

The Education of Girls

Lector in Fabula

I am reading in a school of dreams,
a lost girl in a night's tale, wandering through
a *jardin d'essais*, underfoot, the crunch of pale
green lichen on the forest floor.

Hyacinth gardens fade into a scene of
city lights and I am on Vancouver's Hastings Street.
The pages become stained with east end rot, humanity
pumping heroin through collapsed veins and
there on the corner is a woman weeping, the sound of
her pain palpable in every crack of concrete,
a prostitute whose knees have been broken by
a man with a baseball bat. I take her by the hand and
take her home with me, wash her body and her crushed limbs,
her sore-covered feet. I try to absorb her fever in my touch,
lay her down to sleep in my bed.

In the morning when I wake, she is gone,
only a cool, clear light shining on the tumbled sheets.

Tonight, I'll turn the pages of the book again
my hands inside the spine, reading the places
where memory doesn't work.

Slow Dancing: Beaconsfield 1973

There we are in a house like all the others,
freshly painted trim and gabled windows, brass-numbered
door and neatly pruned hedges, parents away for the
weekend and the basement recreation room is overflowing
with us, sweet sixteens, bodies clutched together in sweat in
the cigarette smoke and beer, slow dancing to Chicago's *Color
My World* and Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*.

My girlfriends and I wear angora sweaters our mothers
bought for us in the soft pastel shades of infants: fingernail
pink, baby blue, pale yellow, and cream. We wear drugstore
scents named for innocence and fruit: *Love's Baby Soft*, *Love's Fresh
Lemon*, or the more sophisticated *Eau de Love* or Revlon's *Charlie*.

For years we have danced in ballet studios, spinning, dreaming our mothers'
dreams of Sugar Plum Fairies, our rose tight confections, pink slippers twirling
pas de deux, jetés, pirouetting our taut muscles until our toes bled. But tonight
we dance in our tight blue Levis, our mothers' voices fading as the shiver of Eric
Clapton's electric guitar strums our spines, the music claiming us and we spill
out under the streetlamps, dancing across equators into the earth's light.

On the streets of suburbia, this is the beginning of hunger.
It catches me by surprise, exploding like a kiss.

Rishma Dunlop

The Education of Girls

We learn to recite the Girl Guide promise:

*I promise, on my honour, to do my best:
To do my duty to God, the Queen, and my country,
To help other people at all times,
To obey the Guide Law.*

We learn the language of semaphore, how to build campfires and lean-tos and latrines. We earn badges, pitch tents, learn how to use an axe and chop wood, how to tie knots, learn first aid and how to survive in the wilderness. We learn to *Be Prepared* and to *Lend a Hand*. We learn the Guide Law.

A Guide is obedient. You obey orders given you by those in authority, willingly and quickly. Learn to understand that orders are given for a reason, and must be carried out without question.

A Guide smiles and sings even under difficulty. You are cheerful and willing even when things seem to be going wrong.

A Guide is pure in thought, word and deed. You look for what is beautiful and good in everything, and try to become strong enough to discard the ugly and unpleasant.

We become capable girls, soldiers in our uniforms, with our companies and patrols and salutes. We learn to build nations and at the close of the day, we sing Taps, the soldiers' bugle call to extinguish the lights.

*Day is done, gone the sun
From the hills, from the lake
From the sky
All is well, safely rest
God is nigh.*

And our mothers kept house, did the laundry and the cooking and the ironing, drove us to Brownies and Girl Guides, did volunteer work, refinished furniture, watched *The Edge of Night* and *Another World* took antidepressants when their lives did not resemble the glamorous adventures of Rachel

and Mac Corey, had hysterectomies at 40.
At the close of every day, they had supper ready when
their husbands returned from the city, fresh and slick,
briefcases in hand, polished shoes tapping them home past
manicured lawns along the asphalt driveways.

First Lessons: Postcolonial

Every morning my mother would
part my hair down the middle, plait
it into long braids reaching down to
my waist. I would walk with the other
neighbourhood kids to the elementary
school, absent-minded, my face always
in a book, reading as I walked, dressed like
the other girls in dark navy tunics, white blouses,
novitiate-like collars.

Those days, my knees were always scraped
and skinned from roller-skating on the concrete
slopes of Avondale Road, my skate-keys around
my neck, flying, weightless
my father continuously swabbing my cuts with
hydrogen peroxide, scabs peeking out over the
tops of my white kneesocks, my Oxford shoes.

In the classroom, we stood at attention
spines stiffened to the strains of singing
God Save the Queen to the Union Jack
recited The Lord's Prayer
hallowed be thy name, learned lessons
from a Gideon's bible.

In geography and history lessons the
teacher would unroll the giant map of
the world from the ceiling, use her
wooden pointer to show us the countries
of the Empire, the slow spread of a faded
red stain that marked them, soft burgundy
like the colour of my father's turbans.
*Ancient history. Crisp whites of cricket
matches at officers' clubs. Afternoon tea
in the pavilion.*

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Decades later I can reconstruct the
story, move past the pink glow,
excavate the hollows of history.

I know now that if that surface was scratched
the pointer would fly along the contours of
the parchment world, across the Himalayas,
through emerald coils of steaming rivers.
Under my fingernails, the scents of spices
and teas, the silk phrasings of my mother's
saris, the stench of imperial legacy, blood
spilled from swords on proper khaki uniforms
lanced through the bodies of Sikh soldiers at
the frontlines of her Majesty's British Army.

But our teacher never said. *Remember this.*

My Mother's Lost Places

My teachers and the women in the
neighbourhood would admire the crimson
blooms on my mother's Kashmiri shawls,
exotic, intricate embroideries on the finest
wool the colour of blackest nightfall.

I know they could never imagine,
as I have only just begun to imagine,
my mother's lost places, her girlhood, the
laughter in summer houses, wild monkeys
at the hill stations of her youth, peacocks,
the heady profusions of flowers and fruit,
jasmine and roses and custard-apples and
guavas. They could not imagine her with
braids and proper Catholic uniform at the
convent school under the stern eyes of nuns
who taught them all their subjects including
domestic skills such as the tatting of lace and
embroidery stitching. They could not taste the
sweetness of Sanskrit poetry, or the star-flung
nights of Persian ghazals.
In Canada, my mother's young life gets frozen into
the icy winters of my childhood, new stories spun

in English on skating rinks, tobogganing hills and ski slopes. A new wife, a new mother, she reads *Ladies Home Journal*, learns to bake me birthday cakes and gingerbread houses, wears Western clothes, pedal pushers and sheath dresses and high heels, sews me party frocks with sashes bowed in the back.

Family Life

In the 1960s they called it *Health Education* on our report cards. Today they call the subject *Family Life*.

At our school, the girls are separated from the boys, gathered in the school gymnasium. The nurse distributes pamphlets about life cycles and Kotex. There is something pristine and sanitized about it, the glossy brochures with the beautiful fresh-faced girl, her blonde hair swept back with pink satin ribbon. We know we will soon become her, young women leading Breck girl lives.

We learn our lessons well, believe we can hold on to our well-groomed dreams.

It takes us years before we realize how many things will make us bleed, how easy it is for the world to rip us to pieces.

Romance

When I am sixteen, my girlfriend Jill and I go for a walk along Lake Saint Louis as we have done for years. It is June, we have graduated from high school and I am still flushed with the memory of prom night, my pale pink gown, all of us dancing at the Hilton, watching the sunrise over Mount Royal

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leaving the hot clutch of teenage lovers at dawn
to return to suburban bedrooms.

We sit on the bench and she tells me,
weeping, *my parents are getting a divorce.*
I weep with her, my memories taking me
to those girlhood years at their family
cottage, where Jill and I would swim and
canoe, listen to the loons at night and whisper
secrets and how I thought then that her parents
were the most romantic couple on earth, her
mom so pretty and her dad so handsome, the
football coach hero to his sons and the highschool
boys and they were so beautiful and in love and
how I wanted to have what they had when I grew up.

I returned home that day, weeping,
told my mother the story, that Jill's mom and dad
were getting a divorce because her dad had been
having an affair with a young secretary, and her mom
with four kids and no training for a job would have to
sell that beautiful house by the lake where they had always lived.
My mother didn't believe me because it was Beaconsfield and
nothing ever happened like that in Beaconsfield and no one
ever spoke of divorce. She told me we were hysterical girls
with overactive imaginations.

But she was wrong. And nothing was ever the same again.

Reading Like a Girl : 1

How I loved them, the stories about the
girl detectives, spunky and brave, solving
crimes with their wits and brains and
All-American good looks. Long after my
mother thought I was asleep, late into the
night, I would read under the covers with
a flashlight.

I drove that sportscar with Nancy
Drew, dated Ned, and looked lovely and charming
and desirable at college football games.

And how I dreamed of being Cherry Ames, student nurse, with her stylish cap and uniform, her black hair and rosy cheeks, her boyfriends and her adventures.

And when I grew up, I became them, Nancy and Cherry. I cut off my long black braids, styled my hair into a bob.

I became the girl detective, the nurse, capable of building nations and soothing the hearts of men. I became Nancy and Cherry, for awhile.

Reading Like A Girl : 2

On the autumn football fields
the cheerleaders chant and jump
their pleated miniskirts flipped into
the air, flurries of thighs gleaming.
Anything seems possible, for such
young bodies, in such a place and
time.

I remain reading my books under the
trees, losing myself in imaginary
worlds, in the tomes of *War and Peace*
and *Dr. Zhivago*, dreaming of dancing in
evening gowns and elbow-length gloves.
Books about revolution excited me,
seduced me.

I try to re-imagine the heroines,
their perpetual tragedies.
Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina.
Anna flinging her body into the locomotive
steam, her red purse on the tracks. I try to read
them and write them differently, give them
different endings, new destinies.

I want them to stay alive, to breathe, to be
plump with blood and desire, to believe that
anything is possible.

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Princess Stories

When I was young my father called me *Princess*.
And princess stories were the ones I loved most,
especially the one about Sleeping Beauty. Her
name was sometimes Briar Rose or Aurora. The
story of the beautiful princess who pricked her
finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel, falling
under the spell of the witch who had been shunned
at her christening.

The curse of a girlchild's birth.

She slept along with the kingdom for a hundred years
until she is rescued by a handsome prince who hacked
through the dense tangle of thorns and wild rose bushes.
The curse lifted with love, his kiss on her lips,
awakening the world.

When my daughters are young, I read them princess stories
The Paper Bag Princess, The Princess and the Motorcycle
tales of strong, independent princesses of wit and courage and
intellect who do not depend on princes for survival.

Still, as I watch my girls, young women now, I am filled
with longing, something that mourns the loss of belief
that a beloved would hack through forests of thorns to
sweep a girl off her feet.

Soja

In my mother's house the scents of memory live,
in the French perfumes he gave her,
Calèche, Jolie Madame, Je Reviens,
lingerie drawers of lace and fragrant silks, lush bouquets of anniversaries.

Everywhere, photographs imprint our surfaces,
lives stilled in sepia and Kodachrome.

I know the gleam and smell of the polished leather of his shoes,
buffed every morning before he left for work.

I press my face into the crisp white cotton of his shirts,
brush my cheek against his jackets, his sweaters,
still warm with the smell of him.
I touch my teeth to the metal of his watch, his cufflinks.

I can hear his voice reading fairytales, singing the
calypso of Harry Belafonte, Punjabi ghazals and lullabies

Soja Rajkumari, soja,
Sleep, princess, sleep
Soja meethe sapne aayen
Sleep with sweet dreams
Soja pyari Rajkumari
Sleep beloved princess

In the hush, I am cradled by the sound of him,
notes love-woven, tangled through the glowing pyre.

In my mother's house
my father's ashes are acrid
in my throat.

Reading Chekhov

Reading Chekhov. Stories about love
the sadness of his characters, always meeting each other too late.
Missed lives, mourning what could have been
departing forever in railway stations.
Tears, a lorgnette raised to the eye, ice etched on windows, gaslit winter scenes
a loveless marriage in a country house in a town like all the others.

I'll read the story differently. A Chekhov love letter.

Love me through departures,
through the faltering valves of your heart,
the ticking of clocks and moving trains.
Kiss me in the cleft of each elbow, behind each knee.

Buddhist's tell us to live our days unattached
to the dust of the world
to enter the blackness.

To always see ourselves as light.

Not so easy to do when the hum of the world
dulls us in its gears.

I am trying to wear light as a garment
to find it in the paradise of afterlife under a stone
in the opened door of a commuter train.

Departure lounge at the airport.
Goodbye a salt-water word you avoid
as if it would open a wound that would never close.
Goodbye a word of red waves, fog-horn sobs, sea-wracked, tongue-uttered
ache
ember of pain in the wrist, a movement toward the
corrosive heart.
Goodbye a word that makes your bones scream a word you dare not breathe.

I am always naked with you.
The winds brought me newborn into your arms
to the one who would hold me through the night.

I have always known you.
My harsh blessing.
Every sweetness has the taste of your skin.
Each wound has the shape of your mouth.

Forget me. As I would forget you. For the suffering.

Remember me. As I would remember you. Claim the way the heart stops
when you come to me naked and scratched.

Climb to my bed bleeding
on the dark wind of dreams.

I have waited for you all my life.
Four decades to find you
and still and still a story that turns back on itself.

We are afraid, as if gentleness
has a daggered edge.

Dance with me beloved.

I am your wild, sweet girl.

I would have you as you are,
aging and heartsick with the world.

All night, all night you can have this book.
Turn the pages on your lap, until they become like well-worn linen
last words soft in your hands.

Meet me there in that story
afterlife of spine cracked open.