

When I was very young, we lived in an apartment on the second floor of a house in Kirkland Lake. Every morning, without fail, I would wake up, climb down from the upper bunk-bed in my faded flannelet pajamas, walk out of the small bedroom, through the living room and kitchen, unlock the door to the outside world, step into the freezing porch, open one of the heavy windows, climb up onto the edge of the sill, look down at the sidewalk far below, and jump. I would wake with a gasp, just as my mother would lean into my room to say, “Do you want to be first?” Before you imagine a romantic story of a driven mother, pushing her children to be first, let me explain that by first, she meant first in the bathroom.

There were five of us in the apartment: my parents, my older sister and brother, and me - and one bathroom. On a typical school/work day, the first person went in at ten minutes to eight. If we were fast, two of us could be finished by eight o’clock, when my father would stumbled out of bed. My mother would warn whoever was in there, first with “It’s almost eight,” and then more urgently with “Here he comes.” We could usually hear his stomping feet as he approached, and at the last second the door would fly open and one of us would slip around him as he barreled in. Every morning my mother would have all of us washed, fed, clothed and ready to leave by eight twenty-two.

This was before the era of the daily shower. We wouldn’t have a shower in any of our homes for years, and all of the kids I knew had one bath a week: Sunday night. Our morning ritual was a fast splash of water in the sink, dressing then eating, grabbing whatever outdoor clothing was appropriate, (it is winter for most of the school year in Kirkland,) and racing out the door. Once we were all gone, my mother would sit at the breakfast table, and have her toast in peace. She didn’t work, because my father had said, “No wife of mine will ever need to work!” - and because, as she said, in the fifteen years it took her to get all three kids into school, “all the typewriters had gone electric”.



The two driving forces in Kirkland Lake were gold mining and hockey. I had nothing to do with either. I never liked the violence of hockey, and whenever I was on skates I would practice gliding around the rink like Canada's sweetheart, Karen Magnussen. My father had worked in the mines before I was born, but by the time we moved to Kirkland, he was an employee of Ontario Hydro. He started work at eight thirty, so we could avoid the frigid walk to school if we helped get the car started. Like every teenager, my brother Billy was desperate to drive, and anything to do with the car, even starting it, was a step closer. This entailed him forcing the kitchen door open if the snow had drifted against it, unplugging the car's block heater, prying a frozen car door open, and praying that the cold engine would turn over. As it warmed up, I would help him scrape the ice-covered windshield, or shovel the steps. If the snowplow had been by, and there was a wall of ice and snow at the end of the driveway, we would attack that as well.

The car seats would be frozen, so it felt like we were sitting on cold boards. If it was forty below or colder, and it often was, the tires would also be frozen, and the first block or two would feel like we were riding in the Flintstone's car, with square stone wheels. My father would have the heat on high, and his window partly down, which was as he said, "the only damn way to keep the windshield from fogging up." This never worked. He would still have to scrape the inside madly as he drove, and would grumble about the condensation from our breathing. He was usually smoking, so whoever sat behind him had to endure the biting wind from his open window, and the odd burning ash from his cigarette. We fought for the front seat.

The term "break-neck speed" would best describe his driving style. By leaving at eight twenty-two, he could swing by my school first, hit the high school a minute later, then squeal off and make it to the Hydro yard by eight twenty nine. If there was no traffic, and no train at the crossing, we made it easily. If there were cars lined up at a stop sign, the curses would fly, and he would drive up the shoulder, or cut through a gas station. He was always late.



I enjoyed school. I loved learning to read, to print, and finally, when I was in grade three, to write. Writing seemed so adult to me. We started with the easy letters like a and c, then progressed to the trickier ones like k and r, until one day it dawned on me that we had learned how to write all the letters. I was giddy with power. I could write anything. I sat in my bedroom, before a clean piece of paper, and in that large, round-lettered penmanship of all beginners, I wrote: fuck. I joined the f to the u like a pro, and finished the k with a curly tail. I continued with fucker. Then fuck off, fuck you, and - the most terrible - motherfucker. I filled the entire page. And then, in classic boyhood oblivion, I ran outside - leaving my first composition on my desk. Right where my mother found it. When confronted with the damning evidence, I tried denial, confusion, then tears, and lastly, our family favourite: pretending it didn't happen.

I did well at school. I had a pretty good memory, and was usually lucky with marks. A few times I won prizes in school for coming first. When other kids' parents asked why I wasn't playing hockey, I would tell them, "I like to sing." I had, by the time I was ten, spent about a thousand hours with our old Viking record player, and memorized a large number of Broadway musical soundtracks. The Sound of Music was one of my best. Being a boy soprano, I could do a mean Julie Andrews. And all the kids. And all the nuns.

I enjoyed doing things that I could do well. If I wasn't the perfect boy, because I wasn't obsessed with hockey, and liked show tunes and singing and skipping, then I was determined to excel at those things. At school, I would get the best marks. In the Kiwanis Festival, I would be the best singer. In the musicals with the town Glee Club, I would be the best actor. I loved swimming, so I was determined to be the best swimmer.

In music class at school, we were taught to play a plastic whistle called a recorder. I loved the precision of music; a world of eighth notes and sixteenth rests. And I loved learning the language of music; words like *expressivo* and *con brio*, which allowed a young dramatic like myself many opportunities for emoting.



By junior high, I was invited to join an advanced program, and was allowed to take grade nine music while still in grade eight. That meant going to the high school. The Kirkland Lake Collegiate and Vocational Institute was a terrifying place. It looked, as did all schools of that era, like an old prison. My nervous classmates and I were led through the empty halls to the music room. The teacher I met that day was one of my first brushes with genius. Mr. Charron was a dark, disheveled little man from Baddeck, Nova Scotia, who had been taught by monks, claimed to have been a failed concert pianist, and as penance was forced to suffer daily through five grades of student bands massacring classical music. It was no wonder he drank.

Some mornings he would come in, obviously having been up “practicing” all night, and tell us to put our instruments away. He would sit at the piano, an old clunker of an upright, and tell us, in a husky morning voice, the story of that day’s piece: “Debussy: A cathedral rises from the ocean.” Then he would play. For the entire double period - a glorious hour and ten minutes. Along with these impromptu concerts, he was also renowned for his outrageous declarations. One of my favourites was: “All great music is about sex!” We would wrack our brains to challenge him with selections that refuted his thesis.

“Death and the Maiden?”

“Why do you think she died?” he would answer, “Sex!”

“The Four Seasons?”

“Vivaldi lived in a whore house!”

“The Brandenburg Concertos?”

“Bach had twenty-two children!”

In the last months of grade eight, when we started to think about entering high school officially, someone decided that there should be an introduction for the incoming children; an orientation tour whereby each student would be shown the ropes by a current grade niner. When my day arrived, a small group of boys from my class trundled off to be oriented. Outwardly I was everything cool - I had been studying music at the high school for a year, I knew my way around



that dungeon - but inwardly I was as panic-stricken as the rest. What if I wandered into a part of the school that I didn't know? What if I got lost? When we arrived, only one of our student guides had shown up. The four of us followed him into the building with eyes downcast, praying not to be noticed, or to attract the attention of any senior boy or girl who might - as he warned - "drag us down a hallway and beat the living crap out of us."

He showed us the cafeteria, the nurse's office, and the outside smoking area. After meandering for what seemed like hours down identical grey hallways, we found ourselves outside the gym. Or rather the change room of the gym. Having only ever been into the boys' room at the town swimming pool, and having put on my bathing suit at home like all my friends, this high school changing room was particularly daunting. I knew I would be expected to get naked in there, in front of other people.

I was thirteen years old when I walked through that door the first time. It had the classic men's changing room smell: a heady combination of sweat, soap, steam and Pinesol. It was a typical brown-tiled, fluorescent-lit room, surrounded by wooden benches against dull green lockers, with an office for the teachers, a washroom, and an open shower with eight nozzles. It was empty as the five of us walked in. Empty save for a lone young man standing in the middle of the room, drying himself with a towel. He was probably eighteen years old, but looked thirty to me. He calmly rubbed himself down, unaware of our presence. Our guide was saying something about Phys. Ed. classes, and pointing around the room, but I heard nothing.

He had straight blonde hair, to just past his ears, in an early seventies kind of short-hair-let-go-longer cut. His eyes were light blue, like a Husky's, and his face had a ruddiness about it, a sort of fresh-scrubbed, just-started-shaving glow. He was about six feet tall, lean, and muscular, though not in the chiseled look that some men strive for; more of a natural athlete kind of body that a lucky few have always been granted. His arms were covered in a fine down of white hair, as were his powerful legs. He had a bit of hair on his chest, and just the beginnings of a line down his stomach. His arms and legs were sunburned; a fiery red that started mid-way down each



bicep, and very high up his thighs. It was June; we had just had one of those hot early weekends, and he must have been outside all day in a t-shirt and short cut-offs.

He lifted his arms to dry his hair, and his cock swung. It was - to a boy in grade eight - massive. It hung down just past the sunburn line on his thighs, and the head of it was red, the same red as the burn. The hair around it was tinged with blonde and orange, and his balls lolled in a loose way as he moved. He turned sideways to dry his legs and his snow-white, perfectly-dimpled, hairless ass shone in the glow of that cool fluorescence. When he dried his back by stretching the towel behind him, everything swayed again.

I was dizzy; I had not been breathing. I looked away, scanning the room, as our guide droned on about gym uniforms. When I looked back, he was gone. The group moved on, and I followed, in a stupor. The whole encounter had lasted maybe eight seconds.

I had seen naked men before. But not like this. And not since my thirteen year old body had been flooded with hormones. Not as a man - seeing a man. I had seen naked girls as well: we were always finding ripped and soggy pages from Playboy magazines, giggling as we passed them around. But I wasn't moved by the women. I hadn't wakened with a gasp.

The following September I entered grade nine. I continued to excel in most subjects. I took Physical Education every year: I spent many hours in that change room, watching boys lose baby fat, sprout hair, grow tall and become men. I played basketball one year, and our team had an impressive record of zero wins in twelve games. I joined the Track team, and ran the hurdles. There was a big French kid from Iroquois Falls who beat me every year. I was always a solid second. I had a great coach who told me "You don't have to be first. As long as you're trying to be first, that's enough." I started to relax about being the best. I started to accept that who I was, was all right.



My final year of high school, grade thirteen, I had a teacher named Mr. Farlow. He taught me French, and had taught me the same subject in grade eleven as well. He had brown hair, and a neat moustache, and spoke with a slight stutter. He was very shy, and he never raised his voice. I thought he was handsome, and I hated to miss his class. But he wasn't my first crush on a teacher. That was grade five. His name was Mr. Richards. He was very young, just out of teacher's college, with shiny brown hair. He used to play sports with us at recess. Sometimes he would come back in after a vigorous game of baseball or soccer, and he would be sweating. He would unbutton his shirt, and wipe his underarms with paper towels, but you could still see the wet marks on his shirt, under his arms, on his back. He was the first.