception of himself as a powerful social being whose actions are not only meaningful but potentially change-inducing. “Personal efficacy must be connected to collective efficacy so that individuals see themselves as part of groups that can and do have meaning and power” (p. 29). Beane also sees lack of self-esteem in young people as a product of our current age of “discontinuity and disbelief, of ambiguity and ambivalence” - an age which prompts, he believes, alienation in adolescents - “The litany of statistics about self-destructive tendencies such as substance abuse, crime, and suicide must surely be seen as a signal from young people that many do not find much about themselves to like” (p. 25).

Canfield (1990) is another contemporary writer and educator who believes that “more and more students have low levels of self-esteem”, which he attributes to lack of “positive, nurturing attention from adults, either at home or at school” (p. 48). Other writers and researchers have also linked low levels of self-esteem to eventual school dropout. The 1991 B.C. Ministry of Education annual report found a probable link between low self-esteem in students and later dropout status. “A student who fails to develop a sense of self-worth... is more likely to have problems connecting with the purpose of school, and consequently is more likely to drop out” (p. 25). The authors of this study report that a recent B.C.

Ministry of Health study found a correlation between low levels of self-esteem in adolescents and increased engagement in self-destructive or risk-taking behaviours” (p 25)

Fairhurst and Pumfrey (1992) emphasise that isolating students with low self-esteem and learning difficulties into separate, “labelled” classrooms only exacerbates problems, and they suggest, instead, that teachers in regular classrooms must make an effort to build self-esteem in troubled young people “Among the people most potentially influential in determining the pupil’s self-concept as a learner are teachers” (p 19). These authors go on to suggest that lack of sensed self-worth may very well spring from initial learning difficulties in students and is therefore of “educational and motivational significance”, and that educators would do well to remain attentive to either overtly expressed or more subtly manifested lack of self-esteem in young people. “Research studies communicate the consistent message that differences in academic performance are associated with differences in self-concept level” (p 19).

Burns (1982) and Martin (1986) found links between student self-esteem levels and pupil-teacher relationships. Brogdon (1992) also believes that teacher interactions with troubled students may either perpetuate or alleviate problems. He suggests that positive teacher relationships with students are far more powerful and effective than “labelling” and remediation. It appears that Brogdon speaks from personal

and tragic experience, as he was himself “labelled” as a child and thus endured the humiliation of enforced remediation

e) What Do Researchers and Educators Suggest as Possible Solutions to the Dropout Problem?

In recent years much educational research has been directed towards identifying school improvement strategies and towards stemming the apparently alarming dropout rate in many North American schools. Recurrent themes appear throughout the literature reviewed here. School size emerges as a significant issue in much of the related literature. Schmitt (1983) writes “As an account of the origins of alienation, this view attributes alienation to the sheer size of our institutions” (p. 179). He suggests that individuals experience a sense of impotence and alienation within large bureaucratic institutions. “The powerlessness of the individual confronted with a massive bureaucracy seems to be a particularly vivid instance of alienation” (p. 180).

A 1984 study prepared in Canada for the Alberta Development Council, entitled Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta, also suggested that smaller schools are less alienating for young people. “Smaller schools facilitate better student-teacher contact and provide students with a better sense of involvement than do larger schools” (p. 9). An Australian study conducted in the mid-eighties echoes this view. “There is a widely held view that links alienation to organisations of large

size which are almost inevitably highly bureaucratised” (Fensham, 1986, p. 297) One suggestion which emerges from this study is that large institutions might do well to employ “house” systems, which might thereby create smaller societies within the larger context. The call for house or family groupings was echoed in the work of other researchers and educators reviewed here. Strange (1992) suggests that “One way to break down the barriers to community posed by large high schools is to break them up into several ‘families’, perhaps consisting of no more than 300 - 400 students and 15 - 20 professional staff” (p. 109). He believes that massive, bureaucratic systems prevent staff and students from ever successfully experiencing “each other’s humanity” (p. 109).

Lockwood (1989) brings attention to similar views held by other researchers, in her interview with Gary Wehlage and Gregory Smith, two researchers employed in recent years at the University of Wisconsin. Wehlage and Smith both call for the establishment of smaller secondary schools. Smith claims that only where school communities are intimate and relatively small may students have “the chance to feel that they’re in an environment where they belong, where adults care about them.” (Lockwood, 1989)

Cuban (1989) also calls for “smallness in schools” which he believes nurtures more enduring relationships among adults and students. This author further suggests that where huge bureaucratic organisations are

already well-entrenched, “schools within a school” may be created, in which commitment and caring between teachers and students are fostered, and the emotional distance perpetuated in more institutionalised settings is eliminated. “These programmes avoid the conventional model of school, where the teacher’s primary concern is academic achievement, where students remain anonymous or emotionally distant from the teacher, and where rewards and penalties dominate the relationship.” (Cuban, 1989, p. 31)

However, research reviewed here suggests that teacher attitude and treatment of students more dramatically reduce student alienation than do attempts to reduce school size. More than twenty years ago Rob Grunsell, a British educator, established a successful school for inner-city dropouts in London, England. His work was founded on the belief that only caring, mutually respectful teacher-student interactions and joint visionary goals could reduce or eliminate student alienation (Grunsell, 1978). More recent studies report similar findings. The Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta (1984) study states “Better student-teacher relationships should be encouraged so that students feel positively about the school environment” (p. 8). This study also suggests that teachers should be encouraged to participate in courses and related workshops which promote improved communication skills, and that increased student-teacher interaction should be encouraged at the senior level. “There should be a shift toward more

student emphasis in teaching at the senior-high level. A teaching system should be developed that permits more teacher-student contact than is the case at present” (p. 9). Hamby (1989) advocates caring, nurturing environments and supportive teacher-student relationships as solutions to adolescent alienation, and he envisages more effective schools where teachers interact with students “as worthy individuals by treating them with respect and acceptance... [in] a school environment characterised by care and concern” (p. 23).

Brogdon (1992) believes that negative teacher attitudes and humiliating or demeaning treatment of students exacerbate alienation and student drop-out rates. He believes that all young people have the inalienable right to school experiences which promote their worth and dignity, and that all students “must be made to feel safe, loved, or at least cared for” (p. 559). Brogdon also believes that “labelling” increases alienation in already troubled students, and that positive, caring attitudes in teachers, rather than applied remediation, would more likely reduce student isolation and failure. He writes “All must have an equal chance to learn... without fear of physical or emotional abuse” (p. 559), and that “teachers must make all students feel accepted and cared for...” (p. 564).

A call for teacher caring was echoed in Brimfield’s (1988) paper, with the further suggestion that the promotion of caring, accepting attitudes in teachers is essential to any scheme of educational reform.

Caring has an implicit dimension... It demands that we drop our

objective, analytical stance toward an educational experience. A caring environment celebrates each person's unique characteristics by accommodating differences while stimulating and challenging each person. The environment is designed with the goal of responding to each person in a flexible, non-punitive way (p. 259 - 262).

Brimfield believes that "receptivity and relatedness" signify caring in teacher responses to students and reduce alienated feelings in young people (p. 262). This view was reflected in the now-renowned British study entitled *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Rutter et al., 1979), which examines findings collected from an exhaustive study of 12 inner city schools in London, England. These authors suggest that teacher concern and personalised attention directed towards students reduces potential alienation and isolation in students. "Staff concern for pupil needs seemed equally important. Thus children's behaviour was better in schools where teachers were readily available to be consulted by the children about problems, and where many children were in fact seen by teachers" (p. 195). These authors believe that people are more successful and behave more positively when they "feel that those in charge understand and respond to their personal needs (p. 196), and they add that teachers would more likely ensure success for their students if they emphasised positive aspects of student abilities and characteristics, rather than "their failings and shortcomings" (p. 196).

Marzano (1992) emphasises that teachers must make students feel accepted before learning can occur. "Intuitively, we know that learning is

inhibited if students do not feel accepted by the teacher. Researchers confirm the importance of a sense of acceptance” (p. 20). Marzano emphasises that seemingly “trivial” actions on the part of the teacher may promote a sense of acceptance in students, but he suggests that teachers employ certain specific activities and gestures which he claims are guaranteed to promote feelings of belonging and commitment in pupils. He mentions using student first names, maintaining eye contact, staying physically close to students, and touching students in appropriate ways, adding “... these actions may seem insignificant, but they send powerful messages to students” (p. 21).

Calabrese (1989) is another researcher who believes that the bureaucratic nature of secondary schools fosters less caring attitudes among those who work there, and he suggests that educators should attempt to develop “an atmosphere in which concern and caring are communicated between administrators and teachers, teachers and students...” (p. 75). This view is supported by Purkey and Novak (1984), who advocate fostering “inviting” school environments which in turn nurture student potential. Purkey and Novak caution that where young people “are treated with indifference, they are likely to become indifferent to themselves and to school” (p. 10).

Van Manen (1991) calls for caring, accepting attitudes and behaviours in teachers, and he suggests that teaching is an enormously

responsible task, which entails a gentle and humanitarian “leading forth” of the young into a world of assumed adult responsibilities. He writes of pedagogical “tact”, and adds that true pedagogy must always be “conditioned by love and care for the child” (p. 65). Van Manen believes that teaching should be viewed as an “in loco parentis” activity, inherently imbued with a sense of hope and responsibility for the young, although he wisely cautions that such attitudes are difficult to maintain within the constraints of huge bureaucratic high schools. “However, this close and personal relation is much less easily achieved by high-school teachers who may be dealing with an average of 150 students a day” (p. 76). Although Van Manen indeed recognises the problems inherent to large institutionalised settings where one-to-one teacher-student interactions are somewhat rare, he nevertheless advocates that teachers in all schools and in all settings ‘always ask first: What is this experience like for this child?’ (p. 152).

However, it appears that no one solution successfully addresses the problem of adolescent alienation. Mann (1986) writes that “These young people need a range of things, just as any systems at-risk population will need services that fit their hurts. If the problem is complex, so will be the solutions” (p. 7). Mann sees the problem as essentially a “nested” one, with many smaller, related problems buried within the larger context. Ekstrom et al. (1986) also believe the problem of adolescent alienation is a complex

one which demands an equally complex response from educators. “No single programme or policy can meet the needs of the diverse dropout population” (p. 67). These authors suggest that school districts implement a variety of programmes, including some designed specifically to meet the needs of pregnant teens, low achievers, and students of low socioeconomic standing.

Seldin (1989) also sees the problem of alienation in North American adolescent youth as complex. “The root causes of alienation and its extraordinary impact on the American high school are numerous and complex. Poverty, ethnic discrimination, inadequate nutrition, physical and psychological child abuse, unemployment, and the availability of drugs and alcohol [are some of them]” (p. 78). Seldin suggests possible solutions, including relaxed “rap” sessions between teachers and students which may encourage adolescents to discuss feelings of alienation, or the establishment of community projects which may involve students in activities of social value.

Mann (1986) proposes a combination of solutions which he calls “the four C’s” - cash, care, computers, and coalitions (p. 14). Cash means that “There needs to be experience with both schooling and paid employment”, caring means “high touch” and computers mean “high tech”, whereas coalitions imply increased interactions between local business interests and schools. Similar suggestions were reflected in the

work of other educators. Grace and Larry Guthrie (1991) believe that the solution to adolescent alienation may be found in closer ties between schools and local communities, in which we “conceptualise the role of the school and relationships among the school, the community and the larger society” (p. 18). These authors postulate that where schools work closely with all other local social agencies, adolescent alienation will decline and schools will become more effective institutions.

Two recent educational projects currently underway in the United States attempt to address adolescent alienation and related drop-out rates (Kruglik, 1991). One is named Project Succeed and is housed within Keystone Oaks High School in Pittsburgh, and the other operates under the auspices of York County High School, although it is housed in a local city shopping mall. Of the two, Project Succeed is the more traditional; students are eventually awarded with an “alternative” diploma, and although they are never expected to complete regular course work, they must, before graduation, undergo a day-long examination which tests their skill and knowledge in basic math, language, science and social studies. Most students who are enrolled in the programme are aged between 19 and 21 years, and almost all maintain outside jobs in the work-force. The second programme, entitled York County High School, is housed in a former Bonanza Restaurant within a shopping mall, and as it provides no enforced hours of instruction for students, this programme appears to be

eminently suited to non-conformist, alienated adolescents who are unable to operate within the constraints of otherwise disciplined and content-driven school systems. Instruction is computer-generated or workbook-driven, although two teachers are attached to the programme and wander about the former restaurant offering individual assistance to any student who requests it. Students in this latter programme are aged between 16 and 21 years, and all appear to have experienced debilitating feelings of alienation in regular high schools. The two projects described here are as yet in their infancy, and academic success and sustained attendance have not as yet undergone evaluation, but initial evidence seems to indicate that the programmes are enjoying some success.

*Everyone wants a dream. Without a dream, we become apathetic. Without a dream, we become fatalistic. Without a dream and the hope of attaining it, society becomes our enemy. We educators must realise that some young people act in antisocial ways because they have lost their dreams. And we must realise that we as a society are partly responsible for that loss (Eitzen, 1992, p. 590)*

### **3) Alienation: Gender-Discriminatory Practices Which Alienate**

#### **Young Women**

##### **a) Societal Attitudes Which Promote Gender-Biased Alienation in Young**

##### **Women**

*There is no point of contact between the dominant male who looks for submission from women and the glamorous femme fatale who must remain elusive in order to prove that her charms are forever irresistible*

*(Richard Schmitt, Alienation and Class, 1983)*

Stromquist (1990) reports that literary statistics over the last few decades paint a remarkably bleak picture for women across the world. “The comparison of literary statistics from 1960 to 1985 reveal that, of the 154 million new illiterates during that period, 133 million were women” (p 95). Stromquist recognises the tragedy of illiteracy for both sexes in underdeveloped nations today, but she emphasises that the problem is compounded for females who must live and work within the constraints of patriarchal societies which not only undervalue education for females, but which more often actively seek to eliminate it. Gender-discriminatory controls promote social inequity of unimaginable magnitude, and only one of the tolls they take is that of wide-spread illiteracy for the one half of the human race which was unfortunate enough to have been born female.

Stromquist sees illiteracy as a predicament of the poor and the

socially unequal among us “Illiteracy does not occur at random but is typically the plight of poor and powerless people, and it is a fundamental manifestation of the problems of social inequity” (p 97) She reminds us that education for women has been found to yield “high returns” in all ethnic and societal groupings across the world where it has been promoted “Numerous studies have reported that more education for women results in fewer children per family, less infant mortality, marriage at a later age, healthier children, and better reared and educated children” (p 97) Given these apparently supportably high returns to educating women, Stromquist accounts for the astounding exclusion of women in some countries from even a basic education, as perpetrations of patriarchal ideologies, which seek not only to keep women subservient in the service of human reproduction, but which seek, too, to ensure their enslavement in ‘technologies and production of goods’ (p 97).

Gender discriminatory biases and the subjugation of women in some underdeveloped countries horrify Western observers, but upon closer inspection, unsettling similarities may be drawn between the patriarchal practices of more underdeveloped countries and those of our own. Stromquist goes on to suggest that even where educational opportunities exist for Western women, the inducement and freedom to do so may be absent “Motivation [implies] a great deal of autonomy for the individual, yet low-income women - engaged in welfare and survival activities - can

scarcely be said to have any autonomy” (p. 103) And many young women today assume that only dismal failures await them. McConaghy (1991) reports that “Many [teenage girls] see a bleak future that includes poverty and relationships that end in divorce, abuse or sexually transmitted diseases” (p. 642). Kostash (1989) suggests that class structures prevent many young women from pursuing a post-secondary education

What is true for women as a whole, however, is mitigated by class. Although a majority of girls aspire to post-secondary education those from wealthier, better-educated, and professional families are likelier not only to make this choice but to carry it through, whereas a working class girl is often obliged to take a job to finance her higher education or to contribute to the family itself” (p. 408).

However, young females deal with more than the oppression of class structure. They deal often, too, with gender discriminatory practices promoted by many secondary-school institutions

#### b) Gender Discriminatory Practices in High Schools Today

*“As one young woman pleaded ‘Please understand that teenaged women are people. We don’t go through stages. The issues in our lives are important to us, the fears real. Don’t look down on us. Try to understand us.’ ”*  
(From A Capella, Canadian Teachers Federation Report, 1990)

Shields (1992) reports that findings from a new report entitled How Schools Shortchange Girls commissioned for the American Association of University Women chronicle alarming and widespread gender discriminatory practices in North American schools today. The report

suggests that schools fail to provide girls with the “same quality - or even quantity, of education as their brothers” (Shields, p. 3). The report further indicts schools for consistently employing gender-discriminatory texts with students of all ages: “... the contributions and experiences of girls and women are still marginalized or ignored in many of the textbooks used in our nation’s schools” (p. 3). Further note is made in this report of secondary-school history texts which examine the exploits and strategies of military leaders or generals during historic periods of warfare, whereas no mention is made of the role of women in maintaining the structures of society during these times of unrest. Steinem (1992) also makes note of history texts currently employed in schools today in which all power and effectiveness is assigned only to men.

Shields (1992) reports findings which indicate that even where girls are not reading gender-discriminatory texts, they are receiving “considerably less attention from classroom teachers than do boys” (p. 3). He also reports that secondary school teachers more frequently call upon male students to assist with science experiments, and that female students more often, and increasingly with age, doubt their own ability in mathematics (Shields, 1992). Shields adds that the predictability of these findings is especially disturbing.

And to anyone who’s worked in a school system - a teacher who’s asked for a couple of boys instead of girls to help move desks, for example, or characterised a quiescent girl as ‘nice’ - many of the report’s accusations sound so familiar as to hardly be news (p. 4).

Tannen (1992) discusses findings which report that boys almost always speak out more in class discussions than do their female counterparts, and she proposes that “...speaking in a classroom is more congenial to boys’ language experience than to girls, since it entails putting oneself forward in front of a large group of people...” (p. 5). Tannen adds that women from single-sex schools speak out more often and are more prepared to grasp interjectory moments in class discussion than do women who attended coed schools. Tannen advocates that teachers more often employ small-group discussion structures, in the hope that female students may more readily participate. Steinem (1992) also makes note of gender differences in students’ verbal interjections during public classroom discussion: “Then there is the crucial question of speaking up in the classroom. We know that boys are called on more often and talk more in their average response [than girls]” (p. 120). Myra and David Sadker (1980) report the findings of a U.S. Health and Welfare Women’s Equity Programme study which revealed that where teachers were shown films in which male students spoke out more often than female students, beliefs still prevailed that the female students had spoken more than their male peers. Findings like these appear to indicate a strong gender bias in teachers which favours male students’ discussion responses over female responses. Steinem (1992) writes “We are so culturally trained to think that females talk too much, that we should be ‘good

listeners', that we seem to measure ourselves against those expectations, not reality" (p 120). Other writers support this view. Belenky et al (1986), suggest that female students learn early to accept subordinate roles when engaging in classroom discussions, and from elementary through to post-secondary education they cling to a belief that such subordination is legitimate. "As Rachel, a college freshman, said, 'I enjoy listening to discussions. I find I am doing okay just through listening'" (p 37). Belenky et al propose that much of the learning acquired by females throughout their formative years is "received knowledge", which is knowledge dispensed by authoritative male figures and directed towards effectively silencing passive women.

One of the reasons we call this position 'received knowledge' is that these women focus on listening, ... Given the women's tendency towards conformist thinking and their subordinate status, it is not surprising that women cultivate their capacities for listening while encouraging men to speak" (p 45).

Women, it appears, are more than willing to accept the constraints of sex-discriminatory practices perpetrated in classrooms at every educational level. "The extreme sex-role stereotypes that the silent women accept, reflect the powerlessness they have experienced" (Belenky et al , p 29). These authors suggest that female students perceive male authority figures as omnipotent and overpowering. "While they feel passive, reactive, and dependent, they see authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering" (p 27). It appears, indeed, that in classrooms today

women continue to be encouraged to listen to the men who in turn continue to talk

Studies on gender differences in the use of language suggest that the world is commonly divided into two domains: speaking and listening. Studies repeatedly, but not consistently, find that it is the men who do the talking, and the women who do the listening” (Belenky et al , p. 45).

And if girls feel excluded from male-dominated classroom discussion, they feel equally excluded from a more subtly male-dominated school social climate. Belenky et al report that in some cases, feelings of alienation are so overwhelming for some young women that they choose to drop out of formal secondary schooling at the earliest opportunity.

Several women said that they and their friends left school early as soon as they legally could, married, and got pregnant (not necessarily in that order) ‘so that we wouldn’t have to put up with being put down every day’ (p. 228).

McConaghy (1991) reports that “... on a personal level [girls] feel pressures and limitations that boys are unlikely to experience, and they express a good deal of resentment toward their male peers and the system which seems to favour them” (p. 642). McConaghy quotes findings from a 1990 Canadian Teachers’ Federation project which explored attitudes and concerns of teenage girls in high schools today. 139 teachers were employed to record discussion group responses gleaned from a diverse group of adolescent female students, and the findings which came from this study were later presented to C.T.F.’s eleventh National Conference on

Women and Education in Vancouver on December 1, 1991. The Federation aptly named the project A Capella, as a “capella”, or an aria sung without musical accompaniment, appeared to reflect the lives of the young girls interviewed, whose songs in and out of school were without support or accompaniment. “The young women overwhelmingly told researchers that their lives lacked the structure, familiarity, and sense of direction that former generations had experienced. It was as if they were carrying a tune without background music” (McConaghy, 1991, p. 642).

Heather Jane Robertson, who designed and supervised this project, reports that:

Girls use drugs, drop out, or don't practice safe sex for reasons we just are not addressing. We have to deal with the underlying factors: feelings of powerlessness, depression, fear of violence, cynicism and neglect. Only then will we have an impact in the lives of young women.  
(A Capella, Women and Education C T F Project, 1990, p. 1)

In other related literature reviewed here it appears that sexual abuse is common in the lives of an astounding number of young women, and that sexual trauma adversely affects future relationships with male teachers or authority figures. “... it became clear to us, after we started interviewing, that women spontaneously mentioned childhood and adolescent sexual trauma as an important factor affecting their learning and relationships to male authority” (Belenky et al., p. 58). Female students not only express concern regarding their own perceived alienated behaviours, but they

repeatedly express apprehension and even distress regarding the abusive and equally alienating behaviours directed towards them by male peers. McConaghy reports that females interviewed in the C T F 's Women and Education A Capella project expressed anxiety and in some cases fear. "They ... expressed concern over heavy drug use in school, date rape, sexual abuse, and the fear of pregnancy" (p. 642)

Steinem (1992) writes of an educational system which not only favours patriarchal ideologies but which somehow denies or denigrates the lived experiences of women, rendering their school-acquired knowledge incongruent with their emotions, and rendering their knowledge of themselves worthless.

It seemed that for women of all races and classes, education had separated what we studied from how we lived. It had broken the link between mind and emotion, between what we learned intellectually and what we experienced as women (p. 114)

Belenky et al. write of "multiplicitic thinking", or diverse, imaginative and reasoned thinking in intelligent women which is often submerged or hidden by those women in order to avoid reprisals. "The tragedy is that ... hidden multiplicity can be silently alienated from the educational process ..." (p. 67). These authors go on to report that some women interviewed believed it more profitable to keep quiet, rather than to speak up, in classrooms and in their professional lives, and they continued to do so even though they believed they had intelligent voices worthy of expression, and even though the repression of those voices prompted

considerable alienation and distress in them. One young woman in this study reported that

I intimidate many men. It's hard. It means loneliness lots of times. It's necessary to learn to compromise to a certain extent - how much you have to shut up and how much you have to talk. And how to be effective by talking at the right moment" (Belenky et al , p. 148)

Other feminist writers support the view that both past and present educational practices effectively silence and denigrate female students. In a bitter indictment of current secondary and post-secondary educational practices, Steinem (1992) writes of art education which portrays women as objects of art but rarely as artists, theologies which promote only male deities, and ethical standards which assume masculine or patriarchal values. Steinem writes, too, of the "lethal underminings" of an education system which includes "being taught to revere 'the classics' of Western civilisation, most of which patronise, distort, denigrate or express hatred for the female half of the race" (p. 115). She adds that not only do materials studied patronise female students, but that teacher responses to those students denigrate them further. "Boys tend to be praised for achievement, while girls are praised for interacting well with others" (p. 120). Steinem suggests that schools should not only dispense with gender-discriminatory practices, but that schools, as mirrors of the society upon which they are founded, should promote ideologies and ethical belief systems which establish healthy societal practices.

If we could be taught in school about the politicisation of  
Songs and Silences

beauty, it would help to create a healthier diversity in the United States, where a majority of black children still choose white dolls (sometimes even saying that black dolls are 'dirty') and seven year old girls of normal weight think they are 'too fat' (Steinem, 1992, p 221)

Steinem's views are echoed by other researchers who suggest that not only are school gender-discriminatory practices irresponsible, but that in many cases the long-term damaging effects on some young women appear irreversible. Researchers often express concern regarding findings which reveal low levels of self-esteem in adolescent females studied. A recent 1991 American University Women's study entitled Short-changing Girls, Short-changing America, found that only 29% of girls in high schools were "happy with the way I am". Steinem (1992) believes that the gender-biased practices, so widespread in high schools today, incur lack of self esteem and even self-hatred in many female students.

Thus, even though girls get good grades, learn how to read sooner, and have an edge over boys in verbal skills, the question we really need to ask is *What are these girls learning?* ... a large part of the lesson is to undervalue oneself (Steinem, p 121).

Belenky et al (1986) report poor self-concept to be of such magnitude in some young women that it renders them not only incapable of accepting praise, but suspicious, too, of male teachers' motives when praise or encouragement is offered.

Some women are so consumed with self-doubt that they found it difficult to believe a teacher's praise, especially when the teacher was a man. One young woman told us that she never felt sure a male professor would take her seriously. The women

Songs and Silences

worried that professors who praised their minds really desired their bodies (p. 197).

Steinem (1992) further suggests that the apparent failure of female students to keep up with male peers in mathematics and the sciences during high-school and post-secondary education perhaps indicates more a lack of their own *perceived* ability in mathematics and the sciences, rather than real and measurable differences in male and female abilities in these subject areas. “Thus, in high school, where the gender gap in math and science begins to open up and widen, the problem may be more girls’ view of themselves than the subjects” (p. 121). These findings are supported in the study conducted by Belenky et al (1986) in which women interviewed revealed that often a specific and negative interaction with a male authority figure initiated early rejection of pursuits of the sciences.

The point at which individual women begin to express negative attitudes toward abstraction, theory, and science differs from person to person, although in many cases it is anchored in a concrete interaction with a specific teacher or doctor or male acquaintance from the past (p. 72).

One young woman featured in this study told interviewers that although she had for some time been secretly working out a scientific thesis, “she dared not share [her work] with male faculty for fear of their ridicule and skepticism” (p. 67).

Belenky et al. propose that every woman, “regardless of age, social class, ethnicity and academic achievement,” should know, like her

male peers more readily appear to, that “she is capable of intelligent thought” (p. 193). However, often, and indeed tragically, this is not at all the case, and many young women have not yet learned the lesson that their voices are powerful and informative and insightful, and are indeed worthy of the hearing. “Perhaps men learn this lesson before going to college, or perhaps they can wait until they have proved themselves to hear it, we do not know. We do know that many of the women we interviewed had not yet learned it” (p. 193). Belenky et al. suggest that “connected” teaching, or instruction which encourages diverse, imaginative and independent thinking, assists women to develop “their own authentic voices” (p. 229).

These authors define “connected” instruction as follows:

Educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasise connectedness over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate, if they accord respect for and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience... These are the lessons we have learned in listening to the women’s voices (p. 229)

In conclusion, the writer of this thesis hopes that every woman may find the voice which is uniquely hers. She herself seeks such a voice, and she perhaps seeks, too, to give expression to the silenced voices of the women upon whom some of her narratives are based.

*“Let her imagine herself bold and clever and sovereign. Let her imagine herself a woman” (McClelland, 1989, p. 411)*

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Honours and Awards

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Publications

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Title of Thesis NARRATIVE INQUIRY: The Songs and Silences of Adolescent Alienation

Author



DENISE HUGHES

30 June, 1993