

A Story for My Teacher:
A Novel and Its
Educational and Philosophical Critique

by

Susan Martha Barber

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B.A., State University of New York, 1980

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Approval

Name: Susan Martha Barber
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy
Title of Thesis: *A Story for My Teacher:*
A Novel and Its Educational and Philosophical Critique

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. Robin Brayne, Director of Graduate Programs

Dr. Stuart Richmond
Co-Senior Supervisor
Professor

Dr. Ann Chinnery
Co-Senior Supervisor
Assistant Professor

Dr. Carl Leggo
Committee Member
Professor, Faculty of Education
University of British Columbia

Dr. Yaroslav Senyshyn
Internal Examiner
Professor, Faculty of Education

Dr. Boyd White
External Examiner
Associate Professor, Faculty of Education
McGill University

Date Defended/Approved: 29 August 2011

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Abstract

My interest in art and education, how they occur together, and specifically, how an object of art educates, led me to pursue how my particular art form, fiction, could “show” what this means. Studying theory has sparked my desire to enter into the process of artistic creation with a heightened awareness of the ideas and issues in arts education. Writing fiction is a personal passion and I am drawn by the ancient educational activity of storytelling, how it shapes emotional responses and uses sensuous language for a more holistic learning experience. I strongly believe that art enables us to learn in ways not available through other means.

This dissertation is comprised of three sections – a Prologue; a novel, *A Story for my Teacher*; and an Epilogue – that endeavour to bring together theory, practice, the world of the novel and the artistic process in art making to defend the value of learning through literature. The Prologue discusses my objectives, limitations, problems and purposes in writing the dissertation in this manner and gives an overview of why in education reading and writing novels is a worthwhile mode of learning. The novel explores parallel lives of an at-risk youth who develops a moral sense through the influence of a teacher, and the new teacher herself who struggles to adapt to the students, teachers and parents’ expectations in a rural school. The philosophical argument in the Epilogue attempts to defend why learning through literature is one of the best ways to fulfill what ought to be the most important educational goal, learning what it is to be human. The ideas of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Murdoch and Nussbaum are examined, especially in terms of how the arts can stimulate thought, emotion, moral deliberation, judgment and aesthetic appreciation. My intention in this dissertation is to show that art is not a diversion or side issue; it is one of the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen and felt.

Keywords: Arts education, literature, moral education, philosophy of education, aesthetics, creative writing, teacher education

*To my creative and deeply thoughtful children,
Sylvia and Daniel*

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Part 1.
Prologue

Introduction

As a student in the Arts Education doctoral program, I have had a strong interest in learning more about art and education, how they occur together, in the sense of how an object of art 'educates'. In particular, I wanted to know more about how a work of art advances knowledge in the individual, and how that can be extended through classroom discussion, and even art making itself, in response to the engagement with the object. It seemed only natural that if many art education theorists were arguing for the importance of alternate ways of learning and the value of learning through the arts, that at some point the talk should end and the creating of art should "show" what this means. In other words, not only should arts educators be knowledgeable about issues surrounding the teaching of art, but they should be producing art themselves. It is my belief that in learning about arts education, theory stimulates the need to produce art, not only to balance verbal expression with creative expression, but to experience the theory in the practice. Studying theory, in my view, has stimulated my desire to enter into the process of artistic creation, now with a heightened awareness of what the artist is thinking and feeling. A greater knowledge of theory also enables one to have a deeper respect for the mystery of creating, which encourages one to want to trust more deeply in letting go of precise planning and controlling and allowing the affective to play more of an equal role with the cognitive. Of course, undergoing this process and increasing knowledge do not guarantee the production of good art, but the awareness of process and continued engagement with making art can increase skills and knowledge which in turn can lead to improvement in the artist's abilities.

With this interplay between theory and practice in mind, I embarked on writing a novel to accompany my doctoral thesis. The subject of this novel would be situated in my research interests and experiences in the classroom; in particular, I wanted to bring together certain ideas in philosophy of education, moral education and teacher education, and examine them in the "world of the novel" which would situate the ideas closer to real life. This would also permit emotions to play a part as well as allowing for sensuous language to enhance the experience. It was my hope that this more holistic approach would provide alternate ways of learning.

In the beginning of this project and right through to the end, I felt I was on a threefold path: on one level, I needed to free myself from concrete thinking and a too heavily cognitive approach in order to be able to “feel” my way through as I wrote the story. At other times, I needed to shift to another mode where I had to step out of the fiction completely in order to access the analytical thinking skills required for recording and applying research. Lastly, I found myself in yet another state of mind when the time came to take stock of what it all meant for education; specifically, judging if what I was writing was relevant to the field, if it was clear, if how I saw it would be the way others would interpret it. In other words, this last approach involved deciding if my personal views could be connected to universal ideas. These three paths frequently intersected but remained separate. It was not until the end of the entire process that I realized how these levels of rational knowledge, practical concerns and judgements corresponded to Kant’s system. This was one of the more pronounced ways that writing a novel allowed me to access another means of learning and comprehend new knowledge that would otherwise not have been available.

In this thesis, I include a Prologue where I discuss some of the objectives I had in writing a novel, what I hoped to learn and what my limitations were in such an undertaking. This is followed by the novel itself, *A Story for My Teacher*. Then, in the Epilogue, I provide a philosophical argument which endeavours to answer why reading and writing literature excels in facilitating one of the most important goals of education: learning what it is to be human.

In the following sections of this Prologue, I would like to give an overview of some of the purposes and limitations of writing the thesis in this manner.

Why write a novel?

As mentioned earlier, I felt that I needed to balance the study of educational theory with art making itself. At the university level I am not suggesting that all students of education ought to write novels in order to deepen their understanding of schools, teachers or students, nor to learn how one develops moral awareness, or even how the arts educate. Fiction is a personal passion, and I am drawn by the ancient educational

activity of storytelling, how it shapes emotional responses and uses sensuous language for a more holistic learning experience. Both reading and writing fiction provide many of the same benefits to students and both have great potential for personal development.

Engaging with literature is one of the main activities in the high school English classroom (English Language Arts 8-12, 2007). This is not just the memorization of titles and authors, plots or the social impact of the work; teachers endeavour, among other things, to awaken in their students the ability to take notice and respond to the emotions and ideas that the work arouses, to develop a more complex appreciation for what can be found there and make connections to their own lives.

Reading and writing fiction both require using the imagination, being more sensitive to language, including nuances, multiple meanings, inference and metaphor. A reader and writer must be open to emotional responses and unusual or unfamiliar ideas that occur in different contexts. Putting oneself in another's shoes and identifying with human situations from different perspectives allows both readers and writers to discover themselves in different kinds of characters, thereby transcending their limitations. Readers and writers also need to set aside judgments and perceive more as they comprehend the role of fate and the necessity of moral compromise.

Reading and writing novels is an education in feeling as well as in thinking. Art connects us to the real world in a more focused way, made special by language and form, which requires for its understanding a greater access to our human capacities.

Instruction in creative writing is not one of the prescribed learning outcomes for students in British Columbia, which I feel is a shortcoming. As said, many of the benefits of writing can also be obtained through careful reading, but writing is much more involved. A writer must invest more of the self in writing, and risks much self-exposure. Comparatively speaking, a reader is passively taking in words on the page and thinking, feeling and imagining what the author has put there. Writing requires an author to create the ideas, feelings and images and present them through aesthetic choices, writing techniques and special language which facilitates an experience that will re-create in the reader a response that the reader believes he or she has produced from within. As I argued in my Master's thesis, *The immediacy of writing: Why literature matters more to*

students who are creative writers (Barber, 2004), writing fiction takes these same benefits of careful reading to a much more pronounced level. That said, much of what writing fiction does can be accomplished by the less time-intensive act of writing narrative or creative non-fiction, which I feel is also of great benefit to students.

Writing fiction, however, distinctly involves creativity. Learning to trust the mystery of the writing process is a freeing act, and the more one writes, the more one recognizes what creative ideas look like. Writing also involves bringing more of the self to the undertaking; the writer takes great risks but there is the opportunity for great learning. Authors are sometimes surprised by the prejudices, stereotypes and ignorance they find in their writing and this can be strong motivation for self-development through examination of personal values and the origins of certain attitudes. If a writer is able to look at fears and other sources of conflict, they can be traced down to deeper levels of consciousness. Also, in deciding how to portray characters, writers must be wary of letting judgements set in. One approach is to hold back through “showing” a character and not “telling” directly who they are. Another way is to allow knowledge of personal histories of characters and their circumstances to accumulate through the novel. Not being quick to judge and being open to perceiving more about a character’s situation allows for a more nuanced and complex understanding of that character. This is especially important in our pluralistic society where students will encounter a wide variety of difference between themselves and others, be it multicultural, religious, gender and sexual orientation, economic standing and lack of opportunity, disabilities, and so on. For writers, the complex understanding and presentation of characters, and by extension, real people, is a moral act.

In writing a novel as part of this thesis and putting my particular characters into play, I had to imagine them in their situations, with their unique thoughts and feelings, even as they were filtered through my own. This split consciousness enabled me to gain insights to how different kinds of characters react to other people and events, and how they might react differently than I would.

Not least, I now recognize that writing a novel is very much an act of self-fulfillment. Reiterating my earlier comment – that there is a need for arts educators to stop theorizing and create art – my desire to write a novel is born out of a hunger to feel

emotion, to find deeper meaning and even touch on the mystery in life that surrounds us, including the ineffable.

Perhaps most important is what Gao Xingjian, Nobel laureate for his novel, *Soul Mountain* (trans. 2001), has to say,

Literature allows a person to preserve a human consciousness... It can be said that talking to oneself is the starting point of literature and that using language to communicate is secondary... From my experience as a writer, I can say that literature is inherently man's affirmation of his own self-worth, and that is validated during the process of writing (2006, pp. 34-35).

Writing for me is more and more a worthwhile way to escape the trivial, nonsensical and instrumental threats to living a meaningful life. Through writing fiction, I can return to the beating heart of humanity and remember what is real. Therefore, in my view, one way to pursue a major educational goal – learning what it is to be human – may best be achieved through engaging with literature, especially through writing a novel. The ideas in this section will be discussed in much greater depth in the Epilogue.

What I hoped to accomplish

Previous to the Arts Education doctoral program, I had written a novel and dozens of short stories. In the last few years I have found myself choosing to write fiction more and more around educational themes. What I had not done was deliberately set myself a task to explore specific ideas through writing fiction but it became something I felt I must do to harmonize my beliefs about art and education, theory and practice. Although very different in style, I also examined previous examples of “novels as dissertations” of other doctoral students, either in dissertation form, a published form as novel, creative non-fiction or chapbook (Crook, 2001; Dunlop, 2000; Sameshima, 2007; from University of British Columbia; and Gosse, 2005 from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto).

What I hoped to accomplish, therefore, was to bring together four main areas: educational theory, practice, the world of the novel itself and a greater awareness of the

writing process. For example, it no longer was enough to read and discuss ideas in *The Republic* (trans. 1987); I now found myself asking, what does Plato look like in the classroom? How could I show this in a novel? The reverse process also occurred; compelling ideas in moral education were easier to imagine in fictional settings. For instance, characters who were good “out of habit” had shortcomings that were unsatisfactory in terms of moral behaviour, which in turn revealed why it is necessary to understand the underlying moral principles behind actions as well. I began to wonder in the world of the novel what kinds of experiences might contribute to moral development in an individual student, inside and outside of school, especially when there is a significant gap in moral values between home and school. The form of the novel might allow me to trace the character arc of a student who might struggle with these conflicts. The writing process was taking me in a particular direction and I decided to follow it.

In choosing to write part of a doctoral dissertation in the form of a novel I hoped to show that learning through reading and writing fiction is a valuable means of advancing understanding, and perhaps that engaging with literature may make a stronger impression because of the more visceral experience of emotional involvement. Stories may be the oldest form of education (Havelock, 1963; Hughes, 1989; Collins, 1996; Maguire, 1988). Ancient people discovered it was more effective to communicate important information if it was embedded in life and infused with emotion, as well as shaped in a certain order to maximize the story’s effect (rise and fall of action), in a way that it seemed things were getting worse (plot), with increasing tension (conflict) intensifying to a high pitch (climax) until some resolution could take place (denouement). That the stories were exaggerated or occurred in a different manner than they actually happened is perhaps where Plato took exception. In preliterate societies, the cultural canon of a people was passed orally from generation to generation, preserving the history and knowledge of the group and unifying its members. It was not always the truth – the point to which Plato (*Republic*, 377-398; 595-605) objected – and worse, stories relied on emotional identification with flawed characters. The “facts” were sacrificed to reveal more general knowledge about “life” and human beings. But Aristotle countered that stories could still show us what might happen, which is something we can learn from (*Poetics*, trans. 1969, Book Nine, p. 74). Nussbaum says, by extension, if we can cultivate a narrative imagination, we have an opportunity to apply

what we learn from literature to real life, and thereby develop moral imagination (1997, pp. 10-11).

I would argue that reading and writing literature is a worthwhile way of learning because it is able to show ideas and situations in a more holistic way, and I hoped to demonstrate this in writing a novel. Not only are readers and writers privy to the most intimate thoughts of a character, but they see the greater relations of cause and effect, the role of chaos in best laid plans, the randomness of fate and the decision-making processes of people under duress. Fiction shows how life is not always logical or linear in its progress. Perhaps more importantly, it shows us the role emotions play. Nussbaum says spontaneous emotion in response to fear or anger can be unreliable as a guide to action, but on the other hand, examining experience in hindsight through emotions can help make more accurate judgments (1990, pp. 40-41). A feeling like anger is closely linked to a set of beliefs, such as a sense of what is fair when we have been wronged. When a belief changes, the emotion is likely to be revised or withdrawn. Because of this cognitive dimension, Nussbaum sees emotions as intelligent parts of our ethical system (1990, pp. 41-42).

Fiction can also clear away the haphazard and trifling aspects of real life and make a space to examine particular ideas. Themes help the reader keep track of significant ideas and mark changes in characters as they reflect on meaning. Themes, such as “coming of age” or “the search for identity”, are the way an individual character’s experience is made universal to the reader and enable the reader to invest their thoughts and emotions in caring about a character. Fiction invites the reader to relax, spend time with the author, and let go of the world for a while. In this state of mind, Steiner (1989) says the reader is caught off guard at times, and the author can penetrate defence mechanisms we have in place in real life for avoiding difficult thoughts about ourselves and life in general.

The main goal I had in mind in writing this novel was to determine whether the aesthetic experience of engaging with a novel is a powerful way of developing understanding. By “aesthetic”, I mean the qualities of a work that affect a person, especially on an emotional level but also conceptual, through the beauty of the work, resulting in the end of joining form and content, achieved through the use of language,

appeals to the senses and even the subconscious. When the aesthetic qualities of a work come together, there is often a sum effect greater than the works' parts and a deeper understanding of what an author has put there is realized in other ways than the cognitive. Often this understanding is difficult to put into words and is referred to as "the ineffable", and yet the reader has the sense that a broader understanding has occurred.

An appreciation of a work's aesthetic qualities is more likely to take place through what Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (1790/2005, pp. 10, 18-19) calls a 'disinterested' state of mind, where the reader has no extraneous purpose in mind while reading. Often this word is mistaken to mean "a lack of interest" and some postmodern thinkers believe it is impossible to remove all personal interest or prejudice from reading or writing a novel. In particular, these thinkers often criticize the attempt to ignore the underlying politics and power dynamics inherent in stories as a source of oppression and an attempt to maintain the status quo in society. This stance offers many valuable points. We must always be critical readers and writers. There are many classical and even contemporary works of literature that are so defective in their depiction of moral values as to prevent us from appreciating their aesthetic qualities. As I will argue in the Epilogue, learning what it is to be human requires developing a greater moral awareness. However, it is not my intention to focus on the deconstruction of literature as the main goal in reading literature; rather, I will discuss literature in its traditional role as providing a thoughtful and emotional experience, mainly through storytelling. My point here is that the reader must be able to let go personal interests in order to gain greater perspective, to see more in the work. For example, one does not attend *Othello* in order to gain ammunition against the opposite sex when a relationship has just broken up. In order to learn deeply and without prejudice, a reader must enter into situations in novels with an open mind, not to the extent of being blind to power dynamics, but with a reasonable amount of distance or disinterest, and be amenable to the experience of engaging with literature and all kinds of people and situations.

Nussbaum calls the novel "the most democratic of forms" because it is about individuals (1997, p. 88). I wanted to create a novel that was accessible to all kinds of readers, written in the vernacular instead of relying on the language of certain disciplines with heavy jargon or highly sophisticated, even convoluted ideas. It is my belief that traditional stories are most effective because they speak to readers' hearts and thereby

open the mind to more complex thinking. Emotional involvement energizes the act of reading (Cunningham et al, 2004). There need be no elitism in the development of moral capacity, Socrates (*Republic*, 1987, 518c) maintained; in fact, “the sort of moral capacity that ordinary people have and use in their daily conduct” will suffice. This supports my view that writing stories with all readers in mind is the best practice, being inclusive of all learners while not ‘dumbing down’ the content. It allows each reader to take something away from the experience of engaging with a novel. There may be many levels to a novel, including the philosophical, the professional, historical-cultural, psychological and of course the actual plot, but each person ought to be able to access ideas through any or all of these means because they all reinforce one another through the artful writing of the novel.

In working out ‘how’ I would write the novel, the above ideas came together to create an epiphany of sorts. I began to see parallels with understanding the allegory of Plato’s cave, and understood that the way I would write the novel was part of my responsibility to return to a more familiar language that would help others begin to understand some complex educational ideas.

I feel that for many reasons this is why a novel is an ideal form, not only because stories may be our earliest and most natural way of communicating information but also because they are effectively told in the vernacular, jargon-free, which is made special through artistic devices, such as sensuous language, heightened emotion, descriptions of character, setting, and the rhythm of plot and themes, all of which are part of the aesthetic experience of reading and writing fiction. The main goal I hoped to accomplish, therefore, would be to demonstrate how much more powerful and holistic this experience is when learning through literature.

Determining my educational subject matter

Having decided to write a novel, I embarked on a process to find my specific subject matter. In the past, the idea usually came first, then the challenge of deciding how best to portray it followed. This time, as stated above, the process was reversed because I felt I was writing as an arts educator. As mentioned, I was writing more often

about educational ideas and believed if I could choose to weave together several of the ideas that were compelling to me, perhaps I could find connections between them and find appropriate characters and situations to explore in a novel.

One issue that has continued to trouble me for many years is that of “at risk” youth. As a high school teacher I was often frustrated by my inability to connect with certain types of teenage boys. I had had some success with other resistant youths, using humour, taking interest in who they were and what they enjoyed doing, giving them extra time and basically showing in an authentic way that I cared about them as people as well as their progress in their studies. But there was one particular type of boy who would not acknowledge me, would not take my efforts seriously. I suspected such boys ignored other female teachers as well, and yet, for the most part, they also ignored most of their peers, except other boys like themselves. Taken together, these boys were often violent, using drugs and alcohol, were anti-social and soon to drop out of school and/or be arrested. Farrington (1998) and Garbarino (2001) agree that common predictors of male youth violence are: poverty, absence of a parent, child abuse, low parental supervision, having a violent parent, and most significantly, associating with delinquent peers. In my experience, they only seemed to respond, positively or negatively, to some male teachers. Ironically, I met a male teacher while subbing in a school who had the opposite problem. He was surprised I could get a resistant group of teenage girls to respond to my efforts at teaching while they ignored him and disrupted or skipped his classes. This increased my curiosity to find out what was happening and what could be done about it.

Furthermore, for a brief time I taught in the Stó:lo Youth Treatment program, where First Nations teenagers of the Stó:lo Nation had the choice of leaving jail and living in a locked down residence if they committed to completing their high school equivalency and were willing to enter a halfway house to enter their job training phase. I had no specific instruction on working with juvenile delinquents and made many mistakes, but learned a great deal about finding the right balance between privacy and friendliness, respect for what someone has been through and encouragement to move on. There was a lot of rage but also a recognition that many people were on their side and wanted to see them succeed. I often felt I was the student and learning a lot about how environment can be so obstructive to the formation of healthy ideas about other

people, education and life in general. I heard about dysfunctional families and the great hardship in certain communities that distorted attitudes about learning in traditional ways through the school curriculum. The great surprise was discovering how intelligent these students were, what a keen sense of justice and overall moral awareness they had and how desperately they wanted to find a safe and dignified way of being in this world. My entire first day with these students was turned over to them wanting to know “who” I was and what my attitude to them was before they would consider learning in my classroom. I distinctly felt their judgement of my moral values determined what kind of relationship they would choose to have with me.

Back in the mainstream high school, I followed up on this with other teachers who said in their experience they found most of the violent boys to have had bad relationships with their mothers or were missing mothers. The teachers said many of the boys had fathers who disrespected women and probably had not developed close relationships with anyone at all. It seemed urgent to me that these boys be able to fulfill these emotional needs at school; it could be the last chance to rescue them from a life of violence, addictions and prison, and the ultimate destruction of themselves and others.

James Gilligan (1997, pp.11-12) says “all violence is an attempt to achieve justice, or what the violent person perceives as justice... so as to receive whatever retribution or compensation the violent person feels is ‘due’ to him or ‘owed’... *the attempt to achieve and maintain justice, or to undo or prevent injustice, is the one and only universal cause of violence*” (italics in original).

Being able to think about these types of boys in this new way motivated me to find out what could be done. Obviously, the curriculum was of little use to them and most teachers and administrators just wanted to see them passed through the system. I was told to allow them to keep their music headphones on in class because that would keep them from disrupting the other students’ learning. But I felt that few educators, myself included, understood the causes of the boys’ attitudes that occurred outside of school. We were not able to comprehend the ‘big picture’. I decided in my novel I would like to deepen my understanding of my experiences, imagine in what circumstances a violent youth might be able to find his way to another path, break out of the pattern he was in. I wanted to create a character whose values at home were at

odds with the values upheld in the school environment, and how he might come to see why it was important to respect others, not see those who followed general rules of good behaviour as 'stupid', and begin to feel it was better to be a positive force in this world than a negative one. How could a teacher help a student overcome negative family experiences and entrenched habits of thinking about life? What might moral development look like for this kind of boy in learning what it is to be human?

Another significant but different issue in education that I wanted to explore was the conflicts inherent in becoming a new teacher. Specifically, I wanted to examine the transformations new teachers go through in their first year, how the reconciliation of "self" and "professional identity" might take place within the teacher. For example, how does a teacher's personality adapt to the expectations of what a teacher must be? Bullock, Knowles and Crow in *Emerging as a Teacher* (1991) state that the teacher enters the teaching context and tries on roles from within a formed self; in fact, the new teacher is teaching the 'self' based on a cluster of meanings, which are tested, adjusted in response to meanings taken from interpretations based on responses of students and others. "It is a conflict-laden process and the teacher needs to make adjustments and compromises... 'reconstructed' selves are formed... socialization is an active process of world building, not a passive adaptation... The teacher moves towards an institutionally defined role and pattern of relations" (p. 6). External issues pressure teachers to search internally, and center on how to deal with classroom management, discipline and power imbalance in the school, even pressure from colleagues to treat students in a certain way that will maintain established hierarchies – all of which cause significant conflict in new teachers. Reasons for becoming a teacher may be in direct opposition with the role the teacher may be forced to adopt.

In my experience teaching in Simon Fraser University's teacher education program (PDP), I have always been struck by how hardworking, determined to succeed, open to new ideas and morally astute my students are. Yet new teachers often feel overwhelmed by classroom management issues alone and many schools do not have mentoring systems in place. To explore these ideas I would draw on collections of narratives by new teachers in Bullock, Knowles & Crow (1991); Dollase (1992); Bullock (1989); and Burke (2006); as well as my own experiences in being a new teacher.

In this novel I also hoped to learn more about how new teachers must continually rediscover for themselves the importance of teaching. How also this must be a personal journey, rooted in unique values and character traits because although 'stages' of teaching have been identified (Bullock, 1989), each teacher must find his or her own values to cling to, what remains true, and ultimately what to build a teaching philosophy upon. The form of the novel would also allow me to portray the intense emotional experience of 'difficult beginnings', the contradictory feelings of having excelled in a teacher education program, being generally regarded by professionals, family and friends as someone of high moral standards, and yet failing miserably at times in one's own first classroom.

Being conscious of stereotypes about small towns, I nevertheless decided that setting the novel in a rural environment with a small school would best create the conditions suited to exacerbating my characters' problems. My purposes were to highlight feelings of isolation, fewer choices of subjects, perhaps less worldly teachers, parents and students, fewer economic supports and therefore job prospects, and possibly more feelings of being nowhere and going nowhere. In addition, a setting such as this might be more conducive to the sense that what one is doing is less important, especially for educators who face low graduation rates and the rare student going on to higher education. Teachers may feel their work is unappreciated and eventually move on to more academic schools in larger cities. This in turn sends a message back to the school and its students. In this novel I therefore wanted to place these characters in this kind of setting as a literary device to add pressure to their dilemmas.

In summary, what I hoped to examine were the particular moral problems of an "at risk" youth, a new teacher, and their interaction, especially in the moral sphere. Taking my own experiences as a starting point, I hoped to clarify in the novel what a morally confused student and a new teacher who is searching for a way to fuse values with a professional identity might look like and get down to some emotional truths.

What problems I expected

From the beginning I was most concerned about writing a didactic novel. I knew I could not have characters come out and discuss Plato or Taylor or it would distort the 'fictional dream' I was weaving. Because this would be a traditional novel, where characters are in opposition, and choices are made and action occurs, long discussions or articulated meditations would seem out of place. Also, the thoughts shared by characters would need to be appropriate for their education levels and awareness of life. I decided what I could do to overcome these problems would be to have conversations between educators interspersed through the text, raising certain issues that would impact the thinking of other characters. These would still have to be interpreted appropriately according to the character and add to the characters' inner and outer conflicts, but this was keeping in line with my overarching goal for the novel: showing how individuals develop moral awareness.

Because a novel cannot come out and straightforwardly discuss ideas, as a writer I would have to prepare carefully (stealthily?) for ideas to arise naturally. This requires spending pages sometimes preparing for the arrival of ideas, planting the ideas in the reader's mind and then letting them unfold. This puts a strain on the writing and the only way to disguise the author 'leading the reader' is to ensure there are other things to look at and think about. On the one hand, this adds to the complexity of the novel but on the other hand, ideas may seem diluted. I attempted to draw these ideas out through a rise and fall of action, and go deeper in places to have characters come to conclusions about what I wanted the reader to think about.

The nature of a traditional novel requires it to have enough energy to maintain forward motion and this is often achieved through plot shifts and character conflict. An author can slip in information when tension is high but must be aware when the writing is becoming heavy-handed. Dialogues are the most effective way to insert ideas but one problem with my protagonist was that he turned out to be quite silent, removing himself from the social fabric of the school and society as a coping mechanism. This put a lot of pressure on the novel to have him overhear conversations rather than partake in them. In all novels, each sentence must do at least two things; for example, advance the plot, deepen character, sharpen the conflict, foreshadow, and so on. In this novel, the

function of each sentence and especially word choices had to carry the burden of many ideas.

As mentioned, I am aware of stereotypes and had to make some difficult choices depending on my needs for the novel. One area was in the portrayal of teachers. It is not my intention to criticize or undermine teachers as a whole, but simply to encounter different teachers as characters, some well-intentioned, some perhaps focused on protecting themselves from different threats as they see them. My new teacher is not meant to be perfect, nor are any of the negative examples of teachers meant to vilify. These characters are not based on real people I have known, but a range of individual people I have encountered. The same holds true for place; I have wholly imagined the town where the novel takes place and created certain features of the land around it. It would be a mistake for a reader to assume any of the characters or settings in the novel are real, or there is any 'truth' about what has happened. Again, I am only interested in emotional truths, what might happen and what we can learn from it.

My own limitations

My shortcomings as a writer are clear in places in the novel. There are sections where the language is not doing what I had hoped it would, the emotional response feels weak and certain ideas and feelings are not suggested clearly to the reader. This is due to a lack of sophisticated artistic technique on my part, and the aesthetic experience as a whole is not as forceful as it could be. However, my learning curve in how novels are written has been hugely advanced through the process of writing. I know I have fallen into the trap of many writers, by taking on too much in the time I had to do it, yet there is nothing more satisfying than finishing a novel you have worked long and hard on. With each story attempted, to be sure, the author is more ambitious in the next. This, then, is a circular problem, because the author's skills and knowledge are often inadequate to their ambition.

Another major limitation is in the imagining of characters and places. Had I lived in a northern B.C. town, gone to school there, known people that the characters were based on, perhaps more accurate details would come to mind and the story would seem

more profound or believable. I have researched small towns, through other novels, tourism, and nature websites and educational and business texts, the latter informing me of the lumber industry in the north (Go Chetwynd, 2009; Royal BC Museum Forests, 2004; Northern British Columbia, n.d.). I realize this cannot replace the experience of living in an area for many years. The details that I have chosen have also of necessity had to function on two levels, both to lend credibility to a setting and often to serve as metaphor or in suggesting ideas to the reader. I am sure there is a more economical way of doing this in the writing and this is one technique I am still working on.

Even with the best writers, there is often a problem with rendering a point of view on life from the opposite sex. I have tried to imagine what pressures there are on this kind of teenage boy, how he must focus nearly exclusively on the males around him, looking for clues on how to be respected as a man. I imagine these boys must be involved in mighty struggles to form their identities. Even as I understand there is a continuum of masculinity in the human gene pool, I have attempted to show a character that may realize he has more of a nurturing side to him than some of the male characters around him. More difficult, as I learned with some of the high school boys I taught, is trying to understand how their anger accelerates so quickly to blind rage, which seems to need to be released through violence to exhaust itself.

Another limitation with the novel is having too many ideas to explore in depth. The novel may be able to capture more of life than straightforward non-fictional texts, but it cannot capture all of it. Therefore, I have had to choose a few specific ideas towards which to direct the reader's gaze and hope they can say enough about what I am trying to convey.

Purpose of doing it this way

I believe that by bringing these characters together at this point in their lives I might be able to show how people connect and learn from one another. For this kind of teen, I did have to create the conditions where he would be receptive to this particular teacher. I knew he would need to be displaced from his usual state of mind to be able to really see her. By situating characters in different settings, I also wanted to show what

other forces might be working on students and new teachers, especially other teachers, administrators, the school culture, the small town, the natural environment, climate and especially parents and families, and even random events that arise. All of this I believed would feel more like 'life' and affect the reader in a different way than factual or straightforward statements.

By choosing to have a student as the point of view character I believed I could show the other side of education, perhaps in a unique manner. From the time of Rousseau's *Emile* (which is not a novel, per se) to recent popular films about education (*Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*), the norm is to show, from the teacher's point of view, how teachers can inspire their students. In particular, I wanted to reveal how the system fails 'at risk' youth, to expose which factors are not in place to help them get out of the cycle they are in and to help them get to where they are trying to go. Most teachers come from middle class backgrounds and are required to spend five years in higher education. It is often a distance too far for many of them to imagine the poverty and ignorance in many of their students' home environments (Allard & Santoro, 2008).

The story-within-the-story, of course, has parallels with my purpose for writing the novel as part of the thesis. Through his connection to his teacher, I have intentionally had the main character discover literature, and within that, other role models, other ways of being in the world, all of which contribute to his being able to see his life through other points of view. Literature itself is a safe way of exploring conflicts and working out values. Literature invites the reader to take questions of justice and goodness out of books and look at them in terms of the reader's own existence. There is also much identification with characters who share similar thoughts and feelings; the student decides what to think about them, and by extension, whether or not to act on these ideas in his or her own life.

What I hoped to learn

In writing this novel, I wanted to better understand how literature can provide a more holistic approach to learning. In attempting to "show" educational theory and

practice in the world of the novel, enriched as it is with emotion, sensuous language and universal themes, I desired to find out if this might allow for alternate and valuable means of learning.

I also wanted to discover if trusting in the writing process would lead to a larger role for intuition in creativity. For example, I hoped to achieve that phenomenon in writing where the characters would become so familiar that they would start to 'take on a life of their own' and begin to speak to me. I wondered if they would tell me more about their situations and add to the organic whole of the story by allowing their actions to drive the plot and take it in natural directions. This part of writing is difficult to describe. It is no longer about the author planning and writing chapters, but letting go and just trusting that other things might happen when the 'world' of the story becomes more defined and the characters are chattering and pulling in directions of their own. If this could happen, I was willing to relinquish where the story would go, and believed I could learn more about the characters, how moral development might take place for these kinds of individuals, what setbacks there might be and how the outcome is never quite what anyone expects. On a technical level, I could learn how this phenomenon adds to the aesthetic experience of reading the novel. I might then be better able to articulate more effectively what the educational value of reading novels is, as well as why understanding literature is a major educational aim.

I wanted to show how education leads out into life and how ideas in the classroom do not just stay in the school but that students do take what is useful inside themselves and examine it in other parts of their lives. For better or worse, values at school are often in conflict with values at home. Aristotle said the school should mirror real life, only in a better way.

Kant, in *Critique of Judgement* (2005, sections 17, 42, 59), makes a connection between the aesthetic and the morally good. I wanted to learn, if we are presented with moral issues through an intense experience in the reading, if this can heighten our understanding, or our desire to understand, the morally good. Because the actual events we are reading about in fiction have no impact on our daily lives, we can remain in a 'disinterested' state. This has been compared to the ideal state of mind for contemplating moral rights and wrongs and deciding on correct action. (In the Epilogue I

will pursue these ideas further.) If events described in a novel can provide enough detail for the reader to envision what they look like, then I wanted to learn if through what Nussbaum calls exercising the “moral imagination”, through developing narrative imagination, we can gain some vicarious experience concerning moral questions that arise in life.

In summary, I would like to remark that often we hear people say that they are a different person after having read a novel. What kinds of experiences facilitate this change? What has been learned? Philosophy and literature have a long partnership in the history of storytelling. It is possible to ponder significant philosophical concepts through the emotional and thoughtful experiences provided by literature. They seem to return us to the core questions posed by human beings in every age, not least being, “how shall I live my life?”

**Part 2. Novel:
A Story for My Teacher**

Prologue.

An overdue assignment

I saw your name, or rather my wife saw your name, in the monthly education newsletter. “Jennifer Brighton,” it said, “this year’s recipient of the British Columbia Teacher of the Year award”, and there was the name of your school. Lynn was impressed you had not left teaching. Said she would have. I had known for a long time you acted on principles, and you would have thought there was a right way and a wrong way to go about setting things straight. That’s what I started thinking myself. I figured I owed you that much. That was always my intention, but it had become clouded with time. Now as I read and reread the article, sensation became feeling, then feelings took hold until details broke through from the untended layers of prairie dust and memory. One look at my wife and I was ready to understand why it was time to do something; restitution means actually harnessing intention to action.

All these years I knew you could never fathom what happened that last time, standing in your front yard, beside your freshly painted house. I still see that final expression of fracture on your face. A Picasso of confusion, of fear, anger, disbelief. As an adult now, I can appreciate that you imagined you failed, due to some moral shortcoming or lack of rules for surviving in a small northern town. Or, perhaps, more painfully, as I start to admit it in the years since, you have judged me as someone very different from the person you thought I was.

But that’s not what I wanted to say. It should start at the beginning. For one thing, I still go by Jason Turner and you might recognize me now, even though I am no longer that fifteen year old boy, slouching through the halls, Oilers cap low over my brow, as I was then. Thinking back, I was, in some ways, like most adolescents – unformed, barely registering a pulse – my posture the shape of a question mark, moving me ahead with no tangible answers for the hazards of my world. I was unable to leave myself behind, yet I was blind to the reasons that made it necessary. Twenty years later, I am still wary about what defines a person in this life, but I continue to search for how to live it.

Here on the fishing coasts of B. C., people distrust renaming sailing vessels when they change hands. It's always the ghost of the first name that comes to mind when you come upon it in the desperate fog. Even a seasoned captain can only do so much when captured in the broiling currents of the Strait, no matter if his ship is inherited or not. You work with the vessel you have, do the best you can. Other ships stand off at a distance, waiting to see if they can lend assistance, sometimes knowing if the ship will pull through or not because of its character. Ships are living things to sailors out here, and who you are turns out to be more important than what you're called.

Your name has stayed with me these years, mainly because I never met anyone like you, in our town of Pike's Mill, or anywhere since. I knew then it was your first posting, and I have often thought it was exactly because you were still too much of yourself and not enough of a teacher that we were able to imagine each other, even get lost in each other. You hadn't yet acquired the veneer of experience, protecting yourself with the attitudes and mannerisms other teachers and students expected. Instead, you were up there with your back against the chalk board, raw, exposed, smiling brightly, slow to react and never expecting, or suspecting, the worst. But more importantly, for me, you were still you.

I've often imagined you at the end of that August, before the 1990 school year started. You, a middle class, educated immigrant from a civilization cradled in the suburbs of Vancouver drove a Volkswagen fifteen hours to the northeast of B.C. laden with the best that had been thought and said in your world. I know in your heart you planned to share and nurture that knowledge in the minds of your students, sending a beam of light into the darkest crevices, the most hostile caves within our stone mountains. After the first month, it must have felt like pebbles on a slope breaking loose, slowly displacing rocks and debris until your whole concept of education and teaching was in a full out slide.

None of it could have made any sense. In fact, there was no sane reason for Pike's Mill's existence at all other than it was one of those northern towns that emerged out of a need for a logging station at the confluence of rivers. Then the train arrived in 1958 and made it all permanent. The mill itself was about three miles downstream from my house, where the ravine let go its grip of the river that passed below us, and from

there on cut a flatter ribbon through the open land. The teachers complained it was a rough town, and a rougher school. Nobody ever wondered why. One thing people in Pike's Mill never did was to question the order of things. If the mill shut down, if somebody's dad got drunk and shot his best friend, if some girl ran off – that was just the way it went. The way the school was run was just another part of that.

You've probably blocked all this from your mind and the particulars of our place up on the hill, in the shadow of Mt. Renata, whose waters ran cold and colder through the cut below our home. For me they are blended memories rather than sharp images now. The view to the west led out to the treeless plain and grey mountains in the distance. I remember taking refuge in the white spruce stand on the south side of our hill when I could, the air fresher for rich earth and birdsong. Black bears and wolves were rare but lived in our minds at all times. More often I chose to track red squirrels and snowshoe hares through the woods. Then eventually I went back to the house, and did what I was told. Before I met you, "normal" for me was being out of school, usually at home, but mostly being around my dad. I worked with him on odd jobs, in vast expanses of silence, fixing cars, driving them places, spending days on the road, steadily staring down the white line as it flickered up before the windshield, inevitable and relentless as the blacktop that passed beneath us. It never occurred to me that things could be different.

I've often remarked on the contradiction that if you ask people what a doctor does, or a lawyer, a priest, an auto mechanic or even a software engineer, they will give a dismissive generalization. But when you ask someone what a teacher does, they answer with clarity. Everyone has spent ten or so years in the classroom and knows that teachers teach. Some teach English, others Art, French, Socials, Math, Science and Phys Ed. Then a person might pause and add, oh yeah – a teacher also helps us learn how to get along with others, to become good citizens, find our place in the world, and even train for a job. Teachers get up in front of the classroom, and read from a book, talk about it, assign homework and work up to a test. Every year the subject gets more difficult, and by the time you turn sixteen, or even graduate, you hopefully know something and can hold your own in the world. That's what it is to be educated.

For me now, I would answer something different. I never learned Math and History. The curriculum was a lot of background noise to the more compelling voices in my head. My wife assures me that a teacher's education is more of a two way street. Teachers learn more about their subjects as well as how to teach the students they have over time. But new teachers, in fact all teachers, ought to have the opportunity to follow up on their students. At the time of the final report card, teachers may not recognize the print they've made. Time works differently on us all. My starting point in your first year was so low that few could discern any progress, and quite rightly, the evidence on paper told I could not be taught. You deserved so much more credit as my teacher. You deserved to know you did leave a mark. The truth was, my education had a much more fundamental starting point than anyone else you had taught. In fact, it was rock bottom. I had to learn what it was to be human.

Chapter 1.

Late September

Dirk Mackenzie could have been taken for me except he suffered bad luck. Once I sensed a threat, nothing could get my mind off it. I could be jumpstarting the batteries of a pickup truck, splicing electrical wiring or using a blow torch in forty mile an hour winds but I would stay focused on whatever was bothering me and still do a good job. But with Dirk, he could lose himself so much in the moment that he could forget the time, who might be standing nearby listening or even that he'd loaned someone five bucks and never been paid back. Just like playing hockey on a melting pond, distractions and strong feeling slowed Dirk's awareness of the big picture, and inevitably he brought a lot of pain upon himself.

When the warning bell rang that morning at Pike Secondary and Todd Effridge's sallow face appeared beside my locker, I knew something was up. He was about a head shorter than me, short even for a grade ten, so I didn't bother noticing him. He was the kind of kid who leapt up at taller boys, trying to knock off their caps to get their attention. I could see two of his friends waiting by the drinking fountain.

"Dirk Mackenzie's going to kick your ass," he sneered.

My hand shoved the metal door and it ricocheted off the next locker with a bang. Todd jumped, then coughed to cover his nerves. This was hard for him, and his friends were watching. He was bouncing on his feet as if following some mental steps before shooting the ball. Dirk had told Lacey, Lacey had told Rick and Rick had told Todd to deliver the message. I stared into the locker like I was counting to ten and he put up his hands and backed away. But he was satisfied; enough people had heard. Safely out of range, he threw over his shoulder, "Three o'clock. Behind the bus shelter."

I slowly peeled off my jacket and hooked it in the locker. Already I sensed kids moving around me with a little more purpose. A fight, even the threat of a fight, lifted the monotony of facing a long morning. Fifteen year old boys were in a tough spot. We still had to go to school, but never did any work. We couldn't legally drive and nothing could

happen outside of school without a truck. Worse, our fathers and teachers could still tell us what to do. I see Dirk, myself and the other boys now as working hard at not caring about anything but working harder at not showing we cared. With no purpose in our lives, no reliable friendships, no status in the world, in our families or anywhere else, we went to school and fought.

I slid a book out off the locker shelf and turned. Some younger kid, all wide-eyed and pumping his arms said, "Are you gonna fight him? You could win. You could win for sure."

I took a step towards him.

"Cool, I mean." He quickly moved off, disappointed. "I just meant you could beat him. He's slower. And not as mean."

I knew what he was talking about but ignored him. The previous week Dirk had punched Todd during a basketball game but accidentally stepped on Rick Blackcrow's foot. In the change room, Rick heaved Dirk against the wall, so in math Dirk and Todd stabbed Rick's hand with a pencil. Telling the teacher was out of the question. All Rick's attention was on not showing any signs of pain. Anything else would make things worse.

Only one time did they try that with me. In grade nine, three of them came in the washroom after me. I knew without thinking, without hesitation, that I would need to go much further than any of them were prepared to go. I did not belong in their group nor did I have any allies in the school. If you choose to be the lone wolf, your life is simplified to one impulse: winning was survival. When they surrounded me, I ripped off the stall door and knocked Rick unconscious, took out Todd's front teeth. Then I ran after Lacey who was fleeing into the hall and I broke his arm.

With Dirk and me, things were more complicated. He was compelled by some sense of family honour to fight me from time to time. Dirk's father hated my father all through their schooling, but he was also afraid of him. When Dirk was old enough to pick up on that, it started to bother him. From time to time, when things in his life went wrong, Dirk would work it around and centre the blame on what seemed most unfair,

most out of control, and ruled by chaos. That was Dirk and me. And that was our town, our school, our families and our boys' lives in a nutshell. That was just the way it was.

The way it was for me that morning was that I had gotten a beating the night before and was already in a slow rage. With Todd halfway down the hall, I turned towards shop class in the other direction and realized Mr. Sennick, the Socials teacher, had been standing there. He was bigger than me, not fat but solid, and he stood with his arms crossed. I couldn't think of a teacher I hated more. When he smiled, the whites of his eyes bulged and the corners of his mouth pulled down. Nobody mistook that smile for friendliness.

"Just try it," he said in a low voice as I passed.

I hawked up in my throat like I was going to spit but kept moving. In the school, Sennick might have the authority to give orders but the students knew him for what he was. My teachers were surprised I'd been showing up at school pretty consistently unlike the other boys but they didn't understand the motivation I had to get out of the house. But once there I felt it as another form of control – bells and late slips, detentions and homework penalties, failing grades and extra work. Sennick was a patient enemy; he used insults and humiliation to get students to comply. Other teachers could care less as long as you sat in your seat. Sennick, on the other hand, got results; kids worked in his class. He understood boys like Dirk and me on a primal level and aimed the insults at our lack of intelligence. With me, Sennick reserved a special kind of animosity that assumed we would eventually engage in mortal combat, given the right opportunity. The most logical reason was to assume that at some point in his life, Sennick must have also come across his match in my father, and if he couldn't get at him, I was the next best thing. You could say my father made a big impression on people that way. Too late they became aware they were outdone, and so their revenge sought out a secondary object, and then they could live with themselves. Sennick was big but not as tall as the principal, Mr. Jameson, but he was more of a concern because he understood the laws of an alternate universe, how to win a fight and persevere. It was only boundaries in the school that gave students like me half a chance.

I edged past him and saw a wiry woman in his shadow. How Sennick got along with the French teacher, Mrs. Larousse, was beyond comprehension. Maybe it was because she sensed how much Sennick relished the role of disciplinarian and was all too happy to let him lead. She knew the value of a well-placed compliment, especially in front of other teachers. Delivered with a Gallic shrug, she implied everyone knew how fortunate they were to have a teacher of Sennick's calibre in this dead-end town. What was not said was that this was the most effective way to build up people like Sennick's sense of entitlement. It also allowed her to pass on her problem kids to him. She was a competent teacher but Sennick allowed her to avoid any real involvement, immersing herself rather in the more refined French language and the higher culture that it represented to her. She seemed to come out of nowhere sometimes, often through her influence on other people, and in this way she could be worse, even more treacherous, than Sennick. As I passed in front of her, she flashed me a sour look and returned to her conversation.

The halls were already littered with candy wrappers, broken pencils, pop cans and wadded paper. Parts of the wing were dim from burnt out bulbs and other teachers stood in their darkened doorways as I passed. Nobody looked at me because I never looked at anyone else. If teachers noticed me, their regard felt full of accusation, judgement, or confirmation of what they already thought. I'd stopped looking teachers in the face years ago.

The only authority not out guarding the halls was the principal. Jameson was different from Sennick; he wore his educated civility like his suit, but he'd been seasoned as a math teacher at Pike Secondary before he'd gone down to university in Vancouver to become a school principal. He knew what he was in for, caught in the middle of ignorant or irate parents, dissatisfied teachers and apathetic students. When I thought about it, I'd say Jameson wasn't a bad guy; nobody complained about the way he handled things, but he wasn't around half the time. But sitting in his office, I'd had plenty of occasion to watch him sort through conflicting reports, usually with Sennick's version at odds with a student's story of what happened, and as the stress mounted, Jameson's sense of fairness diminished. I suspected that Jameson had Sennick's number, but it was too much of a temptation not to let Sennick enforce complete, if harsh, order when Jameson was away.

The school was H-shaped with the office at the centre of the building and I shoved past the kids who didn't move out of my way. I did spot Jameson, just inside the gym. He set his jaw when he saw me and turned back to the basketball team just finishing up morning practice. He tolerated some roughhousing and illegal hits, but not as much as Mr. Alvarez, the shop teacher. The boys both liked Alvarez's class and disliked Alvarez, mainly because he left them alone, let them waste time and never pressured them to produce anything. Kids ended up wandering the halls during his class or sneaking out the back door for a smoke. When Alvarez coached basketball, he mainly ignored what was going on. The furthest he could be pushed would be to express disappointment, and he would pull a boy out for an earnest conversation around the fine points of good sportsmanship. This worked for some, but for guys like Dirk and me, it felt like getting dragged deeper into the fog we struggled against every day.

After the late bell, classroom doors closed up, muffling voices and free movement. The bright lights overhead signalled it was time to tune out. But none of this helped me cool down and I sat by myself in shop with my smoking soldering iron. I was burning the table as much as the metal I was supposed to be melting, getting more and more keyed up. Other boys gathered together, swearing, insulting, and throwing stuff at each other, amusing themselves by ruining one another's work. Sometimes they glanced my way, and lowered their voices.

A fight for me wasn't just a chance to pound my fist into somebody's flesh. I told myself it was a release, a way to purge my system of all the stupidity, frustration and insanity. Rage built up and scorched the soul; a cycle of increasing pressure, fights and periods of calm was inevitable. But there was also the fact that during and after a fight, people regarded me in a different manner. They moved out of my way in doorways, even picked up papers for me in class, or gave up their seat in the library or cafeteria. Even if the attention was negative, teachers and students alike made an effort to work out who I was, wrap their heads around a new hierarchy. It was the closest thing for me that resembled a conversation or a fond regard.

When the two flat metal strips I held slipped and burned my thumb, I hated everything enough to work up a plan. I set aside the soldering iron and went to the washroom. Cold water trickled down my face and neck and I flexed my arms and

shoulders, watching my shirt stretch across my chest in the mirror. I was bench pressing one fifty now and could run up through the wooded hills by my house for an hour before tiring. But this would not be my biggest advantage. I knew without a doubt I had to nail Dirk before he could confront me outside with his friends.

At noon the cafeteria was darkened from steam filming over the windows and most kids preferred to brave the cold courtyard. Heavy gray skies pressed down and the wind slashed between the picnic tables. Only Lisa Smithers, her thin coat flapping around her knees, sat by herself, staring at the ground, eating a sandwich. Other kids in threes or fours stood huddled together or sat at the rough wooden tables. I drifted around the groups, looking at the lunches and someone offered me an orange and a bag of chips. I watched the end of the courtyard. There were no teachers standing inside the door. My heart was pounding and the chips were like ashes in my mouth.

I stood off to the side, my back to the wind, and soon heard Dirk and a few others coming back from the smoke pit. You could say it was Dirk's bad luck that he didn't spot me, or the fact that his arrival was the only thing in my mind. They came tripping into the courtyard, Todd shoving Dirk into a trash can and then he ran laughing over to the far side of the tables. Dirk hurled an apple across the yard at him and missed. The apple bounced off a table and hit my shoulder. I didn't think, I didn't judge; I just calculated the distance between us. When I turned, Dirk blanched. He wasn't ready and he knew he was going down.

Dust and gravel sprayed as he launched himself toward the back entrance to the school. I knew I could cut him off, and reached the middle entrance while he bolted into another. He wasn't primed, wasn't pumped enough. He would be heading to refuge, probably Mr. Alvarez. Thirty kids loitered in the hall but all that mattered to me was to remind that bastard not to make mistakes. Kids were eating lunches, sitting against lockers and some started screeching.

What we didn't know was that you, Ms. Brighton, were coming along with your armful of books. Dirk was running so fast that he just missed my tag at the corner but caught you in a full body blow. I knew he hit you hard from the thud against the lockers. It was enough of a delay for me to pick him off you and hurl him to the floor. He twisted

out of his jacket and got up but I had enough of a grip and my fist connected with his temple.

At first it was just to land a few good hits. He wasn't ready to fight, and couldn't react. His face snapped right, then left. His arms weren't strong enough or quick enough to parry my thrusts. He bent over to protect himself, which made it easier to deliver an upper cut. Two more rights and he went down. He twisted away and I grabbed a hank of hair and brought him back. I had him right where I wanted him. Two, three good blows. Blood oozed from his mouth, then the corner of his eye. Then he stayed down. He couldn't get up, and he put up his hands to block my blows.

"Get up man!"

"He's killing him!"

"Get up, Dirk!"

Then Dirk gave up and it became something else, my fist hitting wet, soft spots, seeing how hard I could hit, how far I could go.

"Stop him! Somebody!"

More and more kids were coming, everyone yelling, no one daring to get too close. Everybody wants a fight, but they also want it to end. When a clear winner emerges, he gets in a few more hits and then he walks away. Everybody knows who wins, who loses. But I kept punching, even kicking. Everybody was there, watching, and I was winning. Dirk managed to roll over and get on his knees. He was scared now. Another punch brought up his jaw. He vomited on the floor. Scores of students were yelling. I heard the hatred but the physical release combined with the heat of their focus accumulated inside me. There was satisfaction mixed with the putrid smell of disgust. Inside and out, I was getting my due, my share. My fist came down again and again. Then it was caught in mid-air.

Sennick's voice roared, "Enough!"

I still freed my arm and got in another jab, and aimed a last kick at Dirk's gut. My nostrils were full of the smell of puke.

"You fucking monster!"

"Dirk! Dirk, man."

"Bastard!"

I gasped but the adrenaline had sucked the air out of me. I looked down at Dirk on the floor. His face was gray where it was not red. My blood was oversaturated with adrenaline, emotion. I keenly felt the force of their repugnance directed at me. A chill spread through my chest. The awareness of going too far, even to win, wedged itself in my mind. It had to be like this, and yet it was underlaid with ancient tracks of guilt, running through the circuitry of my brain. I turned away from Dirk. I'd thought I'd laid it to rest, but the nausea mounted in my gut. Someone to my left spat in my face. I put up my hand and it was slick with blood.

Sennick manoeuvred between Dirk and me, his expression daring me to hit him again, but I was spent. Larousse was there, standing frozen off to one side, horror a mask over her features. Other teachers tried to shout over the din. Then Jameson arrived, pulling the crowd apart.

"Everyone! Go back to your classrooms. Now!"

Mrs. Larousse immediately echoed his words, hushing the students and herding them away. The bell rang, as if to signal the end of the match. I saw an opening and got one last kick at Dirk's head, although without any heat behind it. But Sennick heaved me clear off the ground and flung me away from Dirk, while Jameson got down on one knee to look at him.

Suspended in air for a second, I spun around before I found my feet. I surfaced right in front of you, Ms. Brighton, not two inches from your face. You were still against the lockers, upright now with your hair blown over to the wrong side. I was limp and breathing hard but we both looked at each other at the same instant. I expected revulsion, horror, even hatred. Your eyes locked onto me, startling me with their

luminous blue-green hue, strangely flecked with black. Most strangely, light seemed to pour out of them and I was overrun, falling into a vast pool of aquamarine. You looked right into me then, and the storm in and around me stopped. There was nothing I could do but look back. You still looked, and saw right inside of me. My first thought was to stare back, defy what you thought you were looking at. But I was worn down and then suddenly I knew you were seeing too far into me. I had to get away but my feet were cement. Inside, my strength was going; you were seeing more of what I didn't want you to see. I blinked hard; your face was too close. And then you did the last thing I expected. You smiled. I didn't understand. I didn't know you. You didn't know me. You knew nothing about me. You didn't even know I was in your English class. My elbows rotated as if to stir my legs into motion but your eyes kept reading my face, probing below the surface, and then you were there, fully inside. I couldn't bear it. Panic took the last breath from my lungs. And still I was rooted to the floor.

I shook my head as a last effort to break the hold. It made no sense. You'd taken a bad hit, maybe you were disoriented. Then it came to me. You believed I'd reacted to Dirk slamming into you. You had no idea what had happened earlier; you didn't even know our names yet. Then I registered how young you were, why in the hall Dirk and I hadn't distinguished you soon enough from the other students. In class, the kids manipulated you, easily tricked you. More and more they realized their advantage. And now, you'd received a blow in the hall. A teacher. Down on the ground. You would have never imagined this. Yet in this moment, your eyes spoke the certainty of the universe righting itself. A student had come to your aid. Order was now restored and all was good in the world again.

I tried to swallow. Of course you couldn't have known. With great effort, I turned my eyes away. This kind of attention was something different all together. I was light-headed, cold and small at the core. I tried to inhale. Again I felt your thoughts with certainty; the belief that one act could reverse an indecent world and set things right. The effort was blacking out my vision. My legs started to go and I sank to the floor. You reached out and gripped my forearm. On my knees, at the height of a small boy, I looked up at you, then down at your hand on my arm.

Above my head, Mr. Jameson's voice broke through, as if from within a dream. "Get him out of here. Take him to your room!" I became aware of a clearing in the crowd. To me he said harshly, "Go sit in her class. I'll deal with you in a moment."

I concentrated on locating my balance, being jostled by the kids passing behind me.

Sennick's voice came from the floor, examining the unconscious Dirk. "We need an ambulance."

I risked a look at your face but there was still kindness there. Surely I was exposed; the truth was out. In an instant, you, like every other person I'd ever met, would soon realize I was not a good person, nor would I ever have helped you. I didn't care about anybody, and I surely never let anybody care about me. But I suddenly regretted not being that person you saw. No one had ever looked at me like that before, or at least not for a long time. I decided not to wait for it. I took a deep breath and tore myself away, staggering at first, recovering some anger to clear my head, get myself moving. My face flushed hot and sweat broke on my back. I didn't know what you were playing at or what you were trying to prove. Or what you meant by it.

Pushing off the lockers and into a few stragglers, I aimed myself in the direction of your classroom. The hall shrank before me like a dark, confusing tunnel. I didn't know where else to go. Later I thought how different things would have been if I had just left the school. Hitchhiked to Vancouver, San Francisco, Mexico. But I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. You were in my head. I could stand cigarette burns and a boot on my neck, anything. But not that kind and loving gaze.

Chapter 2.

Previous August

My father deliberately drove a dented Mustang to pick me up at the jail. It was only juvy jail but he wouldn't park near the main doors, near the barbed wire that was balled up like steel yarn around the exercise yards and visiting rooms. I spotted him sitting low in the seat, visor down, the car salt-corroded, not too clean, but not dirty. This about summed it up; no one would ever notice him unless they were already on the lookout.

He popped the car door for me when I walked out. "Nice of you to show up." The radio crackled and he turned it down. "Maybe you want to stay a bit longer. Get in. I've been waiting an hour."

I didn't say anything and he continued talking, watching the rear view mirror as I threw my duffel bag in the backseat. "Once we're out of town, we'll get something to eat."

I stared out the window while he drove out of the parking lot, staying carefully in the lines, and onto the empty road leading back to the highway. It had started to rain and the old wipers dragged across the windshield making the view even more murky than usual. I felt him rake me over with his cold eyes. "C'mon. What did you expect?"

I didn't answer and he pointed at the glove compartment. I opened it and found a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"How would you have been able to get money if I'd gone in?" He let the obvious answer hang in the air for awhile. "Anyway, I've got a something for you at the house." Then he chuckled. "Real nice. She cooked last night too. Cindy... something."

This was my father's idea of how to end a successful adventure. A bottle of JD and picking up some girl along the way. The girls were easy enough about joining

whatever scam he had on the go, but they never stuck around for too long. My father had that effect on people, especially women.

“Wait till you get a load of her. Wants to be a dancer.”

The drive home took four hours and streams of rainwater streaked down the windows, blurring any chance of seeing the mountains or what else might be going by. The road was underwater in places and we drove for miles between great bare mountains, scrubland and no houses for half hour stretches. Then we'd come to a town, more of a gas station with a convenience store and a couple of dwellings beside it, before we were back in the vast northern landscape. The only sound besides the whining engine was the weak scraping of the wiper on my side, and I had to look out my father's window to see anything.

We didn't speak for the remaining time and towards evening we drove parallel along the rising embankment that would become the hill where our house sat. The main road continued on into Pike's Mill and beyond to the pulp mill. You could easily miss our driveway, barely a clearing wide enough for a car, and the long tortured dirt road uphill, concealed by brush. The Mustang struggled over ruts and steep curves for a half mile before we could see the lights in the big window.

Our backdoor let out onto a natural balcony that overlooked the deeply gouged ravine. Melting snow from Mt. Renata to the east had cleaved through the hill; on one side was our house, on the other was untrammelled forest for as far as the eye could see. Giant boulders tumbled into the ravine and twisted bushes grew out of the gaps between them. The cold, black water braided itself between rocks and trees, flowing slowly downhill, until about a mile to the west it levelled out as it reached the flatlands. Looking down into the riverbed, the water appeared to issue from a hidden cave, the ravine twisted that sharply as it followed its path. The uplands of the ravine were dense with brambles and too dangerous for humans to climb on foot. At night, we occasionally heard wolves down by the water, howling and scrapping for food.

My father swore as his gears were tested but he finally passed the last hairpin turn and pulled in beside the house. The garage doors were closed but I knew a black Ford pickup would be inside. The Mustang had served its purpose and he'd probably

get rid of it in the next couple of days. I paused to stretch my legs after I got out of the car. Lights from the mill two miles away gave off a weak glow and there were no stars over the forest. The only light came from inside the house.

She was in the living room watching TV; long raven hair down to her waist, like fringe on the top of her bright red skirt.

She looked at me while addressing my father, "Oh. So this is him."

My father said, "He's okay. Doesn't even look the worse for wear."

She held out a hand pinching a joint and smiled. "But you didn't tell me he was, cute. You know? He's your son? Ha, ha."

My father let this go, then winked at me, saying to her, "Tell him your idea. What you said, about dancing. This is good", he said to me.

"Oh, that, sure. I've got this friend, right? She knows a guy who hires dancers at a nightclub in Vancouver. They scout for girls. Anyone who can dance. For TV and movies? I'm doing it! Cool, eh?" She exhaled, looking at me.

"She can do pole dancing."

"Oh yeah, it's not hard, right? You just do it real slow. My friend showed me how. How old is he again?"

Later she came to my room but she wouldn't stop talking so I sent her away. I just wanted to lie on the bed. Not have to be on watch. There had been too much to listen for, the rustling of clothes, the low murmurings, the groans of nightmares. Hearing nothing, seeing nothing and especially feeling nothing was the only way to be in this world. And I lay there, open eyes, unseeing, and concentrated on the absences. No light, no heat, no cold. No touch or taste. If there was nothing, then nothing was wrong and I could live with nothing being right. Null existence was best, everything set at zero, and when I got there, the nothingness gathered me up in its gentle arms. I fell asleep. No dreams. Then somehow it was mid morning and the sun flared around my heavy curtains.

When I got up, Cindy was gone. My father said she had had to go.

“Where?” I asked.

“She had to go. How should I know?” He picked up last night’s glasses and plates. “Christ. You last night. What the hell’s with you? She felt bad. What could I do?” He chuckled. “I couldn’t let her feel bad, now could I? It took a long while to repair her self-esteem.” The smile on his face faded quickly. He bent over and picked up the red skirt and cursed to himself. I watched him move about the room, reading his temper. He could change, just like that. He smashed the skirt into a ball but it fell open. Then he wound it around his fist before sliding it off, opened the back door and hurled it out over the ravine. It slowly unfurled and dropped out of sight.

“What are you looking at?” My father shouted. “If she wants it, she can go and get it. Fuck.” He glared at me and I felt the hair on my neck rise. My father’s eyes were cold and flat like a deer’s, no depth whatsoever. His voice had such an edge that it was not to be argued with and when it was quiet, you sensed how tense your body was, and how you were just waiting for what was going to happen next.

“Get yourself dressed. We have to go see some people.”

I didn’t move. The last time we went to see some people I was behind bars for three months. He came towards me quickly with heavy steps and I backed up towards my room. His voice bellowed down at me. “Have you got a problem with that?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Until you have something to put on the table, we do it my way.”

I went into my room but didn’t bother to close the door. I gave the bed a good kick, but I did what he said and got dressed. And this is how life went back to being what it was, the only way I could remember it being. There were days of nothing and nothing and nothing, and then my father hatched a new plan. We went to see people, did road trips, saw more people. If he made good money, we went home. Something either happened, or nothing happened. Time stretched onward, immense skies passed overhead, seasons warmed or cooled, and our lives continued above the dark,

cavernous ravine. That is, until the day I fought Dirk, and you dropped a smooth stone into the depths of my memory.

Chapter 3.

Late September – 2

I sat slumped against the wall in your class, my fist throbbing, waiting. The principal would show up any minute, papers in hand. The only question was if I would be expelled or just suspended. But I also knew they had a new policy about trying to do everything to keep kids in school until they were at least sixteen.

The muscles in my back were tightening up but students were eyeing me and I refused to show any signs of pain or fatigue. Out the window, the sun had broken through and I sat bathed in the warm light, listening to your voice above the chatter as you urged the class to settle down, forget about the incident. You moved about, as if on air, handing out books. Nobody said anything to me; it was over for now. The sun heated my face and chest, and I half closed my eyes. You asked students to open their novels and read silently for twenty minutes. My arms and legs felt heavier by the minute. Your eyes kept returning to me, like another ray of sunlight. Blinded by the window's light, I became aware of your warmth and attention. This time I was far enough away, in the opposite corner from your desk, that I could allow myself to unpack what had happened. I moved in and out of the space around me, of time and place, the heat on my shoulders, fighting it, then giving in, the muscles in my arms and chest, trying to track down that look, what I'd felt, held in your smiling eyes, struggling, then sensing a familiar feeling.

I couldn't fight it and rested my head on the wall, eyes closed, allowing walls of sunlight to fill my mind, bright white, dazzling and I felt myself held again, in that gaze. I let go of my tired and wretched state, and was out in the sun, running between white walls of light, bright sheets blowing out around me, my shoulders touching soft cotton. I put up my hands to hold onto one, but the wind whipped it free. Your voice was gentler, slower, and became another's as I ran on soft grass, up and down between flapping laundry. And there, blue smiling eyes knelt down beside me and my mother laughed and took another clothespin as I hid again behind a sheet.

“Ja-son,” she called in our game. I darted around and came up from behind, shouting and she clapped her hands. Again and again, and each time her smile, and sparkling eyes. A laughing boy and his mother. No shadows, just light and laughter. The light on her face was pure and good, and everything easy and open, my heart unconstricted.

My head jerked to the side and I straightened up. I was back in my body. I sat and blinked between worlds for a minute, the heat still on my face, low voices around me, books thudding on desks. My arms and chest tightened and I noticed my hand throbbing again. I hadn't had a memory in so long; I knew I couldn't get it back but I closed my eyes harder, trying to hold on, to see it again, begging for another glimpse. I wanted to see her, remember her hands, her clothes. Anything. My eyes burned in the sun and I had to sit up. The sunlight closed over the scene, leaving only dust motes dissolving in the air around me. Heaviness turned to emptiness and I stared down at the dull floor. It was out of reach.

Then in the same moment, you said my name. I looked up, confused. You were there, no laundry, but looking at me again. You stood closer now, by the door, speaking to Mr. Jameson. The room sharpened around you. Jameson's mouth was set hard, the stiffness in strange contrast to the glowing anger in his eyes. He searched the faces in your class and when he found me, he stopped. To his credit, for the number of years he'd been doing this, he hadn't gone hard-faced all the time. I still hadn't decided if he hated his job or he relished it. But either way, this time it wasn't going to be pleasant. Putting both feet on the floor, I squared myself on my seat and tugged down my Oiler's cap on my brow. I tried not to think about how long an autumn it would be, hanging around the house with my father.

Jameson explained, “..steps to handling this properly... reports to be filled out by you... procedures...”

You listened intently, nodding your head. Jameson was outlining the usual bullshit: a few reports, a heavy talk, a lot of pressure to get me to admit what I did was wrong. Basically, trying to get you to present a united front. So far, he wasn't working up to expulsion, and I started to tune out.

What I did notice was that the principal was towering over you. I wondered then how a five foot two, brand new teacher could ever make it in this school. Between the students and even the other teachers, it wasn't hard to imagine how Dirk didn't see you in the hall till it was too late. On top of that, you had blonde-red curly hair, and from the back could pass for one of the more fashionable girls.

Then you interrupted Jameson. "Sorry – but it's not for both boys, is it?"

Jameson stopped reading from his clipboard.

You continued, "With all due respect, I don't know what kind of a student Jason has been, but he definitely intervened. The problem may be about overreacting or using excessive force, but I don't think it's about starting a fight."

Jameson's tie had come loose in the hall and he had chunks of puke on his pant leg but he was making a mental effort to take in what you were saying.

You added, "Believe me, I am the first person to believe in upholding school rules. Wrong is wrong. But when a student steps in and makes an example like this to other students, I think there is something worth recognizing. Personally, I much appreciated him taking a stand like that."

Jameson rubbed his chin. "So you think Jason reacted to Dirk knocking you over?" I could see him buying time as he listened to your view and tried to compare it to the opinion he had of me.

You tilted your head up at him. "Yes. There are so many students who just seem to have no sense of respect for teachers and who would just have let that pass. I don't believe Dirk intended to crash into me, but Jason didn't let it go."

Jameson was less harsh than he could have been. "I have a student with possibly a broken jaw in my office. I have to say you are probably mistaken. There's a long documented history here of violence. And of other problems."

"So it seems all the more that he shouldn't be harshly punished if he's done something positive. Quite frankly, this is the first time in this school I've experienced

some sense of right and wrong between students and teachers. What message would we be sending if we expelled him?"

I risked a direct look at your face. I couldn't tell by your voice what you were getting at. Jameson was thinking hard too. I was waiting for him to set you straight and tell you more about me. But you were working on him in some way that I couldn't figure out yet.

Jameson lowered the clipboard and dropped his arms. You suddenly realized you were holding the ruler you used to rap on the desk to get students' attention and you quickly set it on the table. It didn't make sense. What was in it for you? Jameson's eyes swept the room, taking inventory of the faces. Broken desks were upturned at the back of the class, a couple of textbooks were lying open on the floor and the teacher's gray stapler had been kicked under a desk.

"They have a lot of energy." You smiled bravely. "They're reading quietly now."

Only because the big man is here, I thought. The rest of the time chaos had full reign. This was why the kids never listened to you, or thought they had to.

You shrugged, then winced and rubbed your elbow up to your shoulder.

"You should get that looked at," Jameson said. He tapped the papers but still didn't go.

"I'm fine," you said brightly. "I always feel better about rewarding good intentions."

"Hmm." He scanned the room, counting the number of regulars in his office. Then he remembered something that alarmed him. "Yes," he coughed. "Sorry. It's Jennifer, right?"

"I prefer Jen."

"Jen. Well, I've been meaning to come in and check on things. Ask how it's going."

Your voice shifted in pitch. "It's going... okay. There's lots I have to learn. But we're getting to know each other, gradually, and the classes are settling in. I had to do a new seating plan this week, but I think it's working."

"You have many challenging students here. They need clear direction."

You managed a wan smile.

He continued, "I try to make a habit of dropping in to new teachers' rooms, especially in September, but the weeks have gotten away from me. Too many administration meetings right now, even about the future of this school. More cutbacks, I'm afraid." He ran his fingers through his hair. "But I should have made time. I apologize for that."

A slight shadow crossed your face but you nodded. Then you recalled something. "I was wondering. Any news about those extra shelves from the library? Maybe... what if... Jason could do his detentions in here and help me assemble them."

Jameson frowned. "I'll have to see about that."

"Give him an opportunity to help."

"Perhaps we can try it but I'm not making any promises, for now." But I could hear in his voice that something had changed.

I didn't know how or why you did it. There was no cause. No reason for you to stick your neck out. And Jameson felt guilty about something. Probably being too busy and not watching out for things again. But it meant I didn't have to spend my afternoons with Dirk and other idiots in detention, or worse, my days at my father's house. I also felt a quickening of spirit from having been on the money about you choosing to see the fight as me making things right. It showed you still thought students actually noticed teachers, or cared. But I couldn't help admitting to myself that it sure as hell helped me. What really baffled me was why Jameson was playing along. He wasn't that worried about Dirk. And he knew way too much about me. What was in it for him?

Before I had time to wonder, Jameson pointed his index finger at me and said in a very different tone, "You. Let's go."

Chapter 4.

Mid-October

Most boys my age didn't want to admit it but they knew they'd end up just like their fathers. They would leave school at sixteen and do what their dads did during the day, which was mostly working in the mill and afterwards getting drunk and shooting up whatever they thought they could hit. It seemed everybody's dad had a pickup truck and the boys talked endlessly about roll bars, CB radios, mag tires – the bigger the better. The boys craved being taken along, driving off road, the attention seemingly on picking a good site, a rough enough terrain, and seeing how the truck handled itself, but really it was about spending hours together, getting there, getting back and talking about it all the while. If the dads were in a good mood, the boys might even get a chance to drive a bit.

Sometimes I'd see them gather in the field where the ravine began to level out, half a mile from our house. By all rights, I could have been down there with them. But if my old man recognized them, he wouldn't have wanted me messing around with that crowd. My father had a way of keeping them from roaring up and around our hill at 2 a.m. More than a few times he had taken a keen pleasure in firing potshots to see how close he could come, and for a long time they hadn't been back our way.

My father's pride was such that he often repeated that he had never set foot in a mill and he never would. He also had never had a regular job since I could remember. There was no security of a regular paycheck but the way he saw it was that at least he was not going soft and he'd never been under a foreman or anyone else. He had chosen long ago to be lean and hungry, but living free, staying strong by living off his wits. No guaranteed meals and growing retirement funds but no chain chaffing his neck. My father also never drank when he was working on something. His reward for a good con was a shot of Jack Daniels, not his motivation.

In my school, most of the millworkers' sons took shop. If you asked the boys honestly, they'd probably say they didn't really mind a future like their dads', but it was

their dads who urged them to try for what they had been unable to do. Getting papers in high school towards being a welder, mechanic or electrician was to open a door towards one of the few skilled professions connected to the mill. In reality most of these boys would have to do time as loggers first, because they would be unable to get to the mill on time, or do a day's work with a hangover or a broken hand. With age, they would get nasty enough and desperate enough so they could eventually give in to the discipline. Or they would keep drinking and not be good for anything.

I knew their home lives weren't all that good. Dirk Mackenzie's family all drank and he came to school regularly with welts across his back. I heard his brother put Dirk's head through a door once. He often called himself "stupid", and with enough reinforcement of that at home, he probably believed it. Todd Efridge didn't think Dirk was stupid though; Todd's dad had gone to see the rodeo in Prince George when Todd was five and never came back. To Todd, the fact that Dirk knew anything about hunting and fishing and how to build fires in winter, meant Dirk was initiated into something Todd was not. Having no one to take him under his wing, even if it meant getting a beating from time to time, made Todd desperate, desperate to fit in, to belong to something that seemed to define masculinity and it made Todd both nervous and annoying. Boys who came to school scarred and frustrated vented on Todd and Todd willingly took on the role of runt to get their attention. None of it was fair and none of it was good, but it lessened the pain and fear of being powerless to control the speed and direction to where it was all heading.

I took shop because I could work with tools and because Alvarez let the guys figure out what was what. Ironically, it was the one class where the boys didn't get into fights. Mr. Alvarez was also the detention teacher and he knew shop was the one place these boys, especially the lost ones, belonged. He had that odd formality about him, maybe because the Spanish accent slowed his speech, yet he was tolerant of the students as if it were the only way to be. It felt like a place to breathe, where nobody was going to get in your face, and there was no more need for brawling, lies and betrayal. I usually sat by myself and zoned out, listening to my Walkman. My hands vibrated with hammers and lathes, sanders and drills, but my head could be empty.

This feeling of refuge was also felt by the staff. Teachers wandered down on their free blocks, the pretense being to get a coffee in Mr. Alvarez's plexiglass-enclosed office and supply room, but maybe it was a need for some relief from other people jerking their strings as well. This left the boys mostly unsupervised, but they knew enough not to abuse Mr. Alvarez's trust. I was spending more time than usual in shop anyway. After my fight with Dirk, things had worked out that I did lunch detentions in shop, while doing after school detentions in your room.

My electrical outlet quit halfway through the block and I had to change tables to the one closer to the plexiglass office door. Mr. Alvarez and Mr. Sennick were sitting there, arguing about the possibility of the school closing. The batteries on my Walkman quit and I wasn't listening in on them but I couldn't help but hear. My head felt comfortably blank as I waited for the iron to heat up again. On the floor I'd spotted a blue plastic man with a parachute pack and I was figuring out how to solder some metal around him.

Sennick's voice had that familiar challenging tone, as if he doubted the validity of everything anyone said. He was on the side that insisted shutting down our school would be a good thing.

"We've only got two hundred students, grades eight to twelve," he was saying. "It's just not economical for them to update the school, heat the building and pay such a small staff here."

Alvarez spoke in his gentle but droning voice, "Pardon me, Lee. But the school is the cornerstone of the community. It is history from generation to generation and we have an intimacy of a small school in a small town."

"History! These kids need to get free of their history. Get out. Get a bigger picture of the world, shake them up out of what they know."

"You are forgetting the other economics? Driving a bus back and forth to Williamstown everyday? What will that cost? Almost three hours round-trip and five days a week. And some of the kids in the northlands already have a half hour drive to

get to the first pick up point. How many extra hours a day is this? Being away from their families.”

“That’s just what I’m saying! “ Sennick continued. “Get them out, mix them up with more diverse kids, more academic kids. Williamstown is more affluent, there’s more happening too. Plus, even you have to admit this, the school has a swimming pool, and a gym three times the size of ours. More sports would be good. Not to mention a proper PE teacher. Their science lab is light years ahead of ours in equipment. Who knows? Maybe Pike’s Mill could produce a graduate who doesn’t go into the lumber yards. Give them something to think about, some competition. There’s more to life out there than smashing up cars and sawing logs.”

“Opportunity is good, but not at the cost of losing a sense of security and belonging. So many of them are fragile and miss school due to family problems – ”

“They miss school because they don’t come.”

“Well, more pressure is also not the answer. We could lose them altogether. The only way is to make it as easy as possible for them to come to school every day.”

I wouldn’t be in school after this year so I didn’t care what happened. Some kids would enjoy riding the bus, as long as they could get high, while others would just stop going. This conversation was typical. Alvarez wanted to go easy and Sennick hard. The only thing they had in common was a love of soccer and hockey. Alvarez had such low expectations he never got upset. With him, even when there were losers he always found something to console them. Sennick, on the other hand, had to focus on winning, and the more punishment he could dole out on the way to that goal, the better. Men like him, including my father, seemed to feed off proving themselves to others. Every time they could force their views on someone else, they redoubled their certainty that their way was the only way.

Sennick said, “So you think the Brazilian players got signed based on taking it easy? It’s only through hard work and a true spirit of competition that they got where they are today.”

“Ah, but you are talking about young people who have opportunities and strong support for their ambition.”

“Exactly why our students need to get out of here!”

“But it is never right to take students away from their families.”

That depends on the family, I thought.

Alvarez said, “I deeply regret, Lee. We must agree to disagree.”

Then they both laughed and turned to talking about the World Cup and Maradona. I tilted my head so the plume of white smoke coming off the iron cleared my face and that’s when I saw you walk in. I had goggles on and you didn’t see me. You were carrying what looked like an official school form and you knocked politely on the glass wall before Alvarez asked you to sit down. I didn’t hear you reply but you didn’t leave. Curious, I angled myself so I could take a look out the side of my goggles.

“Yes, yes, Mr. Mackenzie and Mr. Effridge,” Mr. Alvarez said with a sigh. He ticked the paper with his fingernail and set it aside.

“The usual suspects,” Mr. Sennick said. “What did they do this time – no let me guess. Did someone finally go through a window?” Mr. Sennick’s Social Studies class was across the hall from your English class and he sometimes came in when things got too loud or he could hear chairs colliding with the wall. But since last week he had started closing both your doors at the start of every class.

You blew your nose. The other teachers didn’t say anything. They waited while you cleared your throat. “Could you please sign this form?”

Mr. Alvarez held up his hand. “Of course. Please tell us what happened.”

You waited a moment then said, “This morning Dirk knocked out Travis’s front tooth with his knee. It was...unbelievable! And they both said they were ‘just goofing around’. Sorry for the sarcasm... I guess it’s been a bad day. Well, when I think about it, there seem to be a lot of bad days, actually. These boys...” You stopped and looked at them.

“Please continue, Jen.”

You searched to find some words. “I know it’s going to take some time and eventually... but they just won’t listen to me! And it’s not just these two. The whole class gets out of control... at times. I’m up there, explaining to them, reasoning with them, even cajoling. But they not only don’t think about what I’m saying, they ignore me!” You blew your nose again. “It’s just that I have to be such a ... bitch. From the time they come in till the final bell, I have to harden myself and be suspicious and negative and just unyielding if I want any hope of getting through the class. I can’t be nice, or, oh my god! They walk all over me.” You leaned forward in your chair, laying the flat of your palm on your chest. “It’s just that, you know, I want to be nice to them. I want them to know I’m someone who is willing to understand them. I have good things to give them, but it’s like, I can’t let it show.”

“Well, that’s because you’re basically dealing with animals,” Mr. Sennick sat back in his chair and crossed his arms, but Mr. Alvarez frowned at him.

You didn’t register his words, your own were coming out in such a rush. “I feel – frozen inside, hardened – dead in class. I know I have to toughen up to deal with them, all their insults and disrespect. And I know it’s because they’re immature. But what really gets me is that they don’t see me as a person. I don’t exist as an individual for them.”

Mr. Alvarez said, “Yes, the beginning of the year is not easy. Any new beginning is blind and you are just finding your way.”

You added quickly, “It’s not all the kids, of course.”

“Of course,” Mr. Sennick snorted. “It’s just all the kids in your class. The newbie tends to get the worst kids to start off with.”

“Not all the kids, that’s true, Jennifer,” said Mr. Alvarez.

Mr. Sennick snorted again, but Mr. Alvarez held up his hand. I thought about this for a second. It seemed tough that a new teacher would have to learn how to teach while having all the worst kids in the grade in her classes.

You went on. “It’s just the ones who are resistant to cooperating. They don’t even care if I’m forming a bad opinion of them. When they are all together like that – why do they hate me? The force of it almost scares me. They don’t seem to have a conscience.”

Mr. Alvarez said, “Remember that they can be like that to each other as well.”

You let your hands drop to your lap. “Oh! I know. But it can be dangerous. Today it was. Dirk might have broken Travis’s skull. A few other students were caught in the melee as well. God. I feel like I will never be able to teach unless they can learn to restrain themselves. They are so extreme! I’m not joking. It feels like it’s me or them sometimes. Maybe that sounds dramatic but it feels like I’m living in some literary work where the theme is good vs. evil, playing out in my classroom. And right now I’m asking myself if good can win out. Why all this violence? What is their problem, anyway?”

I wondered where you had come from then, and how you didn’t know what to expect about teaching in schools. I was thinking, this is just the way it is, and you better get used to it. Nothing was going to change anything.

Mr. Alvarez chose his words carefully. “This is not an academic school, Jennifer. It’s more challenging than that, even if we’ve taught in other places. There is a point where we all have to decide how we will handle the more difficult students.”

Mrs. Larousse came in and poured a coffee. “What’s up?”

Mr. Sennick said, “Jen’s just discovered the savages are unteachable.”

“Oh.” Her chair scraped on the floor. “Well, it’s good to find out early.”

Mr. Alvarez counted on his fingers. “There are several approaches teachers adopt. For instance, you can focus on classroom management solely for a few months and then slowly add curriculum. In this case, you will always have to be willing to drop curriculum when problems arise. When the students know that, they may give up misbehaving. Homework will be your main form of instruction in this stage for the students who are capable of doing it. Then there’s a method where you accept what you can do with some of the students and you remove the difficult students, either to special

desks in corners, tables, the hall or the office. Many end up in my shop class where they tend to calm themselves. I can tell you, Jennifer, if you need to do that, don't hesitate."

"Oh. Thanks."

Mr. Sennick sat forward, giving you a hard smile, with his arms still crossed. "Well, Mr. Alvarez is trying to giftwrap you something to think about. Which is fine. No disrespect meant, Marco. But maybe it's time to talk turkey. Roll up our sleeves a little. It's true. You can't be nice. It's never worked for me. But if I set a strong presence in the room and give very little when they start to push, accompanied with clear and consistent rules, then they don't keep pushing. Simple as that. If I see something starting up, I don't wait to find out what it is or give them the benefit of the doubt; I'm dealing with it immediately. Sure, some kids are innocent and they might get bruised, but most of the time they're not. Sometimes they get their nose out of joint. But the upside is that you get a reputation as someone not to be messed with. Eventually, they will fall in line. They get used to it. After that, the first threat of punishment is enough and I don't have to work through increments of increasing punishment."

Mr. Alvarez said, "Thank you, Lee. This is your particular method and it works well for you. But we must remember, for Jennifer, what works for one teacher may not work for another. Lee's is a very tough stance that not all teachers can adopt."

You said, "Yeah, it does seem harsh to me. I already feel like a witch half the time. I'm not sure I could keep that up day after day."

Mr. Sennick said, "Well, I'll put it bluntly for you then. You've got to start somewhere. They're out of control. We've already had four weeks of school. The kids in your class don't have any sense of boundaries. Better drop a bomb on them now rather than let them run roughshod all over you and lose the whole year."

I couldn't stand the sound of Sennick's voice and I was thinking about moving tables again. But I was curious if Alvarez was going to let him bully you. Alvarez hated any kind of conflict but you were on his territory and had come to his office for help.

Mr. Alvarez put his hand on Mr. Sennick's arm.

But Mr. Sennick said, “No, no, let me finish. There’s an important point here. This is painful because your fantasy stage is ending. Let’s face it – when you’re in your teacher education program, you have a dream of what your teaching is going to be like. Happy students arriving on time, prepared for class and eager to learn. It’s a shock, right? Well, welcome to reality.”

I searched your face to see if you were offended. Mr. Sennick was smiling like hell and I was pissed at him for you.

Mr. Alvarez interjected quickly. “We don’t need to put it in those terms, Lee. Jen must search for a way for herself to be a teacher. She’s indeed had a vision of herself, maybe based on other good teachers that she’s known and patterned herself after. But there are still quite a few intermediary steps she needs to master before she can approach those levels of teaching.”

Mrs. Larousse set down her coffee cup. “Well, if I can add my two cents. Lee is an expert teacher.” She tilted her head at him. “And for you, this is the beginning of really having to figure things out, Jen. You’re probably getting exhausted now. Prepping and marking are taking up your whole life, and you are sacrificing your weekends. You’ve told me that a few times already. You need to do your best, of course, especially for the principal’s observations. But you also need to take time out. Teacher burn out is the biggest factor in teachers, well...” She looked at Mr. Alvarez. “How shall we say? Disillusionment? You need to remember it’s just a job and your life goes on. Replenish your energy and continue to enjoy things. Pursue your interests.”

You said, “I guess. I mean, I know that. It makes sense. But I can’t think of anything else right now. I’m obsessed with it because I feel like I’m doing it so badly.”

Mr. Alvarez said, “You’re not doing badly.”

“Don’t worry,” Mrs. Larousse said, stirring her coffee. “You’ve got plenty of time. And everything will come eventually with experience. You’re being too hard on yourself.”

Mr. Alvarez added quickly, “Finding this new identity is part of the struggle to become a teacher. And, we must admit at times it is a struggle. You are who you are

but you are trying to fit that personality into the role of the teacher. What kind of teacher will you be? What kind of teacher can you be?"

You said cautiously, "Well, I do know I can't be a bitch but I also can't be laid back and let it wash over me."

Mr. Alvarez said, "No, you don't want to just let it happen. Part of what Yolande is saying is that you do learn with experience. In the meantime, you will be actively seeking that identity."

You put your fingers to your temples. "So what is it then? I have to be harsh and knuckle them under, or I should just relax and count on things working out in the long run? Aren't these two different things? Sorry, I'm really tired."

The three other teachers sat in silence. I was still thinking about the contradiction you just pointed out. Mr. Sennick was the kind of teacher the kids hated for his punishing, condescending attitude but kids hated Mrs. Larousse somehow more.

You sighed and sat back in your chair. "Well, that's so much about me. Sorry to go on about my problems." You brushed back your hair and tried to smile. "But it's really about them, isn't it? If we are speaking frankly, then it could be the case that so many of them don't seem capable of learning. Not very academic, as you say. But there's a part of me that can't accept that their minds are already closed, that their lives are set out. If I don't try with them then I don't know who I am or what I'm doing here. I can't live in a world where it's not possible to make things better. I'm just ... surprised, I guess. They just don't seem open. They don't believe that it's possible to learn something that could change their lives. That this could make them take control of their own lives."

The other teachers considered this for a moment. I set down my soldering iron and risked a full view at their faces through my goggles. They looked bored but were trying to be respectful and take an interest. My hands were still working the metal under the soldering iron but your voice was echoing in my head. Sennick and Larousse were on opposite ends and Mr. Alvarez was somehow mediating, but you were talking about something else.

You added, "There's something inside every one of them. It's just about finding the right way to reach them. As people as much as students. They haven't realized yet that they might actually want to be rescued from the nothingness pressing down on them."

Your words were like a striker, scrapping across the hard metal of my mind. These words sparked together, and I suddenly understood them, but I had never heard them spoken aloud before. They meant something more in my guts than in my head. The teachers were still sitting there though; Larousse sipping her coffee, Sennick with his arms crossed. Nobody had noticed anything. The other boys were still chatting at tables or playing cards on the couch in the corner. I slowly looked down at the metal fragments I had melted together without really thinking. All the scrap pieces had coalesced into a rough looking creature with spiky armour. I picked it up and examined it from different angles, deciding it looked like something from the earliest stages of evolution. I gave it a shake to see if it would hold together.

At that moment, the bell rang and as one all the teachers all looked up.

Mr. Alvarez pressed the tips of his fingers together. "I hoped we helped in some small way, Jen."

"Oh, yes, thank you." One by one, chairs slid across on the floor.

"And, I'll get back to you on this report," Mr. Alvarez said, pointing at the papers on the table.

You and Mrs. Larousse walked out of the office as I was standing up. You saw me and said hello. My head twitched and normally I would have looked away. But without knowing why, I felt obligated to acknowledge you. Involuntarily, I gave you a nod, and you smiled. Then Mrs. Larousse stepped between us and moved you towards the door.

She spoke over her shoulder to you, "It gets better, Jen, honestly. There are always bad days but then all of a sudden the balance shifts and then there's more good than bad." She cupped her hand over her mouth and added in a low voice, "To be honest, people will offer advice but in the end you're on your own. It's better to think of it

like that. Don't make the mistake of asking for too much help if you want to get hired back here next year. It's really sink or swim."

Chapter 5.

Late October

Over the weekend my father brought me along to a couple of car dealerships outside Edmonton. I knew he was scouting out the right sort of lot, one in an area surrounded by mechanics' garages rather than retail shops. The backseat of the Mustang had open Yellow Pages with businesses circled in red and corresponding sticky tabs on local maps. My old man had his method, that's for sure; precise planning combined with an instinctual awareness of how best to exploit any weakness. On a Sunday, only the dealership would be open and not many other people would be around. After he found the right place, we circled the block, found a locksmith not too far away, then went back to the dealership. My father had settled on a beaut of a truck – a Dodge Ram, fully loaded – and once he'd decided, we moved ahead.

He didn't spend much time talking to the guy; I knew he wouldn't be worried about some salesman with his belly hanging over his belt and a hiccupping laugh. The guy was almost ready to go home to his Sunday dinner. My father did the test drive, copied the key and had it back in less than half an hour. Nothing amiss. But after they closed, I had to go back. I wasn't happy about walking over, even with sunglasses and hood over my head, into the lot. I had seen the cameras up on the showroom rooftop, pointing all over. There was even barbed wire up on the surrounding walls. All that was missing was a guard in a tower. I kept weighing what was worse, getting caught stealing the truck or going back to the Mustang without it.

I sat in the car thinking about this for a second too long.

"What are you waiting for?"

Another option, I thought to myself. Right now there were only two – rejecting or going along with my father's plan. The first choice would get me a serious beating and the thought had occurred to me lately that in my father's eyes I might even be expendable. He'd been going off more and more on his own, meeting some friend and

doing business themselves. I'd noticed the suspicion in his eyes and I tried to hide my hesitation. His rising anger was palpable and he turned in his seat.

"You gonna paint it?"

He sat back. "I don't know yet."

"The roll bars, the cab spotlight..."

"I know, I know. I'll work it out. Now get the hell out of the car!"

Avoiding a fight was definitely the lesser of two evils and I set aside trying to find another choice. It was always like that. I always seemed to arrive at this same point. One look, one sudden movement in my direction from him was enough. Shut up and put up. Discussion was out of the question.

In the end, they had pulled the truck into a closed area and my father was pissed enough about that. He seemed to think my hesitation had somehow brought it upon him. Once he had gotten that truck in his sights, it became a part of who he was, the only thing that meant anything to him. It was a matter of pride that he have it.

It almost surprised me that Monday morning I was back in school and not in an exercise yard. I had your class second block and kids were drifting in after the bell. Dirk and Lacey were arm wrestling and the girls had moved to a safe distance where they sat putting on make up or braiding one another's hair. You moved group to group, asking them to settle down when suddenly Mr. Sennick was there. His voice rattled the lights and all other sound ceased. Caught off guard, your face went white and he stood a moment and glared at you. Then the windows seemed to suck inward as the door swung hard and slammed. You didn't deserve that. I saw the crimson flush rise up from your neck. I remembered from the conversation with Alvarez that you took that kind of thing hard inside yourself.

Many of the students read for a bit, mostly out of fear of Sennick coming back, but then slowly a few voices broke out and the noise level started to climb again. Just as suddenly as Sennick had burst in, you leapt to your feet and shouted at the class.

“That’s enough! When I ask you to read, I mean in silence!”

“Okay, okay,” someone said.

“No, it’s not okay. You be quiet!”

A few students made faces but they didn’t continue to talk. The rest of the class was pretty subdued and you only raised your voice a couple more times.

The next day you seemed even more changed. You weren’t smiling or talking to students when they came in. No one was gathered around your desk. I saw you between blocks talking to Sennick in the hall. The day after that you walked in with your chin down and your face seemed pinched. The gestures you made with your hands that made them look like birds in motion all stopped, while the air you walked on deflated so your footfalls rapped on hard concrete. Instead your arms seemed immovable and you remained standing at the front of the room. There was no talking allowed; no one could get up from their desks. You replaced activities with more silent reading and then we answered questions on worksheets. Bathroom breaks were out of the question and you yelled at quiet Lisa Smithers for dropping her pencil. I was hearing words and phrases out of your mouth that I’d heard all my life, in school and out, and recognized the tone all too readily. I sat back in my desk and zoned out.

The late October sunshine out the window was shrinking and the wall I slouched against was getting colder. Just like at home on our hillside, I noticed signs that animals were preparing to survive the dark months. They’d had their run of warmth and light and now it was time to face the inevitable deep winter. The heaters in the school were already on and kids kept their jackets on during class in case there was a pulled fire alarm. The wind chill could cause frostbite in ten minutes. Everyone sensed that fatigue that came with the drop in temperature, that feeling of having to expend extra energy just to meet the elements. Psychologically, each person had to come to that point where they realized the only thing to do was to try and endure it.

“Miss Brighton, what’s wrong?” Todd asked directly.

You crossed your arms and gave off a “huh”, which did more to exude disgust and anger than any explanation could, and made Todd seem stupid and shallow at the same time. You had drawn a line and it was immovable.

At the end of class you wouldn't let a few of us go because we hadn't finished the worksheets. You sat and stared, waiting. Then Sennick came in and surveyed the scene.

He nodded, “Oh, yes, that's better. They'll start to get it after a while. This isn't a popularity contest.” To you he added, “You're getting it now. After a few days like this, they'll realize it's less trouble to do the work and behave than to go to the office and lose free time.” He smiled fiercely at the group of us. “It's just too bad we can't whip you anymore. Tragic the day they outlawed corporeal punishment.”

I knew his tires had been slashed more than once in the school parking lot and he was carpooling with Mrs. Larousse these days. Someone had even taken a beaker of acid from the Chem lab and poured it on his briefcase. I always wondered what might happen if us boys came across him after dark, alone. Lacey, who didn't fight as much as the rest of us, described in detail his fantasy about taking Sennick on in a knife fight, and even once hung around the ice rink, just playing it out in his mind. For Sennick and bullies like him, it wasn't about them getting people to do what they wanted as much as their need to get and keep the upper hand. People often say it's out of a hunger for respect, but at the core, it's a love of cruelty and the powerful feeling that it brings. It made me uncomfortable to admit it was probably because it was what they were used to themselves in their upbringing. The reward of successful bullying is control, absolute control. It makes the world more simple for them, while it's the variables that drive them mad. As soon as people are involved, there are complications, and things inevitably go wrong. My father would just as soon work and live alone but he was always caught between needing money and needing to enhance his self-opinion through having others reflect back to him how much smarter he was than other people. They went hand in hand; if he had money, he felt smart. But he needed a witness, and that was the catch. He often had to involve other people to get that money and it was his rage at their incompetence that usually drove him to control everything else.

By week's end your personal detentions after school had worn themselves out. Dirk and Todd talked openly in the back or slept at their desks. I could feel your agitation; you started marking papers but then would stare off into the distance. All the while you were chewing the inside of your cheek. I wondered what was bothering you, now that Sennick was openly praising your discipline methods. Over the last few weeks I had installed the shelves Jameson got you from the library, and now sitting below them, I unconsciously flipped through some of the novels I had stacked for you. I tried to figure out what they were about based on their titles, the ones I knew you'd bought with your own money at yard sales. Sometimes I read the first few pages to find out what the picture on the cover meant. You said every English class needed its own library, but I didn't see how the books were going to last more than a couple of weeks. Already I'd seen them tossed in the rubbish bin in the courtyard.

At 4 p.m. Mr. Jameson came in. Dirk and Todd opened their books and all chatter ceased. They both switched on their Walkmen; I turned mine off but left the headphones on.

"Hello, there. Marco Alvarez and I were just talking about you," Jameson said jovially.

You let his words hang in the air a minute.

"How are things going? Do you mind?" He pulled up a chair by your desk.

You shrugged. "I've been trying some new things. Implementing some new rules, following through."

I looked more closely at your face. You still weren't smiling and your voice sounded like you were reading a report.

The principal adopted a sober tone. "I noticed you sent a couple of kids out to the hall and I spoke to the ones you sent to the office."

"Yup, no more nonsense. Zero tolerance. If this is the way it has to be to do some teaching, then so be it."

I was feeling like I was in Sennick's class twice a day now, your words sounded so similar, but without needing to keep track of the physical menace. Your class was predictable and I wondered why Jameson was visiting you if he could see you were on the right track.

"It's true," Jameson said, "that you sometimes have to use severe methods to get things to go in the right direction – for a while. But these students should be in the school's detention now, with Alvarez." He looked over his shoulder and Dirk, Todd and me. "You need to prep at the end of the day and collect your thoughts. Not keep up the discipline. "

You tugged a lock of hair out of your eyes and crossed your arms.

Jameson asked. "What other types of things are you doing to improve classroom management?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think it's getting better. They'll start to get the message soon."

"Or...not."

"Well, the kids who can work are doing their lessons in class. Others are finishing it as homework or spend time after school, sitting. I don't see what the problem is – this all seems pretty normal."

"What else?"

"What else is there? They lose points if they don't do the work, get moved if they talk or misbehave. Or, go to the hall, the office. And stay during lunch or after school. Cut and dried. My next step is to recommend they be suspended from the sports teams."

"Is this helping?"

"For some. We'll see."

"Jennifer, what kind of a class do you want to have?"

You laughed dryly. “Well, that’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because!”

“Because...?”

“They are so...resistant! These boys can’t keep their hands to themselves for five minutes, let alone a class. Every time I turn around someone is punching someone else. Then it gets serious, someone gets hurt and there’s almost a brawl.”

“So, what kind of a class would you like to have?”

You rubbed your temples. “Does it matter? It’s out of reach. I don’t even know anymore. I always thought the best classes were those where the students were really engaged, learning, but also having fun. There was a warm feeling. It seemed like everybody cared and everybody was happy. What is it here? Nobody gives a damn. So I’ll do what I have to do. End of story.”

“This was during your student teaching, I’m assuming. Right now you don’t have a mentor teacher in the room to back you up. Another reason is the students are still testing you. You are a very nice person. Conscientious, hardworking and caring, Jennifer, but you are still discovering who you are as a teacher. This is all part of the process. But what you don’t want to do is give up being who you are in the meantime in order to have a quiet classroom. Jen, can you see a way to strike a balance?”

You thought a moment and I saw you breathe deeply and stretch your shoulders. Jameson was asking you some tough questions but you seemed to be relaxing. Then idea crossed my mind that he was going to fire you and I was afraid you didn’t see it coming.

Instead you were lost in your thoughts, talking to yourself. “That’s what I’ve been thinking about all day. But how can I do that? Any compromise usually means they take advantage of the situation and win. I give them an inch and they take control. Today I had a couple of kids stay after because they wanted to know more about a poem. So

then I thought, maybe I could be tough with the class as a whole but be kind and encouraging to individual students?”

“That might work. It’s definitely a step in the right direction. You don’t want to withhold those good qualities in yourself and what you love about teaching. It’s a pyrrhic victory if you have absolute control but no happiness for you or them.”

“No. I see it crushes them. And, I do a lot of damage to myself.”

Jameson sat forward in his chair and I wondered that you didn’t see what he was doing. It was like my father chatting up some woman in a bar, pretending he was listening, interested in her. You were coming back to yourself, talking like yourself again. And Jameson wasn’t aware of anyone else in the room listening, either. He kept going along the same lines, asking you questions.

“Okay, talk about that a bit. What happens when you crush them?”

“They hate me! And, I hate them for making me have to go to such extremes to get control. I can’t just use words or my voice and yell at them. I have to feel the anger in a physical way, in my whole body, to put enough force into it so they believe what I am telling them. Feeling that real anger is not good. It’s all a downward spiral because they know that I really... hate them then. God, I can’t believe I said that.”

“No, no, we’re having a real conversation right now. Any talk about power involves talking about fear and hatred, cunning and manipulation.”

Jameson was completely in earnest and his whole torso was bobbing with his head. Clearly, he was enjoying this. I wasn’t sure when he was going to strike, but I felt alarms going off in my head. I tried not to keep looking directly at the two of you but I slid back my headphones so as be able to hear better.

“It’s so awful. Like something has to die. It’s not so much innocence or naïveté, but everything I ever based my ideas about teaching on. That’s what I mean about doing myself damage. It’s ... almost not worth doing anymore, if it’s got to be like this. That’s so hard to admit. Especially after everyone has said how difficult the first year is. I know I can work so hard, I can be an expert in my subject area, I can be enthusiastic

and care so much, but they have to at least try a little. I can't help it. That's the way I feel. Otherwise it's all stupid and a waste of time. What a mockery! And I know I make the kids feel like that too."

It seemed like you were having a breakdown and no way should be exposing yourself like this. Jameson would go in for the kill at any moment, I was sure. I shifted in my seat, not wanting to call attention to myself, but wondering how I could warn you. You were telling way too much and it was going to get ugly.

Jameson's voice changed. "Okay. I'll share something with you. When I was a new teacher, I went in the classroom and worked up a sweat, writing all the math notes on the board, ones I'd written up so carefully the night before, clarifying each step and illustrating a beautiful proof. When I finished I turned around and expected to see all those enlightened faces copying it all down. No one was in the room! They had all silently stolen out while I was engrossed in the writing. As you could imagine, I was devastated. It became a joke in the school, even, painfully, among the other teachers. But that's when I got a big message – we're not like our students. We're not fifteen years old, not in high school. But we're also not uneducated, or have parents who never valued education or perhaps had little opportunity in their lives."

You cleared your throat. "I know I have to remember that."

"Teaching is not just about doing no harm, meaning not sexually abusing kids, or teaching biased information as fact. It's also about not abusing that power that comes with having authority over kids. We have the power to shape lives; we see kids every day and that has a big impact. It's not a profession like medicine, where a doctor sees someone once a year. We're teaching who we are. Our values. How to be in this world. It's a lot of responsibility."

"It's unethical to crush them."

The principal drew his breath and waited a moment before responding. Something big had just happened and I stared openly at your faces. What had stopped Jameson in his tracks – I hadn't a clue. But I was thinking that he wasn't that bad of a guy, once you got him away from all the school's problems and dealing with a parade of

idiots all day. That's the only way I knew him. Right now he seemed sincere, even hokey. But I couldn't get over the fact that he had had the chance to destroy you and didn't. It was like you had some power over him that I couldn't perceive. I also was wondering when he was going to remember the three worst idiots in the school were seeing him like this now. We all had a different picture of him and it would be harder for him to get us to take him seriously again, and really believe he took pleasure in bringing the roof down on our heads. Then I remembered he thought we weren't listening. Todd and Dirk's heads were bouncing with AC/DC and hadn't heard anything. Jameson had completely dropped his principal act now and he hadn't used his position or his advantage over you. And, you – you had opened yourself up so far. You didn't have any defences up. All I could think of was that you were going to learn a really hard lesson. This was definitely going to come back at you, if not now, then later.

The principal put his hand on your desk. "I should get back to my office. But just this: keep your ideals, just don't be personally offended if every kid in your class isn't there to drink in the wisdom of the ages. "

You smiled and sat back in your chair. I quickly lowered my gaze.

"Just refocus a bit," he added. "The kids haven't had the same benefits in life as we have, but they can all make progress."

"I do believe that," you said. "Thanks for that. I guess I have to admit teaching is so much more demanding than I thought. So, how do I find the strength to stand up to these challenging kids and not get disillusioned about teaching?"

A voice interrupted; the secretary on the public speaker. "Mr. Jameson, a call in the office. Mr. Jameson."

"That would be me." Mr. Jameson stood up. "I'm glad you understand the path of harsh discipline is not the right one for you. As for finding the strength, it comes with success. Every day you are becoming that person because you put a lot of time and effort into finding out who they are, examining what is happening in class and trying new ways of dealing with it. It's started happening already, Jen."

“So, this is about trial and error, then? Good, because I don’t think I can ‘join them to beat them’. I guess then I’ll just keep trying?” You smiled that bright, open smile where your eyes sparkled and the room lit up again.

Jameson said, “Absolutely. It is a lot harder than adopting one stance, one attitude. But you are naturally doing it. Well, good. I must go.” Then he remembered himself and frowned as he glanced my way on his way out.

Before I knew what I was doing, I let out a sigh. At the same time I realized how tense my arms, chest and back were and I shook out my hands. At that moment you looked at me. You cocked your head and I quickly looked away. I wasn’t ready to confirm that you knew something about me, or show myself like Jameson had.

You moved some papers around and told us that we could go. Dirk and Todd had been playing cards the whole time and had noticed nothing. I marked another sense of relief. They wouldn’t feel your words so keenly anyway, or recognize how you were struggling to find the strength to deal with us. Not be disillusioned. I wasn’t sure exactly what you meant by that but I felt it, again, in a gut sense. I’d been noticing that that had happened before; actually it happened often. Your words echoed and continued to come back to me after I left school. I was also noticing you talked more through your feelings than your thoughts. This was such a new idea that I spent a lot of time trying to understand it. There was something about your not understanding really basic things too. Things like you giving up so much of yourself to Jameson, not knowing you would pay for it later. But Jameson acting so differently with you. I tried to diminish it, deciding it was something people did in movies or the way little kids would talk, mainly because it didn’t fit in my world, the real world. But it stayed with me. I thought about all this as I left the school, then the town, and crossed onto the highway, walking against traffic. It wasn’t until I was almost at the turn to our driveway that for the first time I realized your voice was always with me now, talking with me inside my head.

Chapter 6.

Mid-November

Over the weekend I made myself scarce while my father worked in the garage, occasionally entering the house to take a phone call. He would yell at me to shut off the TV and then yell into the phone. I could tell he was putting together his next job and I only hoped it didn't involve me in a big way. He didn't want me helping with the welding or painting but he couldn't stand the sight of me hanging out in the living room doing nothing. I knew he'd be enraged, possibly to the point of hunting me down and teaching me a lesson, but I couldn't take it anymore. By late afternoon I fled the house, and hiked up through the woods to the high point of the ridge. It was the place I would always choose to go, picking up a track east of the house that ran parallel on the steep hillside through undisturbed stands of timber. The path rose and fell, depending on what obstacles blocked my way but the day was fine and a southerly wind rustled gently in the branches above me.

Snow stayed on the ground all the time now. I walked along in the slanted sun, heavily at first, putting a hand on each tree I passed. There were mostly spruce but I came into clearings where aspen and poplars had taken hold. Warblers' nests were empty now and no bird calls announced my approach. I stopped and noticed the changes since my last visit. In the unbroken silence, I remarked a few split trunks that must have come down in the recent storm and saw how rot and fungus already grew on the north side. Further along I spotted some fresh droppings and recalled the family of great horned owls in these parts of the slopes. I stopped again, to remind myself of details, mentally thinking about how I was looking all around, taking it in. I remained motionless until the chill made my feet ache and then I moved on. At points my footfalls landed on springy cushions of needles hidden by the snow and I began to feel more fluid the longer I walked.

I noticed a lot in myself, too. My legs were longer – and strong – I strode uphill and easily cleared any rocks or roots on the path. The cushiony floor bounced me forward and I started to move with greater ease. I instinctively knew how to angle

through the brush, keeping my balance, the sliding ice surprising me less. Deciding in a split second what would hold, what would give, I saw myself in my mind, moving as I was moving, invigorated by my prowess and the blood heating my muscles. I slipped into a kind of climbing run. I'd once seen a deer, darting through the trees at an impressive speed, not being able to fathom how it could pick its course with such agility, following no path, not knowing where the next trunk lay, or where a sharp stump might loom. Now I felt that the deer was so keenly aware of its being in the moment, exhilarated by its heightened senses, that it fused thought, feeling and action into one forward motion. Freedom from doubt and hesitation seemed to me the best way to be in this world.

Although my lungs were stinging in the crisp air, I didn't stop until I saw the open sky over the top of the ridge where the stone cap broke through. I slowed to listen, take on caution once again, and check for tracks. My back was clear but beyond the cluster of boulders I couldn't be sure. It was the place I always sought out lately, in my mind as well as in the forest, the goal at the end of my trek. I had to see more, know more, and contemplate what I'd seen here two years ago, just below in the crevice.

That winter had been particularly severe and the wolf population had thinned. When the bears came out of hibernation, there was competition for food. The lean and desperate wolves moved into forbidden territory. I'd come up on this ridge and looked down to see a wolf facing off with a bear. Later I thought the bear must have been protecting access to a food source and the wolf could smell it. I knew from my father's stories that there was a passage through the boulders to a good sized pond encircled by rockface, but you had to pass too close the bear's den to risk it. My father had claimed it suicide to attempt it, for man or beast.

Normally a timber wolf keep well off a bear and the only time you heard of wolves challenging a bear was in a pack. But this one was wary and quick footed. I stood and watched. The wolf's coat was matted and hung off its ribs, while the bear's fur was thick and round. I couldn't believe what I was seeing; a single wolf taking on a full grown black bear. Yet the wolf moved in closer.

Then the wolf came snapping at the bear, time and again, getting the bear riled. Save the roars and growls, the air in the forest cleared of sound. The bear forgot the precipice, and the wolf drove it backwards until the bear slipped and fell into the deep crevice. I'd never seen anything like it. More surprising, the wolf didn't seem to want the bear for food. I stayed and waited to see. The wolf stood panting for a long time, inching up to the edge of the drop, checking if the bear wasn't going to get back up.

I didn't see any tracks now and I slowly made my way up to the boulders. I knew nobody would believe me if I said I thought the wolf had fought the bear, not out of a desire to survive the unforgiving conditions that year, but because of a sense of unfairness. True, the wolf's family was starving, but the bear was denying the wolf's right to be there. The bear was exploiting its advantage and the wolf had to draw on other abilities. But what was more curious was the cunning, that the wolf had sensed how to get the bear worked into a lather, to distract it. Even though not matched in strength, the wolf could still put itself in the place of the bear and outwit it.

The edge was icy but I inched over to the place where the bear had tumbled and I took another look. I knelt and peered down to see if the furry outline still lay cold on the lower ledge. The shadow held too deeply now and I couldn't be sure. I wondered if the wolf ever came back to this spot, to do what I was doing, making sure its enemy was still dead. The monster holds such power that it seems supernatural in its vitality and malevolence. We are not at all convinced that it won't somehow rise up from the dead and make us pay.

I balanced myself with one hand on the rock ledge and stared into the crack in the mountain for a long while and thought about the laws of nature and the laws of men. To the north and east, a million trees spread out to the horizon. The sun would set, then rise; the winter would take hold, then thaw. The birds would return and the trees would share their secreted spaces. This was the way it was, all but for this one incident, insignificant but for the place it held in my mind. I peered further along the path to the vast regions I had not yet set foot in. Then the chill took me and I gauged the afternoon light was beginning to wane. Listening a few minutes longer, I then set back down the path, tracking my footsteps in reverse, carrying with me the thoughts that held me most often in their grip. How compelling it was to think there existed the possibility of escape,

with no repercussions. Not to have to give up that which was most precious about yourself, or that which you loved most in this world. Never again to be held in the trigger hairs of cold wrath.

Chapter 7.

Mid-November-2

Back at school on Monday, I expected another class of heavy silence and worksheets. I could see now that teachers learning to teach, parents learning to parent, a foreman learning to be the boss – it was all the same thing. They had to decide on what kind of tyrant they would be in order to get the job done. Once that was set, they worked on perfecting it for the rest of their career. Some women could kill you with kindness but it wasn't as effective as an angry man getting in your face. Still, the kids had learned to tune out because the teachers talked "at" you, and only when their tone heated up and started to take focus was it time to pay attention.

But this was a new week. You walked around the desks, speaking to several students about their weekend as you asked them to sit down. The front of the room was arranged differently, making more of a circle effect. At the bell you clapped your hands together and spoke forcefully.

"We're going to try something different. Derek, you're late but you can have a seat. Today it's your turn. If spelling and grammar are no use to you, then fine. Let's not waste our time. Let's find out what is most interesting to you and your lives. So, I want you to take a moment. Then you tell me – what do you want to learn?"

You seemed yourself again but less familiar at the same time. You had lost that rigidity and sharp expression but were also more teacherly and commanding. The room was unusually quiet and you quickly got the stragglers in chairs. "Okay. Let's hear it. What shall we learn today?"

Somebody yelled, "How to grow killer weed!"

You winced but smiled quickly. "That's one for Biology class. Think about it. This is your big chance. Anybody?" You waited. "Well, why not start big. Ask the big questions. You don't get much of that in school, I bet. But if you can't figure it out, you'll be lost. Some people may manage to get through their whole lives never thinking about

the big stuff, but maybe they're trying to avoid it because it's so hard to answer. But you guys are up to it. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Who will win the Stanley Cup?"

A few "yeahs!" went around the room.

"Dude, shut it."

You put up your hand. "If you have good ideas, you can join in. What kinds of questions am I talking about? Well, these are the questions that have been asked by really smart people for thousands of years, at least since the time of the Greek myths we've been reading. But anybody can ask or answer these questions. And you can't be afraid of what kinds of answers you might get. Okay, so let's first find the questions. Sometimes they're along the lines of, 'How shall I live my life?' Or, 'What is worth doing?' 'Who am I?' It's mainly to become aware that everybody gets to choose how they will live, or what kind of person they want to be. Even if it's just by avoiding things or not choosing anything at all. Remember, just letting things happen is also a choice. If you can admit the truth of that, then you are ready to see the next step and start making some decisions that lead in the direction you want to go."

I looked around the room. Dirk was sitting up straight in his chair and facing the front.

You didn't let anyone start chatting and continued. "I know you've often heard things like, you don't have to follow the crowd or do what your parents expect. These are choices, just like what kind of job you will choose. But the ancient questions are more about how you will be in the world. Inside yourself. What kind of person."

You walked briskly to your desk and picked up a green tin. "See this? Just to help you do some good thinking, I've got some homemade cookies here. Each person who contributes – and it has to be serious – will get a cookie, maybe two!"

Casey up front asked, "What kind of cookies are they?"

"Oatmeal chocolate chip."

“Hoo – hoo.”

Then you said, “Okay, so when I ask how you want to live your life, what I really mean is by which principles or values you want to live by. Or, turn it around. What qualities do you admire most in other people? How do they deal with things, treat other people? What do you think?” You rattled the cookie tin. “Can you smell them?”

I sat forward in my seat. A few others also shifted themselves around to face the front.

Then Casey raised his hand. “I like honest people. No bullshit.”

“Okay, good, ‘honest’. In what way honest?”

Casey thought. “Uhhh, you know. When somebody knows something that you don’t know but they don’t use it against you. They decide to help you instead. It’s like playing fair. They know that if they’re straight with you now, you’ll play fair with them down the road.”

“Okay, very good.” You held out the cookies and Casey took one. “So. Honesty. We could call this being fair, or being just. What is justice then? Can we choose to be just or fair? C’mon, cookies, cookies.”

Casey said, “They’re good!”

People were looking around the room. Something was happening. Dirk had a furrow in his brow and Travis and Peter were whispering. Lisa Smithers scratched her head and she was the smartest in the class. I was thinking about living without fear but that was not a quality or something you could choose.

You said, “Let me put it another way. Why should you be good?”

“Oh, I know,” Chris Tomkins said. “Because God wants you to.”

There was some laughter but you put up your hand. “No, that’s a worthwhile answer. That’s what many religions of the world teach. Chris gets a cookie. And let’s

look at that a little deeper. You can decide to be good for religious reasons but not everyone is religious. Yet most people aren't bad."

Dirk quipped, "You haven't lived in Pike's Mill long enough, Mrs. Brighton."

Only Todd laughed.

"Ms. Brighton." You added, "Most people don't go to church these days so they don't get to hear these big ideas about life anymore. But if you do read religious texts, there's a certain kind of reasoning. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Or, more primitively, 'An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth'".

I held this up to what I knew and I remembered my father saying that these were the most stupid people. They were so used to seeing the best in everything they couldn't bring them to see things the way they were. He also said there was no sinner like a relapsed believer and the only one you had to really worry about was a man on the brink of losing his faith.

Andy jumped in his seat. "Oh! Now I get it. I'll be good to you if you'll be good to me. It's like Casey said. We agree to make a deal."

"Yes! He gets a cookie. You made a good connection there. It is like an agreement or a social contract between people, or even between a group of people who agree to uphold certain rules for living."

"Rules are meant to be broken, Ms. Brighton!" Todd shouted.

"Okay, you have a point. Blindly following rules is also not good. They have to be seen more as guidelines that you have to adapt to each situation. I'll agree to a cookie for that one." You passed the tin to Todd. "But here's the kicker now. You know the rules, you know why you should agree with your neighbour to watch each other's back, but, what if...no one was watching? Nobody can see you and nobody will find out. Do you still have to be good? Maybe ... or maybe not. Let's say you find an envelope of money on your neighbour's driveway. You're pretty sure it fell out of his or her pocket getting out of the car. They don't know where they lost it, or that you found it. Is it okay

to keep it because you won't be caught? The point is, if nobody's opinion of you will change, do you still chose to do the right thing?"

"I'd say keep the money."

"Shut up, loser."

You said, "Peter, please come sit at the table here. So, you are saying in the reverse case, if you dropped your money, you would say it was okay for the finder to keep it. You would still have a good relationship with that person even through you both knew that you were the one who lost it, knowing now that you won't have enough money to feed your kids or heat your house. Hard luck, eh?"

"Hey, finders keepers."

That one seemed to make the most sense to me so far. There was no use fighting it; it was just the way it was. Deal with it or deal yourself out. The sooner you learned to accept life wasn't fair, the less pain would be coming to you. You also wouldn't seem stupid, looking around for someone or something to help you and make it right.

"Yes, and that leads to the related question: what if everybody did that? And another: even if nobody else knew you had taken something that didn't belong to you, how do you think over time you would start to see yourself? Would you think of yourself as an honest person, a good person? You have to admit to yourself that these kinds of things harm other people.

"I'd be a smart person!"

You continued, "How far is it to the next step then? Finding what is not yours is still passive. But what if you look for opportunities to take what is not yours when no one is looking? How much control do you have. 'I'll only do it this one time', you might tell yourself. But if you start to think like this, you start to look for ways to take advantage of people or situations. Okay, can you guys sit down in the back? Dirk, come over in the corner. But we're talking about how we are living our lives. All this adds up over time. You're going along, going along, not even thinking about it anymore. So now we're

coming to the big point. Even if these acts cause no one to think less of you, aren't you doing harm to yourself?"

I felt some currents cross in my mind. It occurred to me that by working to convince myself about the way things were, it also meant that I knew at the same time that I was struggling with it. If I accepted things as they were, then I wouldn't be arguing with myself about it all the time. It seemed now it was just a way of calming myself inside, getting through. But the fact remained that I was lying to myself. I couldn't deny it anymore. This unknown feeling welled up inside me and it was coming on stronger as I sat hard on my seat. It seemed clear all of a sudden that if I was going to lie to myself, then I was diminishing myself, maybe even denying something important about myself. There was no one to stop me here, from thinking differently; in fact, there was someone who might be interested. I balled up my fists and tried to slow time, think about what it meant.

Murmurs from other classes came to us through the door. The band was also practicing in the cafeteria. You waited a little longer then broke the silence. "There are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people who earn their money each day, are parents who take care of their kids, lead decent lives, don't think too much about the 'gray areas'. So what if people are tempted from time to time to cheat on taxes, or cut out of work early, and tell small lies. Does it matter? I still have a lot of cookies here."

"Ms. Brighton, you know the answer. Just tell us!"

"Tell you! That's the whole point. You have to be able to think for yourselves. Each of you has a good brain, with worthwhile thoughts. Don't let anyone tell you differently. Try hard, and think. These are hard questions, no doubt about it. But look how many good answers you came up with on the spot. Last question then. Isn't being false to yourself the worst thing you can do?"

I couldn't hold it in, the force was rising up out of my midsection, unstoppable. It brought a wave of heat up through my body and it reached my chest, my throat.

You added, "What happens when you don't care about being good? Don't you kill what's good inside yourself?"

Dirk complained, "You're making our heads hurt!"

"Yeah. Obviously there's a right answer."

My hand of its own will raised itself into the air. Someone elbowed his neighbour and slowly the whole class hushed and turned as one in their seats to look at me. Your words trailed off as you followed their line of attention, and your eyes widened as you saw me. Then you made an effort not to react. You nodded to me.

My voice was rough from not speaking. "You should be good, because it is – a living thing – inside yourself. You have to take care of it. Anything bad is like a poison that rots your – guts."

No one spoke and no one moved. They were thinking. Not about me, but about what I said. You recovered first and nodded again. You exhaled as you said, "Thank you, Jason."

My name hung in the air, echoing in my ears. Ja-son. Still no one said anything for a long moment. Then Casey said, "You forgot his cookie."

"Oh! Yes, of course. Good one. And Jason is right. Even if you are surrounded by all kinds of nastiness and corruption, you should be good for your own sake. Your self-opinion, or values are connected to self-respect, and this is what makes you, 'you'. It's so hard, but sometimes you have to stand up and be that one person who says, 'this is not right' or 'I don't agree with this'. But later you will be stronger inside. Even if no one else appreciates it or acknowledges it. Good job. Anyone else?"

I took the cookie and stared at it for a couple of seconds. It was the shape of a large medal, golden, with shiny black triangles arranged in an irregular pattern. I bit into the golden biscuit and the chocolate melted in my mouth. The taste was all I could think of. In all my memory, I couldn't remember experiencing anything more true or sweet in my life.

Chapter 8.

Early December

I only have vague memories of my mother. Sometimes I catch glimpses of her in the kitchen, bending over the stove or sitting in a rocking chair, sewing.

One time I recall more clearly was when she was seated in the parked car, her apron still on but her face in her arms crossed over the steering wheel. I seem to be viewing the scene from the grass below the open door.

I asked my father, "Don't you have a photo, or something that belonged to her, a ring, or even a comb?"

He laughed. "What good would that do. It wouldn't bring her back. Would it. Imagine if it could. Amazing. Maybe she could start doing the laundry, or clean the house for us."

The days now were much shorter and I came and went from school in inky darkness. You found some wood and paint and I slowly built cupboards and more shelves but when those tasks ran out you just asked the principal if I could stay and do my regular detentions in your room. I hadn't been fighting since I had been by myself after school, so he agreed. Teachers often drifted in. They got used to seeing me but often forgot I was there. You knew I was good at fixing and building things, and sometimes you asked if I could take a look at something. Other times, when I finished what you'd given me, I returned to my desk to find you'd left novels there. You didn't say anything and never asked me to read them, but I would scan the back covers and once in a while I started the first chapter.

One afternoon I was fixing your electric pencil sharpener and heard Mrs. Larousse's voice. When I'd been in the library dismantling shelves last week, Jameson at the staff meeting applauded you for all the good things you were doing in the school and especially for your creative ideas in the classroom. Alvarez congratulated you in front of the other teachers and then I noticed how Mrs. Larousse had stopped calling you

'the new girl' to Sennick and even dropped the condescending attitude when she spoke to you. But now I made a bet with myself, that her coming in your classroom at the end of the day could only mean one thing.

Larousse said, "Your room is looking good, Jen!"

You said, "It's coming along. I've got a lot of good help." You smiled at me.

Larousse didn't acknowledge me but continued. "I heard you are doing descriptive writing now. The kids are really enjoying it." She caught a glimpse of the papers on your desk and blurted out, "Yes, these are the stories. Oh, even ..." she tilted her head in my direction "...wrote one?"

"Yes. A very good one."

"Oh," Larousse raised her eyebrows. "Well, I was thinking. We could do some coordinated projects like that. When the kids are already engaged, it's so much easier. I don't have to motivate them and get them to choose topics. They already have one that they're working on. Then in my class we can get to the French translation that much more quickly."

"I find that they come up with ideas fairly easily, but I'm okay with the collaborating."

In class you let us spend more time discussing ideas and kids were even talking about what was said outside of class. Dirk and Travis had taken a shine to debating. They mainly argued about who was right but it was a different kind of arguing. You let kids come in at lunch and play cards. Casey even brought in a CD player and you said we could listen to music if the lyrics were okay. Other kids would come and do homework, and even come back after school, if they wanted more help. Even Dirk and Todd were working less at making your life miserable. Other teachers had noticed.

"Well, it is nearing the end of term. They should be coming up with their own ideas. Yet I know how much time you have for creating these lessons. Eventually, Jen, the idea is to get them to work more independently."

Here it comes, I thought. Just when you weren't expecting it. Larousse was never one to give a straight out compliment. She was sensing you were raising the bar for other teachers. Making them look bad. But then you surprised me.

"I find it's worth the extra effort to figure out what interests them most, work with them to find topics they like. Some students need a little extra structure or a clear prompt. But in the end they will produce much better assignments. That's what works for me."

"Aren't you forgetting the curriculum requirements?"

"Of course not."

"Well, you'll probably be glad in a few years that you experimented now because later you will lose all interest in these kinds of things. Experienced teachers move on."

Your face was coloring but up till now you were standing your ground. You probably knew you couldn't afford to make an enemy out of her. Then you caught me off guard and I started to listen more intensely.

Before Larousse could exit with the last remark, you called her back. "So, Yolande, can I count on you to go to the protest after the winter break?"

Larousse's laugh was cold. "I really wasn't planning on it. All your students wrote letters to the District Office, isn't that true? That was quite a step."

"Yes, but it's not enough. The protest is more active. Bodies out in front of the building. Signs, flyers. It shows that students, parents and teachers really care about a local education, and the quality of their children's education."

"Frankly, it seems strange to be talking about protests in our little community. It feels more like a big city event, oddly transported to little Pike's Mill."

"There won't be a feeling of a small community anymore if they kids get bussed sixty kilometres a day to another town."

Larousse's expression soured. "That sounds like Marco talking."

“And we should be setting an example for the students of challenging the government when we don’t like what they are doing.”

“We”?

“Look, I don’t know exactly what I’m doing, but yes, ‘we’ teachers. We have the benefit of more education, more worldly experience. It’s up to us to lead. Let the students, and perhaps their families, know that you don’t have to accept whatever happens because it comes from above. Don’t you agree with that much?”

“You can’t take credit for that idea, Jen. That’s Mr. Jameson talking. Personally, I’d love to move south. I go there every weekend anyway, to do shopping, take in a movie. You can even find a bigger variety of videos to rent. Suit me fine if the school here closed.”

You stared at Larousse openly as she rearranged her jacket and pulled off a few stray hairs. I could see Larousse was acting like she was not bothered. You hadn’t let her off the hook. I was also making some connections between what you’d said in class, about when you know what the right thing is to do, then you are obligated to do it. You had some principles. You were definitely taking the higher road here and Larousse knew she looked bad. I was just wondering how and when this would come back at you.

“Well, then,” you said, smiling, “I guess we have different views.”

“My, you’re really taking this to heart, Jen.”

“Well, now is the time to voice that before the bureaucratic machine starts rolling in the direction of change. Momentum is hard to reverse.”

“Well, that involves a lot of time and effort. But as we’ve seen, you’ve got a lot of energy for these sorts of things. And the principal has noticed. Which is important after a rough start.”

The conciliatory smile left your face. I was starting to get that pressure in my chest again and I knew now it was because there was something bothering me and I

needed to say something. There were a lot of thoughts in my head and I searched hard for one strand and how to say it.

You said with forced cheer, "Like you said, it takes time to figure things out. Thankfully, people helped me in the right direction. Can't ask for more than that."

Larousse studied you more closely. "It's okay, Jen, people like you. You don't have to kill yourself, taking on highly visible projects. It might look like there are a few quick fix-its, and all you have to do is advocate for students. It all sounds good. But you might find out some things can't be fixed." She tapped on my paper on your desk and said, "For example. This kind of thing gets you lots of attention but it can come back to haunt you. Some students are just bad eggs and it's better to stay clear. There's a lot you don't know." Larousse stood up straighter. "You should come over for a glass of wine sometime. Then we could really chat. And I'll get back to you about the writing as soon as I've got my lesson plans finalized."

You stared at her back as she left the room and then avoided looking in my direction. The clock over your head ticked and I knew you should be leaving soon. But you didn't move. My chest felt hollow and I waited. I knew this was tough. Some girls walked by outside, cursing loudly. I thought back to my story. You had told us we could write about anything we wanted, it just couldn't be trivial or nonsense. You said we could tell whole stories through description alone and gave us an example of how an author had described what a farmer saw around his house and barn. By just choice of words, the reader got a sense of what the farmer was feeling, but the reader wasn't told directly that the farmer had just gotten the news that his son had been killed in the war. I thought about that and thought about what had happened in my life a few months ago. What I liked about the idea was I could share the story without explaining. I decided to try it. Everybody in class got theirs back that day but I knew from Mrs. Larousse that mine was still on your desk.

A couple of minutes passed and I got up and came to you. I picked up my paper off your grade book and looked at you. Your face clouded over.

"Yes, your story. I was wondering if we could talk about it a little. Can you stay a minute?" You indicated a chair and I sat down as you turned through the pages. "The

description is good, Jason. I think you've got the hang of it really well. But at the same time, you have a stream of disturbing images, disjointed, nightmarish, and I was wondering if you could speak a bit about that. There are wolves, someone falling a great distance, a fight and possibly death. But then later, you juxtapose some beautiful descriptions, sunlight, hope and the point of view changes and the character, he? she? takes on a much more positive tone. It's powerful, even poetic in places, but very mysterious. It makes me want to know more, to understand better what's happening. But, that depends on what you want it to be. Maybe that's your intention, to let it be sensation, evoke certain feelings. Some experimental work is just that – a collection of images that produces an overall emotional effect. Sometimes the author himself is not even sure what it means." You looked at me for a moment and then looked back down at the rough pages. "Does that make sense?"

I cleared my throat and you looked hard at me. I said, "It's what I thought the other night. Then I wrote it in class."

"Oh." You looked relieved by this. "Good, that's good, Jason. If you can talk about it, it may help you to explore what it is about." You rolled the paper together with two hands. "I did tell the class that you could choose your own topic. I'm sticking to that. You can write about anything and write any way you want. Just keep writing. But I think it would be great if you and I could talk from time to time about your writing. Can we do that?"

I nodded.

You started reading aloud, your finger tracing under the words. "It was red and red and red, but also golden yellow, orange and royal blue, flowers, too. He went down, taking with him all the colours save those the wind shook free, a few yellows, blues. Nature would eventually win out over these mistakes, cover herself. Nothing really mattered. How could it. I stood, rooted to the ground, awaiting the finishing gunshot."

You handed the papers back to me and searched my face. "Okay, here's my take on it, for what it's worth. The combination of beauty and violence is intriguing... in a good way. Something is happening here, on a few levels, which is what's supposed to

happen. It's more sophisticated than expected. The result is a transfer of powerful feelings from author to reader."

I knew you were waiting for me to say something. I wanted to say something. I turned back to the paragraph you had read and studied it.

"It's good in a lot of places, Jason. Here's one other idea. It feels like you have two distinct voices here. Maybe you wrote it at two different times or in two different states of mind. But it has an effect. What if you put the two voices in dialogue? Let them be characters. Argue with each other. If you can separate the two voices in your head then you can write a dialogue. See here? The newer voice emerges more strongly at the end of the story. Why is that? Let it speak more. What is it fighting against? If you can identify that, then you can put your finger on the conflict. That's the stuff of plots. Let the characters struggle and find out what the conflict means. Then you can get deeper into your story and explore a whole lot of interesting stuff. And who knows? Maybe it will go beyond this description and become a full story."

I looked at the paper and realized you believed it was a story. It felt safer that way, to see it as something made up and I didn't mind you talking about it.

You said, "Also, if you do choose to create characters, you should give them names, let us see them, watch them do things. Then it should become clearer what you want to say. Are you okay with that, Jason? It's just an idea. You can think about it, see if it helps."

You handed the paper back to me but didn't let go of it for a second. You looked right at me then, for what seemed an eternity, and my breath caught in my throat. Then you said with such urgency, "We're good, right? I mean, everything's okay with us, with you?"

I thought about my story and everything I couldn't say, then I realized you were talking about Larousse and that you were still unsettled by her comments about me being a bad egg, but also angry at yourself for letting her put doubt in your mind.

I stood up and nodded again.

“I’m so glad,” you said.

I took the paper home with me and I did think about it for a long time. I didn’t have a clue what you meant. But I took it inside of me like a flashlight and shone it all around. I thought about the two voices in my head, one a low static, continuously nattering in the background. The other one, I heard after school, in the woods, when I was quiet and alone. The disturbing, nightmarish elements were part of the setting of my life, while the other voice needed shelter and a space to think, until it could be strong enough to speak for itself.

It had taken place in a field, far off the main highway. Earlier that afternoon, my father’s patience had worn thin. We’d been waiting in a diner that smelled of pork grease and rancid butter. The same Dolly Parton song had come round the reel three times. There were a few truck drivers and an elderly couple sitting in the corner. Tourists didn’t come here.

My father swore under his breath and banged his lighter on the table before he lit a cigarette. Tommy was just getting out of a semi that took off again as soon as he slid to the gravel in the parking lot. He was that good, my father. He could read defeat in a man at two hundred feet. Something in the hangdog expression, drooping shoulders, perhaps. Or the mental anguish that interfered with the smooth pedalling in the knee joints as Tommy approached the entrance.

Tommy’s eyes brightened when he saw us and I saw him pull himself together. My father didn’t look up as Tommy slid into the booth.

“Ah, Jesus, I tell ya,” Tommy said, “it was no good. Not even from the start.” He licked his lips, wanting to get it all out, quickly but cleanly. “There were cops there already, just as I came up. Nothing I could do, or anybody could do. I’m not lying. It was all just bad timing.”

His voice squeaked too much for someone who was telling the truth and my father stared out the window.

Tommy turned in his seat and then continued. “Then they saw me and started to come my way. I thought, ‘What the hell?’ What could I do? I couldn’t go back to my

truck, couldn't keep going to see the guy. I had to hightail it into a shop and then go through to the back door. When I come out in the alley, I made a run for it. But then there were more of them, and sirens." He wiped his brow for effect. "Lucky bastard that I am, I made it here."

I glanced at my father. He'd been waiting in a stench-filled diner for two hours and now he was clearly smelling beer on Tommy's breath. He'd worked with Tommy a couple of times, using him to do the first contact with a mechanic, feel him out, see if they were willing to do work on the side, keep quiet about it. Tommy seemed pretty regular. But I could tell my father didn't trust him, he was still testing him. And this today was confirmation.

Tommy didn't eat and my father didn't ask him if he was hungry. After my father put out his cigarette, we paid and got into my father's truck. We didn't take the highway but drove on a road to the north that cut through some hilly farmland before it reached a junction with the same highway further west. No one was following us, and we passed no oncoming cars.

When my father told Tommy to get out of the truck, he started blubbing. My father reached under his seat for the barrel of the revolver. Tommy went pale but he didn't run. He stood out away from the truck in a tractor path meandering through neglected farmland that was now ablaze with wildflowers. Tommy didn't run, he just stood there. He took the shots, like he knew he was going to have to take a couple of punches and then it would all be over and we'd all get in the truck and go home. A flock of ravens swept up in the air at the two explosions. My father lit another cigarette and told me to get the shovel out of the back. I spit on my hands but there was no saliva in my mouth.

The wildflowers came out of the ground clumped together like baskets you might see for sale in the grocery store. They just needed a ribbon and a wicker basket and they were perfect, arranged symmetrically in hues of purple, yellow and orange. It was hard work though. I stopped every five minutes to wipe the sweat out of my eyes. The groaning stopped sometime while I was digging.

My father smoked and stared off into the horizon. He didn't comment on how long it was taking. After I'd tossed the clumps of flowers back on the fresh mound, my father strolled over and blinked at the carpet of insane colour all around us.

"Huh. Sure is pretty."

Chapter 9.

Mid-December

The deep cold came late that year and there was nothing a body could do but give in to it. From the first reluctant step out of a warm house until bursting into the next heated building, everyone seemed to be holding their breath, trying to keep the ice out of their lungs and noses, and tensing muscles so only the surface layers of skin could freeze. In school, we sat in our classes, lulled by the hissing of steam heaters and the gently falling flakes outside. We shivered despite the heat; the body's core couldn't get warm but limbs and muscles were overheated. As if reminding us this was only temporary shelter, the cruel wind hurled spits of ice at the windowpane, reminding each of us of the pinpricks to come after this warm interlude.

You had put some coloured lights at the front of the room and a fragile tree stood on the corner of your desk. The holiday break was coming but not soon enough. For some of us, the holiday was time of rest, of joy. For others, being exposed to heavy drinking, family discord or even exile. This Friday afternoon, the dreary dusk outside had pushed into the classroom and you had circles under your eyes. You must have given into the heaviness, for you stopped writing across the board and laid down the chalk. You said to us, "Why don't I just read?"

You took down from the shelf a well-worn collection of short stories. Your voice filled my head and eased me into a calm but strangely conscious state. If you had looked tired before, now when you read your voice came alive. A few kids sat forward in their seats; others got more comfortable. The things that were stinging, nagging at me were pushed away, creating a space for words that attached themselves to ideas. It made it easy for me to form pictures in my mind, and I started to see people moving through landscapes, gesturing, talking, even speaking inside of me. Their words were that distinct, and I felt I recognized something about them, like I did with real people.

You were talking about a father – a boy and his father – a boy who had to decide whether he could be loyal to his family or prevent his father's revenge on a wealthy

landowner. The father was hard-headed, and thought the world owed him something. He wanted to teach the boy about how things worked. Then something prickled deeper and I froze up. I realized what you were saying and I stared hard at you. Somehow you'd found out. The story and my life became blurred; I knew the fictional boy lived in the rural American South, sometime in the early 1900's but it was a weak cover for my own situation and I became filled with the real terror of being caught out. But you weren't looking at me, you weren't even thinking about me. I shook my head, what the hell was wrong with me? When I told myself this boy was the son of a barn burner, had a mother, sisters and a brother, the details seemed an artificial disguise for my own life, but I held onto that idea. No one was turning around staring, no one connected how exposed I felt. Gradually I could listen again more comfortably, then more closely.

You finished the story and immediately several students asked you to read another. You were pleased and flipped through some pages until settling on one. This story was about people in Ireland, at a Christmas party held by some old aunts for their students and family. I ceased to be alarmed and allowed myself let go, and really listened to the story. Again, I was struck by the distinct voices and I saw and understood each one of them. I was in all of them at the same time, but I was somehow still me, sitting in this room. I could be anyone of those people, I thought. It was easy to think along with them, understand them. I could see their lives and almost with clairvoyance, perceive where they were headed. Their choices were leading in certain directions and what would happen to them assembled before my eyes. I seemed to have parts of all of them in me, but I wondered if I could choose, which one would I want to be? I suddenly felt like I could leave myself behind and become someone else, forever. And never look back. This startled me back into my body and my muscles tensed. No, I couldn't hold onto it. It wouldn't last. My body would betray me, reclaim me, lash me to my history. And yet, as I listened again, your voice brought the same relief, the escape from myself, like an easing of pain. I wanted you to keep reading forever.

It was your voice then, I thought, full of clarity and goodness, promising that there existed another world, there for the choosing. It was telling me not the way things were but how I could be in this world. I was listening as though my life depended on it. It was my only lead on how to understand, how to name how I was different from who I thought I was before. Then another realization came, so visceral I was out of the story, fully into

my own mind. I suddenly saw that the gulf that existed between myself and others was because other people lived based on mutual trust, an agreement that Casey had talked about when he got a cookie. Other people had a two way deal that did not figure in my life. In stories, actions were followed by reflections that adhered to a certain kind of logic, a certain way of seeing the world. Life was still not fair at times, but it was agreed by the people in the story that it was not fair. It was this agreement and understanding that made it bearable. In this way, characters added up to each other and could take it inside themselves as self-knowledge. Then they made resolutions and decided to act. No one stood banging their head against the wall all the way through a novel.

Your voice spoke to me directly out of this world and I glanced around the room at the rapt faces. I couldn't help feeling aware of being right here, right now. The details of the classroom presented themselves in a clearer light, now that the darkness outside was complete. Other feelings, almost of tenderness, crept up in me. I noticed how Lisa Smither's pink sweater was unravelling at the cuff, exposing her arm almost to the elbow. And the silver chain that attached Casey's wallet to his belt loop – his brother had given it to him when he came back from Alaska and Casey had worn it every day since last Christmas. Rick was so thin, his shoulder blades stuck out of his worn shirt and I wondered if he actually got enough to eat. Even, strangely, looking at Dirk, noticing the callouses on his hands hanging at this sides. There was something terrible about it all, and yet, also beautiful. We were here, all of us, right now. All the pain, the confusion, despair, cruelty – and still there was laughter, surprise, the newness of hearing, seeing and feeling every day. Emotions that came to us without bidding often had to be repressed, diverted, disguised and denied. We were fifteen year olds desperate for life, having no idea that adult experiences would destroy us. Being in this room, now, with our ignorance and energy, foreshadowed our fate to come, but immediately after that thought, I knew for certain that we were alive, right now. We would die later, each and every one of us – in two years, thirty or seventy – the particulars unfolding in each life. Like the characters in the stories, a lot of us would get married, one would die in the mill, five would move away, three would come back broken but finding their place here still remained, two would have children that would die, four would nurse parents to the end, one would shoot off his foot and one would disappear without a trace.

The tightness in my throat was unfamiliar but not distressing. I felt larger inside somehow, like I'd spent time on a mountain I knew well but the visibility was suddenly much extended. Finishing the story, you simply closed the book and sat for a moment. The bell was an unwelcome intrusion, even at the end of the day before a weekend. As if in a dream, I packed up my books and left the room. My head still full, I moved through the hall, reluctant to break free, reality at the far edges of my vision. I closed up my locker and at the same time Dirk turned, and we saw each other. I could see his eyes were also far away. He fastened his lock and gave it a yank, then looked back at me.

"Hey, man, take it easy," he said.

I nodded at him. "You too."

Chapter 10.

January

He was away through the darkest time of winter, all through the holidays and on into January. When I needed money, I went into the garage and dug up a strong box under a filthy mat. I took only what was necessary for food. Every penny would have to be accounted for when he got back.

There was a perfect stillness in and around the house. The ravine was frozen through and sunlight sparkled on the white caps of the boulders. I sat on the back of the couch, taking it in. At night branches cracked with the weight of the snow and a high keening blew up through the tress. I seemed to be seeing more, hearing more, and especially thinking about things in new ways. There were levels to things I'd never thought of before and I wanted to give them all my close attention. A few times I hiked through the woods but once fell waist deep in a burrow and didn't venture out much after that. I was happy anyway, staying at home through the school break, undisturbed, reading. After sitting with a book for a few hours, I'd go back and stare out over at the ravine, listening to my heartbeat. After the last class at school, I'd asked you if I could take home your short story collection and a good many novels as well, and you'd agreed. Now, with each day of reading and thinking, there were many things accumulating inside of me, things I much wanted to say to you. You seemed to be there, somehow, in spirit, out my window, in the white light and cobalt winter sky.

I'd take my coffee in the late morning out by the big window and start reading, hardly pausing for a sandwich or a can of soup. When my eyes started watering, it was dark. I figured I was reading about a novel a day, and still couldn't get enough of it. Characters were in the room talking to me now, explaining their troubles and I could see myself in them, thinking along with them, predicting what I would do next and finding out what happened when certain choices were made. It was like trying out other lives, other options, and my imagination envisioned new futures for myself. The TV was no good anymore; there was nothing true there for me. My only regret was I didn't have more books. But when I ran out, I knew which ones I wanted to re-read.

When school started up again I left the house early to catch rides with truckers heading into town. Coming home was different. I could be in your classroom, reading, and hated to leave school too soon, even if it meant having to walk the three miles to the house. The road was piled high with snow on the shoulders. Walking in the road, I was invisible until the cars came upon me. I guess the main reason I took the risk was because I was living in a world populated by people I could understand, people who made sense, and I wanted to remain in that world as long as possible. Oddly, I had the sensation that they would be able to understand me if they were incarnate; they were that palpable to me. Although I knew they were not real, some things carried over. I also realized about this time that you were the only living person who really knew something about me. It had become clear to me that for a long while, you were in my head, but now I knew that I must figure often in your thoughts as well. I couldn't find words for it but I saw it as mutual, a silent recognition, something that was pretty much there from the beginning. I started to think about it as being more like a hidden level in a story, when two people know each other and the smallest glances or gestures keep them in each other's minds. This level of understanding between people slowly surfaced as the novel went on, just as it surfaced between us. So far you'd done nothing to indicate that this wasn't so. I didn't know how this connection was made, or when you decided that you understood me, but I also felt more and more that I understood quite a bit about you. You had become a character in the story of my life, reading along with me, me talking to you about the stories, but also you as that link from the literary world to the world of the school for me. From the books to the schoolroom, I recognized the same logic. Your way of being in the world remained consistent and I could see you followed the same principles for living your life that were in the stories.

This idea was incredible to me. I never thought about anything like this before. At first it was about letting people who didn't really exist shape your thoughts and feelings to such an extent. I even thought for the first time that it didn't matter anymore that nobody around here had ever known me, or cared. There was something else out there that was even more compelling now. But then it was more about being privy to a nearly invisible world. I tried to concentrate hard and think about you in a more focused way. There was so much more going on than I realized. I tried to take it, fathom what it meant.

After the holiday break, you'd done some reorganization and put six new books at the end of the shelf closest to where I was sitting. I spotted them right away and the first one I started reading was pretty good. There was also a poster with new rules beside the door. There was now a homework chart where we could check for missing work.

Mr. Sennick dropped in the second day back. You were marking papers and his voice startled you.

"So! You've decided to come back. Brave girl."

"Yes. Well, brave or not, the job's isn't yet half done. I was able to do a lot of planning and that should help. How was your holiday?"

"Good, good. Quiet. A little snowmobiling, a little cross country. Planning, eh? Well, it's still about who's got the power. You'd do well to remind them right away when they get back from a break. And every other chance you get."

You didn't reply and he looked around the room. "No one would blame you, you know, if you got out of teaching. Nice people usually don't last. It goes too much against their natural personality. If I knew then what I know now... I probably would have quit.

"Really." You started marking again.

"Yeah. It gets hard to keep your chin up. You feel it, fighting against it, when you're coming to work. The dread coming over you, just on seeing the school. And then, it's the way you feel all the time. For me, I've got six and a half years till retirement."

I thought about the gulf between you and Sennick and couldn't imagine him ever being earnest in his desire to do what was best for his students. I also couldn't imagine you ever becoming so hardened that all you cared about was keeping control of the people around you.

Sennick stood up straight. “I came about the protest. I just heard you were organizing something. I’m not sure you can do that. Using your role as teacher to rally people around you.”

You turned in your chair. “It’s not for me. I asked the students and they want to do it. It’s totally optional and –“

“But everyone is doing it, so no one wants to be left out.”

“It’s not like that – it’s about understanding what is happening and doing something about it.”

Alvarez burst into the room. “Ha! I thought he’d come here. Don’t let him talk you out of it, Jennifer. He’s just mad because he didn’t think of it!”

Sennick ignored him. “I’m just concerned about you using your position to influence the students.”

“That’s a bit ironic, coming from you, Lee?” Alvarez quipped.

I thought Alvarez had a point. Sennick never hesitated to use pressure to get the students to do what he wanted. But you had not pressured anyone; we’d just talked about the pros and cons and debated the school closing. In the end you’d said the school trustees were coming up for a meeting and you urged our parents to go and be heard. You said you’d go with us. One idea led to another and then students wanted a protest, and had started making signs. You’d said it was exercising our rights.

“Jennifer,” Alvarez said, “in English class, you should get the students to write letters. To the government, and our newspaper.”

You answered, “They need to start talking about it with their parents, that’s for sure. By the time the trustees come, they may have already made a decision.”

Alvarez said, “This is true. The bureaucracy is slow but hard to reverse. I agree now is the time for a protest.”

Sennick said, "You're both wasting your time! It's happening for good reasons. Get these kids out of this dead end town."

You said to Sennick, "I'm surprised as a Socials teacher you don't want to use this as a chance to teach what these ideas really look like. Maybe the students could learn about being good citizens if they could more easily see the connection between book knowledge and life."

I stopped pretending to read and looked up. Sennick's face had changed. Maybe Alvarez's support spurred you on or maybe you were deliberately gouging him after he'd made those remarks about you being too nice. Alvarez and Sennick had obviously had words about the protest but Alvarez was now taking your side against Sennick.

You didn't stop there either. "Besides planning, I did some research over the holidays, too. Some students may thrive at a bigger school, but as you say, some don't excel at academics. They may even do worse because they need other places to belong and that usually is found in smaller groups. That's why we have to let changing schools be a choice."

"Precisely!" Alvarez exclaimed. "Well said."

Sennick turned and bellowed at him, "Well, it's not a choice, is it? They will either close the school or they will not."

Alvarez appeared to shrink in the doorway. He was out of his role as peacemaker and yet was too afraid to enter fully into the conflict. For this sudden disloyalty, Sennick wasn't going to let him have a say in making a decision.

"Maybe so," you said, "but there's also the option of making up advanced classes here for the academically minded and not disrupt the community for the rest. It comes down to what's best for the majority."

"And you're going to teach extra classes."

“I would. Twice a week at lunch. Part of prep block. To the advanced students who are capable of working well on their own.”

“Then you’re a minority of one!”

Alvarez stood with his arms at his sides, grinning like a scarecrow. He bobbed his head in the direction of the hall. “I’m afraid I have to get back. Excuse me.”

Neither you nor Sennick took notice. You stood up and narrowed your eyes. “That’s why you are coaching hockey in town, and soccer in school, right? To give the non-academic students a chance to succeed in another area, isn’t that so? That’s a lot of extra time. It shows that you really are there for the kids.” You looked back down at your papers, then added, “The protest is two weeks from today. At 3:15.”

Mr. Sennick put his thumbs in his belt loops, staring down at you. “You know, I think you are making progress. After that day in Mr. Alvarez’s shop class, I never thought you’d last.”

You held his gaze for a good long moment. Then you said very carefully, “I believe we are talking about the higher purpose of education, are we not?”

Sennick stood glaring at you and didn’t speak.

“Is it purely academics, or might it be something more?”

I’d never seen Sennick at a loss for words but he was angry. To him you must have seemed a young upstart but there was no one now to witness him putting you in your place. I wondered how he could take it further, without playing his most obvious advantage, a physical threat. He couldn’t walk away but he couldn’t get the upper hand, so he did what damage he could, going after what was important to you.

“You may think you’ve got it all figured out,” he said. “But with some of them,” he jerked his head in my direction, “you’ll have to cut your losses anyway.”

I was surprised by the indignation in your voice. “All the students are making good progress. They all have different strengths and good things are starting to happen.” You turned back to your desk and sat down.

He pointed his index finger at you. "Maybe he'll tell you what happened when the truant officer decided to make a house call last year."

"I'm sorry," you said. "I've got a lot of marking to do here."

Your face was white as you shuffled through the papers in your folder. After he'd gone, you threw down your pen and looked at me. Then you rolled your eyes and I felt corners of my mouth twitch.

It was forty below the afternoon of the protest but the kids had dragged out their dads' hunting parkas or moms' fur coats, and added insulated white plastic moon boots or hockey toques. Dirk had a sheepskin cap with flaps and Casey claimed his socks were heated with batteries. You asked me to carry the signs, maybe as a way to make sure I was coming but I wouldn't have missed it. I thought later all the heavy hats we wore were more to disguise ourselves because we didn't really understand why we were there, but all the same, we wanted to be there. To us, it felt like something you might see in a movie or on the news on TV. But you gave us your orders and each group had a job. Dirk and Travis got to block cars and hand out flyers before they could drive on, which suited them fine. Eight kids, two on each corner at the cross-streets of Mill and Main, stopped people and urged them to go to the steps of City Hall. I had a bad moment when I saw a blue Dodge Ram two blocks away, cruising up to Dirk and Travis, but the truck backed up when it saw the commotion and turned right on Dunford Street.

You waited a half hour with Lisa Smithers's parents for the crowd to grow, and then formally asked the mayor to come out. Alvarez never showed, and neither did any of the other teachers, although to be fair Jameson was out of town. The mayor didn't come right away and you were persuading the crowd, talking to almost fifty people, to think about the impact closing the school would have on the town. Right now it was already dark, and you said if the kids were bused, they wouldn't be home for another hour and a half.

Mrs. Smithers said in a quiet voice that she and her husband had attended Pike Secondary and so did their parents. People moved up closer to hear. She remembered

her grandfather's stories about when it was a one room schoolhouse. Mr. Smithers said the school was the centre of the town and you couldn't replace that feeling of belonging. Then finally the mayor came out and he said his name about ten times and reminded everyone all he was doing to make Pike's Mill a better place. That's when I realized you hadn't said your name at all, or even told us why you were involved.

The cold was starting to bite but when I looked at you, you were smiling and joking with people. You'd been working on this for weeks, and it wasn't even a sure thing that it would turn out the way you wanted. Everybody knew money would be the deciding factor and if they found more money, the school would stay; if not, it would close. Simple as that. But you were out here, repeating the same story to each new group who came up to the steps, asking for their support. Half the people walking by just tried to avoid you, but it didn't bother you. Some guy was deliberately blowing his car horn when you were talking to the crowd, but you ignored him. Dirk and Todd had chucked a few dozen flyers in the trash and had headed to the pool hall. There would probably even be more problems for you at the school the next day.

On my walk home I remembered the novel I was reading where the characters cared so much about ideas that they were willing to put themselves in danger to make sure those ideas stayed alive. It wasn't the ideas really but what they represented, something felt important about them. It was like these characters didn't care about themselves anymore because they cared about other people so much. Mostly it turned out to be suicide, and I thought nobody in reality would do something like this. Just a lot of heroic bullshit, and self-preservation would kick in in real life. It just stood for something in a novel. But, then I thought some characters weren't doing it to show anything. They weren't going to get any recognition, or reward, like money. They didn't want to be a leader after the war was over. They just planned to go back to their normal lives. Maybe that's all they wanted all along. That really got me. But in this time and place, they felt they had to do something. It was as if they knew that the majority of people, people who were like Alvarez, were basically good men and women who would prefer to avoid trouble. Individually these people knew there could be consequences they couldn't afford, and yet they were about to lose something important. If someone could bring them together, help them find a voice, they would have a different kind of identity. One to be reckoned with.

I think that it was around this time, right after the protest that cold day, that I became aware that something was happening for me and my head felt filled to bursting all the time. It was also this urge, this sudden need to find out, to know things. I wasn't waiting for things to happen to me anymore, or sitting and watching things pass. There were different sorts of answers that could be weighed and valued. It felt new and bright, like something was out there. Now I knew that I was compelled to go after it.

Chapter 11.

Home schooling – 1

I was almost through the last Dickens book. It was a still February night when I was torn out of the novel by the unmistakable sound of gears struggling uphill, wheels whirring through frozen mud, catching on rock. Lights swung up on the house from below and I bolted up and scanned the rooms. Something small, anything, could be enough. I turned on the TV before he came in.

He grunted in my direction as he came in, and set down a heavy metal toolbox and a few plastic bags with food.

“Put these in the fridge.”

He never called me “Jason”. Just “boy”, or “you”. I stood a moment, thinking. “I’ve got a name.”

He glanced at me as he took out the bread. “Well, be glad I’m not calling you any of them. What’s up your ass. Did you miss me. What’s this?”

He picked up a book I’d forgotten by the fridge. I tried to shrug. “School”.

“Since when,” he said.

“It’s for school, that’s all.”

“Well, don’t get too into it. There’s a big job. Up north. Jack’s going to join us. We’re leaving the day after tomorrow.”

I stood up to my full height, which was taller than him now. He noticed, and eyed me more closely.

I said, “I can’t”.

“You can’t. Can’t? I’ll say what can and cannot be done.” He kept looking at me.

I said firmly, “I think I should have a choice here.”

“You’re almost sixteen. You don’t need more school. I need you now.”

I thought I’d try another tack. “You want the truant officer back here? I’m not going.”

He was faster than I remembered. The toolbox swung up to the side of my head, connecting just above my ear. I could barely push away the kitchen counter before I blacked out.

In the day, we squinted against a vast white light, the sun reflecting off the frozen world we travelled through, off the hard-packed white road below us and the high banked snow that stretched out to the horizon. The white horizontal plane was only broken by colourless ice mountains in the distance, barely etched against a darker white sky. My father smoked, and the radio was on or it was not. I dozed within white hot pain, throbbing headaches that would flare red when my head rolled and touched the window. A clear liquid oozed from my ear the first few days and then crusted over. Black and white magpies pecked through the buried grass, sometimes taking flight en masse so that it felt we were moving backwards.

In the night, we found motel rooms near car dealerships and took notes. Maps of the prairies were spread out around the beds, chairs and tables. Yellowed telephone books lay open on the floor. I did what I was told and didn’t ask why we were waiting, why we marked gas stations, garages and dealerships on some parts of the map and why not on others. I hadn’t put any novels in my duffel bag before we left. I just stared at the TV after dinner. On the road I thought about calling the school; as the days passed the idea seemed random, senseless and then inane. At first there remained some impulse to let you know I hadn’t just vanished. But my father was suspicious of me now. If back at the house I had attempted to test my new knowledge in a hostile environment, that desire was fading fast. The world had diminished to another code of

ethics, such as they were. His mindset infused everything we did: hunting down what was out there, deciding what could be taken advantage of, especially at the expense of others. Life was bound to natural law, the law of his nature, and in the stark light of the prairie winter, the impulse to live, to sustain life, was reduced to knowing when to move, when to stay put.

By the fourth day we were in the suburbs of Saskatoon, where my father could safely approach mechanics and salesmen, finding out what makes and models were selling best, what the asking prices were. Entering the lots or the buildings, he took time to appreciate the quality of the vehicles, the orderliness of the business, and then casually put out feelers, inquiring about “off-hour” sales and overtime work. He was looking for reliable middlemen, signs of flexibility and greed. Sometimes they sent us to other mechanics, a cousin or a friend of a friend. Young guys who had start-ups in garages behind their homes, usually in ramshackle neighbourhoods. My father always looked at the faces, the conditions of the equipment and either talked for a bit or drove on.

Heading back to Calgary, we hit blizzard conditions and we were low on gas. Soon the wipers couldn't keep up and snow thickened on the blades as they moved to and fro. My father kept driving, although at a crawl, so he'd have time to stop when he felt the road go out from under us. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He shut off the radio and sat forward in his seat, relying on senses I was unaware of, to do battle with the elements. I knew it was foolhardy to stay behind a truck because you could follow it right off the road into a gully. It was most dangerous on bridges and curved embankments but my father, who was always attune to when risk outflanked opportunity, kept going. There was a wall of white in front of us, and as far as I could see, there was nothing to indicate we were on a road. Still my father steeled his gaze into it, sensing more than seeing the way before us. I braced my hands on the dashboard and stared ahead. It was madness and I expected at any moment to go off into a roll. There were two choices here: put up and shut up, or, provoke a fight trying to talk some sense into him. The ringing in my ear was a reminder of the latter's consequences and that left trying to deaden the voices in my head. If I had learned anything in the last few months, it didn't seem to be any use to me now. But at the same time, I couldn't face going back into the numbness. It seemed important not to backslide, not to lose sight of things that I

had started to understand. But I felt the old pull, of being sucked into the nothingness, and despair, of not knowing how to resist it.

In an hour we drove out of the storm and slowly visibility returned. We stopped for coffee. We hadn't spoken for two hours. He told me to check the air in the back tires. Then we got back on the highway.

My father didn't put the radio back on. The intensity of the blizzard was still in him. He caught me thinking a few times.

"If you're going to daydream, boy, don't be surprised to wake up with snow up your nose when I shove you out of this truck." His hands still gripped the wheel and he leaned toward the dashboard as if pulling the truck with him.

In Calgary the next day, I wasn't surprised to see Jack Hofbauer show up at our motel room. Loud, barrel-bellied, with a thick mat of brown hair, he wore a plaid flannel shirt-jacket over an undershirt in the minus forty temperatures. The room was seventy degrees difference with the air outside, and Jack complained how hot it was. One thing about Jack, he filled up the silence between my father and me. My father tolerated Jack's banter, even his drinking and carousing, because Jack could still get up in the morning and do his job. My father would say he was useful, that his chatter put people more at ease, whereas my father couldn't let go the intensity.

Jack hadn't seen me in a while. He sized me up and laughed. To my father he said, "He's grown, eh? The 'boy decoy' isn't going to make us legit anymore, especially now that he's got a record. Was a time when that innocent face got us out of a jam or two."

My father said, "Still has lots to learn before he can handle himself."

Jack said, "Needs more specialization, on the job training, eh?" He was looking at me, working up to some idea, a new way to amuse himself. Jack respected my father, understood full well who was in charge. I thought he was pretty sharp about sucking up just enough, giving my father the credit he craved for being the brains. This of course allowed Jack to do what he loved, not to think too much, do the people-side of it and enjoy the ample rewards of being the high rolling, successful con artist. As long

as Jack was smart not to brag or go too far, my father let him run with it. For my father, I suspected Jack satisfied some former comradeship he once knew.

Jack had picked up on my father's tone and was curious. Before I knew it, he'd swiped my Oiler's cap off my head. "Still wearing this? Jesus. We got that at a playoff game in Edmonton, what five years ago?" He waved it out of my reach. "Did anybody mess with it in jail? Did they, did they?" To my father he said, "Remember how he screamed when I tossed it out the window on the highway. Guess you were in the other car. I had to go back and get it, he was that undone."

I lunged for my hat but a wave of dizziness hit me and I half fell on the bed.

Jack studied me, looking back and forth between my father and me. "What's with him?"

My father didn't say anything. Then Jack kicked my legs out, sending me full over the mattress. He flicked my hat at me, hitting me in the face. To the room he said, "You got any beer in that fridge?"

My father peeled off a twenty and said to me, "Get a carton of smokes and some beer for Jack. We got business to do."

And that's how in ten minutes all the changes I felt inside, turned to dust. This was the new status quo and now I'd be lucky to be their go-fer boy. I balanced myself on the bedside table and put on my heavy down jacket. As I stepped out of the door, the cold blast hit me and I leaned into the harsh wind.

Over the next two weeks I sat in the car, listening to them talk. Or, sometimes Jack would get out of the truck and yak it up with a group of mechanics, feeling them out, maybe getting a tip on the next guy who might be willing to do a paint job outside of hours, replace wheels, add or remove chrome – all with no questions asked. Slowly he and my father were putting together a string of skilled workers, unknown to each other and separated by the right distance. At other times we scouted models we knew we could sell, then sniffed around for those who might buy. One trip led to another and soon

we were doing it all, all of the time. My father was in charge, Jack did what he was ordered, but Jack in turn took the piss out of me whenever he felt like some entertainment, knowing my dad would ignore it and I'd have to take it. Our hierarchy was established. I knew once we started working in earnest, I would be doing the riskier jobs, like hopping over barbed wire fences and hotwiring the cars, and being the one to drive them out of town. I had no standing, I wasn't a full player yet, and in this world, you'd never get that unless you had respect. I did a good job on what they told me to do, not because I would get a third of the profit – I barely got spending money – not because they would appreciate me more if I was professional, but because I feared messing up as much as I feared getting caught by the authorities. For my father, I was in the same category as “stupid people”, which was the rest of the human race. My father was starting to understand that I didn't think like him, I wasn't motivated like him. If something went wrong, he would leave me to whatever fate had in store. He figured the consequences would be the best way to teach me.

I sometimes wondered how my father might see things in ten years, if there was a plan, a goal he was working towards. Did he envision us working together, father and son, him accepting me as a business partner? Relying on me to handle some angle of the scam, run my own part of the operation? When I proved my competence, would I earn his trust? No, in a second I knew this was laughable. My father was, could only be, the boss. If someone ever asked him, he'd say he only worked alone. Then as an afterthought, he might add that he hired a couple hands to pitch in on the extra labour. That was clear enough to Jack, and that was the main reason my father continued to use him. There was no competition. But I found myself asking what the tension was between my father and me, and why it felt like competition. Just as he made it clear he had no respect for me or my skills, he also took pains to show me how much better he was in every way. It was an odd paradox – my father at times displayed sincere doubts about my value to him, even my usefulness as a means to an end, yet something about me threatened him. He was driven to crush any sign of rebellion or sense of independence. This became a growing presence in my mind. One thing I did not lie to myself about – one serious fuck up or instance of disloyalty, and whatever his concept was of blood connection would be fatally severed.

Chapter 12.

Home schooling – 2

In March my father noticed the make of truck in the motel parking lot, and by coincidence, Jack struck up a conversation in the lounge that night. He came back up to the room to fetch my father.

My father turned to me and said, “If you can keep your mouth shut, come and learn something.”

The lounge was plaid red carpeting and red leather booths. Three men in knitted sweaters sat drinking out of bottles instead of pints. Jack hailed them like he’d known them all his life.

“There they are! Guess who I met in the lobby? My old buddy!” To my father he said, “These boys are heading up into the hills, marking out the cuts for the summer.”

My father put on his game face. “Aren’t you a bit early for that?”

Two of them looked at the older man with the moustache and he said, “We didn’t get to it in the fall last year but they’re calling for an early thaw. The company decided to send us up and see if we could get in there. By the looks of it, they were right.”

Jack jumped in. “They’d send you into avalanche conditions if they thought they could make more money, he he.”

“As long as the road in is good, the hillsides aren’t bad around the lake where we’re headed.”

My father leaned forward and said, “I have some business interests between here and Prince George. Sounds like the mills up in western Alberta had an overflow haul last year. They sent a good load to BC.”

Jack guffawed, “You BC loggers – the rest of the country could go under but B.C. could stay afloat just on sales to the Far East.”

The thin man with the graying hair shrugged. “Yes, business is good – right now. That’s a fact. But that’s good for everyone. What do you do?”

My father nodded. “I pick up some work from time to time, from private individuals, who want trees cut on their property. Big trees. Usually for landscaping, to keep a view.” He let that hang in the air and every man took a sip of their drink. I could see what my father was doing, going off on some tangent till he got what he wanted.

Jack added, “Well, you can’t blame them. A house is worth more with a view.”

My father said, “Often it’s mutually beneficial if I can find some companies in the area who have their equipment on site. Sometimes they’re happy to rent it out on the weekends. For private jobs.”

The logging men thought about this. Jack said, “It’s not that unusual. I had a friend whose company was able to do that.”

The man across from my dad wiped beer off his moustache. My father asked if he’d ever rented out equipment.

“No, I’m afraid that’s not something we could do.”

My father asked more directly, “Well, have you ever done side deals when property lines overlapped, and it would just be easier to cut in straight lines?”

“No, it’s not allowed.”

My father sat back in the booth. “Well, I bet some of those logging roads are hell to get into, this time of year. What do you use, snowmobiles? Helicopters?”

Jack said, “Snowshoes?”

The men laughed, and sat back in their seats. I knew they thought the point had emerged and been settled. The gray-haired man said with some pride that they had

good four wheel drive trucks and the roads were pretty well maintained, even now. “Alberta takes care of its logging industry. Along with oil, it knows which side its bread is buttered on.” He raised a glass to the other men and they said, “Hear, hear.”

Then they named the turn off the highway, where they were headed, and how long they’d be gone. My father looked at Jack. Bingo.

This chance meeting shifted the whole focus of our trip. The logging camps were remote and it was easy to track pickup truck tires in the powder. We waited two days after the men said they were heading up, then found the camp. No one was around. It was too easy. Two new Ford trucks, mint condition. We had them back to Edmonton, repainted and sold within a week.

Based on this new knowledge, my father called around hotels in the logging regions. Our new routine was to locate logging roads, check the snow prints and do a reconnaissance around the camps. Then, to save time, at the motel, Jack would call around, pretending to be trying to contact the loggers and find out when and where they’d gone. I could tell my father was pleased at this stroke of luck and he wasn’t watching me as closely. My job was to get out of our truck before we entered the camp and circle around from a distance, determining if there was someone left behind. I’d sit and wait, looking for signs of smoke, the smell of burnt wood. I’d stand still for fifteen minutes near to the cabins, and if the silence was deep and unbroken, I’d risk shattering the air with my footfalls breaking through ice packed snow. Then I’d move in, touch the truck hoods, the cabin walls, see if they held any warmth. Often Skidoo trails revealed the direction they’d gone and my eyes traced them as far into the forest as I could, usually down to a frozen lake.

This ended up being the longest part of the job. After I was sure the camp was clear, I’d go back to my dad’s truck, and Jack and I would return on foot to hotwire the trucks if we couldn’t find the keys. We’d be gone in two minutes.

We did this four times in one month. By now my father had also discovered Sunday car auctions. He and Jack worked the crowd, sometimes running into familiar faces who connected them to buyers. We began to rotate between logging sites, mechanics and auctions, but my father knew this could only be a good thing for so long.

He already wouldn't set foot twice in the same auction and had me contact a buyer and bring him to a coffee shop in another location. After the sale, we'd drive all night to get to the furthest corner of the province and wait a few days. Waiting was the hardest part on Jack because my father wouldn't tell Jack how long it would be. My father seemed to be relying on some gut instinct to tell him when enough time had passed and when would be the right time to try it again. It was good money, but weeks were passing. Jack spoke more and more frequently about Calgary, and meeting up with some friends of his. One time when he started winding up about it my father shot him a glance and Jack quieted down after that. So far, business was good.

Time went on and then two things happened that signalled a change. The days were getting longer and the air didn't have quite the same bite as it did a month ago. The snow could still be quite heavy, though, in places at this time of year. The next time we headed back into western Alberta and I was sent to scout a camp, we'd almost missed the filled in truck prints in the snowfall. I had to backtrack on foot and signal to my father that it was necessary to go up a ways further by myself. My father was at ease that day and waved to me that it was okay. Jack was asleep in the cab and my father had found good camouflage off the road. As always it was a relief to breathe in the fresh air. It seemed I was breathing in life itself after the oppressive smell of smoke, beer and stale hotel rooms. The clouds were heavy and close to the ground, more like dusk than noon, and I crept up carefully till I saw the vehicles and the outlines of two cabins. All was still and I moved in, watchful for hidden plumes of smoke. It had been snowing for hours by the looks of it and there were no footprints around the camp. I relaxed a bit and scanned the clearing down to a frozen lake, ringed with strong cedars. It was a Christmas card, sparkling and serene. White, silver and black in simple strokes. The tranquillity wrapped around me like soft blanket and I tried to hold onto it so I could go back to it later in my mind. When I finally turned towards the cabins, I stopped short. Not thirty feet away was a wolf, surprised by my sudden appearance. Bits of snow clung to its belly but its fine silver tipped fur shone through. Its eyes watched me and I quickly glanced around; it was alone. Winter would linger another couple of months here but the wolf looked lean yet healthy. It sniffed at the air, trying to catch my scent, not afraid, not aggressive, just interested. It was the first living thing that had seen me, really seen me, for more than two months. I felt a quickening inside. All these

weeks of deadening myself, hiding what I had, came back to me with a force, urging me to let all the life I had inside me come rushing out. The wolf didn't move and we just stood, looking at each other, feeling the weight of the snow accumulating on our backs. It turned its head and the weak light was enough to allow colour to show through the wolf's eye. Clear blue with a black pupil, the beauty of it made me catch my breath. Then the moment passed. The wolf shook its fur; it needed to keep moving. I also couldn't ignore the feeling that my father was waiting. I slowly moved off and when I looked back the wolf was gone.

It was then that I started to hope in earnest that something, anything, would intervene, to end this trip. Some incident, not too bad, and not caused by me, would steer this adventure to its natural close. I had so completely smothered myself inside, almost beyond recognition to myself, but now something was stirring and I started to think again.

Then, more significantly, another change occurred two days later. Jack was in a dealership in Medicine Hat, negotiating for one of the trucks we'd taken in the last camp, and my father fidgeted with the radio, lighting one smoke after another. Jack should have been done in five minutes; it just required crunching the numbers, and fixing a place of transfer. A couple of times my father touched the keys, as if to start the engine and then held off.

We were parked across from a bus stop and several kids waited after school. A girl was crying, and slowly it penetrated my hearing, and I turned. She was sitting on the bus bench, with two older boys on top of a snow bank above her, dropping ice chunks on her head. Then I saw that she was moon-face, small-eyed, probably Down syndrome, but the boys were tormenting her nonetheless. I felt myself splitting. The side of my face towards my father resisted showing any reaction, while the side towards the girl was becoming screwed up in anger. She was feebly flapping her hands as the boys laughed down at her. My hand automatically went for the door handle, but my guts clenched as my father shifted in his seat, angry in his impatience. He noticed the girl and saw the boys, but then looked back over at the dealership. At that moment, the pressure in my chest seemed enough to rent me in two. I jumped as another schoolboy yelled near my window and scrambled up the snow bank after the boys. Then a

passerby, an older woman, went to the girl. I watched them intently. The schoolboy's face shone red with anger, then after the tormentors were chased off, he looked down at the girl being comforted. She was sobbing but the woman sitting beside her was wiping off the snow, talking softly to her. Then she looked up and the boy slowly slid down the bank and they stayed there talking for a while.

My father's attention was still fixed on the dealership and had missed my acute interest in the drama. My breathing steadied. I hadn't thought of you or Pike's Secondary in a good long time but I suddenly needed to know what you would say. It seemed like a story you might tell, to illustrate some point about the human urge to connect. Imagination takes us into others' shoes and stirs action. Sitting inside this car, beside my father, I knew this was a basic human quality yet my father had not reacted. For me, it was spontaneous. My hand was on the door handle until a greater fear restrained it. My father could never see himself as weak or in need; therefore, he ignored those who were vulnerable. Or worse, preyed on them. He might be agitated by the time it was taking Jack, but anything he was feeling was limited to his own sense of self. Seizing the door handle wasn't something I thought about. It was more like an electric current running from my brain to my hand. There was a difference here. For some people it was a natural response; for others, not reacting was natural. I kept that in my thoughts for a few days and let it give me hope.

We could make no deals in and around Medicine Hat and I thought we might call it quits but my father just high tailed it to northern Alberta. Jack was going straight to the pubs directly after checking into our motel rooms and staying there till bedtime. I sensed I just had to bide my time, keep playing by their rules. I couldn't win, but I couldn't risk doing anything other than trying to survive. If I could manage just to hang on, I might be able to save my skin, maybe more. At least I had to keep believing in that to get through. What it might look like, and when it would come, I had no idea.

I only had to wait for the last job ten days later. The sun was high now in mid-April and there were signs of mud through the softening ice. I had been fantasizing about ways I could sabotage the job when it happened beyond anyone's control. We had come up quickly on a camp and my father dropped Jack and I right at the entrance, within view of three sweet pickups. They each had two feet of snow on them, ice

crusted over, and we hadn't had any snowfall in a week. Jack decided to go into one of the cabins to see what else he could find. I looked around, waiting for him to come out before I struck the wires, but I could feel my father's irritation – he hadn't meant to come up so close. He'd already turned his truck around and I was relieved when Jack came out, carrying a big CB radio, so I started my pickup. I heard the holler come up from the lake before the engine roared to life and that's when I realized we'd been in such a hurry that we'd forgotten to check the far side of the camp. For his size, Jack moved quickly and even found the keys in the visor. But three guys were hustling up from the shoreline. I gunned for the logging road as soon as Jack's motor started. My father was tearing over the bridge the second he'd heard the uproar and I felt the same bridge give a little when I crossed behind him, softened by the thaw and the force of my father's crossing. Jack, either because of panic or bad luck, lost one wheel as a log slipped out, then the whole thing gave way. Jack's truck went nose-first into the gully, and Jack, not wearing a seatbelt, crumpled into the windshield. This time, I didn't think of my father, I just leapt out of my truck. In a second I wrenched Jack's door open from the top and yelled at him to get out. Gunshots tore through the air and Jack heard them. He got a foothold on the back of the driver's seat and I could lift his fat ass by his belt. He shrieked as he rolled out but I got part of him under my back and with all my strength heaved him up the incline. More gunshots, and shattering glass, but they had to come round the cabin and stacks of firewood, giving us time to jump in my truck. A few bullets hit the cab and tailgate as I let it fly down the logging road. The last I saw in the rear view mirror were two guys shaking their fists and another aiming down a gun barrel.

We were onto Plan B – we always had a Plan B – but I had to think what the fuck Plan B was while we were careening down the mountain. I decided to head for the gas station at the highway junction and as luck had it fifteen minutes later, saw my father waiting. Jack was unusually silent in his seat, but when I stepped out, I could see how pale he was. In contrast, my father was in high colour. He didn't say anything – he'd seen the bullet holes and we knew we'd have to leave it somewhere. This alone was enough to send him into a black mood. But worst of all, he knew his distinctive blue Dodge Ram had been spotted and he was facing the necessity of giving it up.

I followed him at a distance west on the highway, and an hour later my father slowed onto the shoulder. I pulled up behind him but turned on a side road leading into

a thicket. About eight hundred feet in, I cut the engine and then looked at Jack. He was half-conscious and I got out, and walked around to his door.

“Jack, man, get out. We got to leave it here.”

I could see he was holding his arm funny, and I peeled back his jacket. The collarbone stuck out through his undershirt, splintered and gray. He moaned as I swung his legs out the door but the jolt on sliding him to the ground was too much. He wailed all the way to my dad’s truck. As soon as I opened the door my father swore and told me to shut him up. I got him propped up in the back seat with a blanket under his arm, but Jack couldn’t stop. After twenty minutes my father stopped the truck again and reached under the driver’s seat.

“Whoa, whoa, hang on,” I said. I started shaking.

“I’m gonna shut that son of a bitch up,” my father said.

“I’ll shut him up!” I turned to the back seat. “Jack, shut it. Now, man.” To my father I said, “He’ll be quiet, just give him a chance.”

“I did give him a chance. He fucked up. What did he take out of the cabin. He should have just got the truck.”

My father’s eyes were bulging and I scrambled to think. Jack was sweating and moaning; he couldn’t take each jolt on the road. I couldn’t think.

“And you,” my father said. “You should of fucking left him there. Well, we’re going to dump him here, that’s what we’re going to do.”

We were 30 kilometers from the nearest house. Jack wouldn’t just freeze to death, animals would get him. If they couldn’t hear him, they’d smell the blood. It would be slow, and real bad. I couldn’t imagine a worse way to go. I stared hard out the windshield. My father was livid and it had taken a lot less in the past for him to make these kinds of decisions. I knew Jack’s only hope was if there was a stronger reason not to kill him.

I said, “Stop at Grande Prairie – there’s a hospital –“

“ – are you out of your mind.”

“Listen. They saw your truck. Drop Jack in front of the hospital – he’ll take the hit. He won’t talk, you know that. They’ll find the truck, connect it with Jack and we’re out of it. Think about it.”

My father still held the gun in his hand but hadn’t moved.

“You can’t do better than that right now,” I said.

Jack, as if sensing his life depended on it, quieted down. My father chewed the inside of his cheek. I willed myself not to say another word, knowing it would be too much. It took a full minute but then my father put the truck in first gear and we moved back on the road.

No cop lights appeared out of the dark night and we slowed coming into a sleepy Grande Prairie. As I’d hoped, the clear “H” sign appeared close to the centre of town. There was no one around, not even at the entrance. My father slowed at the turn into the drive and I got Jack out before he started hollering, and put him half on the road, half on the hospital driveway, so someone would see him. My father pulled away before my second foot left the ground. We didn’t talk till morning.

As the day went on, a sense of relief, even hope, went through me. More by luck than calculation I’d been able to do the right thing. I’d saved Jack but also avoided the wrath of my father. It was a compromise I could live with. I started to think maybe this was the way I was going to get through. I knew my father could never compromise. In his books, Jack had fucked up, royally, and deserved to die. Like my hand going for the door handle, the need to act was an electric current crackling through me, and again I was aware I could not live abandoning Jack, even if it was passive murder, just leaving him there in the wilderness. Jack was still a human being, and didn’t deserve that end.

The further we drove, the more I was feeling not only had I saved Jack but I’d found a way to save myself. But it could have gone either way. I could now be standing over Jack on the highway. Under normal conditions, I knew my father would give no quarter. But his truck had been seen. And that was enough. Without thinking it through, that’s what had come to me, and he’d bought it.

My old man knew when to quit and by noon the next day we were headed back to Pike's Mill. He had \$80,000 to show for nine weeks of living on the road. And he didn't have to share the last of it with anyone. For the moment, he seemed content. At our last meal on the highway, he picked up a woman who was drunk at noon and drove her home. I knew for sure then that our adventure was over, at least for now.

Chapter 13.

May

That Monday I stayed home, watching TV. There didn't seem much point in going back. By Tuesday, my father and Marlene, that's what this one was called, had a fight, and, as per usual, she packed out of here immediately. He probably hit her; a clump of her hair was caught on a nail on the door frame and she'd left without her coat. It was still below freezing in the mornings. I'd started watching a movie version of a novel I'd read in school, but my old man took the remote and put on a game. Later, I sat on the edge of my bed for a while, thinking. There was a cold moon shining in my room that night and rustling in the brush outside my window above the ravine. After midnight, I heard snarling; a pack of wolves it sounded, probably fighting over a hapless rabbit. These were the last weeks of starvation and they were making it through any way they could.

My father was out Tuesday morning when the truant officer and a cop yelled up at the house from the driveway. I shook myself awake and went out. They told me that I had forty-four days of unexplained absence and if I didn't get in the car and go with them, they could have my father arrested. I was about to say he wasn't home but then I figured I'd better go with them and let him sort it out later.

At first I didn't feel anything. The engine on the police car vibrated up through my chest and slowly I was aware my heart was pounding. I'd been in police cars before, for worse reasons, but I wasn't thinking about that. The cop did a slow approach to the school as though he were looking for escaped prisoners.

I didn't have to stay in the office long; the secretary signed the paperwork and then told me it was your block. I was invisible in the hall, no one looking me in the face and nobody whispering to anyone else on seeing me. There were some announcements about a field trip and the girls' softball game after school. Your classroom was very bright and there was no place to hide. You started in your chair when you saw me but I lowered my eyes. My desk had not been taken and I sat down

and stared straight ahead. When the announcements were finished, you looked away. You didn't address me, you didn't come over to talk. During the lesson you seemed not to see me, not to be thinking about me, but I could hear it in your voice, watched it in the stiffness in your stride as you moved about. I could feel your attention as you spoke to the class about feuds between families and how lines are drawn in Romeo and Juliet's town. I went to the washroom once, then later we read silently from the play. I was waiting for something to happen, but you never spoke. Even when the bell rang at the end of class, nothing happened. For the rest of the day I avoided your end of the hall. I didn't know what to say but I was fighting the urge to go to you. In shop, Alvarez was in and out of the room and there were only five other boys. No teachers spoke to me and it seemed like half the student body wasn't there.

Towards dismissal time, I couldn't ignore the heavy feeling anymore. From not feeling anything in the cop car, I was in a whole different space now. I remembered being bothered in February, feeling I owed you something, an explanation, or at least a conversation, some brief exchange, anything. But as the weeks wore on, it didn't seem to matter. My father's world swallowed up anything that I wanted. Small things had reminded me of you and I associated certain kinds of thoughts with you. But they were infrequent, and gradually vanished over those months away so that they no longer seemed real or important. But back in your classroom for five minutes, it all came flooding back. I was angry for not preparing myself better, leaving myself open to it. Why should I care if you didn't acknowledge me? I wondered what had happened with you, how you felt now. I stood at my locker for a long time, going back and forth inside myself. Not knowing was worse than knowing. All those long days on the road hadn't been able to completely deaden me, it seemed. It bothered me more and more that I had forgotten something important about myself. I didn't want to permanently be that other person, the person I was when I was with my father, who I had to be in order to compromise and survive. After about five minutes of taking books out of my locker and rearranging them, I finally went down to your room. The door was closed and the lights were out.

You didn't come to school for one, two days. On the Monday I was sure you'd be there. I went to your class first thing, ready to say something. The same sub was sitting at your desk. I went back out into the hall and Mr. Sennick was standing there. When

he saw me he crossed his arms and grimaced, making his eyes bulge. I tried to duck past him.

“She’s not here, is she?” He said it as if he were challenging me. “It was real hard, but she finally found out about you.”

“Stay out of it.”

He acted like he hadn’t heard me. “Took long enough. Poor kid. She’s a real nice person. Really thought she could help you.”

The principal was just coming along and slowed when he saw us.

The blood rushed to my face. “You don’t know anything.”

Sennick stepped closer but Jameson arrived and put a hand on Sennick’s arm. “Okay, Lee. Thank you.” Jameson looked at Sennick, but then asked if I had a minute. “I should probably tell you there is going to be a court summons for your father. While you are still a minor he is responsible for your getting an education. If he doesn’t show, then the Ministry has the right to intervene.”

Sennick said, “What he’s saying is, what essentially was your problem is now his problem. Both of you are finally going to get what you deserve.”

Jameson winced at Sennick. “He will have to appear in court.”

This was too much for Sennick to let pass. “That might be worth going to.”

“Lee, please.” Jameson said to me, “It’s civil court but there is a judge. With your history of attendance – and your record – it could be deemed that you be removed from your father’s care.”

I looked down the hall. “Where’s Ms. Brighton?”

He looked up to the top of my head, more even with his own. “She’s taking a couple of personal days.”

“Why?”

“Why. Why do you think?” Jameson’s tone was less professional. He glared back at me.

“Cause she’s sick. Why else.”

“Maybe she is sick. She talked about you constantly. She had started to convince some of us.”

Sennick said, “Then again, some of us know better. We don’t have to entertain any fantasies about who you are.”

Jameson gave Sennick a sharp look. “Ms. Brighton always sees the best in everyone, she’s that kind of teacher. Sometimes she can also convince the student to see the same.”

Sennick said, “But unlike other teachers, she didn’t know when to cut her losses. You became too important to her.”

I said, “She’s coming back.”

Jameson said, “We certainly hope so. She may need time.”

Sennick added to Jameson, “You think she’s coming back? Jeez, she was never cut out for ... I’ve never seen...”

I couldn’t hold it in. I yelled at him, “You don’t know her! You don’t know anything about her!”

“Oh, and you do. That’s a good one. Delinquent youth knows the teaching profession.

“What’s it to you? You know nothing.” To Jameson I said, “She’s coming back then?!”

“Why, do you think she should come back?”

“I’m asking you!”

“You sound like your father.” His words hung in the air. Then he jabbed a finger at my chest. “You were the one student she would have defended till the end. She was adamant about it.”

I spun on my heel and left them there in the hall. I turned the corner and got about halfway to the exit doors then shoved into a washroom. I slammed the stall door shut and leaned against the wall, pounding my fists on my thighs. My head was exploding but it felt like my chest might rip open first. It was too much. What was the point? Christ, I knew there was none. I couldn't care. It was impossible to care. They said you must have known I was a lost cause but you kept trying. Why? It was driving me mad. Why did you start this up. You made me wake up. It was like the world was different around you. Like I could breathe. I didn't know I was under this weight until I was around you and then suddenly it was lifted. But it was more. It was like someone finally saw me and I became visible to myself. That was it. I was reflected in your vision. You reminded me of someone I'd clung to all these years, someone who saw me clearly, undeniably. But now there was but the faintest glimmer. Who were you, that you did that? I was nobody to you. It was even useless – I was better off in the dark. Your way was not the way things worked. Your world was not the real world. I punched my fist again and again into the bathroom stall door. The sweat ran down my back and my eyes blurred, my face was...wet. What the fuck? What was happening? That was me there in that instant – punching the door, bloodying my fist, and fucking crying. That was me as I had been since the day you first looked into me. Raging and hurting. Two minds, two voices. Two people in my head – one that saw everything through a dark lens, the other through sunlight. I could hear them now, distinctly, separately. You had noticed, pointed them out in my writing. Which was the real me, the outer dark voice, or, the inner, thoughtful one? You'd encouraged this second Jason to step out into the light but the other one knew he had to get back under cover, back into the shadows. But this new Jason was somebody, whereas the other was merely “boy”, “you”, or worse. This new Jason could be holding his head in his hands, tears on his face, because someone else felt for him. That just killed me.

Someone came in the washroom, got some paper towels and left. I put my knuckles in my mouth to stop my rasping breath. A few tears fell on my hand, and I recalled another time that happened. A time when my mother thought I'd fallen into the

ravine. I must have been four or five. There was her horror-stricken face above me, as she leaned over the rocks, and I looked up at her from a ledge I had fallen to. Warm droplets fell from her eyes like summer rain. She carefully lay on her stomach, hooked one arm around a rock as she reached out for my hand. Said couldn't lose me. I forgot about the danger, I just wanted her not to cry. I let her pull me up and then I watched her bury her face in her hands, then wrap me in a tight embrace. I'd gone over the edge and somehow it was the end for her. That's all I could recover of the memory. But I thought I understood now. The idea calmed me and I started to feel solid inside. That was it, it made sense. The idea that someone could care so much about someone else that the thought of losing that person was a kind of death.

I left the school and started walking towards your part of town. All I knew was Cedar Street and the make of your car. The further from town, the more uneven the sidewalk became until it broke up into a sandy shoulder. Lawns were gradually replaced by scrub and gravel, gardens disappeared into weeds and tall grass. Wrecked tricycles and fluorescent plastic toys were left out, and a few rusting cars were parked on yards. That you would live here, in the midst of your students and their rough lives instead of the more orderly neighbourhoods east of the school reminded me again of how differently you saw things. Nearly two miles along, the tidy lawn and the newly painted fence stood out even before I recognized your car. It was a small house, brave amongst the other more basic dwellings, but clearly someone tended to it.

I had no idea what I was going to do, no plan. As I came up right in front, I saw that at noon your blinds were still drawn. Every window was darkened and your car was not parked straight in line with the driveway. That bothered me. I was reading you like a character in a book. I also knew if I walked up and knocked, you wouldn't answer. The door was locked and would stay locked. That really got me. I gripped the sharp point at the corner of your picket fence. You weren't supposed to be hurt; there was something wrong about that. It was just part of your job. Students weren't worth hurting over. You couldn't care that much and survive. It was just that, a job. Teachers got paid to care about their students' learning, and then moved them along. Gradually, after a few years, they became tired of that, and slowly let the students decide if they were going to care about their own learning. To go to school every day you would have to choose between yourself and the job. Like Larousse, if you wanted to preserve the world you held dear,

you had to deaden yourself to the school world. I didn't miss the irony of this, and caught myself wanting to tell you about it.

I turned away from your house and saw your neighbour's pickup truck parked so close to your fence that it was pushing it over. Your neighbours also probably borrowed tools from you and didn't return them. It was an easy guess from there that you tutored their kids in the evenings and helped the parents fill out social assistance and unemployment forms. They never met your kind before. With your goodwill, you laid out the 'welcome' mat, but they saw it as 'wipe your feet here'. For them, if you weren't fighting or causing trouble, then you were someone to stay away from. But you had an odd status; anytime they had to go up against an authority, they came to you as 'teacher', seeking help or understanding. Most who were taking a free ride off you were at the same time suspicious and resentful, and the rest of the time found excuses to make fun of you or not to pay attention to you. But I knew you well enough to know you weren't looking for gratitude. They didn't know the half about you.

That's when I realized I knew you pretty well. All this time I'd been thinking that you were the one I'd let inside, that you were the one person I could depend on to understand, and yet, here I was, seeing you through these other people's eyes and feeling more and more pissed off. Who was there to defend you? To hold them off? You'd seen me as someone safe, someone you could share a knowing smile with, roll your eyes at when fed up. That's when I understood that you must have felt pretty alone in our small and unwelcoming world. And I'd just gone away with no explanation. You thought you'd lost me over the edge, and were relieved at me coming back to school, and yet because of my own unease, I hadn't spoken, or even acknowledged you. My chest was hurting again and I looked around the place. I knew then I needed to do something. It had to be clear and strong. The wood pile needed restacking, and probably your car needed a spring tune up. It wasn't right though. I thought for a long while. It had to be real. Giving up something important. I took off my Oilers cap and looked at it. Swinging open the gate, I walked up to your mailbox and hung it off the newspaper rack. It was the best I could do for now.

I paused at the end of your driveway, re-focusing my eyes towards the gray smoke rising from the mill in the distance. Beyond I knew where the river would curve

up away from town, heading northeast where it would flow out of the ravine and my house. The sun was higher in the sky now, just at the meridian point. I would have to choose soon what kind of a life I wanted by deciding what kind of a person I wanted to be – who I wanted to be all the time, not just part of the time. There was only one way to do that and it couldn't be done here, in this place. The timing had to be judged. I knew in that moment that everything could go very badly. What I didn't know was how much I was willing to sacrifice and if I would be able to do what needed to be done.

Chapter 14.

Year end

There had always been rumours in Pike's Mill that the lumber yards would be closing down but late in the spring layoffs started and everyone knew there was more bad news to come. Dirk said his dad was heading down south to see if he could pick up shifts at another mill, and if successful, the family would follow. A few of the other boys were going to jump the gun and move away this summer. The school might have avoided closing but it seemed the town might shut down all the same.

Most of the class exams were written and kids spent free time signing yearbooks and lying out in the sun at lunch time. The bell schedule was a rough guideline and teachers ignored latecomers as well as those who went on extended visits to return library books. Even the more rigid attitudes were softening; students to teachers as well as teachers to the more difficult students. The calendar was unwinding along with the structure of the school. After the last bell, the sound of teachers laughing could be heard in the hallways. They seemed to know they were also going away soon, either from the school or from the town for the summer.

On the last day, the kids left at noon. Desks and textbooks still needed to be organized and teachers wandered in with cups of coffee and plates of food from the staff room. You asked me to help out with loading boxes, dismantling shelves and move your belongings down to another classroom at the end of the hall. You were coming back next year, and I felt the least I could do was to make it easier on you. It was like someone else had put up the shelves in your room last fall, someone who used repressed rage to drill into the walls and hammer boards into place. I was blind to why anyone needed so many books, why anyone would waste so much time reading, let alone becoming engrossed in the thoughts and feelings of people who weren't even real. Now as I sized the paperbacks and hardcovers to fit into boxes, I reviewed the stories in each one, and thought about how so many of those characters still lived inside me.

My hands worked lightly and I asked if there was a dusting rag. You smiled and thanked me, and I nodded in response. You had returned my Oilers cap and I was wearing it with the brim turned round the back. At first it seemed strange, so much light was coming in my eyes, but my face was a lot more visible, which seemed better somehow. I think you liked it that way because I kept catching you staring at me. Ever since the day I'd gone to your house, whenever there was a shadow that crossed your face, I felt like I'd do anything to make it go away.

As we listened to the occasional teacher call down the hall to another, again I was conscious of how much the atmosphere had changed. Around three o'clock Mr. Alvarez stuck his head in and Jameson followed.

"We heard this was your apple cake. Delicious."

Jameson chuckled, "We got there just in time. It's all gone now."

Mr. Alvarez called into the hallway, "That's because Mr. Sennick ate four pieces!"

Mr. Jameson saw me. "Hello, Jason. Helping out Ms. Brighton?"

I nodded and you said, "Yes, he's doing me a huge favour. I may just get these things moved out by the end of the week."

Mr. Sennick appeared in the doorway, Mrs. Larousse at his elbow. He said, "Guilty as charged. I confess, I did eat four pieces. But I've got a good excuse! I need the energy. I'm not slacking off like some people this summer."

Alvarez said, "Yes! tell them your news."

"I've just gotten off the phone with the town hockey rink – I'm going to coach Pike's junior hockey team! We've got at least four other nearby towns to commit teams as well. Practices start in three weeks."

Alvarez said, "Well, done, Lee," and the others agreed.

Jameson said, "But you'll still be able to find time for slacking this summer, I hope. This fellow," he indicated Mr. Alvarez, "is going to spend a month in Columbia, right? Do you mind if we tell?"

"No, it's not a secret. My wife and I are adopting a boy and a girl who have lost their parents. The papers have finally come through."

You exclaimed, "Oh, that's wonderful! You didn't want to tell anyone about that?"

"It was too uncertain, and very hard on my wife to wait."

Jameson added, "Someone else is not slacking this summer. You are all truly ruining the reputations of teachers everywhere." He turned to Mrs. Larousse.

"Well, it's not all work but I'll fess up. I'm going to France to set up pen-pals for the younger grades and two homestay exchanges for the upper grades. I'll visit the homes of the families and take care of the legal end of it. But I might slip in a few trips to the beach. And of course, some museums and cultural sites!"

I listened to their full voices, joking around, letting down their guards, and thought they seemed happy, even glad to be doing what they were doing. During the year, there were times when I lost sight of their generosity, their deep caring about other people. I had spent my life on the wrong side of good people, and it was easy to justify loathing them, ignoring the toll their responsibilities took on their outlook. With an end in sight, or at least a deserved break, they could take chances about showing who they were and not be worried about cynicism or being ridiculed. It struck me as odd now; here was Sennick who seemed to despise the losers but he was going to be spending time with mostly the high school dropouts or jocks, giving them something meaningful to do with their free time. He was trying to extend the feeling that starts in school, that somebody wants them to do well, to get better at doing something. That they can be cheered by the crowd for doing something good for their team. Alvarez was a big surprise. I had no idea he wanted a kid, let alone two. He seemed to agonize over students while in school. Who would want that in their home? Hell, I didn't even know he had a wife. It was the same feeling I had standing in front of your house, seeing that you actually lived

somewhere out of the school, that you were somebody other than a teacher. Just an average person to the people around you.

The day after I went to your house and left my hat on your mailbox, you still didn't come back to school. I went to Jameson, and he, Mrs. Larousse and I made a house call. Perhaps the shock of seeing us at your door was enough to shake you out of your state of mind, but Mr. Jameson put it to you more kindly. The school simply couldn't do without you. Mrs. Larousse said that she had never met a more innovative nor committed new teacher in all her life. You recovered enough to invite us in for tea and that's when Mr. Jameson started to talk about next year, and the delay of budget cuts that would save the school. All of which, he said, were due to your efforts. I made myself say a few words. That's when you started to cry and I felt bad.

Now Jameson was saying, "We also wanted to congratulate you, Jen, on a first year well done. Great work."

Mrs. Larousse clapped her hands, and said, "Bravo!"

"Yes, and it wasn't easy," Mr. Alvarez added. "All's well that ends well, right, Jason?"

I looked up and then nodded at him. He gave me a toothy grin.

You smiled too. "It was pretty amazing."

Mr. Alvarez added, "And I bet now you can say you feel like a real teacher."

"It's funny, but I really do. And these are definitely my kids and I don't know what I'm going to do when a lot of them leave next year."

Jameson joined in. "Everyone – Mr. Sennick, Mrs. Larousse, everyone – has been impressed by the way you rose above a lot of problems. You had to do it your way and you didn't succumb to negativity about the kids. Those are the qualities of a real teacher."

"Good point." Sennick added. "A real teacher keeps looking for the right solution, knowing if she can find one, it may only work for this kid at this time, and not taking it

personally if one doesn't come along quickly, or even if it doesn't come at all. Sometimes there are just impossible problems. But when the impossible becomes possible – well, that's a tremendous moment."

You didn't say anything and I just kept putting books in boxes.

Mr. Alvarez continued, "And next year will be totally different, but you'll be ahead of the game and be able to adapt what you've learned this year for the next group of students."

"We'll be glad to have you back, Jen," Jameson said. "If you're sure you want to stay. Things are uncertain, but at least we know the school has one more year."

You said, "Well, I'm having a house painting party with the students on Saturday, so I guess I'll have to stay!"

"Excellent. Well, unfortunately, I must get back to the office. The rest of you can keep slacking! Thanks again for the cake."

Mr. Alvarez waved his hand, "And you must come to the teacher's barbecue next Wednesday. I'm sure we'll all be more relaxed then."

You watched them head out the door and then turned to me. "Jason."

I set down the books I was holding.

"I want you to do something for me." You looked at me for a long moment. You had never asked me for anything this whole year and I read the serious intent now in your face. That you had thought a lot about who I was, what I needed to become, to join the society of other people, I felt in my guts. I trusted you more than I'd ever trusted another person in my life and I was ready to listen to you. I made a silent vow that whatever you said, I would try to do it.

You gripped the edge of the desk. "Promise me you will finish school."

It wasn't what I expected but then I thought you could be one step ahead of me. I searched your eyes to see if you had guessed what I was planning. It scared me to

think you knew me that well. You'd taken me back, forgiven me, and my first thought was that now you wanted payback. But then I stopped. I had to stop thinking like that. You would never use a situation to get what you wanted. But I did feel like I owed you the decency of honouring this request, or, if not, at least some kind of an explanation. In my heart, knew I couldn't make that promise to you and you deserved an honest answer.

I took a deep breath. "It will probably take me a little longer, Ms. Brighton. I... I might be going away soon."

You weren't going to be put off. Your eyes didn't leave my face. "But you will promise to finish, some day?"

I wanted to tell you how much I had learned from you and that no diploma could be as important as that. If the words could have left my head and formed themselves on my tongue, I could have put into eloquent terms just what knowing you had meant to me, and especially what it would mean in my future life. But I also knew you were shaped by certain values, an implicit belief in the importance of education, which insisted students ought to follow a certain path in their learning. Assignments, tests and diplomas were the best way to prove learning had occurred. Years later I could find words for these ideas but not now. All I knew at this moment was that my graduation was important to you, and because I had become deeply attached to you, I wanted to give you this. And yet, I knew you would want me to be honest. I wanted to be honest, and fair. If this was a way I could repay you, then I had to be sure I could do it. It was the oddest of gifts, though. Doing this for you when it would benefit me most. At the same time it made me grin because I knew that this is what you most truly wanted from me.

Finally I said, "Yes, I promise. I will finish."

Chapter 15.

Last day of term

One benefit of being my father's son, in addition to having keen senses and quick reflexes, was being able to track things within myself that had changed. What was not there yesterday stood out today in high relief. It all had to be evaluated, held up to harsh scrutiny, but if the changes held, then they tended to get stronger.

That last day of school I would have said the state of mind I had entered into lately was due to perceiving a larger world, a brighter world. It seemed like good things might actually happen to me in my life. Whatever or whoever I had been before, now I felt like I was the 'real me'. In this state of mind, I knew things about myself, also about my father, and the expanding world around me. It was as if I'd sensed some rails under my feet and I now had the strength to pull myself out of the morass, the engine being some convictions or conscious beliefs about the way things should or could be. I often felt drenched in insight; at other times it was alike breathing in the sweet perfume of a mountain rose. Not least of all this, I also realized for the first time that I could stand being me.

That morning of the picnic, my father mumbled something about having a little job to do but I managed to skip out of the house early enough while he was still working in the garage. I felt alert, and clear, considering I'd gotten only a few hours sleep. I carried a blue notebook under my arm, most of the writing I'd done during the night. The sun was shining; an astonishingly blue sky flashed between the trees. The woods were full of rich humidity and nature itself breathed into me its very life-giving force. I began bounding down the slope, aware of myself as both a body in joyful motion, and seeing myself as I must look, hair flying, legs thrust out, blood pounding in my ears. The earth beneath me was spongy and green, hopeful with spring's continued life. Summer was no longer a distant promise; the warmth and light were something that could be depended upon to stay now.

There were enough cars on the highway and I might have stuck out my thumb, but I continued to jog along. By the time I got to your house there were already ten kids setting out cans of paint, and more were drifting in. Casey's dad was just dropping off Todd and Casey, and I helped them unload a twenty foot ladder out of their truck bed. You had laid out a few work stations and I immediately offered to take the most difficult job, up on the rooftop. I easily scaled the tall ladder and got myself organized with paint pans and brushes, but then paused. The rooftop also had the best vantage point. Mount Renata shone to the northeast, still capped in heavy snow, but judging from the rising waters in our ravine, it was melting quickly. To the south, vast woods with the highway cutting in and out. The prairies to the west had shimmers of spring green rippling outward as far as the eye could see. I thought I could make out a herd of deer, brown specks scattered over the land. I realized I hadn't seen that in awhile.

It would be a day of taking stock, remembering, imprinting scenes in my mind to take with me. After collecting up a few things in my backpack, I had spent much of the night putting into words all the changes of the last year, explaining to you what had happened inside me. From time to time I glanced down to make sure the blue notebook was still where I left it, on a shelf under your work table. I tried not to think about later, when we would have to part, take our last looks and bid farewell. For now, I reminded myself the day was fine, the paint smelled of newness as it whitewashed over the old cracks and peels. I could be steady inside, listening to the banter below, while arranging a photo album of sounds and faces in my memory.

Like the chickadees flitting between the branches beside me, "Be careful!" "I am!" was the duet between you and the students. You tossed up cans of pop to kids on ladders and they in turn, tossed them up to me. Dirk took the gutters closest to me and Todd was doing the front of the house. I stayed up there all day, painting around the upstairs windows. I took out the panes and cleaned all around. I fixed some of the insulation so drafts wouldn't get in. When I finished the last window, the first had dried and I could finish the trim around each, climbing up on the gables and painting upside down in parts. At this, you shouted my name and I held up a rope tied around my waist to the chimney so you could see I was safe. You gave me the thumbs up and said how great everything looked. I couldn't remember enjoying painting as much.

By late afternoon everyone was pretty well covered in a sunny yellow shade of latex. Some kids were in the kitchen helping out when I came down, while others were tending the barbecue. By the time you set out dinner, we ate like we'd never seen food before. I ate standing up by the barbecue but after I went back for seconds, I didn't even think about it, I just sat down at the picnic table with everybody else. Dirk was talking about going up to his dad's cabin in a couple of weeks. "There's great fishing, a beautiful lake! All you need is some food and a sleeping bag, man. Most beautiful spot in the world."

Travis said, "Are you gonna keep it? Even if you move?"

"My dad says the mill might lay-off but probably not close. We'll wait and see."

"So he's gonna let you go up alone?!"

"Yeah. He said if I took care of the house this summer while he's away, I could have some free time at the cabin."

"He's sure you won't burn the place down?!"

"Shut it." Dirk looked at me. "Hey, man. You could come up if you had time."

Everyone's eyes turned my way.

I nodded. "That'd be nice. I'd like that."

You were picking up empty plates and you flashed a smile my way. I realized we were all sitting there, like civilized people, appreciating the good food. It seemed like just a few weeks ago we couldn't get within a mile of each other or someone would be pounding on someone else. Maybe we actually had a chance of becoming decent adults after all.

Dirk looked at me. "What are you doing, next year?"

"Don't know. Getting a job."

“My dad says there’s construction work in Prince George. But I want to get off on my own. Away from family, especially my brother. Casey here, he’s got an uncle’s just lost his wife. Owns a fencing outfit in Dawson Creek. He says he could use some company. Even has a cottage behind the house where we could stay. He’s looking for a few good workers, to do odd jobs. You could come down with us.”

I nodded.

“Think about it.” Dirk gave me a knowing look. “It would be good to get away.”

“I will.”

Everyone went back to chewing on their corn on the cob. You brought out more meat and some of us went back for more. Then there was cake and blueberry pie. The pie was still warm and you had ice cream to go with it. Afterwards, we lingered, hating to break it up, even though the sun had now splashed crimson bands across the horizon as it slowly slid behind the western hills. Some of the kids said nice things before they left and you were happy. I went around, picking up paintbrushes, soaking them in turpentine, tidying up rags. Dirk helped me get your ladders back in the garage and I went in the house to wash up, dreading the end, yet satisfied that you would eventually read my story. When I came out, Dirk, Lisa and Travis were still sitting on the steps eating more corn, but I felt I should start back. I’d been gone a long time. I stood up straight and you looked over at me. I stopped to retrieve my blue notebook and went over to you. My head was too full and I knew it wouldn’t come out right. I couldn’t find any words but you made it easy.

“So, you’ll probably be working this summer,” you said. “You could do worse than paint houses!”

“Yeah.”

“I believe you could do a lot of things.”

“I don’t know. I’m not bad at fixing cars. I can build stuff too.”

“And academic ‘stuff!’” You laughed but with much kindness and encouragement. I could always hear so much in your laughter and voice. “Your final essay was good, you know. Keep writing. And read.”

“Okay, I’ll try.” My feet seemed to be cemented to the driveway. The words I wanted to say were stuck in my throat, and the notebook stayed in my hand.

“No matter where you end up, remember, there’s always a library.”

Your eyes lingered on me and then you looked down the street. “Is that your ride?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a blue Dodge Ram creeping along. Nothing on the street had changed; the houses sat in the gathering dusk, the voices of students still trilled in the background. But the universe was suddenly realigned and my face went cold. You cocked your head at me and then turned to follow my gaze. The pickup made a slow, measured approach and slid into the space beside the curb across from your house. The food was coming up my throat and I told myself to breathe. You stood up taller, all the while searching my face and looking back at the truck.

As my father stepped from the cab and crossed the street to us, the chatter behind us stopped and Dirk swore. “Jesus! man.”

Travis said, “Wha..?”

Suddenly they were both on their feet, yanking Lisa up by the arm. She protested but Dirk took the plate from her hands and they dragged her to the backyard, and headed over the fence.

“Jason, do you know this man?”

I could hear your low question but his boots took slow and deliberate steps while I knew he was quickly reckoning the details. I also knew you had never encountered anyone like him in your life. Your instincts were not going to help you. Everything was wrong – your goodwill, willingness to suspend judgment, waiting to learn more. Regular people just couldn’t add it all up quickly enough. Few decent people could.

As he neared, your voice cracked a little “Jason?”

I knew my father heard it, the pleading in your voice, the desire to make it all right. He had sized you up before he crossed the street. I could see you were still puzzled by the intensity of his gaze, just beginning to feel acutely uncomfortable as the object of that scrutiny. But first he had to deal with me.

“What’s this.”

“Teacher,” I said.

“Hunh.” His face twisted and he looked away, around the neighbourhood and back up at the house. Crows cawed in the distance and we waited. I felt you next to me, working through a new thought, trying to decide what it meant to be excluded from his greeting, that in fact you were not worthy of notice. Then my old man stared you down. You dropped your arms, then clasped and unclasped your hands in front of you. My stomach couldn’t decide whether to heave or bear down. One thing was clear; it was all on me now.

But then you recovered. You set your jaw and said, “I’m Jennifer Brighton, Jason’s English teacher.” You offered your hand.

My father’s face changed to an amused regard. He wasn’t expecting this either. Usually indignation overruled decent people’s reaction to this kind of rudeness. The adrenaline was still cramping my guts and I was watching my father to get clues on how it would play out.

“Well. My boy’s teacher.”

You waited with admirable fortitude for my father to retrieve some manners, to respond to yours, when you should have paid attention to more primitive urgings to run in the house and bar the door. You did not remove your hand and he finally looked at it and shook it.

“What are you teaching him, teacher?” My father was grinning harshly.

His forced friendliness made you jerk your head back. Unconsciously you rubbed your hand on your jeans.

“Oh, English,” you breathed out. “You mean, what have we done? Like school work? Well, we’ve covered many things; poems, plays, novels. Some Shakespeare.” It was ridiculous, but your voice was getting stronger. I knew you thought this was to be an impromptu parent-teacher conference and you seized on this reliable bit of etiquette.

“We’ve integrated a lot of writing styles into our work.” You added quite sincerely, “You should be proud – Jason’s made excellent progress in several areas this year.”

“Well, that’s good. Real good.”

I could no longer stay in three minds. I could understand how you were feeling and what made you say the things you did. I also knew exactly what my father was thinking, and the direction he was headed due to his rage with me. But my own head was collapsing from within, nothing was coming to me, and I could not lie to myself about striking a compromise this time.

I said as forcefully as I dared, “Time to go.”

You looked at me but my father was intently fixed on you. “My boy’s never told me about you. Keeping secrets from dad, I guess.”

“We’re going to the truck.”

The slightest shadow crossed my father’s face. Your brow knit together as you recollected bits you’d heard, trying to find some way of understanding what was happening, what you should do. You kept looking between my father and me.

Then you surprised me again. You pointed out your chin and asked, “What about you, Mr. Turner. What do you do for a living?”

My father broke into a disarming grin. “You know, you remind me of someone. I can’t think of who that is right now. It’ll come to me.”

There could be no half-measures now. I didn't wait; I let my elbow knock into my father's arm as I walked by him on the way toward the pickup truck.

He slipped into a self-deprecating voice. "Oh, I have a few business concerns between the northern towns. Keeps me away a lot, I'm afraid. That's why I need my boy to help out sometimes. Can't be helped. But it seems you folks want to take me to court, stir up a lot of trouble. Isn't that right."

I opened the door and quickly felt under the driver's seat until I found what I wanted and moved it under the passenger seat. The keys were still in the ignition and I drove the truck into your driveway.

"So that's why Jason missed so much school?" you were saying.

"You're not from around here. Vancouver, right? You see, we're not quite as well off as you folks."

Your face had high colour, but you asked, "But is that common? That boys start working real jobs with their fathers before graduating?"

"Unfortunately, that is often the case," my father sounded confessional.

"I do need him to help out from time to time."

You shifted your feet and for the first time leaned forward. "Mr. Turner, this is an important time in Jason's education. Everyone says what an improvement they've seen this year. If you could just let the school know ahead of time, he could take work with him and not be penalized for missing so many classes."

"Well, there's an idea. I guess I never thought that much about school. Didn't get much of it myself." Without seeing his face I knew he gave you a wry smile.

You back-pedalled quickly. "That must have been very difficult for you."

My father checked out the house again. "Nice evening. Nice of you to have the kids over."

Relief swept over your features and you relaxed your arms. “Well, they did a huge job for me. It was greatly appreciated.”

“We’re going, now,” I said harshly. “Get in.”

My father turned and narrowed his eyes at me. “What’s your hurry, boy.” Then he appeared to think of something. To you he said, “We have a great view of the sunset over at our place. C’mon over and have a beer. Kick back, take it easy. Jason will get you back whenever you say. I have to get up early myself tomorrow.”

“Oh!” You turned and looked around at the mess. “I don’t think I can.”

“You probably don’t know many people here, or have many friends.”

“Oh, another time maybe.”

“Aww. Nothing’s going to happen to a few paint cans. You worked hard today. Come have a beer with us. I’d like to hear more about my boy’s progress.”

I imagined I saw in your face that familiar pull between being the new person, and being lonely, a desire to fit in, to be with people. A desire to know my father better to know me. The sun was weakening and the birds setting on the power line over your head were becoming dark silhouettes. As soon as I saw you smile I deliberately ground the gears and my father jerked his head around. I threw the truck in reverse and made sure I ploughed into your neighbour’s tree. A mask slipped over my father’s features and he moved quickly. Throwing open the driver’s door, he got in and heaved me to the side. The blue notebook I’d so carefully compiled slipped from my hand and fell out the door. But as I shifted to the passenger’s seat, I let my foot hit the gas for good measure and the truck lurched ahead. He backhanded his fist into my face with a stream of curses but kept driving. In the side mirror, I saw your hand go up to your face. Sheets of paper were caught by the tires and the flurry of motion, and fluttered past your feet and on down the road. That was the last time I saw you, standing in the centre of a storm, pieces of my life swirling about you.

He tore across lawns, then up and down side roads till he was moving quickly enough towards the place he wanted to be. You were out of his mind now, and with no

seatbelt, I tried to balance myself with one hand against the dashboard while the other gripped the door handle. He didn't slow down until we passed the turn off the highway on our side of town. Instead of going up to the house he cut through the lower woods till we got to the end of the flatland where the river came out into the open and the slopes of the ravine started their rocky climb upward. He drove more cautiously then, his expression still stony, watching where the rocks jutted up. The truck heeled violently. In sight of the river he cut the engine.

"Get out."

I opened the door and moved away from the car.

"Me and you have business."

"You're right about that," I said.

"I've lost all patience, boy. I've been waiting. Thought you were learning, getting smart. But it never went that way with you. Now I see how things are." He got out of the truck. "Enough talking."

He reached under his seat for the gun. I took it out of my waistband and moved around to his side of the truck. I could see his jaw working.

"So that's the way it's going to be."

I nodded. "Start walking." I waved the gun in the direction of the ravine.

He crossed to the river bank.

I said, "No. In the water."

The night air was coming over us, out of the darkness of the deeper canyon. I glanced up ahead as he waded and I leapt, rock to rock, waiting to see the outline of the house perched above. A house that had once been a home, with yellow curtains in the windows, geraniums on the sunny side in summer. At one point, there'd been a laughing boy, chasing around ballooning bedsheets, a loving mother. We pushed into

the deepening gorge, leading into the darkness. The walls of the ravine began to close in over our heads, trees growing out over the cold water.

My father said, "You planned this."

I didn't answer.

"It doesn't have to be this way."

I couldn't stand the weakness in his voice. "Keep moving."

Small movements in the brush signalled our approach into the hidden wild. Glowing eyes watched, but it was too dark to distinguish what hid there.

Then he got mean, cursed me. "You've been playing along, all along, haven't you? All the while planning to turn on me."

"Just like you turned on me? Every day of your life?"

Nearly below our house now, I pushed all thoughts out of my mind and told myself just a bit longer, a little bit longer.

"How much further," he asked.

"Till you start finding their clothes."

"It's too dark. Whose clothes."

He stopped in front of a misshapen tumble of fabric, hair and bones.

I said, "That would be the last girl? Marlene?"

"How would I know."

Further ahead, I recognized the red skirt, once a bright batik, now faded, caught on some branches. Nearby there were more rags. He stopped moving. The wind moving down the mountain made a keening sound, swiftly flowing in tandem with the

sound of the river between us. Renata was melting above, sending her healing waters back to earth, but to stand in her path was to endure a chilled cleansing.

My father's voice sounded unfamiliar. "We don't have to do this. Not like this."

"What other way do you think it can be?"

"The water's cold." He broke down and sobbed once.

I hated him then like everyone else hated him and knew I could make him do whatever I wanted. If I told him to lie in the freezing water for an hour he would have to do it. And something came to me. It cleared my head. I didn't want to know but I had to ask. "Is she here."

He stared ahead, his face stony, the shoulders a little bent.

"Mom. Is she here."

He felt me watching him, and shrugged.

Until I met you, I had no idea I could be different. You taught me to see the best in things, trust in the idea of goodness. To feel compassion for those less fortunate and to withhold judgement. But now I wasn't sure. I was back to a more simple set of rules.

He put his head in his hands and wept. Then his legs gave out and he slowly sank down.

I suddenly wanted to say to you, knowledge is not power; it is confusion. I see it in your face, at the end of your driveway, eyes wide and staring as we drove away. Your sense of what being good meant was at odds with what you knew and what you were feeling. Education only works when everyone is educated in the same way. It takes another kind of knowing to survive war, deprivation, poverty, abuse. You learn to be selfish, not to trust anyone, use every opportunity to advance yourself. This kind of world is a gritty reflection of your kind of world, but in my world, I am good.

My father started pulling himself towards me with his arms. My revulsion found its way to my hand. The explosions surprised me, splitting the air, birds fleeing from the

brush. The two gunshots continued to echo deep up into the ravine, and I slowly sat down on a boulder with my feet in the stream. Instantly the temperature numbed them. In the full darkness I sat and then looked down. The water between my boots was all the darker as the black blood flowed through me.

Chapter 16.

Deferred grade

The view out my window has changed many times over the last few years. At first I stared out over a stark prairie, mostly reflecting a punishing light off the hard-packed snow. Like the ice on my window, I spent lifetimes suspended in a numb, frozen state. Later, the distance was shorter to other concrete walls but within those confines a garden had been planted and carefully tended by the more privileged occupants. Whether it was the fragrance of roses in summer or the feel of rich earth between my fingers, or just something other than the intractable nature of concrete and metal that held me inside, the lure of being out of doors and connected again to living things began to have an effect on me. Gradually I became the gardener, learning how to look at leaves and roots and flowers again, even the insects that inevitably bored into them or maintained them, and I found myself studying their beauty and unique qualities. That is one version of the story of how I recovered some semblance of myself.

Nowadays, the view before me consists of easier shades of grays and greens, an ocean of feeling muted by the colour of sky above water. The ten years I spent behind bars allowed me to hone many life skills – auto mechanics, carpentry even some metal work. But there was slow progress in other areas needed for life, like clear thinking, emotional stability, social interaction and communication. In prison, I talked to no one and no one talked to me. I could have read books but they reminded me too much of things I wanted to forget. For the longest time I kept your voice out of my head. For what it's worth, I did eventually get my high school equivalency diploma, mainly because it was something to do inside, but it was the one time I permitted myself to wish that you had known that I had made good on my promise. At least I knew you wouldn't judge me harshly on that.

In the maximum security facility, I waited for the right person to come along. I wanted a witness who wasn't mechanically doing a job, blindly following rules or trying to enhance a career. I was fortunate. The psychiatrist I visited every month was a real person, someone who could put himself aside, perceive another person's way of living.

He was also not unlike Mr. Jameson in appearance and demeanour. With time, Dr. Kronen determined how things had unfolded, and when he was on the right track, I would give him a few more details to add to my file. In the end he was quite adept at connecting the dots, and after eighteen months with him, I slowly moved from “high risk” to reoffend, to “low”. At my first appeal, Dr. Kronen testified to my traumatic childhood and the intense crisis that precipitated my choosing to protect my teacher over being loyal to my father. After that I decided to share key pieces of information, which as you probably know, occupied much space in the news. Finding missing people and unravelling the mysteries of their deaths is always sensational.

After the final hearing Dr. Kronen spent several sessions with me, undoubtedly trying for closure. I assumed that was for him. He asked me at the end of each session to think about what I’d learned from this experience and how I would use it in the future. He didn’t intend for me to think about you but it sounded like something you would have asked me to write about in class so I gave it a shot. It seemed like Dr. Kronen was just a warm up anyway, and that eventually I had to face the fact that you were the final audience, if only in my head.

I made a list, and thought first about Mr. Alvarez, and how it’s important that students learn from a variety of teachers. Most parents prefer the ones who push their kids, the ones who have a good reputation for getting them to learn and score high on tests, especially in tough subjects. Other parents are grateful when a teacher takes a special interest in a child with a disability or some learning problems, who is an introvert or just doesn’t fit in, and is able to encourage them. However, the students themselves have much different preferences. The most popular teachers are the humorous ones, the ones who let them slack off once and awhile, even the eccentric ones that are at heart likeable. With Alvarez, he could see the quiet students who were hurting in some way, and being around a teacher like him was like finding sanctuary. These kinds of teachers are criticized for appearing to coddle students or not upholding high enough academic standards in their classes, but not all classes should be set up purely for academics. Although there was a deep sadness at the core of Mr. Alvarez, there was also a tempered hope, and students and teachers alike knew where they would want to go when they were having trouble getting through. What could be more important than that?

What I learned from Mrs. Larousse was that although she wanted to live her life elsewhere, she was able to bring the outside world to our little community with a passion, and give students a glimpse of our place in the larger scheme of things. She taught me how to cope with loneliness; loneliness being the trade off when someone wants or needs to be free. And also how to keep your spirits up by creating a refuge in another world, when the world you live in is intolerable. Things can get better.

Mr. Sennick, who at times seemed to share so many of the same qualities as my father, showed me that a person can decide on personal limits to pressuring people to do their best and ultimately accepting their shortcomings. Students need to learn how to deal with bullies, and when they discovered Sennick would only go so far, they began to think about how they would respond to him. They also found that Sennick would let up when the students developed the maturity to bring higher standards to their own work, and that they could even stand up for themselves and defend their choices. Sennick knew when things were starting to happen inside the students. For those who couldn't do academic work, he helped them to excel in sports. And they learned that when they performed well, the crowd would rise up from their seats.

Mr. Jameson was easy to resent until I listened to him talk to you. I learned that a leader is caught between getting things done and keeping people happy. The principal is always the centre of conflict, between students, parents, teachers, counsellors, district administrators and even the media. Jameson showed me that a person in power does not necessarily have to abuse that power; in fact, he can use it to inspire others. He saw your sincere desire to be a good teacher and he encouraged you to find your own path to dealing with problems. He let you make mistakes and knew you would learn from them. This was the ultimate in trust and respect.

A child's view of life is like a camera lens slowly coming into focus, details coming into question and sharp images beginning to jar. I studied my father all my life and what I learned from him was in the negative, what not to be. Pain drives a child to seek love and acceptance elsewhere. I think that is what bothered my father most, that other people could care about me, especially when he saw that you and I had an easy, meaningful bond. That he could only care about himself was both his greatest strength and greatest vulnerability.

What I learned from the women he brought home was that you can have fallen a great distance, even have lived a rough life and been forced to do things to survive that disgust society, and yet it was the very society that raised them to despise themselves that made them seek love and some tenderness in the wrong people. That intense need to belong somewhere, to take refuge in a dangerous environment, if telling themselves it was only for a short while, was still worth it for the intimacy it brought. I understood from them that no matter how unfortunate their circumstances, no one deserves to be used and discarded cruelly, without dignity.

I didn't tell Dr. Kronen everything, about everyone. I stopped short of talking about the most important things. He gathered that you were a good person who did not deserve to die, but other than the fact that you'd had a positive effect on my participation in school, he was in the dark. Sometimes the biggest things are the most impossible to talk about, so I made a deliberate decision to leave it there. But sometimes what can't be said can come through in the telling of a story.

I often have this picture of you in my mind. You will always be standing at the end of your driveway, a shocked expression frozen over your features as you watch the bloodied face of your student drive away, his life in words lost, pages tumbling out of sight. I imagine that you are still there, cross-examining yourself about what you could have done, how things might have been different. You would have believed some part of it was your fault, a failure to act perhaps, had you seen the signs in time. As you stood there, Dirk was running home across the street, some half-crazed idea of brotherhood in his head, a determination to do something, while Todd and Lisa were yelling from the backyard. My father's truck sprayed gravel over your yard as we tore around the corner, racing as fast as we could to the end of the only life I'd ever known. But here as always, there are multiple interpretations of what happened, making judgment all the more complex.

On paper, I killed my father; that is police fact. Yet, this is only one slant to the story. In truth, for some time I had dreaded it would come to that, and the only question was if I would have the strength to do what needed to be done. But I did not know that another pickup was hurtling after us, had missed the place we turned off before our driveway, and had doubled back through the rough woods until its driver saw through the

heavy trees where my father had parked, our figures just visible in the late dusk, moving upstream. I never heard the engine, I didn't see the lights; I only heard violent footfalls splashing towards me. In that moment, it was as if the instant my father fell, his enraged spirit came out of nowhere for retribution. As I turned, I could not make out a face, only a figure that was similar in build to my father and carried a rifle. I shot Dirk without even knowing why, or what he was doing. That I killed my father, it is a fact of cold-blooded murder; that I killed Dirk, was an incomprehensible accident.

These images of you and my would-be rescuer were my twin judges in prison. Through your eyes, it was enough to wonder about a person who had transformed over one year's time from a child who accepted he had no control over his life to a young man who had decided to follow a more moral path, a path that entailed a well-planned escape if freedom was to be had. I had never been more certain in my life that that was what I had to do. And yet to transform again in those few seconds in your driveway to someone who could contend with the kind of man who in a slow rage was more lethal than a cornered mountain lion, someone who knew in fact that only such a transformation could save his own skin as well as yours, raised some other penetrating questions. These were the questions that gnawed in the dead of night, that hindered any chance of real escape, questions that centered upon how I never hesitated, how I knew my father so well that I was able to draw upon some instinctive, no, deeper than that, some cellular, even genetic level, on how to think and act like my father, and ultimately be better at outwitting my father than he was with me.

It was argued in court that I knew murder was wrong but the deciding factor in committing murder lay in my fear for your safety, and mine. The judge said it would be a heavy enough load to carry, having come to the point where I understood just what kind of a man my father was. Boys who kill their fathers are often lost, caught between needing that father figure to guide them in life, yet living with the knowledge that self-preservation requires turning against that father's passed on identity.

I chose not to talk to Dr. Kronen about what kind of person I could be if I was better at murder than a monster. An idea I still contemplate is that if this 'ability' had lain dormant in me all these years, could it arise again? And what of this identity? How could someone be both an honourable person and a killer? The judge seemed to think

this weight on my conscience would be enough to contemplate over a lifetime, save for Dirk.

Dirk was by far the most decent person standing in that bloodied river that night. Proof that we boys of hardship and strong feeling have remarkable courage, Dirk seized on the moment to reveal his silent tie with me. What I learned from Dirk was that through all those years of fighting, the realization came eventually that we were not fighting each other, but the common enemy of the demons inside us. That knowledge created such a deep identification that it made Dirk realize that he had to fight for me, in order to maintain his own identity as a survivor. Dirk's bad luck was to arrive like a hurtling meteor, intending to battle beside me and destroy the demons that attacked us both, attacking with me, not realizing that this good deed was the last thing I expected to be coming at me out of the night. What I learned from Dirk was that this moment exposed forever the person who pulled the trigger had not a shred of rationality left to even question who the figure running up behind him might be.

Eventually they let me out of jail. My sense of disbelief has still not left me. That I ended up sacrificing less of my life than expected was a kind of gift. Later, however, I began to appreciate the judge's insights. Can you really call it freedom when your thoughts are shackled by memories? Practical concerns distracted me for a while. I did the only thing I knew how. I left jail, stole a car, and went back to the house where I dug up my father's toolbox in the garage floor. It was still there, over two hundred grand, enough for a new start. I drove to the ocean, to the most different and furthest place I'd ever been. On the highway I stopped to help a coastal fisherman fix his truck. In B.C. he gave me a job repairing boat engines, and over that first year I learned how to fish and sail. A year later, I paid cash for my own boat and I picked up steady work. It seemed easy and I fell into oceanic rhythms, the rise and fall of tides, fishing seasons. I just needed time, I thought.

I've re-learned many things since then. You get good at walking on a moving boat; there is never a time when the floor is steady. They say the semicircular canals in the ears of sailors coordinate with vision over time to strike an internal sense of balance. It was easier just to stay on the boat, even after work, and I found I preferred to sleep surrounded by the wind and mist, knowing that I could disappear.

It was through the fisherman that I started taking 'at risk' kids on the boat. His daughter was a teacher at our local school and they both thought I could give the kids a taste of a real challenge, in often scary conditions. I easily grasped that it could be a way for the teens to escape from themselves, get knocked out of their usual patterns and figure out something about self-reliance. I even ended up talking to them when the teacher would pick them up. Sometimes she would stay after to ask me about their behaviour and how I thought the boys were doing. Then I noticed the debriefings were becoming longer than the voyage. My wife and I have been married now for five years and we have two kids. I've told her about the events in my life. I let her tell me her vision of what a happy family is.

As I said at the beginning, she has often marvelled that you stayed in teaching. I've spent a lot of time on my boat, reflecting on this. There is a last lesson to be gleaned from this, I sense. I have discovered I can be in a family, be a good worker, function in society and even contribute something, but inside myself I haven't learned how to avoid doubts, loathing and despair. When things become difficult, I try to pinpoint the meaning of your perseverance, your teaching award. I trace back to your struggles in the school, not letting the bad poison your outlook or corrode your optimism. Being good for you was by living by your principles, no matter what the situation. But then I get stuck in the same place. Where you could not help falling down was in the face of true malevolence, an inability to adapt these principles. Who could have; who should have to? All the same, if I am honest with myself, I admit you would have said murder was wrong, period. There should have been another way. Two murders could have been avoided. This is what I fear divides you and me. Idealism serves us well most of the time but what I know is a visceral kind of knowing – I was the only one uniquely positioned to read the situation. Dirk's accidental death aside, murder is wrong, and perhaps to you it is always wrong, but for me, committing my father's murder avoided the deaths of many more innocent people. From my way of looking at it, I did what I did for the greater good; or, in your view, I saw what had to be done and therefore was obligated to do it.

If only that were the end of it. Alone on my boat I spend hours at a time staring down a conundrum. It never gets easier but at times you think you are getting closer to finding a set of guidelines. One night I was anchored off the Sandusky marine park and

a good blow came off the Straight. There was a distress call and I was the closest. Without thinking, I approached the ship, which was being battered against a rocky shoal. I plucked the captain out of the waves and towed the half-sunken ship out. I had saved a life. This situation arose on three more occasions. Caught in blinding storms, the vortex of high tides in narrow channels, or engines failing at key moments, these disasters were chances to change fate, mine and others'. Lives were reclaimed, and labels such as bravery, strength and selflessness were attached to my name. I didn't revel in this publicly but admitted I craved it personally. But fate is not transferable and the right outcome is not guaranteed by good intentions.

Then about ten months ago, a local ferry was broken on a low spit of land off the point. I hadn't heard the distress call, and arrived too late. Ten children and their parents were lost along with the crew. If only I had not been repairing lines on the jetty, had had the radio turned up, had a Walkman on. The news centered on what if the captain had not been drinking, had not ignored the weather report, or the harbourmaster had noticed the freshening wind sooner. Who was to blame? The senselessness of it was intolerable. Weeks passed and the more I thought about this tragedy, the more it got tangled up with my own struggles. As long as I saw myself as being able to do some good, it felt like having control. The captain of the ferry wouldn't have to live with his mistakes, continue to replay the consequences over and over in his mind but I grinded endlessly around my own remorse.

Life demands absolute vigilance. Alert to this fact, I knew why I had messed up; I hadn't been on guard. This thought began to eat away at me, and I wondered if I would ever be able to free myself from the pain. From the time that I met you, through the revelations I experienced from reading great novels, enabling me to clarify who I was and who I wanted to be, I had always believed that self-improvement, mainly through moral awareness, could grow by gaining more knowledge of the world. If we can clearly see a dilemma, we know how to deal with it. I always thought that this kind of knowledge would eventually lead to contentment. Once I understood how to be good, I could then choose to act in ways that would take me in the right direction.

But, as it turns out, mistakes occur and bad things keep happening. I might have an idea of what being good is, but I couldn't ensure I would behave correctly every time.

Too much is random, too much has no purpose or meaning. Every day there is meaningless suffering. Being good seems at times to be pointless. Why should I drive myself mad, examining in painstaking detail what happened? The truth is: there is no point. No higher meaning. No reason governing life. End of story. We move through the night, only hoping to avoid the impenetrable fog, the rocky shoals, and just hope for endurance.

And yet, there are my nights now, spent on immovable land. The blackness comes, washes over me, moving deeper into sleep, my wife beside me, children breathing softly in the next room, no sound but the wind in the tall trees. I sometimes get up and feel my way around, and stand over my children in the dark. Nothing troubles their sleep and they breathe in the rest they will need before starting a new day. Unconsciously I begin to breathe in rhythm with them and calm myself inwardly. Other times the nightmares seize me. Two shadows approach and my limbs freeze. Then I'm pulled in, and there is a pause before that defining moment, that deafening 'crack'. My muscles propel me upright and my chest is racked by my pounding heart. I stare down the blackness as gunshots echo up through the ravine. Fear and grief leak out with my sweat, and I know then that I will never know who I am, I will always be between two worlds, wandering with no purpose.

Panting, the adrenaline brings me to near panic, and I claw my way back up, looking for a handhold, and pull myself up by the first and only grip I've ever found. I tell myself I cannot live with this burden, and I wish you'd never awakened me to myself. And then I recall how you did not give up, you did not let your judgment of yourself or the confusion destroy you, but let it strengthen your determination to be even better.

My breathing slows as these competing thoughts swirl about in my head until finally I only see the complexity. The gunshots in my ears gradually fade, the echoes inside the ravine diminish, eventually becoming my heartbeat, my pulse. I am here, now. Just as I felt when I sat in your class once, listening to a story about a boy who had the strength to fight his way free, and not without great pain, I'm aware I can feel more, hurt more because of imagining difficult things. But at that time I was also made to feel I was bound more closely with everyone in your class, everyone in our town, even the world. I'm conscious that this feeling also brings with it a terrible beauty.

In these fractured nights, I close my eyes as if to press back against the outer darkness. I know it will be night for a few more hours but then the day will arrive. Another day is given and I can choose to live it, and put as much good into it as I can. There may be no point to it, it is true, other than the importance of continuing to try. But maybe it is enough to remember that you and I, all of us, are alive, and it is within our grasp to understand what it is to be human.

Part 3.
Epilogue

Why is engaging with literature one of the best ways to satisfy a key goal of education, learning what it is to be human?

Introduction

In this Epilogue, I would like to discuss the value of reading novels and what major educational aims this might satisfy. In writing this particular novel, I was able to discover new knowledge not available through other means of learning, and this occurred through creating characters, conflicts, actions and consequences, as well as through the examination of concepts and feelings. An attempt was made to express these elements in special language that added to the aesthetic qualities of the novel. Having now finished the novel, I have a much deeper appreciation for the worth of writing and reading novels, especially how the synthesis of all these features points at new understandings about people, ideas and situations in real life as well as the imaginary world of the novel.

In my experience, this new knowledge continuously emerged at every stage in the imagining, planning, researching, writing, rewriting and editing, mainly because there have been so many more levels of exploration. In particular, through imagining the characters in the novel, I was able to “see” the lives of these kinds of people in a more holistic way, envisage abstract ideas at work in real settings and understand conflicts and other factors that come into play in schools, such as families, peers and the local environment. It has also enabled me to perceive more in the students I encounter now in real classrooms, and I find myself less likely to judge their ability to learn through the mandated curriculum.

More importantly, in creating characters, I have had to find that link to something in myself, and from there, examine people around me for more clues to how certain characters think and feel. This has demanded going beyond the everyday, perceiving people clearly, and looking more deeply into how they behave in certain environments and situations. Writing a novel requires holding conflicting ideas in the mind while moving ahead with plot development, and it is in this complexity of recording the particulars while keeping the universals in sight that often yields great insights. The

most significant connections often arise from that play between the imagination and the understanding. The experience of writing a novel allows ideas to move from theory to practice, or in Kantian terms, from applying rational thinking to practical reasoning, and on into aesthetic judgment.

In writing this novel I was able to perceive new parallels between philosophy, education and literature, including new insights to Plato's concept of education, morality and the aesthetic experience; in Kant's proofs on how the mind imposes order to create knowledge; and also concerning ontology, where Taylor (1989) states values must be intrinsically motivated in order to develop morally, especially when instruction in this is rare in our increasingly technical and instrumental society. Although many postmodern critics are sceptical that there can be such a thing as "intrinsic values" when we are all embedded in particular cultures and therefore adopt many of its values without question, I still believe that even within similar cultures, in fact, even within the same family, people can hold different values and choose what will become part of their personal ethics.

Most significantly, I feel I can argue more forcefully that moral awareness, which is fundamental to grasping what it is to be human, can be suitably encouraged through engagement with literature. In the classical liberal democratic tradition, this is one of the most important educational goals. With Plato, I believe that this centers on perceiving "the Good". In literature, there are many supporting "goods" of the Good to be found, such as justice, honesty, kindness, sincerity, and respect. These goods are often presented in themes in literature that help us identify ideals and moral principles as distinct concepts. Also, these goods may assist us in envisioning other people and developing empathy which may transfer to real life. However, the real power of art towards developing moral awareness is derived from the aesthetic experience that occurs when form and content come together to create a sum that is far greater than its parts. For these reasons, I believe literature, along with the other arts, can offer concrete clues about working through daily dilemmas and the way we live our lives, as well as returning us to profound and eternal questions, such as "how shall I live my life?" that concern human beings which I consider in the following sections.

In this Epilogue it is my aim to explore why engaging with literature is one of the best means of pursuing one of the primary goals of education: learning what it is to be

human. I will first consider each of the parts of this statement in detail, and then later examine it again as a full statement.

Why should learning what it is to be human be a primary goal of education?

From early Greek civilization to contemporary times, prominent thinkers have debated what the most important aims of education should be. Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Dewey, and Nussbaum, for example, each have attempted to locate the foundation upon which all the other educational aims ought to be built. In this section I would like to briefly review some of these aims and I would argue that there is one aim which must precede all the rest. Creating a peaceful and highly functioning society, active citizenship, gainful employment and tolerance all must flow, in my view, from a more fundamental aim, one that starts with the moral development of the individual.

The most pointed example of the process of determining a dominant educational aim occurs in Plato's *Republic* (1987). If one considers Plato's goal of "harmony in society" from a utilitarian view, or aiming at consequences that will lead to the greatest happiness for the most people, which in this case could be stated as doing what is best for society, many would agree in terms of the big picture that life cannot move forward if there are wars and social strife. Under these conditions it is tempting to name peace or harmony as the primary goal. Under more stable conditions, we need to define what harmony is, and how to achieve it. But Plato (434a, 441e, 442d) describes "harmony" as each person doing what they are meant to do. This seems to lead to the idea that if each person is exercising their particular skills and knowledge, society in turn will be functioning well. In other words, what is good for the individual is good for society.

If we take this literally, we could say the most obvious way to determine each person's potential would be to allow a period of exposure to instruction and learning tasks. Over time, a person would acquire necessary knowledge, discover if there is an affinity for one type of task over another and identify any natural talent. This would require several years of instruction, groupings of types of tasks and knowledge with evaluation by experts, accomplished, namely, through a system of education. It would

follow logically that students would be introduced to subjects befitting their age, growing in complexity, and students would be noted for their proficiency, rewarded with advancement until they could choose their occupations out in the world. This process may be two-part; first, finding out what most interests them over time or what they are best at doing because they are drawn to it, but secondly, this exposure may reveal, in terms of character or temperament, what they are most suited to doing. One career, for example, may appeal more to a courageous person, another to someone who can exercise their inclination for strict honesty, or, another, friendship and collaboration.

However, I do not believe Plato is intending to be so literal, and he follows up the statement about each person finding their place with another question, namely, “What is justice?” “Dikaiousune” is a term that is sometimes translated as “justice”; other times as more leaning towards “morality”, “good conduct”, “minding your own business”, “not interfering with others” or as “doing the job for which one is naturally fitted” (Lee, 1997, pp. xxxii, 7). To go to school or to join society requires some principles for living and working in harmony. In the *Republic*, Plato names four qualities or virtues in particular: wisdom, courage, discipline and justice (427e), and of these, justice is the more important. In any case, Plato seems to be talking about the quality of justice in two senses, both in the individual and in society. In fact, where there is harmony in the mind, spirit and appetite, with the latter two subordinated to reason, a person may perform their proper function and achieve fulfilment, similar to when elements are in balance in society (444). Plato ends by saying, “Justice, therefore, is a principle of this kind; its real concern is not with external actions, but with a man’s inward self, his true concern and interest” (443c).

Again, where is this justice or morality to be learned – in society? Obviously the smaller society of the school would allow students to learn about justice in its proper proportion, but with the necessary guidance. Each child learns through relevant experiences in each stage of his or her education, not through direct instruction, but through a teacher’s creating and making the most of certain opportunities in context. Plato asserts that teaching is not putting knowledge into an empty mind; the “capacity for knowledge is innate in each man’s mind” (518c), but the excellences of the mind are similar to those of the body, in that they are not innate but are encouraged through guidance and practice (518d).

In school, students may encounter subjects and skills which prepare them for their future pursuits, or learn what it is to be a good and active citizen in anticipation of entering society, but something more important is taking place during an education besides acquiring skills and knowledge. As students gather more practical experience with others and identify moral issues or principles, they become more aware, for example, of what the meaning of justice is. In both the curriculum and experiences with others in the school, teachers can guide their pupils towards knowledge, help them begin to learn for themselves and distinguish truth from falsehood. Certain truths in the abstract, Plato's "Forms", become distinguishable as concepts, as ideals. Given a "normal" early childhood, a student can grasp over time that there is one particular moral value that is shaping the others. If the conflict that arises has to do with "fairness", the teacher may have to model for the students a particular thinking process, leading with "What is the best thing to do in this case?" An idea of what is "good" comes to mind. Or, often the case in the negative is instructional; such as, why is a certain treatment of a friend "not good"? The student learns that what is honest is also good. These concepts of goods, or, "the Good", must be grasped as more of an overarching idea in order to be understood and applied in particular cases.

On a side note, more recent examples of attempts to privilege moral development in education exist, of course. Schools such as Kohlberg's Just Community Schools were organized so, "students play active roles in creating justice" (1971, p.89). Numerous other examples of programs in schools in Canada and the U.S. aim at raising moral awareness and character development, such as the Roots of Empathy (Roots of Empathy in British Columbia, n.d.), Child Development Project (Child Development Project Homepage, n.d.), Positive Youth Development (Positive Youth Development, 2010), to name only a few. Many schools in the Greater Vancouver region also implement local or school-specific programs, such as Virtue of the Month and school mission statements, as well as the B.C. Ministry of Education mandated Anti-Bullying initiative (B.C. Education, 2010).

Returning to Plato's idea, understanding "the Good" takes many years of education, but becoming aware of it and connecting it to something known but unarticulated in the self begins in school and continues through life. When society has a strong sense of the source of moral values, specifically, "ideals", then that society will

tend to follow certain social rules that lead to citizenship, tolerance and harmony. For Plato, the vision of the Good is the ultimate educational objective. A teacher cannot put knowledge in a student's mind; he or she can only turn the student towards the light. Plato says, "The mind as a whole must be turned away (from the world of change or mere appearances) until its eye can bear to look straight at a reality and at the brightest of all realities, which is what we call the Good "(518d).

Another approach to determining the primary educational aim is to ask, how should a student be educated in order to become a knowledgeable and active citizen? Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, (2002,1178b2) describes the highest human goal as living the contemplative life, but quickly adds that a life of thought is not enough; one must be active in civic life. Nussbaum (1997, p. 9) describes how cultivating the whole human being through a liberal education is best for the function of citizenship and life generally. She names three capacities essential to this aim: 1) critical examination; the ability to reason logically, look for consistency in reasoning and develop accuracy of judgement – in other words, to think for oneself; 2) the ability to see oneself as not just a citizen of a particular group but as a member of the whole of humanity and understand this is where higher loyalty must lie; and 3) to develop "narrative imagination", the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person's story or be able to identify with different kinds of people and see meaning as the person intended it. This latter capacity I will discuss in more detail later, but one of the main aims that can be extrapolated from this list is actively to develop tolerance and understanding in our growing multicultural, pluralistic society.

All of these capacities are highly valuable in education but I would argue that creating good citizens is not the starting point or highest aim in an educational system. As I have said above, this must follow a more fundamental level, an awareness of the student in himself, of intrinsic reasons why he should think for himself, from which it will follow that he can actively become a good citizen and recognize the value of considering the whole of humanity in one's deliberations and why it is morally right to be tolerant.

I think for the same reasons as above training a student for an occupation cannot be the leading educational aim. Dewey (1997) likens the student to an "organism", growing over time, and growth itself seems to be the main aim of education here. But

critics have asked, growth in what direction? No one would disagree with the importance of moving towards states of greater knowledge, especially now that the concept of “life-long learning” is a reality, but there must be some overarching idea directing this growth, and as I have said, character and temperament must be considered in a student deciding what direction she needs to go. To be fair, Dewey was influenced by the political and economic conditions of his era, a time when more workers in particular fields were needed to advance the country and much pressure was on educators to provide citizens who could fulfill those occupations. But in turn, the question could be asked, is there not a pool of workers who out of economic necessity will gravitate to the jobs available, and should not education focus on “norms” rather than particular conditions? I see these as perennial questions in education.

I would like to return to Taylor (1989) who attempts to “show the connections between the modern moral outlook and its multiple sources, on one hand, and the different evolving conceptions of the self and its characteristic powers, on the other; and to show also how these concepts of the self are connected with certain notions of inwardness...” (p.498). In a developing self, there will be many sources of knowledge, about many areas of life. But if students cannot take this knowledge, and understand it from within who they are, their development will not take place wholly, and organically. Knowledge of how to be a good citizen may influence a sense of self and expand on principles already in place, but grafting on new areas of knowledge will not be continuous with an inner sense of identity.

All of these above aims are worthwhile and contribute to social harmony and justice, but they also must start from within the person. Quite simply, if students can come to grasp certain intrinsic moral principles for themselves, then many of these other worthwhile aims of education can be realized. The reverse holds true as well. If young people have an education that aims to develop their sense of what it is to be human, the less human inclination to treat people as a means to an end, or fall into the habit of instrumental thinking, will not sit well with them. In the next section I will discuss what it is to be human, specifically in an educational sense.

In my novel, I have tried to show how these other aims of education fail to reach a student like Jason. Attempts to encourage development through the curriculum or

appeals to be a good citizen do not have any meaning for him because a more basic part is missing. At the beginning of the novel, Jason is too underdeveloped as a human being in terms of his identity; he is not yet aware of who he is, what qualities are most important inside himself. He does not understand what it is about himself that needs to lead him forward; he only has the slightest inkling about what the Good is, more of an idea that he recognizes when he feels it; for instance, when Jen looks closely at him and “sees” him as a person, or when he observes her interacting with others. Training in a job might provide him with a livelihood after school but it will not enable him to deal with life situations or give him reasons for behaving according to ethical ideals or social expectations. Like many of Jason’s peers, and especially in the example of their fathers, we see many young men falling into the easiest job, the path taken by their fathers, but their misery, dissatisfaction and dysfunction as persons are clearly evident. I see this as primarily due to these jobs having little meaning, and as a result, the young men look for meaning elsewhere. Unable to find meaning in their lives, they may turn to drugs, alcohol or other distractions to ease their inner pain. In this story, the boys are lacking support from people who can commit to long term, consistent and wise mentoring; their families are dysfunctional, few have higher education, attend religious places of worship where they might be exposed to moral ideas, and the community overall sees itself as disadvantaged and a place to be escaped. I imagine that at best, as these boys move into middle age themselves, like their fathers, they may come to accept that life is to be endured. Perhaps they can develop the important quality of compassion, seeing others like themselves who suffer, but they may not have the capacity to think through problems, using reason and feeling, or locate moral principles inside themselves that can guide their decision-making processes. Without awareness of these moral principles, and without living in a moral community where they could develop moral values, they are less likely to hold fast to certain truths and learn from consequences that will allow them to perceive what goodness is, which ultimately would result in an overall sense of fulfillment or flourishing.

In closing this section, I would like to quote Taylor (1989) as saying,

One could say that seeing good empowers, and that it thus functions as what I have been calling a moral source. We have here a further step in the process I have called the internalization of moral sources. Alongside the sense of our dignity as disengaged, free, reasoning subjects,

alongside our sense of the creative imagination as a power of epiphany and transfiguration, we have also this idea of an affirming power, which can help realize the good by recognizing it. (p. 454)

It was my intention to show in the novel what a difference this can make in a life.

“What it is to be human” in an educational sense?

Psychologists cite certain factors in distinguishing what makes us human compared to other species; namely, besides genetic factors, that we use complex language. Philosophers, on the other hand, name our ability to reason. But humans are also unique in comparison to other sentient beings in their ability to express sophisticated and subtle emotion and to articulate complex thoughts about feelings. Emotions in the moment can provide great energy but may cloud our judgement; however, with hindsight, emotions may be relied upon to help us better understand how we feel now about an experience, enabling us to think well. When we know how we feel, we know what we think. Good judgement follows rational thinking about feeling (Nussbaum, 1990).

Being human is also directly related to having moral inclinations, to the degree of being able to go beyond social needs of mutual cooperation to a state of selflessness; for example, when we put ourselves in danger for another person. Qualities that make us most human frequently surprise us because they go against what seems to be most logical, practical or naturally instinctive. Often someone who feels strongly about a situation will go out of their way to help another person, donate money for a disease they do not have, labour to write a sonnet to move a beloved, or even become overwhelmed by reading a sonnet that was written four hundred years ago – all of these are motivated by something deep within – intrinsic values that connect meaning to the Good.

If a child is fortunate enough to be loved, that child will grow up knowing that love is good, and by extension that it is good to treat others well – with respect, honesty, fairness and all the other goods that stem from an idea of wanting to be treated as the child has been treated. As the child grows, this treatment not only provides the child with emotional stability and a sense of what is normal, but an awareness that this type of

human interaction makes sense. There are clear reasons to be good to others, beyond Kohlberg's pre-conventional level of moral development which states, "behave well to avoid punishment and gain rewards", and, "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" (1971). There is not merely a practical, mutually beneficial level of understanding between people but a sense of well-being in good relationships, which on a larger scale promotes harmony in society. What rationally makes sense for the individual, by extension, for the whole of society, also feels right.

Perhaps, then, a more fundamental starting point to thinking about "what it is to be human" in an educational sense is one that prioritizes the internal development of the individual before moving outward. Consider Socrates's exhortations, "Know thyself", or, "To thine own self be true". I take these statements to have two meanings. First, Socrates is asking us to make an effort to be truthful to ourselves about who we are, what we know, and why that is important. Second, in the sense of being good to ourselves – do not sell ourselves short due to ignorance or low self-esteem; we have the right to gain knowledge, to improve ourselves. Do not sacrifice our most important needs to others; rather, be confident in ourselves as full people, demand to be treated fairly and so on. Ultimately the meaning ought to be: seek knowledge for ourselves and about ourselves so we have the inner strength to be good, thereby allowing us to be ourselves at all times. When we are aware of ourselves, monitoring our reasons for actions, always learning and advancing our knowledge, we can count on ourselves to do what is right in most cases.

There is a long history of debate between fact and value, and Kant famously joins pure reason and practical reason in his philosophical system, which I will discuss in more detail below. Kant in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (2009, 396.6-.7) says all rational beings recognize the difference between knowing the truth and knowing what to do about it; in particular, recognizing reason's "practical power" to produce a good will. Rational thinking or pure reason assists us in deliberating on principles which will then guide us in how best to proceed in exercising practical reason related to taking action.

On the other hand, I believe someone in moral conflict experiences conflict surrounding identity. Plato calls it a lack of inner harmony; the rational mind is not

controlling the emotions and appetites (444b). For someone truly aware of what is causing moral conflict, he or she will need to know what is the right thing to do to feel better. A person must look inside to find what principle is good, which quality can be relied on, in order to feel better about oneself and maintain a high self-opinion. Furthermore, if the conflict is about respecting another person's right to do something, it is necessary to "be" fair. To see oneself as a "just" person requires locating this principle inside, repressing self-interest, and leading with this quality in the decision-making process in order to do what is right. Socrates discusses at length how people can decide from an external position what to do in making moral decisions, as in the example of doing good when others are watching, but not being good when they can get away with it or it will not harm their reputation (366). A moral person is aware of the reasons behind moral principles and chooses actions that will lead to inner harmony. Socrates says this person knows it is best to be moral for oneself first; being good is its own reward (358a, 591).

When a person is morally aware, he or she also recognizes there are good and better choices to be made. A person for whom goodness is the ultimate goal, for instance, will work towards improving knowledge, discerning qualities involved in higher moral decision-making and clarifying understanding. These are all qualities that make us human, and always working to improve ourselves presumably can make us better human beings.

I have mentioned principles that are upheld as ideals, but connected to these are qualities, or personality traits, in the individual. What qualities make an exemplary human being? Being aware of one's character or how a personality is developing has always been a moral concern. Socrates in *Meno* (1985, 95a-96d) says virtue cannot be taught, but awareness of good character traits and how to apply them is the first step, along with a guide or teacher to lead the way (*Republic* 518). Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, (2002, 1106a19) talks about the functions of things; for example, an excellent horse is good at running, carrying its rider, and so on. In answer to what makes a good human being, he says "doing what they are meant to do in an excellent manner". If someone is meant to be a harpist, they are not simply playing the harp, but through much practice, playing well. In moral terms, practice of good actions leads to habits. Habits lead to more spontaneously good responses in moral situations, until with

time, habits finally become part of who a person is. Traits can be isolated and defined, such as Aristotle does with his Golden Mean. Courage is a virtue, but too much can lead to reckless and dangerous behaviour; too little is considered cowardice.

This may be the biggest difference between Plato and Aristotle in terms of ethics. Plato (505a) focuses on ideals or principles, for example, the highest form of knowledge, the Good, and other forms that are universal, while Aristotle (1106b5) asks a person to estimate the middle ground, and act with moderation. Plato directs us to keep working to perceive the Good; Aristotle instructs us to develop moral habits through practice. MacLachlan (2010) criticizes Plato's forms as being too abstract and not taking into account different cultural values when claiming there are universal principles of good and bad. MacLachlan also adds that Aristotle does not provide a reliable tool to guide behaviour; for example, when two principles are in conflict, there is no overarching ideal of the Good.

To recap, what I have been looking at so far is an examination of what makes us most human: our rational thinking, complex emotional capacity, an ability to reflect and learn from experience, a desire to contemplate ourselves and our behaviour, to seek guiding principles or ideals and consciously choosing habits that with practice can shape our character as virtues. Aristotle (1178b2) tells us that the contemplative life is best but adds that this is not enough; we must be active. This leads back to questions of motivation: when we understand principles and excellences, what should move us to be actively moral? Socrates has said virtue is its own reward, as is the healthy, balanced soul and the inner harmony that follows. Aristotle says it is happiness ("eudaimonia"), in the modern sense of "flourishing". If the ability to reason and understand right and wrong is innate, it follows that a person will benefit internally from being moral. Socrates (*Apology*, 41c) goes as far as to say, "The good man cannot be harmed". But to me, this seems a step too far removed from reality; as social creatures we are too much embedded in our social world.

In my novel, Jason starts to "wake up" to how he is different from his father, especially through noticing his feelings, namely after the fight in the hall, hearing Jen defend him and sensing her kindness. He begins to locate some goodness in himself and can name what goodness consists of. It may be true that he must have retained

some awareness of this from his relationship with his mother; he knows why it is good to be good. Jason also begins to feel a lack of harmony or ill fit in moral outlook with his father and Mr. Sennick, and being more drawn to Jen's outlook. At the same time he feels he knows more about the world than Jen, feels protective of her, almost as if she is a projection of how he sees himself on reflection, as a victim of his father's unjust treatment and the unfairness of being young and less worldly.

Another stage in Jason's moral awakening is when he overhears Jen and the principal's conversation. Mr. Jameson is not taking advantage of her naïveté; in fact, he is encouraging her idealism. Jason recognizes a higher path here, a place where ideal behaviour is valued as a guide, even though it may not be attained in every case. Jason realizes Jen wants to be a better person, for no external reward, but because she will feel better about herself and may find a way to be a better teacher and human being. At first he is quite amazed this is something worth pursuing and contemplates this idea for many months afterward.

In terms of Aristotle's virtues, Jason does worry about finding a Golden Mean of idealism; he knows a person cannot be blind or too innocent about the bad things in this world, but he also does not want to fall into a cold realism or misanthropy like his father.

As a writing technique, I decided one of the best ways to highlight these contrasts was to put characters together whose values are in opposition. I had to imagine how each character would see the situation and have them form and express their ideas and opinions. This in turn forced me to consider different points of view, different orientations toward morality and what might unfold as a result. For instance, Jason has to decide what to do about the conflicts he encounters and his subsequent actions reflect his moral development. Over the course of the novel, he moves from Kohlberg's preconventional level of avoiding punishment to a more idealistic stage where he recognizes the value of upholding principles. (One of the middle stages is choosing compromise; after their road trip, Jason seeks a way to satisfy his father's sense of hard justice toward Jack, while finding a way to ease his own conscience by keeping Jack alive rather than being complicit in what likely would have been murder.)

Nonetheless, in May Jason senses the growing feeling that things will go badly. In this regard, there are strong overtures to *Hamlet*; Jason waits as long as he can while pondering what the right thing to do is until the idea that “the readiness is all” becomes the only option in the moral complexity he finds himself in (v.ii, 223). He knows he will have to accept the immoral consequences in his father’s lawless world if he chooses to hold fast to the ideals in Jen’s principled, moral world. Paradoxically, he opts to save his soul while sacrificing his life. Jason does not believe “the good man cannot be harmed”, and at the climax, he understands that he will probably have to go to jail for the rest of his life. But as he has come to see it, he must privilege intrinsic values as the only alternative to living with himself, no matter what the extrinsic values of society may do to him.

I am not devaluing the intrinsic approach to developing moral awareness; on the contrary, it may be the best model we have. But in the next section I would like to examine less abstract ethical theories, those with extrinsic considerations, such as teleology, and to some extent, Kant’s deontology (in the sense that it asks what the outcome would be if a universal maxim could be willed), that are based on principles but those that arise from considering consequences or what might happen if everyone behaved in a certain way.

Deontology and Utilitarianism

Whether we have an intrinsic moral sense of right and wrong based on our ability to reason and perceive the Good (Plato) or consider the extrinsic appropriateness of our actions from within our virtues (Aristotle), there is still the question of motivation. More to the point, are human beings at their best and most moral when they are motivated by principles or results? Does fixing one’s eye on ideals and reasoning about what is right lead to more ethical behaviour? Or, should we envisage the best outcome, and then work backwards in order to achieve those ends? These are some of the motivations behind the deontological and utilitarian approaches.

Deontology, or “what is incumbent upon us”, from “deo” or duty, focuses on duties, rights and principles as the only basis for judging actions. Deontology does not depend on individual virtues, as virtue ethics does, but on a careful evaluation of what

our duties and responsibilities are in each situation. Kant is the primary philosopher associated with deontology, and like Socrates, he believed that principles or duties are universal and absolute, true for everyone in every situation, that they can be apprehended through reason, and that they are good for their own sake, or their own reward.

For Kant, what makes us morally good is solely our will or our intention to act according to universal moral principles. For Aristotle, intentions might lead to happiness but Kant disagrees, saying that being happy is not the same thing as being morally good. Rather, it is acting with the intention of doing our duty, because it is the right thing to do, that makes us morally good. Furthermore, there is an extension to what Kant calls “moral law”, which is similar to a nation’s law. As citizens, we are required to act in accordance to the law because it is the law. MacLachlan (2010) sees Kant’s moral law as “the embodiment of objective moral truth, a concept similar to Socrates’s ideal of goodness. Acting out of respect for that moral law means not allowing anything – not personal happiness, not love, not fear, not even the government’s law – to get in the way of doing what is morally right” (p.67).

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (2009), Kant states that all motivations other than duty or moral law only get in the way of doing the right thing. Moral deliberation, virtues included, should be stripped of considerations of experience, self-love or self-interest.

How do we rationally determine what our duty or responsibility is? Kant (2009, 421) provides an answer in what he calls the “categorical imperative”: “Act only that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”; where ‘imperative’ is a command that tells us what to do, and ‘maxim’ is in the sense of a rule that one can propose to oneself. Kant’s goal was to determine if a rule or principle could be applied to all people, all of the time. This is the extrinsic view involved in the deontological approach, if only in theory. Kant is considering what would be the result if all people did this, if this moral law became universal. However, I would note here that Kant is not considering actual consequences; it is only an imaginative means for testing an ideal.

Kant elaborates on the categorical imperative in terms of fundamental human rights, which recognize the dignity and worth of all human beings. By the very fact of being human, we are entitled to being treated equally, both in terms of legal rights and in the eyes of the government, as well as through universal moral law. Therefore, a second or extended categorical imperative (2009, 429) states, “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” As rational beings, people have an inherent value in themselves, and should never be used as objects or tools to gain the goals desired. Any action that deceives, coerces, or manipulates others is not treating people as ends.

A good will or intention is paramount and Kant is not concerned with outcomes. Life is too complex with too many variables to control what unfolds following an action, and, just as good intentions can lead to bad results, so can bad actions lead to good results. “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*” (2009,393.1 {italics in original}).

I feel, however, this approach raises questions pertaining to the pressure on an agent if there is the obligation to act on everything that needs to be done. Principles also seem to come into conflict; for example, if murder is wrong and always wrong, would someone not protect his family if they were in mortal danger? Which principle takes precedence? As well, it may be difficult to set aside emotions in the moment.

In contrast, teleology, from “telos” or end, refers to ethical theories that focus on goals of actions. The specific goal, or “good”, must be worthy of being pursued and any results that produce this end are morally right. Also, if maximizing the good is the objective, then we must work in the direction as producing the most good possible. For example, if freedom is good, then the more the better.

I will briefly look at one of the most well-known of the teleological theories, utilitarianism, as espoused by Mill. At first, there seem to be similarities with Aristotle; both aim at the goal of happiness. But in utilitarianism, it is not reasoned or rational self-interest that leads action; it is necessary to work towards everyone’s happiness, not just

our own. Mill (2003) says, “The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others” (p.194). In fact, what is best is not privileging one person or group over another. Higher pleasures such as those that appeal to reason, education, creativity and a sense of morality surpass those of our senses and appetites.

I feel utilitarianism may be one of the most common ethical theories embraced by society but hold that it is impossible to measure happiness, compare different kinds of happiness, let alone envision every outcome in order to evaluate consequences. Determining long term effects is mere speculation; we simply cannot predict the future.

In summary, some people choose to act on principles regardless of consequences. Others think each situation should be judged and acted upon in terms of best outcomes. Both of these positions have sound ethical reasoning behind them. In reality, most people find a balance between the deontological and teleological approaches in deciding what to do. Yet some situations are impossible to balance as seen in moral dilemmas.

In my novel, the climax is intended to highlight the dilemma between deontology and utilitarianism. Is Jason motivated by principles or results? What philosophy is the best, or least damaging, in this particular situation? Which is more compelling, intrinsic or extrinsic motivation?

Jason’s moral development is directly connected to his becoming less and less concerned about consequences, or avoiding pain in Kohlberg’s terms, as his sense of morality takes hold. As his vision of the Good becomes more fixed, he senses the importance of perceiving more and more of this ideal as a way of salvaging what is good in himself, of forging an identity worth having and possibly of finding a way of being in this world that he can live with. However, Jason is still a realist, and knows that he straddles different moral worlds, but as the novel progresses, he must decide which one will allow him to live with himself, to be the person he wants to be. At the novel’s climax, the decision is between the deontological and utilitarian approach. He cannot be a good Kantian and save Jen whom he sees as good and innocent in his father’s world, but knowing she is a Kantian makes it all the harder to do what he must do for the greater

good. Jason is willing to sacrifice his own life to save Jen and go up against his father's rage to do what is right for the best outcome. Here I also feel that there is another factor, one well represented in ancient Greek literature: Jason does not count on the role Chaos plays (unforeseen consequences) and what it causes him to do.

After writing the climax I realized that the deontology – utilitarianism dilemma was the protagonist's main conflict. I found myself revisiting the strengths and weaknesses of both and wondering how I could backtrack and reflect them more in Jason's development, and then "show" them more distinctly. I also thought about real life, and how in most situations, people must prioritize the criteria necessary for deciding which course of action is best. Jason is under tremendous pressure to decide which is most important: self-preservation, protecting a good person, namely Jen, or, being a loyal if fearful son. He is able to split his thinking three ways and quickly envision the consequences of all three directions. Self-preservation and loyalty to his father would be most "natural" or instinctual, but because of his greater moral understanding, he could not live with himself if he abandoned Jen, knowing what he knows about his father. Like Hamlet, he recognizes the inevitability of self-sacrifice and so moves forward with unified mental faculties, in order to execute the best plan.

Before considering the implications these ideas have for teaching, I would like to review my argument so far. I believe human beings have developed many systems of thought as frameworks for determining the best mode of action in moral deliberation. I feel that true moral decision-making is complex, and that consciously or unconsciously, we may draw on one system of thought or a combination. Ultimately, however, we are most moral when our starting point is an awareness of our intrinsic values, where rational thought and examined feelings take precedence before leading outward toward other considerations.

If education aims to teach what it is to be human, how can teachers facilitate this in the classroom?

We have learned from Socrates that virtue cannot be taught, mainly because it is through practice that one gradually discovers the Golden Mean, but that each person

has the capacity to learn, although for higher mastery a guide is needed. This section will examine what that guidance consists of and how a guide can facilitate moral awareness in students.

“Since teachers are essentially concerned with guiding the development of young people, with encouraging particular forms of positive human association, and with promoting the intellectual and moral virtues required for such association, they are unavoidably professionally implicated in profound questions about the moral ends and goals of human life” (Carr, 2000, p. 82). Plato (518d) says teaching is a professional skill and a teacher can turn the student’s mind around, towards the light, so he or she may grasp the truth for herself. “Today as in the past, the teacher’s role is critical to the future prosperity and well-being of our society” (Dollase, 1992 p. 1).

I see the role of the teacher in this instance in three particular areas. First, in who the teacher is as a person, in terms of internal, moral character and values; second, in the development of a professional identity and an awareness of ethical obligations that occur during teacher education programs; and thirdly, in the teacher-student relationships that take place in the classroom.

Teacher as person

What initially draws students to a career in teaching may be that they enjoy being with children, acquiring knowledge and passing it along to other people. Later they may discover they like the challenges of working with different kinds of learners, specializing in a particular area of curriculum and even being the authority in the classroom. Lortie (1975) cites five major attractions: interpersonal (working with young people), service (performing a mission of special moral worth), continuation (liking school and wanting to learn more), material benefits and time compatibility.

In order to perform a “mission of special moral worth”, I believe a future teacher already has in place a number of virtues that are compatible with teaching; for example, a perception of the Good, a highly developed sense of justice, honesty, selflessness, industriousness and so on. It has been my experience in teaching numerous education and PDP (Professional Development Program) or teacher education courses, that the vast majority of these students display these qualities. These pre-service teachers are

also very aware of themselves as role models to their future students and that they cannot help but bring their moral values into their classrooms. Whatever personal or cultural values they hold, they also say they feel confident about how they will not tolerate injustice or unkind behaviour, exclusion or prejudice, lying, cheating and other negative acts that they see as outside universal values. Who they consider themselves to be as persons is what they bring to the profession, along with the knowledge they will need to be effective teachers in the classroom.

With or without knowing it, these education students are speaking about the union of theory and practice. Thus, to gain a better understanding, Carr (2000) says, “of the ways in which the professional knowledge and reasoning of teachers impacts upon their professional practice, it is crucial to grasp not only the way in which they exercise moral wisdom in their actual practical dealings with children, but also the way in which their moral and evaluative deliberations are informed by a wider understanding of the world, human nature and society” (pp. 82-83). The teacher as person brings much self-knowledge, knowledge of the world and knowledge of other people to the profession, and feels confident about having the ability to become a good teacher because of seeing him or herself as the right kind of person to do the job. Perhaps through acquiring some teaching experience, as a camp leader, daycare worker, volunteer teacher’s aide, ESL tutor and the like, he or she has accumulated some understandings about principles behind teaching and the virtues of a competent teacher. Carr (2000) adds, “...although practical moral wisdom requires us to be widely informed by different sorts of reflection upon the nature of human life and association, it is nevertheless not in and of itself a form of *theoretical* reasoning focused on the discernment of *truths*, but a form of *practical* reasoning concerned with pursuit of the *good* (p. 83, italics in original).

Teachers differ in their dispositional make up, and their mental processes may be unknowable, but I am more interested in a particular common cluster of virtues that many prospective teachers seem to have in common and how these might relate to their values. Carr (2000) does step back into more Aristotelian terms when he states, “We might reasonably start from the idea of teacher education and training as a matter of systematic initiation into a particular mode of normative, evaluative and practical discourse concerned with the principled articulation and formulation of educational issues and problems in the light of competing concepts of human flourishing.”

Teacher education

As I have said, teacher education in some ways begins with the new teacher's self-awareness of moral values and their development. Barrow (1998) says a teacher must be educated to educate others, and part of this education is moral education. In teacher education, virtues and moral sentiments are nurtured and defined when pre-service teachers discuss their responsibilities when ethical issues arise. Also, moral awareness is made more acute through a mentoring system. The longer practicum or student teaching phase is a series of steps where the new teacher learns how to think like a teacher, and act like a teacher, the latter especially requiring an understanding of the appropriate moral responses, akin to Aristotle's Golden Mean. In particular, through contemplation or reflective practice, the new teacher grapples with life in the classroom and has a sharp sense of his own strengths and weaknesses. Dollase (1992) says, "In striving to meet high standards of performance in their daily teaching, these beginners also confront and must deal with practical realities and constraints of the classroom and school environment. Adapting to the new realities while struggling to maintain their idealism and enthusiasm is the focus" (p. 68). Much of what the teacher believes about teaching and himself is called into question. This can often cause much internal crisis especially if the teacher begins to doubt his or his pupils' moral orientation.

Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1991) say, "The teacher enters the teaching context, tries on roles from within a formed self, a teaching self-based on a cluster of meanings, which are tested, adjusted in response to meanings taken from interpretations based on responses of students and others. It is a conflict-laden process. The teacher needs to make adjustments, compromises, always fine tuning. New selves, 'reconstructed' selves, are formed" (p.6).

As humbling a process as this is, it is a necessary one for many reasons. Most education students are middle-class, care about education and have attended post-secondary institutions themselves (Allard & Santoro, 2008). As shocking as it may seem to these new teachers, many children do not arrive at school prepared and eager to learn, with a good breakfast in their stomachs, appropriately dressed and happy to be there. The conflicts new teachers experience serve to deepen their understanding of their roles as educators and the principles they must uphold to be effective and good

teachers. Furthermore, although Plato has been criticized for giving priority to the general over the particular, a beginning teacher must choose this as a starting point and identify what is good for the majority and teach to the class, maintain a teacher-centered classroom until classroom management skills are mastered and she can begin to focus on individual needs. Carr (2000) says progress in one's moral philosophy begins with being able to appreciate diversity, and developing a deeper sensitivity. This is merely part of the process of becoming a teacher.

As the new teacher fuses theory and practice, as well as her personal and professional identities as teacher, she is adopting habits in the Aristotelian sense, exercising them, practising them and shaping them towards excellence. Understanding principles and how to apply them to particular situations better enables her to keep sight of the Good and have a sense of being rewarded for getting better and better as a person and as a teacher.

Student-Teacher relationships

The last area I would like to consider of the different ways teachers can facilitate learning what it is to be human is perhaps the most significant, and that is through student-teacher relationships. I will not discuss how a teacher delivers curriculum in an ethical way nor what issues may arise in the specific subject areas, such as Social Studies or Science. It is rather in the Kantian sense that teachers understand that in relations with students, that all persons are worthy of respect, have dignity and the right to freedom. Students in this case are ends in themselves, and the moral law applies to them as persons.

I would argue that in the case of teachers, they have both a personal and professional duty to perform in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, because the new teacher must forge an identity that consists of both their existing identity and their emerging teaching identity, the teacher will be able to draw on principles and experiences from both. Her life experiences will enable her to better understand her students' overall lives, whereas her professional experiences will help her better understand the students as learners in the classroom. Carr (2000) says, there is "considerable continuity between personal and workplace aspects of teaching" and

“teachers should above all avoid hypocrisy and be ‘authentic’ in their dealings with pupils; they should really practise what they preach, should really rather than merely apparently ‘care’, and be utterly and selflessly committed to the personal flourishing...of their charges” (p. 13, italics in original).

Nussbaum (1997) cites Socrates’s central educational goal as “the examined life” and points out there is little indication of how this abstract ideal might be realized in formal educational programs, but one central task is to confront passivity in the pupil. “Critical argument leads to intellectual strength and freedom – by itself a remarkable transformation of the self, if the self had previously been lazy and sluggish...and also to a modification of the pupil’s motives and desires....Reason, in short, constructs the personality in a very deep way, shaping its motivations as well as its logic.... The pursuit of ethical truth is essential to full humanity” (pp.28-29).

To end this section, what I have been examining here is that the process of becoming a professional, especially that of becoming a teacher, is inherently caught up in defining and embodying a moral identity. Questions of values naturally arise and the new teacher must distinguish which intrinsic values hold and which do not in order to succeed in the classroom. From there, the teacher must begin to form a teaching philosophy he or she can build on and from this a professional identity is set in motion. It could be argued that this identity affects the entire identity, personal and professional, as certain moral understandings grow and take hold.

In my novel, I wanted to examine the critical phase of development that Jen is experiencing. She is able to recognize that there are affinities between her and her students, in terms of an education in virtues, and because of this, she is more able to connect with what the teens are going through in terms of their own emerging identities as moral agents. She, and to some extent, Jason, are both able to grasp that they are at a junction; they are both aware that they can strive towards the kind of person they want to be. Jen is searching for the best, most moral way of being a good teacher. She looks around herself at examples of teaching and decides to forge her own identity. Jason, because of his own new awareness, watches her struggles with great interest.

Jen also seizes upon the theory she has acquired in her teacher education to inform her practice in the classroom. Keeping in mind the ideals that seem good to her, she compares what can be achieved in reality. She falls back on other practical strategies, such as getting to know her students, their backgrounds, learning styles as well as the school culture, that will help improve her chances of success.

Postmodern critics doubt the possibility of agreeing on common or “normative” values, or what virtues would be accepted as universal, but often teachers work this out with their students as a class. For example, a rule of no fighting or rough-housing in the school would prevent students from being injured and create a safe learning environment, which is presumably something everyone could agree on. No lying or cheating on exams would uphold the virtue of honesty. In a broader sense, a teacher would learn the existing values of the school through being mentored by other teachers.

Jen is very much an outsider, and when considering the specific values of her students, school and community, she finds she is very much on a two way street. She may bring existing ideas of high standards to her class, but must adapt these to practical realities: students are not as materially wealthy, have not had as many opportunities for a variety of experiences nor as much exposure to people and ideas as the more urban students she is used to. Again, this is an adjustment, and she is not scaling back her expectations for her students. She is redirecting her instruction, possibly making it more explicit, until she is surer of their prior knowledge.

Lastly, Jen has many fine qualities already in place as a teacher, namely being open as a person. She models her willingness to consider different points of view and learn from students, other teachers and her community.

In reality, for many teachers, the school environment prevents substantial participation in their students’ moral development. A typical high school teacher may have as many as 200 students and is hard-pressed to keep track of academic development let alone the particular stages students may be going through in terms of moral understanding. How can a teacher possibly contribute significantly to each student’s moral development? In the next section I would like to put forth one solution and argue for it also being one of the most worthwhile approaches.

Why engaging with literature is one of the best ways to learn what it is to be human

Storytelling may be the oldest form of education. Visual story records such as the cave paintings at Lascaux made 17,000 years ago may be concrete evidence of our desire to see ourselves memorialized, share experiences, celebrate ourselves, honour the sanctity of life and know ourselves better, but we can also be sure since the time of language development, people told stories to one another as a way of understanding this complex experience of “being human”. Although the oldest preserved writing occurs on clay tablets in Sumer in 3500 B.C. in strange cuneiform text, and later in pictographs such as in Chinese and Egyptian writing, it is remarkable in other ways that the earliest existing long work of fiction, the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, found in written form in 2100 B.C. after a much earlier oral tradition, is still comprehensible to us in terms of its human drama.

Prior to the spread of literacy in ancient Greece, storytelling, mainly shared through lyrical poetry, became not only the recorded history, culture and religious ritual of a people but also the custodian of the group’s identity and values. Havelock (1963) calls the oral tradition a compilation of inherited lore. He sees Plato’s conception of Homer as one of furthering a “tribal encyclopaedia”. The tale itself is designed as a kind of vehicle, that in addition to the story to be conveyed, is put to use as a kind of “literary portmanteau” which contains a collection of usages, conventions, prescriptions and procedures.

In his analysis of *The Iliad*, Havelock (1963) sees it less as a work of art and more like a metrical schoolbook, saying,

Taking the first hundred lines alone, we have separated out a total of about 50 and identified this content as didactic in the sense that they recall, memorialize acts, attitudes, judgments and procedures which are typical [in Hellenic culture]... This is the way in which the society does normally behave (or does not) and at the same time the way in which we, its members, who form the poet’s audience, are encouraged to behave. There is no admonition: the tale remains dispassionate. But the paradigm of what is offered is in contrast to what may be unusual or improper and excessive or rash. In sum when Hesiod describes the content of the Muses’ song as *nomoi* (law) and *ethe* (ethics), he is describing epic, and Plato’s conception of Homer’s function as it was

claimed by Homer and for Homer makes sense. He is indeed an encyclopedia of Greek or at least Homeric 'paideia'. (p. 87)

In this section I would like to examine in detail what storytelling and literature in general can do that is so valuable for students as they learn what it is to be human. A single teacher may not be able to offer individual guidance to all students, but reading a story as a class with themes and ideas that are relevant to student lives, will not only enable students to examine their own views but they will benefit from discussions with their peers and probing, guiding questions from their teacher.

In Havelock's description of storytelling, there are many essential ideas that illuminate the source of what role storytelling has played and may continue to play in education. That scholars have determined qualities that indicate early Greek stories were meant to be morally instructive through presenting normative attitudes, pronouncing judgements as a way of establishing models of ethical behaviour, that the stories themselves were dispassionate and that virtues were contrasted to a Golden Mean, all point to how this early literature set the stage for a method of education that was highly valued. I would argue with Havelock, however, that the main reason stories were valuable to a people was not because they were a source of factual knowledge as much as the stories themselves had emotional meaning. The ancient Greek people knew the stories of Achilles and Hercules from frequent telling; what they wanted was the emotional experience again, told perhaps by another poet, in another style, with new insights. People do not necessarily choose to engage with literature because they want to find out about "war" or "traveling by sea" as much as they want a good story, although this may add to the enjoyment of the experience, especially in historical fiction. To read or listen to a well-known story is to "feel" it again, absorb more of the details and take a deep pleasure from it. The most well-loved stories had the most meaning, both for the individual, and the collective audience. Understanding comes in waves; on first exposure, certain qualities are grasped, like plot and character, but to hear the story again and again carves a deeper appreciation on more sophisticated levels, especially after lively discussions with a variety of people who offer different insights. The equivalent today is reading and discussing novels in book clubs or watching films again and again, and getting something new from each exposure.

Through recognizing the place of Homer as spokesperson for ancient Greek culture, Plato realized the power of literature to shape people's minds. Plato's rejection of the poets due to the lack of truth in stories, the emotional responses that caused the audience to lose rationality, and the mob's identification with flawed characters, makes it all the more of a contradiction to learn Plato himself wrote plays in his youth, and most surprisingly, recommended in his program for children's education that they should not study math or philosophy, but the Greek myths. Hughes (1989) states, "Everyone knows that the first lessons, with human beings just as with dogs, are most important of all. So what would be the effect of laying a foundation of the child's mental life of this mass of supernatural figures and their impossible antics?" (p. 161). Today we might say that myths have an important role to play in developing the imagination. But in Plato's time ancient Greece was at the crossroads of competing military powers and cultural wars, and religious passions and dark superstition ruled the minds of the populace. In Plato's view, the philosophers were the real "heroes", and Hughes (1989) believes, they saw themselves as moving society "towards the seriousness of existence and a bright perception of universal and human truths.... Attending to the world of a story is the beginning of imagination and mental control...the beginning of a form of contemplation" (p. 163). Each story is a "unit of imagination", unique and separate in itself, no matter how many the head holds. "It does not matter how old the stories are. Stories are old the way human biology is old. No matter how much they have produced in the past in the way of fruitful inspiration, they are never exhausted" (Hughes, 1989, p. 165). In the classroom, there will always be new ways of looking at stories in a new light or through current circumstances and the younger people coming along will be hearing it for the first time.

A more favourable view of storytelling comes from Aristotle in the *Poetics*. For him, drama might not tell the truth but its vicarious experience of the universals of pain and suffering was instructive because it could show what might happen. The catharsis caused by the play's climax and denouement also releases collective tensions and serves a valuable purpose in society.

In more contemporary times, especially after the concept of aesthetics has come into being, of which I will speak more of later, literature in all its forms continues to be valued for its stories, whether it be for entertainment, for escape, for healing, for specific

purposes or as art for art's sake. Literature has always been all these things, but I would like to focus mainly on its value in education, as a means of moral development and in learning about humanity.

One of the key reasons literature can facilitate great learning is because it is more holistic than other means. It can encompass any subject and information in a non-fictional approach and it can cover minute instances or the whole of history; people in any culture, religion, race or location are its subjects; we can enter the most alien or "other" mind from our own. Literature is at the same time simpler and more complex than other forms of learning, if only because it aims to reveal different ways of thinking and feeling through artistic techniques that shape the familiar in such subtle ways that it can access the subconscious. Literature works on the mind just as life does; things that seem insignificant can slowly grow and take on more importance. The reader begins to make connections and see patterns as they command greater attention.

Murdoch (1997) says, "For better or worse, art goes deeper than philosophy...When we ask what a novel is about we are asking for something deep. There is always something moral which goes down further than the ideas. The structures of good literary works are to do with erotic mysteries and deep dark struggles between good and evil" (p. 21).

At different ages, children get different things from different kinds of literature as they learn to read more and more sophisticated texts. Art can be purely for entertainment, often forgettable, such as the bestseller of the month, a distraction to pick up in the airport, or when people seek consolation or escape into fantasy in reading literature. It can be used for a purpose; for example, if a Social Studies teacher wants students to learn about slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* might be assigned. At its most extreme, this latter can be used for propaganda, as with some political or religious art. If Aristotle only saw plays being performed to reduce social tensions, the plays would be considered to have a purpose.

Literary works that are considered more artistic or thoughtful do not follow a formula and the authors do not know in advance of the writing what the final product will be. They may have some ideas in mind and a direction they will follow but they will

mainly be discovering and defining this as they write. The actual creation of the story goes on their heads and nowhere else. Often literature also attempts to say something serious about humanity and asks us to think and feel, all the while telling us something about ourselves as we read about others. Murdoch (1997) astutely calls this “unselfing” (p. 63), and I see this as related to Kant’s stance of “disinterest” as the correct way of opening oneself to the experience of art. Eagleton (2003) relates disinterest to “objectivity” (p. 133), another term rejected by many postmodern thinkers as impossible to achieve. Being disinterested does not mean one is seeing the world and other people from a bird’s eye view; rather one “decenters” the self from the act of perceiving to allow for more compassion or fellow feeling. This is where ethics and aesthetics are closely linked. Murdoch (1971) elaborates on this, saying,

Almost all art is a form of fantasy-consolation and few artists achieve the vision of the real. The talent of the artist can be readily and naturally employed to produce a picture whose purpose is the consolation and aggrandizement of its author. To silence and expel the self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands good moral discipline... the consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it, and not to ‘use it as magic’... the appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available entry into ... the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. (p.63)

With students and their many distractions and escapes from reality, literature can bring them back to “the real” in a way that is not specifically about their own lives but allows them to examine things that could happen. This, in turn, encourages them to think about problems in life rather than avoiding them, and the stories can present some moral guidelines for learning how to deal with them.

Another key reason literature enables us to learn about being human is that it can end feelings of isolation. Stories allow us to connect with wiser and more educated people, and escape our intellectually, emotionally and morally stunted environments. Whether we are living alone in a crowded city or suffocated by family and friends in a small town, stories speak to us in different voices, encouraging multiple points of view and urging us to break free. Self-teaching is also possible; the author James Baldwin vividly recounts obtaining his first library card and the feeling of suddenly being granted

access to worlds that had previously been denied. (in Nussbaum, 1997). For some students, this might be life-saving.

We also become vulnerable in losing the safety of isolation. Steiner (1989) remarks on the “indiscretion of serious art, invading our last privacies”. He describes it as a “psychological wobble in our time-sense produced by the familiarity of the ‘coordinates’ in a work of art” (p. 142). Literature draws upon and balances both cognitive and emotional elements, producing recognition of archetypes in characters and situations, and reaches into the subconscious, creating this sense of unsettling.

Nussbaum (1997) joins several of these ideas and describes the way literature enables us to consider the “other” through exercising “narrative imagination”, which in turn develops “moral imagination” in the reader (p. 90). For example, if we are first able to “see” characters in their situations, find some part of ourselves that understands them, then we can identify with them and enter the story on a deeper level. At this point we can become one with the story and feel a character’s indignation or despair when they experience injustice or prejudice. I believe this identification is essential for developing compassion. Nussbaum (1997) says this ability is critical for making “any responsible acts of judgment, since we do not know what we are judging until we see the meaning of an action as a person intends it” (p. 11). Being able to decode such meaning is an act of the imagination.

I feel this is key to moral learning while engaging with literature. Students are often trying on new identities and wanting to find out what life looks like from other vantage points. They may imitate someone they have taken an interest in, and for a time period, talk like that person, adopt the same fashion sense and attitudes. Parents are often perplexed by the change in their child, but after it happens enough times, they accept it is the next “phase” a child is going through. For the child, inevitably situations arise that call into conflict their values and the admired person’s values. The child can either follow through and see what happens, or discontinue imitating the person and return to their “old self”. This is similar to what happens while reading literature, but on a much safer and thoughtful level. As the reader watches and imagines a character, it becomes clear who this character is and the reader may find parts of the character inside himself. While reading, that part of himself can grow and become more defined

as he watches the character, to the point where the character's traits or flaws may become too pronounced for the reader to continue to identify with and imagine they are one and the same. This is when a split in consciousness occurs; the reader understands the character and why he or she acts in certain ways, but where it is in excess, the reader understands it has become too much, and recognizes they can no longer share the same principles, or the particular virtue is no longer at the Golden Mean. The reader then notices this as the point where things start to go wrong for the character. Figuring out this moral turning point is a valuable skill to have and it results in a sense of satisfaction in the reader. It is akin to solving a mystery in and about life, and now the reader feels he or she possesses valuable knowledge. It is also about making a connection between a universal idea and what it looks like as a particular experience. The reader feels more aware of situations in general now and what they may look like if they come up in real life.

For those who value this kind of knowledge, there can be no doubt that it is a worthwhile educational pursuit. It cannot be measured, the change it brings cannot always be marked, yet a person who recognizes it as knowledge feels something significant has occurred.

In my novel, I chose to show Jason discovering ideas in novels to further his development of moral awareness. For him, there is explicit value in learning through literature: he is being exposed to different ways of thinking about moral situations. He is able to make the important distinction that literary works are not a guidebook for behaviour; in fact, what is unfair in life can remain unfair, but stories provide practice in thinking about issues, give a certain vocabulary for discussing moral ideas, and present consequences that follow choices – all of which can help the reader transcend his or her own limitations.

For Jason this is a process that can grow to change his life. He has a greater sense that there are other kinds of people in the world, those who do not see people as objects, or ends to a means. Specifically, it awakens in him the idea that there is also an immorality in going along, doing nothing. It becomes important to have thought about the choices available to him and to judge which is best. He also becomes more motivated to pursue moral knowledge and to understand more. This course of action

may or may not improve his life, but there is still a sense of transformation in gaining a broader perspective.

Before moving on to consider aesthetics, I would like to acknowledge a more current view of literature. If literature is examined through the lens of politics, as so many postmodern theorists do, we can agree that opinions of literature change from person to person because we judge works based on our own concerns. One sharp example is how one's enjoyment of Jane Austen novels is shaped differently, depending on whether a person shares the same culture or having had ancestors who may have been colonial subjects of England in the time period portrayed. Value judgements are indeed subjective and there can be no real "objective" point of view, as pointed out. Postmodern thinkers have argued that many of the works that often are cited as part of the literary canon often conceal a structure of values, which are upheld by power structures that embrace ideologies, which function to reproduce social power (Eagleton, 1982, p.13).

I believe this makes an important point, mainly that we need to question the values promoted in any text, not just fiction. Just like a newspaper editorial, and even the so-called objective reporting in feature articles, fiction presents the world view of the author along with the material that is chosen to be included in the writing. But we must also step back from texts and appreciate how an author and the work are also embedded in a culture. How could they not be? A larger issue is whether enough voices are able to be heard in our pluralistic society and if there is opportunity for debate and greater understanding.

Teachers today do have a responsibility to present a variety of literary voices to their students, and not just a politically correct nod in the direction of say, African American authors during Black History month. There has been a positive shift in the English classroom in recent years, where teachers are leaving off organizing literary study in units; that is, the poetry unit, the short story unit, and so on. More often today reading literature seems to be centered around themes, such as love, the struggle between good and evil, and coming of age, where students will read appropriate plays, poems, fiction and non-fiction which often includes diverse voices since these themes are common to all human beings.

Aesthetics

Before I progress into the main ideas of this section, discussing why engaging with literature is an important way to learn what it is to be human, I would like to explore a significant means of learning in the arts, through the aesthetic experience, and what kind of knowledge this might be.

Abbs (1989) says “the aesthetic is most adequately conceived as a particular mode of responding to and apprehending experience” and “is the most basic mode of human response. The tiny child begins to mediate its world aesthetically: through touch, taste, smell, sound ... Long before we are rational beings, we are aesthetic beings” (pp. 4-5). Baumgarten, (in Kul-Want, 2007) who coined the term, said, “Aesthetics is a specialist area of inquiry concerned with perception and sensory experience” (p. 4). Philosophy quickly realized that this inquiry expanded into issues of subjectivity, identity and transformation of values and beliefs, much of it done subconsciously.

Plato is well known for perhaps being the first to consider beauty and truth together. As mentioned, Plato found art immoral and untruthful, merely imitative, playing on emotions and overall a dangerous influence, so much so, he chose to ban the poets from his republic.

In response to Plato, Aristotle in *Poetics* gives an extensive analysis of art, which laid the foundation for modern aesthetics. It is less centered on the relationship between art, morality and truth and more on the interaction of pleasure, understanding and emotion (Kul-Want, 2007). Aristotle defended works of art because they have their own structure and forms which are independent of structure and forms in reality; for example, plays revolve around character, plot and action. Because art has its own internal sense of structure and organization, Aristotle says it has “fictional status” rather than false status, as Plato believed. It is this fictional status that creates enough distance to allow the audience to appreciate and enjoy things that in real life would be painful or fearful. The fictional status, however, does not exclude the emotions, which are the link to reality. The work of art produces catharsis, which is not disengaged or merely contemplative. It awakens a sense of vulnerability in the audience and shows how the

work of art is relevant to one's life. Tragic art, according to Aristotle, possesses an ethical quality. Here we find a concrete link between ethics and aesthetics, of which I will speak more below.

Kant, in *Critique of Judgement* (2005), revisits many questions left over from the first two critiques and attempts to create for aesthetics its own faculty that will correspond and complete pure reason and practical reason. Scruton (2001) says, "The faculty of judgement 'mediates' between the other two. It enables us to see the empirical world as conforming to the ends of practical reason, and practical reason as adapted to our knowledge of the empirical world. Kant believed 'judgement' has both a subjective and an objective aspect..." (p. 99). Furthermore, no one since Plato had given to aesthetic experience the central role in philosophy that Kant was to give to it. He perceived that both metaphysics and ethics must remain incomplete without a theory of the aesthetic, which is as I see it: only as rational beings can we experience beauty, and without the experience of beauty, our exercise of reason is incomplete.

Aesthetics encounters the same fundamental problem as practical reason; it cannot be both subjective and objective. That is, the aesthetic experience is a posteriori, based on new knowledge, which is at odds with being a priori and claiming to be universal and necessary. To have an aesthetic experience requires a direct exposure to the work of art. No one can judge the work who has not experienced it; he would be lacking his particular response of feelings, thoughts, attitudes and judgements. If, for example, being told a painting depicts a sleeping gypsy, a lion and a moon, a person would not necessarily judge it as beautiful. He would need to see it for himself. No one could tell him how he should respond. We could say from this that there can be no concepts or principles of aesthetic judgements. Kant (2005) says, "The judgement of taste is not based on concepts; for, if it were, it would be open to dispute" through proofs of universal and necessary propositions (p. 338). However, aesthetic judgements are still judgements. If someone asks why I think something is beautiful, I must give reasons that arise from rational thinking and can be communicated through universal ideas. I fully expect that if I like something then others will too. This leads to Kant's accompanying idea, that "the judgement of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise there could be no room for contention in the matter, or for the claim to the necessary agreement of others" (2005, pp. 338-339).

Again, Kant is caught between two kinds of statements; a priori and a posteriori; however, the judgement is clearly not analytic. Kant decides its status must be synthetic a priori, but understands that aesthetics raises the same problem as all philosophy: how are synthetic a priori judgements possible? (2005, p. 289).

The objectivity challenge can be addressed in a way similar to how it is handled in practical reason. Scruton (2001) says, "It was enough to show that (practical) reason constrained each agent towards a set of basic principles. In aesthetic judgement the requirement is weaker still. We are not asked to establish principles that will compel the agreement of every rational being" (p. 103). Kant says, "In aesthetic judgement we are only 'suitsors for agreement'" (2005, p. 237).

Another link between aesthetics and practical reason is in the act of contemplation, attending to a something for its own sake and entering a process of abstraction where the agent distances herself from any personal interest she may have in the work of art or ethical situation being considered. This "disinterest" removes the agent from any empirical conditions, and indicates that the object of her attention matters, so much so, that she sees the object as an end in itself, just as in practical reason, where people are seen as ends in themselves. The same result is that personal interests will have no influence on judgement.

To end this section, it is perhaps time to stand back and understand why the aesthetic has such power over us. Lyas (1997) names a certain delight the individual feels because of the way the mind is structured and why this pleasure is important to us. In art, the imagination is freed from concepts or they are indeterminate. We could be told that "true love is constant" (p. 25), stated as a fact. Or, we can read Shakespeare's sonnet and let the double or subtle meanings of words and images trigger thoughts and associations that may be from experiences or other literary sources. The imaginative synthesis of thoughts, feelings and even subconscious connections allow for a "free play" between the imagination and understanding, which gives us great pleasure. Kant believes this begins to answer the question of the power of art. This in itself is a kind of freedom; freedom from the deadness of our habitual lives, release from a mechanistic world view and the inhumanity of instrumental reason.

An aesthetic experience transcends the limits of possible experience and human beings crave glimpses into deeper, more comprehensive meaning, and especially emotionally-felt meaning. The artist appeals to the imagination and aims to portray the essence or “forms” of things. Scruton (2001) says no concept can allow us to rise so far; yet the aesthetic experience, which involves “the perpetual striving to pass beyond the limits of our point of view, seems to ‘embody’ what cannot be thought” (p. 109).

Many postmodern thinkers would reject this view of aesthetics. Their starting point might be to declare that institutions decide what is considered art and institutions are mostly made up of “experts” who have been legitimized by earlier experts, who as postmodernists would say, have proven their ability to maintain existing standards or the status quo. This involves a certain power dynamic, where the right knowledge confers power; for example, the power to keep some authors in and others out of the literary canon.

My novel could be seen as a modernist work, with a central protagonist who struggles to develop a unified self, and follows a Freudian/scientific pattern of breaking with his father to achieve independence and manhood, echoing many ancient, mythic tales. There is an attempt at a coherent narrative and logic, and undoubtedly many of my personal values are put forth. A postmodern reading might determine that it is not really about an individual at all, but a representation of economics, a Marxist-rooted view of lower class rural workers who are unable to find gainful, steady employment, and succumb to the pressures that rise to commit theft and violence against the middle class.

Knowledge in the arts is knowledge of the individual; one conception of knowledge in philosophy is that it is “a justified, true belief”. Postmodernism, in general, would counter that there is no stable, certain knowledge; it is all relative to a person’s standpoint. I have mentioned above that in the traditional view of storytelling, ethics and aesthetics share many qualities, namely in how the objective and subjective, universal concepts and personal taste, seem to go hand in hand. In the next section I would like to examine this relationship in greater detail.

Ethics and Aesthetics

I have already indicated in the previous section how many thinkers, notably Plato, Aristotle and Kant, have found strong interconnections between ethics and aesthetics. I am not supporting the view that “ethics and aesthetics are one” but I will argue that given the nature of literature, it is very difficult to consider one without the other when examining the value of learning through literature. Hopefully at this point I have also made it clear that any theory of knowledge, if it hopes to embrace the true range of human knowing, must include non-cognitive as well as cognitive approaches, especially those involving emotions and sensations.

The fact that Kant chose to focus his third and final critique on the importance of aesthetics in art and nature which he believed would complete his system, seems to elevate the concept to one of equal footing with reason and ethics. Indeed, Kant sets out to “rehabilitate the less rational parts of the human psyche by showing how feeling and sensation can help orient us within the social domain and play important roles supporting moral reflection and driving moral commitment: thus, feeling is central to ethical life and need not be pitted against the dictates of reason” (Lucht, 2005, p. xii). Kant goes on to propose that feeling is also able to provide hints about metaphysical mysteries that reason cannot solve. In the aesthetic consciousness, we pick up on the possibility that “nature and reason are rooted in the same supersensible substrate; on the level of the thing in itself, underneath phenomenal experience and inaccessible to intellect, rational subject and world may originate in a common source” (Lucht, 2005, p. xii).

Lyas (1997) finds Kant’s connection between the aesthetic and the morally good obscure, and yet recognizes that this takes the aesthetic out of the realm of private indulgence. If we engage with art, “this contemplation may be morally uplifting” (p. 32). This in itself is valuable and leads to a reflection on the morally good.

To arrive at a deeper understanding of the connection between aesthetics and ethics, however, we shall have to revisit Aristotle and his views on tragedy. Aristotle is perhaps the first to see the emotions as significant in moral development. His starting point is that emotion can be educated. That is, the appropriate emotional response, at

the correct time is essential to the development of virtue, and one way of effectively accomplishing this is through engaging with literature.

We must take responsibility for the emotions we have, as well for how those emotions are cultivated. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* says that "we need to have had the appropriate upbringing – right from early youth, as Plato says – to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education" (1104b11). Emotions, according to Aristotle, are not only educable but this education is indispensable if we are to "find enjoyment or pain in the right things." This is the case because pleasure experienced in the wrong way "causes us to do base actions," while pain wrongly experienced "causes us to abstain from fine ones" (1104b10).

Prefiguring Nussbaum, Aristotle says experiencing art is a way of enlarging our moral imagination; when we watch a tragedy, we extend our knowledge of what is or is not morally possible. In *Poetics*, Aristotle sets out to explain what the function of tragedy is. To fulfill the function of tragedy, a work must first meet certain requirements of the genre, which Aristotle lays out in great detail in chapters 6-15 in *Poetics X*. Properly fulfilled, the function of tragedy shapes our understanding by helping to shape our emotions – in particular, pity and fear. Having emphasized the function of tragedy, though, it should be remembered that in his exposition on tragedy it is precisely Aristotle's emphasis on the form of tragedy (that is, the plot structure) that makes his position with respect to emotions intelligible. That is to say, the form of the genre of tragedy is most suited to fulfilling its function, which is "by definition a mimesis of actions that rouse [pity and fear]" (1969, 1452b). If a piece of work fails to satisfy the form of tragedy, whatever emotions it elicits (if any) will by definition not be pity and fear. I think it is critical that what Aristotle is saying here is that in tragedy form and function are inseparable.

Penwell (2009) says,

Furthermore, the function of tragedy is practice in bringing some kind of order to what otherwise might appear to be chaos. To the extent that human beings find themselves in a world that seems not to be guided by any underlying plot structure, people try to make sense of the world around them through the construction of narratives. It is through these narratives that one's life and the actions of others are understood. Without

some narrative, life appears to be a disjointed series of random episodes, unrelated to any larger story. Humans gain a certain mastery of the world through a narration that suggests meaning, where before the narration, there was none. (p. 25)

From an Aristotelian point of view, it seems clear that moral education – in the training of the emotions through literary narrative – is intimately bound up with aesthetic education. Penwell (2009) adds, “We learn things from literature that we could not learn in any other way. Because of the nature of art, tragedy illuminates creative possibilities that would have remained otherwise hidden in darkness” (p. 26).

There remain many areas of ethics and aesthetics I would like to explore, and those that seem most interesting are the ones that draw upon many of the key ideas I have been exploring so far. That said, the ones I find most valuable in “learning what it is to be human” are also the ones dealing with the most profound and enduring ideas in literature and in life. Although it sometimes may not be clear to adults what students are getting out of the quality of fiction they read, it may be appropriate to them individually at that point in their lives. In this section, however, I would like to examine the interplay between aesthetics and ethics in its most important role in the best of literature, the highest expression of civilization and humanity.

Murdoch offers possibly the most penetrating view of ethics and aesthetics, drawing on both Plato and Kant in her examination of morality and literature, and yet she does not fit neatly into any particular school of thought. Of philosophers who support an aesthetic-ethical theory in general, Ruokonen (2008) identifies three branches: neo-Platonism, neo-Aristotelian and postmodernism. Because in postmodernism aesthetic considerations are offered as a replacement for realistic moral theories and it is impossible to justify any shared criteria for comparing ethical arguments in general, I will not be looking at an approach that sees aesthetics as mainly an individual creative endeavour. A postmodern ethics of self-creation, while supported by Rorty and Foucault, goes against my central claim that life is lived in relation to other people, in a shared sense of being human.

Nussbaum may agree with Rorty and Foucault on a “perfection-aesthetic ethics” which sees aesthetics not as the grounding but consummation of ethics, but Nussbaum

is clearly in the neo-Aristotelian tradition. In this category, Murdoch does not conceive ethics and aesthetics “as one” but differentiates clearly between the two, and furthermore, she sees morality as infinitely more important than aesthetics.

Murdoch and Nussbaum overlap in many areas of their thinking but it is important to make some distinctions. For instance, Nussbaum (1990) emphasizes the value of literature in developing a variety of sensibilities and perceptions required for grasping the manifold goods of a particular situation. For her, in the Aristotelian sense, “the good life” reads like a narrative, which can be compared to a work of literature. “A novel is itself a moral achievement and the well lived life is a literary work of art” (p. 148).

Roukenen (2008) sees Murdoch as defining the morally ideal way of relating to the world in terms of an attitude typically connected to the aesthetic experience. This involves recognizing another person as an independent source of meaning. Furthermore, Murdoch often cites qualities that constitute “good literature” as proof of the qualities involved in morality. Metaphysical in the Platonic tradition, she sees the Good as unifying and organizing human moral experience. And like Plato, and hints of it in Kant, she includes the mystical, the supersensory, in her philosophy. There is more than a contingent connection between goodness, beauty and truth for her, especially in how they are concerned with isolated acts of persons: ethical progress and aesthetic experience are interwoven phenomena.

In one example, Murdoch, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1971), takes aesthetic experience as the most important way of practicing “unselfing”, an activity that can free a person from the egotistical, instinct-driven psyche directed at self-preservation. Beauty, she says, “is the convenient and traditional name of something that art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness” (p. 84). The strength of beauty is in the blurring of boundaries between the perceiving subject and the object, which can make us better people by making us less self-centered.

Again, I feel this has distinct overtones with Kant and his concept of “disinterest” in contemplating art and moral situations. We set aside our self-directed thoughts and perceive what is before us. The unselfing that takes place allows the reader to enter

fully into the imaginative experience and understand more fully what thoughts, emotions and sensations are involved in the whole work. The moral aspect of the work opens up and there is no self-interest to distort seeing the full complexity.

To return to the comparison, I see one of the most prominent distinctions between Murdoch and Nussbaum as mirroring the same conflict between Plato and Aristotle. Nussbaum perceives the essence of tragedy in both art and life, yet Murdoch does not see it as a conflict between competing goods. The idea of a “distant but magnetic Good” brings unity to virtues for Murdoch and the Good organizes human experience. Roukenen restates Murdoch’s view: “moral improvement is a gradual increase in our knowledge of the world. One who can truly see the situation also knows how to act in it.”

Another significant point of departure is with Nussbaum (following Aristotle) in seeing “the good life” as a series of actions involving human standards of excellence, leading to good habits and ultimately to good character and happiness. In stark contrast, Murdoch says, morality holds no promise of happiness; rather it is about facing the frailty and transience of the human condition, and not flinching from that view. The Good is in the end indefinable and unreachable, an ideal to be aimed at but never achieved. It is a motivating transcendental principle that compels us to try and be good, yet as limited beings, we are doomed to fail in our attempts at perfection.

Murdoch says all our attempts to be virtuous are without reward and the idea of the Good should not be used as a consolation. This is what divides the aesthetic from the moral: the aesthetic experience cannot but help console in a manner. There is an inherent pleasure in perceiving an art object, with its unity and meaning. But this is also why I believe literature gives important clues to morality. Literature can filter out all the static, the random thoughts and feelings of reality, and just examine one idea with clarity. However, in the end, literature rewards us rather than pains us as we are able to perceive the beauty, the suffering, the sheer variety and enormity of human life.

The Good offers a sense of what perfection could be, and unifies human perception with its sense of direction, but it should not give us the idea that there is a purpose to life or we are progressing toward some end. Murdoch states an essential

feature of life is its contingency, and it is a moral task to grasp this. Life is full of meaningless suffering and it would be a serious error “to romanticize death through giving it special meaning or a higher purpose” (1971, p. 82).

Here lies the central problem of moral philosophy for Murdoch. How is one to connect the realism, which must involve clear-eyed contemplation of the misery of the world with a sense of uncorrupted good without the latter idea becoming the merest consolatory dream? (1971, p. 61). We are inclined to protect ourselves from the meaninglessness and pain of life. We sink into daydreams to avoid reality but fantasizing is moral failure since it distorts reality. (1971, pp. 51-52, 78).

How can this be overcome? Should we focus on trying to perceive the Good? Murdoch says, like the sun, it is not visible and impossible to look at directly, as in Plato’s allegory. It is an idea, the source of light, which reveals things as they really are. An increasing awareness of goods will help us see unity and interdependence of the world. (1971, p. 68). One can hope for a spark of insight that indicates something real, akin to what we get when we engage with quality art. “Art is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the center to which the more uncertain steps of metaphysics must constantly return” (1971, pp. 71-72).

Art is less accessible than nature but also more inspiring since it is actually created by human beings and speaks to human experience. Art is confirmation that different people can feel the same, whether they are in the room next door, a distant country or lived two thousand years ago. We recognize in shared human experience a greater sense of belonging and being understood, which may allow us to transcend our local circumstances and encourage us to be better people.

Murdoch says (1971), “Literature ... in particular shows us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. (It) shows us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance; the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue. The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of life itself... This form (of literature) often seems mysterious because it resists the easy patterns of fantasy” (p. 84).

Murdoch (1971) says that good art reveals how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how different the world looks through different points of view. Art transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of the reader. Most of all, it makes a clear connection, for us as human beings, between reality and compassion. Murdoch (1971) claims, “the role of art is to show us suffering without a thrill and death without consolation” (p.85). Or, if there is any consolation, it is the austere consolation of a beauty which teaches that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be good.

In writing my novel, I rediscovered the idea that we learn more from tragedy than comedy. When things go wrong in fiction or in life, we tend to dwell on what happened, examine the factors that led to certain outcomes, and try to understand the reasons why. This contemplation requires deep thinking and feeling and an attempt to be honest with ourselves.

I now realize Jason’s tragedy is not so much in finding himself in the position where he must kill his father to spare Jen, but in the violence fuelled by high emotion that spirals out of control, allowing Chaos to play a role. Jason spends many years constantly reviewing his grief and remorse. At the end of the novel, even though much time has passed, the habit of moral thoughtfulness has become a way of being in the world for him, something that will last the rest of his life. In the end, he may or may not be able to resolve what has happened, nor move on from his youthful mistake – or decide if it was a mistake – or just an accident, due to ignorance, immature spontaneity, desperation, fear or other factors. The gravity of this experience will echo in his mind and continuously shape his moral awareness.

Form and function combine in the novel and the plot makes Jason’s emotions intelligible. Perhaps the reader feels great sympathy for the position Jason has been put in, and asks him or herself what they would do; how would they find a way out of the moral dilemma that Jason experiences, and finally how would they resolve feelings of remorse for killing a friend? This pity for Jason might translate into fear in one’s own life. What role does Chaos play in our lives? Is moral choice really available to us? If outcomes are really out of our control, do we just do our best and accept Chaos may

make a mess of things? Maybe we will come to see that it is better not to judge other people who suffer misfortune.

At the climax Jason practices unselfing in his considerations of what the best course of action is. Throughout the novel, he has a sense of moral improvement as his knowledge of the world increases. He makes a decision on what he will do based on seeing the situation for what it is, without consoling himself with fantasies of things working out for the best. He knows his moral choice holds no promise of happiness and he cannot back away from what he feels must be done; there is no perfect solution to his problem. He, therefore, does not see himself as a hero, progressing towards some romantic, public recognition of his sacrifice.

Afterwards, the shock of realizing he has killed Dirk is another stage of realism; any attempt to envision the Good by Jason has been destroyed by an opposite force. He can no longer comfort himself by telling himself murder was necessary for the greater good. Contingency here is a factor along with Chaos.

Just as Jason must reflect on this for the rest of his life, the reader may feel what has happened is unfair or too harsh a reality. Later in life Jason may arrive at feeling a sense of beauty in suffering, in recognizing that all human beings suffer. There may be a change in consciousness because of this, and a greater sense of connection between humans and the tragic nature of life. Like Murdoch, his awareness of the human condition can yield a more important kind of attention towards others; she names the "just and loving gaze" as a mark of the active moral agent (1971, p. 33). Yet questions remain. If we are powerless to control what happens, and we eventually suffer from things going badly, then how shall we live our lives? Is it all pointless? If we play the game of life but cannot win or depend on life being good or fair, should we give up and just do what we want? Jason slowly decides that it is still most moral to attempt to be good.

In concluding this section, I have attempted to show the unique relationship between the experience to be found in the best works of art and the deeper moral understanding they may provide. It has been my intention to show that art is not a diversion or side issue; it is one of the most educational of all human activities and a

place in which the nature of morality can be seen and felt. In whatever fields students may pursue, in whatever employment they may later accept, they cannot live humanly full lives without the knowledge of self and others, a sense of what it means to be in this world and accept the universal fate of all living beings. It may only be through art that human beings can possibly come to terms with this fact. Perhaps in a distant future we will know why we are here, what is our purpose, and where we are going, but until then, we can only settle on the idea that, knowing what we know, the best we can do is understand from within why it is important for ourselves and for others to be good.

Conclusion

In undertaking to write a novel and provide a philosophical argument for my doctoral thesis, I was intent upon both showing and discussing the value of learning through literature. Coming to the end of this project, I feel more strongly than ever that art enables us to learn in ways not available through other means. If wise words from the past are gradually being droned out by some of the more politically focused postmodern voices, special interest groups, the mechanical distractions of technology or even our dependence on science to tell us what we know, we are indeed in serious trouble. It is exactly the most profound and enduring literature that has the ability to return us to our most human selves when all else falls short.

And yet, most perplexing in many ways, are the number of contemporary thinkers who overlook art as a means of human development. A stunning example is that of Habermas, one of the last great “system” builders, who in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1979), creates an elaborate and interconnected framework, showing parallels between an individual and society’s development in linguistics, psychology, morality, politics, economics and so on. There is one glaring omission. Is not art one of the most powerful ways to communicate? Is it not a force that propels ideas into society? Habermas’s system is so astute, so simple and logical, that the flaw is all the more pronounced.

One can only imagine the reason that art is not included in serious philosophical studies of human development is for the same reason that art is downplayed in the

school system, especially during budget cuts or recessions. Taking the most generous view, one can only assume it is due to a gross ignorance of what art can accomplish or a lack of appreciation or exposure to the world's best art, which itself makes a case for the urgency of including art in the school curriculum.

Stories have been valued as a way of learning since humans began to communicate. Plato may have rejected how the poets moved their audiences but he also recognized the power of art, which could simply be described as providing an experience that transcends the daily grind, rich in both thought and feeling. By means of its form and content, and through artistic devices, literature also involves more of a person, grasping the complexity of existence that more closely resembles real life.

As I have endeavoured to show, there is more to knowledge than just proving its objectivity through rational thinking. Restricting knowledge in this way cuts us off from many other forms of knowledge that diminishes life overall. The aesthetic experience as a vehicle for learning through its appeals to thought, feeling, sensory experience and perhaps even access to the subconscious involves more of the perceiver. As Kant has shown, there is in practical reason and judgment both an objective and subjective element. To put it briefly, in order to know what it is to be human, a person must be aware of what he or she thinks and feels subjectively before considering how others may conceive of the same thoughts and feelings universally. To compare and contrast educates, and in this awareness, a person can better appreciate the reasons behind these similarities and differences.

Our moral values determine our identity and a person must understand these values intrinsically. When we read deeply, we enter into other moral systems and see over the length of the story how characters work through conflicts. In much fiction, characters learn about themselves, and with the knowledge they have, attempt to make good choices. Teachers reading literature with their students can highlight this process, encourage students to make comparisons and contrast what they might do in the same situation. This act in itself offers students more choices when they may encounter ethically challenging situations in their own lives.

Students need to know they can find something authentic and deep about their own lives, and more importantly, can pursue something more meaningful than surfing through superficial sources of entertainment and digital stimulation to stay busy and feel needed. There are choices to be made that enhance quality of life and develop a more concrete sense of self. To know what you want to do in life, what career you are suited to, why it is important to be a good citizen, to be tolerant, and all of the other aims of education – all of these goals must flow from knowledge of the self.

Understanding novels is much like understanding life: it comes in waves. Understanding is developed through the use of language and this is why discussing literature in the classroom with a teacher's guidance is so important. A major educational aim in engaging with literature is to get students excited about a work, provide the necessary background details, such as information on culture, history, and practices that help advance understanding of the author's ideas, ask important questions that point at common meaning, while at the same time encouraging students to find their own subjective responses. Writing responses to literature, whether in reading logs, blogging, poems, literary critiques, narratives or even fiction, also helps to deepen understanding. When we write, we must find comprehensible language to communicate what we understand, a public language which can be grasped by other readers. All the same, it is often difficult to capture the totality of the experience of a novel; the sum of the parts can surpass words, and move into the realm of the ineffable or even mystical. This, too, can play an important role in education, providing students with another dimension of understanding that is more intuitive and felt than most other learning experiences. As I have tried to demonstrate, developing moral understanding in particular helps us better see other people, and appreciate more the strangeness of life while at the same time recognize its familiarity.

In reading literature, what strikes us forcefully is how the mundane fades away to the immediacy of what a character experiences. There is sometimes a sense of intoxication as powerful feeling and thought come together, and we must pause to consider what this means to us, to our lives. At the same time, as we let go of ourselves and examine what is happening to characters, we cannot help but ponder how this applies to all of humanity. It is this strange contradiction of taking the experience into the self and allowing ourselves to "try on" new ways of being, while at the same time we are

moving out of ourselves, leaving our personal interests behind, or “unselfing”, in order to clearly comprehend characters and situations that are quite unknown to us. This latter, as Murdoch has said, is necessary for moral progress, and being able to see the real.

Murdoch also says there is no reward for being good, nor any purpose to reading literature, just as there is no purpose to life. Depending on one’s point of view, this can be devastating or liberating. In the latter case, we can choose to make what we will of our lives, learn as much as we can and perceive more and more of the Good. We can embrace as many of the other goods as we can, such as kindness, sincerity, honesty, tolerance, respect and other valued qualities. There may well be no before or after, no design to life, or “great mover”, but in accepting that, we can choose to pursue what is most meaningful, in whatever time we have.

Having attempted to show how literature is one of the best ways to grasp these kinds of deeply human ideas, I will end with a quote from Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina* (1868/1981):

I’ll go on getting angry at Ivan the coachman, I’ll go on arguing, go on expressing my ideas inappropriately, there will still be a wall between the inmost shrine of my soul and other people, including my wife; I’ll go on blaming her because of my own fears, then repent; I’ll go on not understanding with my reason, why I pray, and go on praying – but from now on my life, my whole life, no matter what happens to me, every second of it, is not only not meaningless as it was before, but it has the incontestable meaning of the goodness I have the power to put into it!
(p. 868)

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