Who are you?
What makes a friendship tick?
How can you tell the difference between love and like? And how do media images influence the way you view the world, yourself, and others?
Look within for some thought-provoking reading…
The selections in this unit will help you look closely at yourself, your relationships, and the way the media defines your world.
Looking tough, looking dishevelled, looking bewildered, looking at nothing at all.

two young boys handcuffed to detectives, walking stiffly from a courtroom on the second floor of City Hall.

“Those punks are going back to the Don where they belong …” a court attendant.

Some of us should be made to go along with them.

Focus Your Learning
Reading this poem will help you:
■ discuss stereotypes
■ speculate about character
■ consider the connotations of words
■ write your own poem

Activities
1. With a partner, discuss how you think teenagers are perceived by adults. Is the adults’ perception right? Write your thoughts in a brief paragraph.

2. Imagine that you are one of these boys. Write a journal describing what you have done, and your thoughts after you have been sentenced.

3. The words “prisoner” and “punk” both have largely negative connotations, or emotional associations. “People” is more neutral. Working in groups of two or three, make a chart with three columns, headed Positive, Neutral, and Negative. Then think of three synonyms that have different connotations but the same basic meaning, and write each word or phrase under the correct column. See which group can come up with the longest list.

4. Write another version of this poem, in which the two protagonists are elderly people being viewed as stereotypes. Think of an appropriate setting for your poem.
Our Appearance …

KAHLIL GIBRAN

Our appearance,
our words,
our actions
are never greater
than ourselves.
For the soul
is our house;
our eyes its windows;
and our words
its messengers.

Focus Your Learning
Reading this quotation will help you:
■ interpret a message for a particular audience
■ research quotations
■ apply your understanding of a quotation

Activities

1. Paraphrase this meditation, using language
   that will appeal to a teenage audience.

2. Use various resources to research quota-
   tions from different cultures that have to do
   with the soul. Combine your quotations
   with those of others in the class, to make
   a “soul” dictionary.

3. Find and watch the video “The Elephant
   Man.” Compare his tale to Gibran’s medita-
   tion. In a paragraph, describe how this med-
   itation might be applied to the elephant
   man’s story.
Activities

1. Look at the painting. How has the artist made it look realistic? Consider the use of light and shading, and how the painting resembles a photograph.

2. Artists find art everywhere—in dew on a leaf, in the way shadows play across a face. Look around you and make a list of everyday items that might make effective pieces of art. Choose one. Present your idea. Give reasons why you think it would make a piece of art.

3. Find other works by Canadian artists, either locally or by doing research in books or on the Internet. Present your examples to the class. Explain what you think is interesting about the artwork you found.
Summer sun blazes down on Arctic Bay, drenching the bay and its circling hills in radiance, throwing the whole scene into some kind of postcard-perfect visual overdrive. Backpackers lag their steps, gape at the view and count their travel dollars well spent. Dennis Shappa, who lives there—but never takes the view for granted, not for one minute—throws back his head and laughs. It’s the laugh of an exuberant young man who loves life, has big goals and every year gets closer to them.

Six years ago, to the month, there was no laughter. “It happened in summer, 1992,” he says. “Suddenly I had to rewrite a whole chapter in my life.”

They found Dennis unconscious on the floor of the Northern Store, felled by a brain aneurism that didn’t quite kill him, but certainly seemed to have done the next best thing. It robbed him of short-term memory. “Even three years ago, I still had to write everything down. Everything! ‘Have your shower, brush your teeth,’ things like that.”

After initial treatment in the south, Dennis came home and attempted to return to high school. “I couldn’t do it. I had headaches like a sledgehammer to the head every 10 seconds,
and I was very depressed. I couldn’t even breathe, I felt so sorry for myself.” I look at this relaxed, genial young man who has climbed mountains I can’t even imagine, and I ask how he did it, how he got past the anger.

“Well, the nurse at the clinic gave me Prozac for a while. That got me through the dark season. And I ran! I ran and I ran and I ran. And I wrote lots of letters and poems. That gave me an outlet.”

But, I push, you could have given up.

“After the accident, I had a whole new perspective. Also, my mother is a very spiritual person. I think she’s the source of my strength.”

The new perspective, and the inner strength, made Dennis someone who said Yes to life’s possibilities. Further rehab in the south taught him to be well-organized. Yes. Books and writing, which he’d always avoided, suddenly beckoned. Yes. High school was out, but adult education was available, with instructor Barry Tibbett, right there in Arctic Bay. Yes. He could still plan and work toward a career. Yes!!

“They tested me and I entered at the 120 level, which is the equivalent of Grade 12. Now I’ve finished the 130 level and I’ll start on 140 this fall. I need a 150 level to get into the Nunavut Teachers Education Program—that’s my goal. I want to be a teacher.” Not surprisingly, Dennis wins the best attendance award each year. “One hundred per cent last year!” And he flashes a huge grin.

This year, finally, Barry Tibbett is retiring from his work with Arctic College. Dennis’ face clouds for a moment, measuring the loss of the man who has been friend and instructor, who encouraged and believed in him from the start. (And helped him become proud owner of seat F5-408 from the old Montreal Forum, but that’s another story.) Then he brightens again. “But now Kathy’s coming back to town as instructor and I’ll be working with her. I’m looking forward to that.”

They already know each other. Kathy Okpik Oqallak (daughter of the acclaimed and much-missed Abe and Rose Okpik) lived in Arctic Bay before moving with husband and family to Nanisivik for five years. “Dennis has come such a long way,” she says. “And he’s so much fun. We always tease each other.”

Laughter is certainly part of Dennis’ recipe for building a new life. So is hard work. “I carry my daytimer everywhere. I don’t have to write down the basics anymore, but I still need it to keep myself organized. See? There’s your name for this afternoon. And I have to read things over and over, more than most people.”

In fact, keeping busy is at the heart of Dennis’ message to others with disabilities, especially those now at the depressed and overwhelmed stage that he went through years ago. “Don’t give up hope, keep being strong, pray to God. Work hard at your therapy, and keep busy. Don’t just sit and feel sorry for yourself! Do something. Volunteer somewhere. When I was on the waiting list for adult ed, I volunteered at the school. And I tell the elders, if ever you need help, call me. I’m glad to do it. If it weren’t for the elders, where would we be?”

He also has a message for anyone who sometimes feels shy or awkward around someone with a disability. “Don’t be afraid of us. Treat us like your brother or sister. And—be sure to include this, It’s very important—don’t take advantage of us.” He explains how so-called friends did take advantage of him at first. It’s a reminder that we owe justice to people with disabilities, as well as ordinary friendship.

Dennis lives the busy life he urges on others.
School, volunteer work, some seasonal work this spring at the Nanisivik Mine (earning high praise), lots of reading through the N.W.T. library service (books arrive with return postage paid), and his own output of letters and poems.

One of those poems, written after the road-accident death of a little boy in town, seems to sum it all up. *Life Is So Precious* is the title, and it says, in part:

> Observe everything around you  
> Take care of things that you’ve been putting aside saying you’ll do them later.  
> Maybe there won’t be a later.  
> Just try and be nice to people and hope for the best for you and people around you.

It concludes: “And live life to the MAX.”  
Just like Dennis Shappa.

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**Activities**

1. Write a letter to Dennis Shappa in which you compare his experience with setting goals and overcoming obstacles with your own experiences in these areas. Offer him encouragement as he continues to strive toward his goals.

2. Find evidence in the article to show who its intended audience is. Rewrite the article to make it suitable for publication in a national newspaper. Make changes to the content, style, and tone as you see fit. Compare your new version with that of a partner and discuss your choices.

3. Perform a monologue in which Dennis retells the events of his life before and after the accident. Find ways to make the retelling as dramatic and interesting as possible.
The mirror is a good place for looking. I hated myself when I was a kid. All I could see were the big teeth and the glasses. After all these years, I am more gentle with myself, and sometimes I even like what I see. Again, brief instances of centredness, contentment. But the interesting thing is that since living in Canada I have been forced to see something that I had never seen before: colour. In Chile I didn’t have a colour. I was like everybody else. Colour was not an issue. Here, I have been forced to see myself as a dark woman, “a woman of colour.”
Do I like this term? Can I live with it? Sometimes I can, sometimes I can’t. I can live with it when it brings me close to other women who may have gone through experiences similar to mine, women who live in the margins of this society because of the colour of their skin. Then I like it. I cannot live with it when I realize that it is a term largely determined by the fact that there is a dominant colour and culture that not only I am not a part of, but that looks down on me and others like me.

But if society wants to define me, “put me in my place,” by pointing to the colour of my skin and my accent, there is little I can do about it. Call me what you wish. What I do know is that I am a lot more complex than what you see or hear. I have several cards up my sleeve, and I may choose not to show them to you. I am a traveller, a wanderer. I live in a language that’s not mine, in a country that’s not mine. But who doesn’t? Perhaps “home” is only a search interrupted by brief moments of contentedness. Perhaps home is nothing but my own dark skin, reflected in the Canadian mirror of my here and now. Perhaps.

**Activities**

1. Write a response in which you consider how the culture you grew up in has shaped who you are: your looks, tastes, and beliefs.

2. Analyse the tone of this piece of writing. What words, phrases, or expressions help to convey the tone? Choose a paragraph from the piece and rewrite it with a different tone. Share your new version with a partner, and have him or her describe the differences in tone.

3. Choose a quotation from the essay, and create a poster campaign to promote awareness of the immigrant experience. Illustrate the quotation with a collage or other visual that reinforces the message.
I worked hard to be Anna Murphy’s best friend. Don’t get me wrong—it was worth it. Without Anna I’d have been nobody. But Anna never has to work hard. She’s probably the best-looking girl in town and, what’s worse, it’s all natural. Even as a little kid she had everyone drooling about how cute she was, with her long blond curls and big brown eyes. Now everyone’s telling her she should be a model. They make me want to throw up. She has this fake, modest smile and a “What, me? I’m not pretty enough” routine, and then just eats it up when they all rush to contradict her.

Her dad’s loaded, and nothing’s too good for “Princess.” Boys fight over her—like, actually fight. I used to hope that some of whatever she has
would rub off on me. I mean, I deserved some pay-off for all the crap she dished out.

The latest load started the day we went into English class and Miss Grainger had this guy with her. He was drop-dead gorgeous, like one of the hunks we drool over in those magazines we don’t admit reading because they’re not cool. He was about six foot two with these amazing shoulders. At first I couldn’t see his face because he was bent over, reading some list on Miss Grainger’s desk. Then, wow! Green eyes with long, thick lashes. Tanned skin without a zit in sight. He even had a slightly crooked nose that saved him from being a total pretty boy.

Anna gasped. “Donna, who is he?”

Like I’m supposed to know?

“Aha! Even Grainger’s making eyes at him, the dirty old lady.” Anna’s had it in for Miss Grainger since last year. Grainger just hadn’t heard the news that Anna was Miss Perfect and had told her it was a shame that she did just enough work to get a decent grade when if she worked hard she could be brilliant at English. That’s a real no-no, criticizing Anna. After all, her entire life the rest of the world’s been telling her how wonderful she is.

“Come on, settle down. We’ve got a lot to do today.” Grainger gave some latecomers the death stare as they stumbled in, banging against chairs. “This is Mr. McCallum from the university. He’s going to be with us for the next two months. At first he’ll be sitting in on some classes, and later he’ll be teaching.”

Anna, always the drama queen, buried her face in her arms. “Oh no, he’s a student teacher. Let’s hope he’s a keeper, I’d really like to get to know him.” This last bit came out in the breathy voice Anna uses when she’s trying to sound sexy but sounds like she’s having an asthma attack. “I hope that creep Lowther doesn’t screw things up again.”

Anna has this seriously selective memory. OK, Bob Lowther did start the trouble with the last student teacher. She was so stupid. She told us to express ourselves any way we liked. So he did. For Bob, jumping from desk to desk hooting like a chimp expressed exactly how he felt about her dorky ideas, and the rest of us weren’t far behind. Anna and I sat on our desks screeching as loudly as we could. A bunch of kids at the back lit up cigarettes. Even Dennis Mason was winging paper planes around. You should have seen his face when one of them hit the student teacher smack between the eyes, and she started to cry. He rushed up to her, apologizing like crazy. Anna was laughing hysterically. And she even gave Elly Kovacs a hard time for about a week afterward for helping Dennis get the stupid cow out of the room. Here Anna was blaming Bob for the whole thing, right? Like she was a total angel.

Miss Grainger showed Mr. McCallum to a chair and turned her attention back to us. “Get out your copies of Julius Caesar and let’s make a start.”
Anna was trying to check out the student teacher without being too obvious, so she had made no move to get out her book. I nudged her in the ribs.

“All right, all right!” she whispered, hardly taking her eyes off him as she fumbled in her backpack.

I thought she’d have to concentrate then because Grainger asked her to read Portia. I have to admit it—Anna’s pretty good. She’s been in just about every school play since kindergarten. When she was a little kid she used to go on about how she was going to be a movie star, but she dropped the idea when Mrs. Snow, our drama teacher, told her how hard it was to break into acting. Now she says she wants to be a news anchor. I can see her doing it, too. Daddy will pay for her to go to some fancy media-studies college. And then she’ll waltz up to a television station and expect them to fall all over themselves to give her a job. The sickening thing is that they probably will, because she’s good-looking and, no matter how she tries to hide it, pretty smart, too. Me, I’ll be lucky to manage a year at the local community college, if I can scrape together the tuition, doing whatever subject is most likely to get me a job, any dead-end job.

“Anna, just what is so fascinating at the back of the room?” Grainger couldn’t resist a small smirk when that got a giggle from the class. I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing and put on my best sympathetic face.

Anna just blushed and muttered.

She didn’t turn around again after that, but she didn’t follow the play either. She had a piece of paper half hidden under her book, and she was doing a pretty passable sketch of McCallum.

“Well, Anna? We’re waiting.”

Everyone silently turned to look. Anna stared down Miss Grainger with this sneer on her face as if she’d been interrupted at something seriously important.

“It’s your line, Anna.” Miss Grainger was sounding real snippy. “When you follow the text, it makes it run so much more smoothly for those who are listening.”

I thought Anna got off easy, but she flounced around in her seat and flicked the pages. She glared at me, and I wasn’t much help. I knew the general area, but I’d been too busy watching her to know exactly what speech was next.

“Someone show them where we are, for heaven’s sake.” Grainger was doing this eyes-rolling-upwards thing she does to show how stupid she thinks you are. It ticked me off that I was being included—I’d been paying more attention than Anna. But that’s just typical. Dennis turned around, showing us the page and pointing to Portia’s speech.
Anna started reading then. Her face was bright red, and for the first few words her voice was shaky, but she got it together. It was this scene where Portia confronts her husband, Brutus, and Anna had us all believing how angry and hurt old Portia was, even with the geek reading Brutus sounding like a talking log. At the end of the scene, she glared at Miss Grainger.

““There, Anna. See what you can do when you concentrate?”

I thought that was pretty neat, but Anna gave her the hate stare for the rest of the period.

When it was over and Miss Grainger shepherded the student teacher out, Anna packed up her books and turned on me. “What’s the matter with you, Donna? You made me look like an idiot back there.”

I couldn’t believe it. What had I done?

“He’ll think I’m a real bimbo, being told off for turning around and then not following the text.”

This was my fault?

“You could have just kept track of where we were meant to be.” Anna was really getting into it now. “He’ll think we’re just a couple of airheads.”

The self-important, spoiled little creep, pouting because some guy she didn’t even know might think she’s a ditz. Oh well, all she wanted was someone to lash out at, and guess who was there—good old Donna. I bit back what I really wanted to say, thought it’d be better to suck up to her. That’s why she keeps me around, after all. “Come on, Anna, he’s got to think you’re quite something after the way you read.”

That stopped her. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you read Portia like you really felt all those things, so you can’t be stupid, right? You must understand the play.” I went in for the killer punch. “And I saw him looking at you while you were reading, like he was impressed.” I hadn’t, of course, but I knew she’d buy it, she’s so vain.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really, Anna.”

“Come on, let’s get some lunch.” Anna sauntered out of the room with a huge smile on her face.

This McCallum guy was all Anna talked about for the rest of the day. You’d think he could walk on water, the way she went on. On the way home with some of the others, she was even worse.

“Wow! Is he good-looking—but mature, too.”

“Anna, he’s probably only five years older than we are,” said Michael. “The same age as your brother Liam—and you’re always saying what a jerk he is.”

Michael was Anna’s boyfriend, Mr. Wonderful to her Miss Perfect. They were The Couple, if you get what I’m saying. I suppose it’s kind of predictable—captain of the football team and the head cheerleader. I’d kill to
get a guy like Michael. But Anna just acted like he was her due or something, and treated him like dirt. All the time, too, not just now going on about how gorgeous the student teacher was, like Michael had no feelings.

I go out with one of Michael’s friends on the team, Doug Washburn. He’s all right, but that’s all. He’s OK looking but nothing compared to Michael—Doug looks like those movie actors who play the hero’s buddy and never get the girl. I know he has the hots for Anna—what boy doesn’t—but he hasn’t the nerve to ask her out, so he makes do with me. If I hadn’t been Anna’s friend I doubt he’d even have bothered. I don’t really like him that much but, hey, at least he’s on the team.

Anna just stared at Michael like he was stupid. “He’s nothing like Liam. You can tell this guy’s been around—he’s sophisticated.”

“Oh, come off it, Anna. You’ve never even spoken to him, you’ve seen him once and suddenly you know everything about him.” Michael wasn’t picking up the danger signals—the way Anna’s face was flushing, how her lips were tightening.

“His suit was one of those fancy designer ones—Boss or maybe even Armani,” I tossed in to back Anna up, maybe earn back some brownie points.

“So what!” Michael was getting steamed himself now. “Anna, that guy doesn’t even know you exist. And even if he does, he’s not going to be interested in a schoolgirl.”

Anna stopped dead and turned to face Michael. “That’s what you think.” Giving everyone her biggest, brightest smile, she said, “You just wait and see.” Her chin was up, daring Michael to challenge her. What had I started here?

Michael hitched up his backpack. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Maybe you’ll be in a better mood. Bye, guys.” Off he went, not looking back even once.

I’d have been devastated, run after him even, but all Anna did was smile. “I’ll show him.” Looking around, she said, “You’ll all see.” She linked her arm through mine. “Let’s go, Donna. Come over to my house and we’ll do our homework.” That was a laugh. Anna just wanted me there so she could go on about McCallum. I’d end up doing my homework really late, after I’d watched my kid sisters till my mother got back from work.

By the time Mr. McCallum started full-time at the school, instead of just coming on observation visits, he had a real following, with the girls drooling over him and the boys thinking he was an OK guy because he was a jock and helped out with the sports programs. Anna kept dropping hints that she was going to make a play for him, and she had most people believing she could pull it off. Michael never said anything, just got this closed look on his face. Maybe, if he got really ticked off with her, I could make a move on him.
McCallum’s first lesson was OK. At least he tried to make things interesting. Even Bob didn’t mess him around. You could tell McCallum was nervous because he was already at the front of the room when we piled in, pacing up and down by the board where he’d written “Living Language.” When we actually sat down and showed signs that we’d listen, he relaxed a bit. Anna had bagged some seats right at the front and stared at him like a kid looking at an ice-cream cake.

This “Living Language” crap was all about how language changes. He started off by getting us to work in pairs, writing down as many slang words as we could think of. Bob could really have taken advantage but he didn’t, and he had all this great street slang from when he used to live in Toronto. McCallum got all excited, making some crack about how we had a real expert in our midst. Bob almost forgot that he was the school bad boy, and grinned. I could tell that Anna was getting mad, but she had nothing to outclass Bob, so she had to make do with tossing her hair and leaning back. The guys in the front row had a fine time, but McCallum didn’t seem to notice. Anyway, by the end of the period she was getting pretty desperate.

It was the homework he set us that gave her a chance to get noticed. He wanted us to talk to someone older, like our parents, and collect a list of the slang they used when they were our age. The idea was that we could see how words had changed, and maybe how some words had different meanings now.

We packed up and I waited like normal for Anna, but she made this sign with her hand that I was to go. I mean, who did she think she was, dismissing me like I’m her slave or something. Michael was starting up the aisle toward her, but I met him on my way out.

“Anna doesn’t want us to wait.” Well, how else could I say it? He looked as if he might protest, so I grabbed his arm and steered him out of the room.

“What’s with her?” Even with the noise in the corridor I could hear how mad he was.

Looking really sympathetic, I said, “Don’t worry, Michael. She’s talked so much about McCallum that she’s got to make him notice her or everyone will laugh at her. Once she’s done that, she’ll let it drop—you’ll see.” I was lying through my teeth, of course. I knew how serious Anna was—she’d told me often enough over the past few weeks—but Michael swallowed it.

“Tell Anna I’ll be out on the field kicking a football around, OK?”

I was straining to hear what was going on in the room, so I kind of brushed him off. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll do that.” Once he’d gone, I stood as close to the open door as I could without being seen. Anna was standing by the teacher’s desk while McCallum packed up his stuff.

“Mr. McCallum, does it have to be a parent we ask?” Anna was giving
him the Smile full blast. It was almost funny to see her run through her

Without looking up, he replied, “Well, no, anyone older will do.”

“See, I thought I’d ask my great-grandmother.” Anna’s voice carried real
well, all eagerness and please-notice-me. “She’s really old, but she’s still all
there. I visit her every week in the retirement home, and she tells really
interesting stories about when she was a girl. She was a suffragette in
England.” This was a crock. Anna was always complaining about having to
visit her, about how she had whiskers and slopped her food.

“That may be too far back, you know. The other kids might find it diffi-
cult to relate it to their own experience.”

Anna didn’t miss a beat. “Exactly. That’s why I thought if I interviewed
her daughter—my gran—and my own mother, then maybe I could sort of
map their experiences, showing how circumstances affected the way they
talked and all that.” Got him! What teacher wouldn’t be flattered by a kid
wanting to do extra work for them after their very first lesson? “It would
take a long time, but it could be really interesting.”

Closing his briefcase, he looked at Anna for the first time. “You’re …?”

“Anna. Anna Murphy.” She positively glowed.

“Well, Anna, if everyone’s as enthusiastic as you are, the next month is
going to be fun.” He smiled in her general direction and swept out of the

I moved well away from the door so Anna wouldn’t have any idea I’d
seen and heard it all.

“Donna, you were right! He likes me. He was really keen on my idea
about the homework and he made a point of asking my name.” It all came
out in a rush as Anna ran up to where I was lounging against some lock-
ers. Notice the way she just expected me to be waiting, like I had nothing
better to do. “This is going to be easier than I thought. You should have
seen the way he looked at me.” As we passed the glass trophy case, she
stopped and checked out her reflection.

I had seen the way he looked at her. I didn’t say anything—just stored it
all away for future use.

Anna made sure she was always the last out of McCallum’s class and usu-
ally found something to talk to him about. As her best friend, I waited out-
side in the corridor. It was pathetic, like being back in grade three when you
think it’s so neat to have a teacher notice you. She gushed away, and he
always took time to talk about some assignment or her slang-in-the-family
project. She’d actually done the whole thing, just like she said she would—
it must have taken her hours. Anyway, pretty soon she’d get him talking
about himself. Once she even spun him this line about how English was
her favourite subject and how she wanted to be an English teacher. He
launched into this long rambling story about how he’d decided on English because he wanted to share his love of literature with kids. If you asked me, it was all a load of crap, but they both seemed to believe it.

I never let on that I listened, just made the right noises when Anna told me her latest triumph—how he looked at her, how he really wanted to ask her out but couldn’t because he was a student teacher. It was kind of sad. He obviously liked her, but she was reading far too much into it.

The way Michael acted probably convinced most kids there was something going on. He was so jealous and possessive that if you wanted him to lose his temper all you had to do was say the word “McCallum.” There was this dance coming up and Michael practically begged Anna, in front of a whole lot of people, to go with him, like there was a chance she might turn up with someone else. She agreed in this real condescending tone, and when Michael went off, she kind of hinted that he would just be the front to hide what was really going on.

See, the big news about the dance was that McCallum was going to be there. He’d told some guys on the football team that student teachers were encouraged to get involved in the school’s extracurricular activities. So, he and the nerdy science type were going to help the regular teachers run the dance. Anna was in heaven.

“This is my big chance, Donna. I know he really likes me but I’ve got to show him I’m not a kid.” She looked like my little sister Stacey does when she watches commercials for real fancy toys on television—she really wants them but is pretty sure she won’t get any.

As Faithful Friend, I could dig around a bit, maybe get something I could use on her later. “He knows that already, doesn’t he? I mean, the way you say he talks to you when you’re alone. You said he just couldn’t act on how he felt, that’s all.”

“Yeah, well, that’s true, but I really want to show how different I am from those girls who have crushes on him.” She was staring past me, focussed on the parking lot. McCallum was walking toward a red sports car. “You know why he was assigned to this school, Donna?”

I didn’t, but I knew she was going to tell me.

“He’s Warren’s nephew.”

Typical, Anna calling old man Pelletier by his first name. Apart from Anna’s dad, who owns the biggest construction company in Elmwood, Pelletier is about the richest man in town. He has this big poultry-packing factory and a whole load of farms outside town. All I knew about him was that I’d do just about anything not to end up working for him once I was out of school.

“Big deal!”

“My dad says he’s staying with his uncle and during the summer he’s
going to be working up at the processing plant.” Anna’s voice was quiet and
dreamy. It didn’t take much to work out what she was thinking. I tried dig-
ging a bit more but Anna just smiled real secretively and said, “I’m going to
Lexington this Saturday to look for a dress. You want to come?”

Shopping with Anna is not easy, trying to keep smiling while she throws
money around like there’s no tomorrow and I search for whatever’s cheapest
but doesn’t look too cheesy. “Nah, I’ve got one already.” I changed the
subject quick. “What are you looking for?” I didn’t want to talk about my
clothes, a tacky hand-me-down from my cousin, the queen of bad taste.

“Just you wait and see.” Anna smiled knowingly and headed off.

Anna wouldn’t show me what she had bought until the actual night.
Doug and I were going to the dance with her and Michael, so he came by to
pick us both up. He didn’t ring the doorbell, just honked from the drive-
way. That was weird, but I didn’t say anything when I got into the back seat
with Doug.

Anna turned around. “Hi, guys. All set?” She sounded as if she was trying
to keep from laughing.

“Put your seat belt on, Anna.” Michael’s voice was tight. He was sitting
up real straight, glaring out the windshield.

“All right, give me a break.” Anna stayed twisted, facing us. “He’s such a
grouch tonight.” A giggle escaped, choked off as Michael slammed the car
into reverse and backed onto the street so Anna was thrown off balance
before she turned and sat facing the front, her seat belt still hanging loose.

“Is your brother the DJ tonight, Anna?” Doug usually has the sensitivity
of a bull moose, but I couldn’t believe that even he hadn’t noticed the ten-
sion.

“That’s right—Liam’s my man.” I could have sworn she was still trying
not to laugh. Liam was crazy and he’d do just about anything for Anna.

The school gym was already crowded by the time we got there. They’d
tried to decorate it with clusters of balloons and paper streamers, but it still
looked like a hole. Anna and I went to the cloakroom to take off our coats.

Get this—a deep crimson jersey number that clung to every line and
curve of Anna’s body. It had one of those necklines that was kind of off the
shoulder, and I swear willpower alone was keeping it up.

“Anna!”

Anna spun around to give me the full effect. It was so tight that she
couldn’t have been wearing any underwear. “Michael doesn’t like it.” She
sounded so smug that I felt real sorry for him.

“It’s different.” One of my all-time great understatements. She made the
rest of us look like little girls in party dresses, all bows and velvet. “What
did your parents say?”
“Dad hasn’t seen it. He’s out with the Rotarians. Mom was OK—just made some crack about borrowing it for the Lions Club dance.”

My mother wouldn’t have let me out of the house in something like that.

“Do you think he’ll like it?”

I shrugged. “Hey, what guy wouldn’t?”

Walking back through the gym was quite something. Anna kind of glided through the crowd, acknowledging them with smiles and waves, like she was royalty or something. I don’t think anyone even noticed me. So, what’s new?

Michael and Doug had bagged one of the tables arranged around the walls of the gym. When he saw Anna, Doug went bright red and didn’t seem able to speak, which made it real awkward since Michael was sitting there stone-faced and silent. Anna and I kept badmouthing everyone around us, why they shouldn’t have worn what they did, how badly they’d done their hair—you know, the usual. We didn’t really mean anything by it. Besides, Anna’s mind was elsewhere. She kept looking around, trying to spot McCallum in the crowd.

“How about dancing?” Anna stood up and looked down at Michael.

He didn’t move his eyes in her direction, just shook his head.

Doug found his tongue. “I’ll dance with you, Anna.”

He didn’t even look at me, let alone ask if I minded, and he stepped on my foot stumbling out toward the floor with her. That really showed how I rated.

Michael was white faced. “You said she’d drop it.” He almost spat each word. “She’s making a fool of me.”

How come I always get it in the neck from everyone? Like it was my fault the way Anna was behaving? “Look, Michael, I was wrong, OK? I think Anna’s being a jerk, but I can’t do anything about it.” I leaned forward and put my hand on his. “I think she’s treating you real bad.” I waited till he looked at me. “But it’s herself she’s making look like a fool, not you. People will see through her.” I wanted to add it was about time they did but, hey, maybe this wasn’t the perfect moment.

He almost smiled. “Thanks, Donna. I really appre—”

“Hey, guys, you should see McCallum. Does he ever look cool.” Good old Doug with his usual wonderful timing.

Michael gripped Doug’s arm. “Where’s Anna?”

“Calm down, she’s gone over to talk to McCallum, that’s all.”

Michael turned. “Do you want to dance, Donna?”

“Sure.” I ignored Doug’s whining about being left by himself and followed Michael out onto the dance floor.

He headed for the centre of the floor and started dancing, but he was really
looking around for Anna. I don’t think he’d have even noticed I was there, except that I pointed toward the stage. Anna was with a whole group of girls, clustered around McCallum. She grabbed his hand and started pulling him onto the floor. He glanced back at Miss Grainger, who just shrugged.

Liam was playing a fast number. Anna looked up at him and suddenly the CD stuck. With hardly a pause, Liam had his second player going. His voice came over the loudspeaker. “Sorry about that. But never fear, Liam’s here. Let’s slow the tempo down a bit, get into a romantic mood.” He reached for a switch and dimmed the lights.

In the gloom, Anna threw her arms around McCallum’s neck and pressed up against him. His back was rigid and his hands on Anna’s waist seemed less holding her than trying to push her away. Even in the dark, they were the centre of attention.

“That’s it. I’m out of here.” Michael stalked off the dance floor. I headed back to our table so I wouldn’t look like a total dork standing there by myself.

“Where’s Michael?” Doug asked, a face on him like a spoiled kid.

“Look, I only danced with him because he was upset about Anna.” Doug was just dumb enough to believe me. “He saw her dancing with McCallum and took off.”

“I’ll go look for him,” Doug said.

The lights came back up. Anna still had hold of McCallum’s hand and he looked real uncomfortable. The dance floor was clearing, and I heard a couple of sniggers as McCallum finally pulled his hand free, muttered something and headed back to Miss Grainger.

For a few seconds, Anna just stood there, looking like a baby whose rattle’s been snatched away. Then she lit up a smile and kept it burning all the way back to our table.

“He’s the smoothest dancer. Did you see us?” Anna didn’t seem to notice Michael and Doug weren’t there, just watched closely for my reaction to her next statement. “It’s real hard for Iain. He has to play things so carefully till his teaching practice is over. That’s why he couldn’t dance with me again.”

Iain! Right. Like I didn’t know she’d made a point of finding out McCallum’s first name from her father. “Yeah, you looked great together.” I was more interested in McCallum with Miss Grainger, talking real seriously and looking in our direction.

Finally, it dawned on Anna that I was alone at the table. “He left,” I said. “Doug’s gone to look for him.”

Anna sighed. “He’s so immature at times! I mean how are we going to get home?” She sat down, turning toward the dance floor.

Miss Grainger was standing there alone.

Doug never caught up with Michael. He came rushing back, panting.
“His car’s gone from the parking lot!” He shifted from one foot to the other, like he was waiting for a reward or something.

“He can be such an idiot.” Anna was smiling as she said that. It gave her a real buzz to know that she had them lining up for her favours. “Never mind, we’ll get a ride with someone else, I’m sure.” She was looking around the room, scanning the faces. With a sigh she sat down at the table, picked up her drink, and then turned to Doug. “Since everyone seems to have deserted me, how about another dance?”

And that’s how I got to spend the rest of the evening, watching Anna make out that she was having a great time. McCallum was nowhere to be seen.

I had to baby-sit the next day. My mom had actually been offered some overtime, which was too rare to refuse. Anna called at nine o’clock.

“Hey, Donna. Do you want to come over?”

“You know I can’t leave the brats by themselves.”

“But I really need to talk to you.” There was a pause. “Can’t Stacey watch the little guys? Your mom doesn’t have to find out.”

“Are you kidding? Stacey would rat on me in a minute. And Mom would murder me if she found out I left Stacey in charge.” It would never occur to Anna that she could come over, maybe help me. I have to jump at her command. I think she’s been to my place maybe twice, acting like she’s doing me some huge favour.

“I wanted to talk about Iain.”

I sat down cross-legged on the hall floor, figuring I was going to be listening for a long time. It was weird. I didn’t have to say anything, not even make those encouraging “uh-huh” or “mm” noises.

“Oh, Donna, he’s got such a great body, all hard and muscular. He smelled good, too, not sweaty. I just know he wanted to say something to me, but everyone was looking at us. He has to be so careful.”

What a load of crap.

“Did you see? He didn’t dance with anyone else—just me.”

I had to face it—she wasn’t just doing a number on Michael and the others, she was doing one on herself. Maybe that’s what happens when you always get everything you want.

“Monday, I just know he’s going to say something.” Oh, really? “It’s his last week at the school, so he’ll be able to take more chances.”

Right. I was going to enjoy watching Miss Snot find out how it feels to be disappointed, just like the rest of us. Meanwhile, I’d put up with Anna’s hourly calls, saying the same things over and over. And you know what—she never mentioned Michael once.

On Monday, Anna came to school wearing black jeans and boots and a white shirt with a black suede vest over it that cost a fortune. She must have
been up real early that morning, because her hair tumbled around her face in that casual way you know takes hours to get right. She was so wired that it was lucky English is always in the morning. I don’t think I could have stood much more of did she look OK and what did I think he’d say.

When we got to class Miss Grainger was there, sitting at the back with a notepad. With Anna beside me, it was hard to concentrate. She wasn’t really sitting, she was posing. If McCallum asked a question, she just about killed herself to be the one to answer, but he never called on her—not once.

When the period was over, Anna went into her usual routine of packing her things slowly. She was so intent on McCallum that she didn’t notice Miss Grainger coming up behind her.

“Was there something you wanted, Anna?” Miss Grainger had to move back to avoid getting stepped on when Anna jumped in surprise.

“Er, I wasn’t quite clear about the assignment, that’s all.” Anna was stuttering. “I, uh, just wanted Mr. McCallum to go over it with me.”

Putting her hand in the small of Anna’s back, Miss Grainger guided her toward the door. “Ask one of the others, I’m sure they’ll have written it down. Look, Donna’s over there. Ask her.”

Anna’s face was brick red.

Miss Grainger came out a few seconds later with McCallum.

As they passed us, Anna turned away, pretending to be looking for something in her backpack. “What’s she doing here?” she asked once they’d disappeared down the corridor.

It was pretty obvious to me, but I wanted to see how Anna would explain it away.

“I suppose she has to assess how he’s doing, maybe write a report or something.” The colour was going from her face now. “Yeah, that’s it.” She smiled and walked off, the bounce back in her step. “I’ll just have to wait, that’s all.”

The wait was longer than Anna expected. Miss Grainger turned up at every one of McCallum’s lessons that week. She even gave up pretending to make notes. I bet most everyone had worked out why she was there. Funny, though. No one said anything to Anna. If it had been me, jokes would have been all over school by now.

Michael hadn’t spoken to Anna since the dance, but he and I had talked a few times. He kept saying he hated to see her make a fool of herself. He’d even called me at home once to talk about her. I could get him talking about something else for a bit, make him laugh, but he kept coming back to Anna.

By Thursday, Anna was getting desperate. She couldn’t get past Miss Grainger in class, and in the halls McCallum either had people around him or he hurried away from her. She kept telling me he was just being ultra-
cautious. Come on! But I could see that she was getting edgy. Maybe this was the time to give Miss Teen Queen a little push, show everybody what an idiot she could be. So I suggested she write him a note.

I was with her when she wrote it, but she wouldn’t listen to any of my suggestions. She kept going on about how it had to have the right tone, mature but not pushy, and it took her about a hundred tries to get it right.

Dear Iain,
I know that it has been difficult to balance your role as a student teacher with the friendship that has developed between us. I also realize that you had to treat me like just another pupil. Now that your practice teaching is ending, we can meet as equals. I shall be waiting at The Coffee House on Main Street at 11:00 a.m. on Saturday. No reply is necessary, as I know it might be difficult in the school situation.

Love,
Anna

She got me to leave it on his desk. He plunked his books right down on top of it, so he didn’t see it until after all the goodbyes, when he started putting things in his briefcase. For once, Anna didn’t hang around, so she didn’t see him read the note, make a face, and then crumple it up and throw it in the garbage.

Miss Grainger looked at him. “Anything wrong?”
He shook his head and started out of the room. “Nothing important.”

After they left, I got the note from the garbage, smoothed it out and put it carefully in my bag. At least Anna hadn’t dotted all the i’s with little hearts, but “the friendship that has developed between us”—who was she kidding?

Michael was sitting out on the grass beneath this big oak tree behind the gym. Normally, he’s part of a crowd, but he was by himself, his back against the tree, long legs stretched out in front. He was twisting a piece of grass between his fingers.

“Hey, Donna. How’s things?” He hardly even glanced up.

I sat down next to him, where he couldn’t avoid looking at me. “You’re not going to believe what she’s done now.” I tried to get just the right tone—concern for him, but slightly ticked off at her. I held out the note and, after a while, he took it. I allowed myself a smile then, just a little one. “I mean, just who does she think she is?”

Michael didn’t say anything, just folded the note up carefully and put it in the back pocket of his jeans.
“We could pass it around, and then a whole bunch of us can turn up at The Coffee House. It would be so funny.” I could just see it—Michael and me together—and the amazed look on Anna’s face. Me giving his hand a reassuring squeeze every now and then.

When Michael finally spoke his voice was low. “Donna, you’re supposed to be Anna’s friend. And here you want to set her up, humiliate her. She’s been a jerk the last month, for sure. But why do this? You really are vicious!”

I couldn’t believe it. He was going to take all this crap from her, pretend this never happened, and go on playing Ken to her Barbie! He just didn’t get it. “Michael! The point is, you all accept whatever she does. She snaps her fingers and everyone jumps. She’s making you look a jerk!”

I thought that would get him, but he just shook his head. “I know that. But she couldn’t help herself. Everyone’s entitled to make mistakes. At least Anna never means to harm anyone.”

I got up and walked away. This wasn’t how it was meant to turn out.

I went down to The Coffee House. I watched her for an hour, sipping the coffee I know she hates and trying not to cry. I never told anyone, though. There was no point. After all, gold just keeps on shining. It’s only us cheap imitations that tarnish and get junked.

Activities

1. At the end of the story, the narrator refers to “us cheap imitations.” Read the story again. List all of the evidence, either in her actions or her words, that shows the narrator regards herself as a “cheap imitation” of Anna.

2. a) The story is written in the first person. What effect does this perspective have on the story? Is the narrator likely to give reliable information? Justify your answer in a short paragraph.

   b) Retell the story from the point of view of Michael, Mr. McCallum, or Anna herself. Present your tale as a monologue to the class. Afterwards, take questions from the audience.

3. The narrator says she “worked hard” to be Anna’s best friend. Imagine that you are the narrator, applying for the job of “Best Friend.” Research some different ways to organize résumés, and create a convincing application for the position.

4. Present the information in the story as a talk show. Interview the various characters in the novel. Invite members of the audience to ask the characters questions about their feelings and motives. The host should ask questions of each guest in turn, and the guests can also interact.
CHARACTERS

MRS. POPOV, widow and landowner, small with dimpled cheeks

LUKA, Mrs. Popov’s footman, an old man

MR. GRIGORY S. SMIRNOV, gentleman farmer, middle-aged

GARDENER, COACHMAN, HIRED MEN

The drawing room of a country house. MRS. POPOV, in deep mourning, is staring hard at a photograph. LUKA is with her.

LUKA: It’s not right, ma’am, you’re killing yourself. The cook has gone off with the maid to pick berries. The cat’s having a high old
time in the yard catching birds. Every living thing is happy. But you stay moping here in the house like it was a convent, taking no pleasure in nothing. I mean it, ma’am! It must be a full year since you set foot out of doors.

**Mrs. Popov:** I must never set foot out of doors again, Luka. Never! I have nothing to set foot out of doors for. My life is done. He is in his grave. I have buried myself alive in this house. We are both in our graves.

**Luka:** You’re off again, ma’am. I just won’t listen to you no more. Mr. Popov is dead, but what can we do about that? It’s God’s doing. God’s will be done. You’ve cried over him, you’ve done your share of mourning, haven’t you? There’s a limit to everything. You can’t go on weeping and wailing forever. My old lady died, for that matter, and I wept and wailed over her a whole month long. Well, that was it. I couldn’t weep and wail all my life, she just wasn’t worth it. (He sighs.) As for the neighbours, you’ve forgotten all about them, ma’am. You don’t visit them and you don’t let them visit you. You and I are like a pair of spiders—excuse the expression, ma’am—here we are in this house like a pair of spiders, we never see the light of day. And it isn’t like there was no nice people around either. The whole country’s swarming with ‘em. There’s a regiment quartered at Riblov, and the officers are so good-looking! The girls can’t take their eyes off them—There’s a ball at the camp every Friday—The military band plays most every day of the week—What do you say, ma’am? You’re young, you’re pretty, you could enjoy yourself! Ten years from now you may want to strut and show your feathers to the officers, and it’ll be too late.

**Mrs. Popov:** (Firmly) You must never bring this subject up again, Luka. Since Popov died, life has been an empty dream to me, you know that. You may think I am alive. Poor ignorant Luka. You are wrong. I am dead. I’m in my grave. Never more shall I see the light of day, never strip from my body this … raiment of death! Are you listening, Luka? Let his ghost learn how I love him! Yes, I know, and you know, he was often unfair to me, he was cruel to me, and he was unfaithful to me. What of it? I shall be faithful to him, that’s all. I will show him how I can love. Hereafter, in a better world than this, he will welcome me back, the same loyal girl I always was—

**Luka:** Instead of carrying on this way, ma’am, you should go out in
the garden and take a bit of a walk, ma’am. Or why not harness Toby and take a drive? Call on a couple of the neighbours, ma’am?

**MRS. POPOV:** *(Breaking down)* Oh, Luka!

**LUKA:** Yes, ma’am? What have I said, ma’am? Oh dear!

**MRS. POPOV:** Toby! You said Toby! He adored that horse. When he drove me out to the Korchagins and the Vlasovs, it was always with Toby! He was a wonderful driver, do you remember, Luka? So graceful! So strong! I can see him now, pulling at those reins with all his might and main! Toby! Luka, tell them to give Toby an extra portion of oats today.

**LUKA:** Yes, ma’am.

*(A bell rings.)*

**MRS. POPOV:** Who is that? Tell them I’m not at home.

**LUKA:** Very good, ma’am. *(Exit.)*

**MRS. POPOV:** *(Gazing again at the photograph.)* You shall see, my Popov, how a wife can love and forgive. Till death do us part. Longer than that. Till death re-unite us forever! *(Suddenly a titter breaks through her tears)* Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, Popov? Here’s your little wife, being good, being faithful, so faithful she’s locked up here waiting for her own funeral, while you—doesn’t it make you ashamed, you naughty boy? You were terrible, you know. You were unfaithful, and you made those awful scenes about it, you stormed out and left me alone for weeks—

*(Enter LUKA)*

**LUKA:** *(Upset)* There’s someone asking for you, ma’am. Says he must—

**MRS. POPOV:** I suppose you told him that since my husband’s death I see no one?

**LUKA:** Yes, ma’am. I did, ma’am. But he wouldn’t listen, ma’am. He says it’s urgent.

**MRS. POPOV:** *(Shrilly)* I see no one!!

**LUKA:** He won’t take no for an answer, ma’am. He just curses and swears and comes in anyway. He’s a perfect monster, ma’am. He’s in the dining room right now.

**MRS. POPOV:** In the dining room, is he? I’ll give him his comeuppance. Bring
him in here this minute. (Exit LUKA. Suddenly sad again) Why do they do this to me? Why? Insulting my grief, intruding on my solitude? (She sighs) I’m afraid I’ll have to enter a convent. I will, I must enter a convent!

(Enter Mr. SMIRNOV and LUKA)

SMIRNOV: (To LUKA) Dolt! Idiot! You talk too much! (Seeing MRS. POPOV. With dignity.) May I have the honour of introducing myself, madam? Grigory S. Smirnov, landowner and lieutenant of artillery, retired. Forgive me, madam, if I disturb your peace and quiet, but my business is both urgent and weighty.

MRS. POPOV: (Declining to offer him her hand) What is it you wish, sir?

SMIRNOV: At the time of his death, your late husband—with whom I had the honour to be acquainted, ma’am—was in my debt to the tune of twelve hundred rubles. I have two notes to prove it. Tomorrow, ma’am, I must pay the interest on a bank loan. I have therefore no alternative, ma’am, but to ask you to pay me the money today.

MRS. POPOV: Twelve hundred rubles? But what did my husband owe it to you for?

SMIRNOV: He used to buy his oats from me, madam.

MRS. POPOV: (To LUKA, with a sigh) Remember what I said, Luka: tell them to give Toby an extra portion of oats today! (Exit LUKA) My dear Mr.—what was the name again?

SMIRNOV: Smirnov, ma’am.

MRS. POPOV: My dear Mr. Smirnov, if Mr. Popov owed you money, you shall be paid—to the last ruble, to the last kopeck. But today—you must excuse me, Mr.—what was it?

SMIRNOV: Smirnov, ma’am.

MRS. POPOV: Today, Mr. Smirnov, I have no ready cash in the house. (SMIRNOV starts to speak.) Tomorrow, Mr. Smirnov, no, the day after tomorrow, all will be well. My steward will be back from town. I shall see that he pays what is owing. Today, no. In any case, today is exactly seven months from Mr. Popov’s death. On such a day you will understand that I am in no mood to think of money.

SMIRNOV: Madam, if you don’t pay up now, you can carry me out feet foremost. They’ll seize my estate.
MRS. POPOV: You can have your money. (*He starts to thank her.*) Tomorrow (*He again starts to speak.*) That is: the day after tomorrow.

SMIRNOV: I don’t need the money the day after tomorrow. I need it today.

MRS. POPOV: I’m sorry, Mr.—

SMIRNOV: (*Shouting*) Smirnov!

MRS. POPOV: (*Sweetly*) Yes, of course. But you can’t have it today.

SMIRNOV: But I can’t wait for it any longer!

MRS. POPOV: Be sensible, Mr. Smirnov. How can I pay you if I don’t have it?

SMIRNOV: You don’t have it?

MRS. POPOV: I don’t have it.

SMIRNOV: Sure?

MRS. POPOV: Positive.

SMIRNOV: Very well. I’ll make a note to that effect. (*Shrugging*) And then they want me to keep cool. I meet the tax commissioner on the street, and he says, “Why are you always in such a bad humour, Smirnov?” Bad humour! How can I help it, in God’s name? I need money, I need it desperately. Take yesterday: I leave home at the crack of dawn, I call on all my debtors. Not a one of them pays up. Footsore and weary, I creep at midnight into some little dive, and try to snatch a few winks of sleep on the floor by the vodka barrel. Then today, I come here, fifty miles from home, saying to myself, “At last, at last, I can be sure of something,” and you’re not in the mood! You give me a mood! How can I help getting all worked up?

MRS. POPOV: I thought I’d made it clear, Mr. Smirnov, that you’ll get your money the minute my steward is back from town?

SMIRNOV: What the hell do I care about your steward? Pardon the expression, ma’am. But it was you I came to see.

MRS. POPOV: What language! What a tone to take to a lady! I refuse to hear another word. (*Quickly, exit*)

SMIRNOV: Not in the mood, huh? “Exactly seven months since Popov’s death,” huh? How about me? (*Shouting after her*) Is there this interest to pay, or isn’t there? I’m asking you a question: is there this interest to pay, or isn’t there? So your husband died, and you’re not in the mood, and your steward’s gone off some place, and so forth and so on, but what can I do about all that,
huh? What do you think I should do? Take a running jump and shove my head through the wall? Take off in a balloon? You don't know my other debtors. I call on Gruzdeff. Not at home. I look for Yaroshevitch. He's hiding out. I find Kooritsin. He kicks up a row, and I have to throw him through the window. I work my way right down the list. Not a kopeck. Then I come to you, and you're not in the mood! (Quietly, as he realizes he's talking to air) I've spoiled them all, that's what, I've let them play me for a sucker. Well, I'll show them. I'll show this one. I'll stay right here till she pays up. Ugh! (He shudders with rage.) I'm in a rage! I'm in a positively towering rage! Every nerve in my body is trembling at forty to the dozen! I can't breathe, I feel ill, I think I'm going to faint, hey, you there!

(Enter LUKA)

LUKA: Yes, sir? Is there anything you wish, sir?

SMIRNOV: Water! Water!! No, make it vodka. (Exit LUKA) Consider the logic of it. A fellow creature is desperately in need of cash, so desperately in need that he has to seriously contemplate hanging himself, and this woman, this mere chit of a girl, won't pay up, and why not? Because, forsooth, she isn't in the mood! Oh, the logic of women! Come to that, I never have liked them, I could do without the whole sex. Talk to a woman? I'd rather sit on a barrel of dynamite, the very thought gives me goose flesh. Women! Creatures of poetry and romance! Just to see one in the distance gets me mad. My legs start twitching with rage. I feel like yelling for help.

(Enter LUKA, handing SMIRNOV a glass of water.)

LUKA: Mrs. Popov is indisposed, sir. She is seeing no one.

SMIRNOV: Get out. (Exit LUKA) Indisposed, is she? Seeing no one, huh? Well, she can see me or not, but I'll be here, I'll be right here till she pays up. If you're sick for a week, I'll be here for a week. If you're sick for a year, I'll be here for a year. You won't get around me with your widow's weeds and your schoolgirl dimples. I know all about dimples. (Shouting through the window) Semyon, let the horses out of those shafts, we're not leaving, we're staying, and tell them to give the horses some oats, yes, oats, you fool, what do you think? (Walking away from the window) What a mess, what an unholy mess! I didn't sleep last night, the heat is terrific today, not a damn one of 'em has paid
up, and here’s this—this skirt in mourning that’s not in the mood! My head aches, where’s that—(He drinks from the glass.) Water, ugh! You there!

(Enter LUKA)

LUKA: Yes, sir. You wish for something, sir?

SMIRNOV: Where’s that confounded vodka I asked for? (Exit LUKA) (SMIRNOV sits and looks himself over.) Oof! A fine figure of a man I am! Unwashed, uncombed, unshaven, straw on my vest, dust all over me. The little woman must’ve taken me for a highwayman. (Yawns) I suppose it wouldn’t be considered polite to barge into a drawing room in this state, but who cares? I’m not a visitor, I’m a creditor—most unwelcome of guests, second only to Death.

(Enter LUKA)

LUKA: (Handing him the vodka) If I may say so, sir, you take too many liberties, sir.

SMIRNOV: What?!

LUKA: Oh, nothing, sir, nothing.

SMIRNOV: Who do you think you’re talking to? Shut your mouth!

LUKA: (Aside) There’s an evil spirit abroad. The Devil must have sent him. Oh!

(Exit LUKA)

SMIRNOV: What a rage I’m in! I’ll grind the whole world to powder. Oh, I feel ill again. You there!

(Enter MRS. POPOV)

MRS. POPOV: (Looking at the floor) In the solitude of my rural retreat, Mr. Smirnov, I’ve long since grown unaccustomed to the sound of the human voice. Above all, I cannot bear shouting. I must beg you not to break the silence.

SMIRNOV: Very well. Pay me my money and I’ll go.

MRS. POPOV: I told you before, and I tell you again, Mr. Smirnov: I have no cash, you’ll have to wait till the day after tomorrow. Can I express myself more plainly?

SMIRNOV: And I told you before, and I tell you again, that I need the
money today, that the day after tomorrow is too late, and that if you don’t pay, and pay now, I’ll have to hang myself in the morning!

**Mrs. Popov:** But I have no cash. This is quite a puzzle.

**Smirnov:** You won’t pay, huh?

**Mrs. Popov:** I can’t pay, Mr. Smirnov.

**Smirnov:** In that case, I’m going to sit here and wait. *(Sits down)* You’ll pay up the day after tomorrow? Very good. Till the day after tomorrow, here I sit. *(Pause. He jumps up.)* Now look, do I have to pay that interest tomorrow, or don’t I? Or do you think I’m joking?

**Mrs. Popov:** I must ask you not to raise your voice, Mr. Smirnov. This is not a stable.

**Smirnov:** Who said it was? Do I have to pay the interest tomorrow or not?

**Mrs. Popov:** Mr. Smirnov, do you know how to behave in the presence of a lady?

**Smirnov:** No, madam, I do not know how to behave in the presence of a lady.

**Mrs. Popov:** Just what I thought. I look at you, and I say: ugh! I hear you talk, and I say to myself: “That man doesn’t know how to talk to a lady.”

**Smirnov:** You’d like me to come simpering to you in French, I suppose. “Enchanté, madame! Merci beaucoup for not paying zee money, madame! Pardonnez-moi if I ‘ave disturbed you, madame! How charmante you look in mourning, madame!”

**Mrs. Popov:** Now you’re being silly, Mr. Smirnov.

**Smirnov:** *(Mimicking)* “Now you’re being silly, Mr. Smirnov.” “You don’t know how to talk to a lady, Mr. Smirnov.” Look here, Mrs. Popov, I’ve known more women than you’ve known pussycats. I’ve fought three duels on their account. I’ve jilted twelve, and been jilted by nine others. Oh, yes, Mrs. Popov, I’ve played the fool in my time, whispered sweet nothings, bowed and scraped and endeavoured to please. Don’t tell me I don’t know what it is to love, to pine away with longing, to have the blues, to melt like butter, to be weak as water. I was full of tender emotion. I was carried away with passion. I squandered half my fortune
on the sex. I chattered about women’s emancipation. But there’s an end to everything, dear madam. Burning eyes, dark eyelashes, ripe red lips, dimpled cheeks, heaving bosoms, soft whisperings, the moon above, the lake below—I don’t give a rap for that sort of nonsense any more, Mrs. Popov. I’ve found out about women. Present company excepted, they’re liars. Their behaviour is mere play-acting; their conversation is sheer gossip. Yes, dear lady, women, young or old, are false, petty, vain, cruel, malicious, unreasonable. As for intelligence, any sparrow could give them points. Appearances, I admit, can be deceptive. In appearance, a woman may be all poetry and romance, goddess and angel, muslin and fluff. To look at her exterior is to be transported to heaven. But I have looked at her interior, Mrs. Popov, and what did I find there—in her very soul? A crocodile. (He has gripped the back of the chair so firmly that it snaps.) And, what is more revolting, a crocodile with an illusion, a crocodile that imagines tender sentiments are its own special province, a crocodile that thinks itself queen of the realm of love! Whereas, in sober fact, dear madam, if a woman can love anything except a lapdog you can hang me by the feet on that nail. For a man, love is suffering, love is sacrifice. A woman just swishes her train around and tightens her grip on your nose. Now, you’re a woman, aren’t you, Mrs. Popov? You must be an expert on some of this. Tell me, quite frankly, did you ever know a woman to be—faithful, for instance? Or even sincere? Only old hags, huh? Though some women are old hags from birth. But as for the others? You’re right: a faithful woman is a freak of nature—like a cat with horns.

**Mrs. Popov:** Who is faithful, then? Who have you cast for the faithful lover? Not man?

**Smirnov:** Right first time, Mrs. Popov: man.

**Mrs. Popov:** (Going off into a peal of bitter laughter) Man! Man is faithful! That’s a new one! (Fiercely) What right do you have to say that, Mr. Smirnov? Men faithful? Let me tell you something. Of all the men I have ever known my late husband Popov was the best. I loved him, and there are women who know how to love, Mr. Smirnov. I gave him my youth, my happiness, my life, my fortune. I worshipped the ground he trod on—and what happened? The best of men was unfaithful to me, Mr. Smirnov. Not once in a while. All the time. After he died, I found his desk drawer full of love letters. While he was alive, he was always
going away for the weekend. He squandered my money. He flirted with other women before my very eyes. But, in spite of all, Mr. Smirnov, I was faithful. Unto death. And beyond. I am still faithful, Mr. Smirnov! Buried alive in this house, I shall wear mourning till the day I, too, am called to my eternal rest.

SMIRNOV: (Laughing scornfully) Expect me to believe that? As if I couldn’t see through all this hocus-pocus. Buried alive! Till you’re called to your eternal rest! Till when? Till some little poet—or some little subaltern with his first moustache—comes riding by and asks: “Can that be the house of the mysterious Tamara who for love of her late husband has buried herself alive, vowing to see no man?” Ha!

MRS. POPOV: (Flaring up) How dare you? How dare you insinuate—?

SMIRNOV: You may have buried yourself alive, Mrs. Popov, but you haven’t forgotten to powder your nose.

MRS. POPOV: (Incoherent) How dare you? How—?

SMIRNOV: Who’s raising his voice now? Just because I call a spade a spade. Because I shoot straight from the shoulder, Well, don’t shout at me, I’m not your steward.

MRS. POPOV: I’m not shouting, you’re shouting! Oh, leave me alone!

SMIRNOV: Pay me the money, and I will.

MRS. POPOV: You’ll get no money out of me!

SMIRNOV: Oh, so that’s it!

MRS. POPOV: Not a ruble, not a kopeck. Get out! Leave me alone!

SMIRNOV: Not being your husband, I must ask you not to make scenes with me. (He sits.) I don’t like scenes.

MRS. POPOV: (Choking with rage) You’re sitting down?

SMIRNOV: Correct, I’m sitting down.

MRS. POPOV: I asked you to leave!

SMIRNOV: Then give me the money. (Aside) Oh, what a rage I’m in, what a rage!

MRS. POPOV: The impudence of the man! I won’t talk to you a moment longer. Get out. (Pause) Are you going?

SMIRNOV: No.

MRS. POPOV: No?!
SMIRNOV: No.

MRS. POPOV: On your head be it. Luka! (Enter LUKA) Show the gentleman out, Luka.

LUKA: (Approaching) I’m afraid, sir, I’ll have to ask you, um, to leave, sir, now, um—

SMIRNOV: (Jumping up) Shut your mouth, you old idiot! Who do you think you’re talking to? I’ll make mincemeat of you.

LUKA: (Clutching his heart) Mercy on us! Holy saints above! (He falls into an armchair.) I’m taken sick! I can’t breathe!!

MRS. POPOV: Then where’s Dasha? Dasha! Dasha! Come here at once! (She rings.)

LUKA: They’ve gone picking berries, ma’am, I’m alone here—Water, water, I’m taken sick!

MRS. POPOV: (To SMIRNOV) Get out, you!

SMIRNOV: Can’t you even be polite with me, Mrs. Popov?

MRS. POPOV: (Clenching her fists and stamping her feet) With you? You’re a wild animal, you were never housebroken!

SMIRNOV: What? What did you say?

MRS. POPOV: I said you were a wild animal, you were never housebroken.

SMIRNOV: (Advancing upon her) And what right do you have to talk to me like that?

MRS. POPOV: Like what?

SMIRNOV: You have insulted me, madam.

MRS. POPOV: What of it? Do you think I’m scared of you?

SMIRNOV: So you think you can get away with it because you’re a woman. A creature of poetry and romance, huh? Well, it doesn’t go down with me. I hereby challenge you to a duel.

LUKA: Mercy on us! Holy saints alive! Water!

SMIRNOV: I propose we shoot it out.

MRS. POPOV: Trying to scare me again? Just because you have big fists and a voice like a bull? You’re a brute.

SMIRNOV: No one insults Grigory S. Smirnov with impunity! And I don’t care if you are a female.

MRS. POPOV: (Trying to outshout him) Brute, brute, brute!
SMIRNOV: The sexes are equal, are they? Fine: then it’s just prejudice to expect men alone to pay for insults. I hereby challenge—

MRS. POPOV: *(Screaming)* All right! You want to shoot it out? All right! Let’s shoot it out!

SMIRNOV: And let it be here and now!

MRS. POPOV: Here and now! All right! I’ll have Popov’s pistols here in one minute! *(Walks away, then turns)* Putting one of Popov’s bullets through your silly head will be a pleasure! *Au revoir.* *(Exit)*

SMIRNOV: I’ll bring her down like a duck, a sitting duck. I’m not one of your little poets, I’m no little subaltern with his first moustache. No, sir, there’s no weaker sex where I’m concerned!

LUKA: Sir! Master! *(He goes down on his knees.)* Take pity on a poor old man, and do me a favour: go away. It was bad enough before, you nearly scared me to death. But a duel—!

SMIRNOV: *(Ignoring him)* A duel! That’s equality of the sexes for you! That’s women’s emancipation! Just as a matter of principle I’ll bring her down like a duck. But what a woman! “Putting one of Popov’s bullets through your silly head …” Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were gleaming! And, by God, she’s accepted the challenge! I never knew a woman like this before!

LUKA: Sir! Master! Please go away! I’ll always pray for you!

SMIRNOV: *(Again ignoring him)* What a woman! Phew!! She’s no sourpuss, she’s no crybaby. She’s fire and brimstone. She’s a human cannon ball. What a shame I have to kill her!

LUKA: *(Weeping)* Please, kind sir, please, go away!

SMIRNOV: *(As before)* I like her, isn’t that funny? With those dimples and all? I like her. I’m even prepared to consider letting her off that debt. And where’s my rage? It’s gone. I never knew a woman like this before.

*(Enter MRS. POPOV with pistols)*

MRS. POPOV: *(Boldly)* Pistols, Mr. Smirnov! *(Matter of fact)* But before we start, you’d better show me how it’s done, I’m not too familiar with these things. In fact I never gave a pistol a second look.

LUKA: Lord, have mercy on us, I must go hunt up the gardener and the coachman. Why has this catastrophe fallen upon us, O Lord! *(Exit)*
SMIRNOV: (Examining the pistols) Well, it’s like this. There are several makes: one is the Mortimer, with capsules, especially constructed for duelling. What you have here are Smith and Wesson triple-action revolvers, with extractor, first-rate job, worth ninety rubles at the very least. You hold it this way. (Aside) My God, what eyes she has! They’re setting me on fire.

MRS. POPOV: This way?

SMIRNOV: Yes, that’s right. You cock the trigger, take aim like this, head up, arm out like this. Then you just press with this finger here, and it’s all over. The main thing is, keep cool, take slow aim, and don’t let your arm jump.

MRS. POPOV: I see. And if it’s inconvenient to do the job here, we can go out in the garden.

SMIRNOV: Very good. Of course, I should warn you: I’ll be firing in the air.

MRS. POPOV: What? This is the end. Why?

SMIRNOV: Oh, well—because—for private reasons.

MRS. POPOV: Scared, huh? (She laughs heartily.) Now don’t you try to get out of it, Mr. Smirnov. My blood is up. I won’t be happy till I’ve drilled a hole through that skull of yours. Follow me. What’s the matter? Scared?

SMIRNOV: That’s right. I’m scared.

MRS. POPOV: Oh, come on, what’s the matter with you?

SMIRNOV: Well, um, Mrs. Popov, I, um, I like you.

MRS. POPOV: (Laughing bitterly) Good God! He likes me, does he! The gall of the man. (Showing him the door) You may leave, Mr. Smirnov.

SMIRNOV: (Quietly puts the gun down, takes his hat, and walks to the door. Then he stops and the pair look at each other without a word. Then, approaching gingerly.) Listen, Mrs. Popov. Are you still mad at me? I’m in the devil of a temper myself, of course. But then, you see—what I mean is—it’s this way—the fact is—(Roaring) Well, is it my fault, damn it, if I like you? (Clutches the back of a chair. It breaks.) What fragile furniture you have here. I like you. Know what I mean? I could fall in love with you.

MRS. POPOV: I hate you. Get out!

SMIRNOV: What a woman! I never saw anything like it. Oh, I’m lost, I’m done for, I’m a mouse in a trap.
MRS. POPOV: Leave this house, or I shoot!

SMIRNOV: Shoot away! What bliss to die of a shot that was fired by that little velvet hand! To die gazing into those enchanting eyes. I’m out of my mind. I know: you must decide at once. Think for one second, then decide. Because if I leave now, I’ll never be back. Decide! I’m a pretty decent chap. Landed gentleman, I should say. Ten thousand a year. Good stable. Throw a kopeck up in the air, and I’ll put a bullet through it. Will you marry me?

MRS. POPOV: (Indignant, brandishing the gun) We’ll shoot it out! Get going! Take your pistol!

SMIRNOV: I’m out of my mind. I don’t understand any more. (Shouting) You there! That vodka!

MRS. POPOV: No excuses! No delays! We’ll shoot it out!

SMIRNOV: I’m out of my mind. I’m falling in love. I have fallen in love. (He takes her hand vigorously; she squeals.) I love you. (He goes down on his knees.) I love you as I’ve never loved before. I jilted twelve, and was jilted by nine others. But I didn’t love a one of them as I love you. I’m full of tender emotion. I’m melting like butter. I’m weak as water. I’m on my knees like a fool, and I offer you my hand. It’s a shame, it’s a disgrace. I haven’t been in love in five years. I took a vow against it. And now, all of a sudden, to be swept off my feet, it’s a scandal. I offer you my hand, dear lady. Will you or won’t you? You won’t? Then don’t! (He rises and walks toward the door.)

MRS. POPOV: I didn’t say anything.

SMIRNOV: (Stopping) What?

MRS. POPOV: Oh, nothing, you can go. Well, no, just a minute. No, you can go. Go! I detest you! But, just a moment. Oh, if you knew how furious I feel! (Throws the gun on the table.) My fingers have gone to sleep holding that horrid thing. (She is tearing her handkerchief to shreds.) And what are you standing around for? Get out of here!

SMIRNOV: Goodbye.

MRS. POPOV: Go, go, go! (Shouting) Where are you going? Wait a minute! No, no, it’s all right, just go. I’m fighting mad. Don’t come near me, don’t come near me!
SMIRNOV: (Who is coming near her) I’m pretty disgusted with myself—falling in love like a kid, going down on my knees like some moongazing whipper-snapper, the very thought gives me goose flesh. (Rudely) I love you. But it doesn’t make sense. Tomorrow, I have to pay that interest, and we’ve already started mowing. (He puts his arm about her waist.) I shall never forgive myself for this.

MRS. POPOV: Take your hands off me, I hate you! Let’s shoot it out!

(A long kiss. Enter LUKA with an axe, the GARDENER with a rake, the COACHMAN with a pitchfork, HIRED MEN with sticks.)

LUKA: (Seeing the kiss) Mercy on us! Holy saints above!

MRS. POPOV: (Dropping her eyes) Luka, tell them in the stable that Toby is not to have any oats today.

CURTAIN

Activities

1. What is the significance of the last line in the play? Discuss with a partner.

2. Much of the play is melodramatic: that is, it exaggerates the emotions of the characters. In groups, act the play out, using all of the descriptions and language within the play to create the exaggeration.

3. Create a poster for a presentation of the play. Consider what images would most closely suggest what the play is about. Also consider what colours would be most effective, and what words you might use to describe the play or entice an audience to see it.

4. In groups, list all of the traits of women and men described or demonstrated by each of the characters. Then write a paragraph of response either agreeing or disagreeing with the views on the opposite gender presented in the play. Give three reasons why you feel as you do. Exchange your paragraph with someone who disagrees with your view.
1. Create your own crossword-style poem based on one of the following themes:
   a) friendship       c) love
   b) family          d) loneliness

   Use a thesaurus to find words that describe the theme, and then organize the words.

2. In groups, organize a choral reading of the poem. Decide on how the words should be said, in what order, and by whom. Present your reading to the class.

3. Consider the ending of the poem (which appears in italics). Write your interpretation of this ending, and how these words might apply to relationships between people. Exchange your analysis with a partner, and compare your views.
To My Son

HELEN FOGWILL PORTER

When you were small
you used to climb
in our bed
when lightning ripped the sky.
We’d hold you tight
between us
while your father said:
“That storm is miles away”
a second before the room
was lit
with fearsome light.

Now when lightning strikes
you stay in your own
narrow bed
trying to think of other
safer things
and we in our wide bed
sigh separate sighs
because we no longer know how
to comfort you.

Activities

1. What other title might be appropriate for this poem? Share your suggestions with the rest of the class and listen to those of others.

2. Create a comic strip that expresses the theme of the poem. Make it as humorous as possible. Display your cartoons around the classroom.
There used to be someone to whom I could say do you love me and be sure that the answer would always be yes; there used to be someone to whom I could telephone and be sure when the operator said do you accept the charges the answer would always be yes; but now there is no one to ask no one to telephone from the strangeness of cities in the lateness of nightness now there is no one always now no one no someone no never at all.

Can you imagine what it is like to live in a world where there is no one no always no one and never some one to ask do you love me and be sure that the answer would always be yes? I live in a world where only the billboards are always, they’re twenty feet tall and they circle the city they coax and caress me they heat me and cool me they promise and plead me with colour and comfort: you can get to sleep with me tonight (the me being ovaltine) but who wants to get to sleep with a cup of ovaltine what kind of sleep is that for someone who used to have someone to ask do you love me and be sure that the answer would always be yes?

Focus Your Learning
Reading this poem will help you:
- explore mood
- speculate about character
- propose solutions to a problem

Activities
1. With a partner, examine the poem to identify all of the words and phrases that create mood. Share your list with other pairs, and revise your own list according to any new information. What is the mood of the poem?
2. Write a personal ad as if you were the poem’s narrator.
3. What advice do you have for the narrator of the poem? Write her a letter, in which you explain what you think she should do to overcome her sadness and loneliness.

I ran into Wes Holman the very day I was collecting for Miss Tretheway’s flowers. But it never came into my head to ask him for a contribution.

Miss Tretheway had taught grade three in our town for exactly fifty years. She had died the night before in her sleep. As chairman of the school board I had thought it would be fitting if all the grade three alumni who were still around made up enough money to get a really handsome “piece.” She had no relatives. If I’d given it an instant’s consideration I’d have known that Wes himself must have been in grade three some time or other; but I didn’t.

Wes was just coming through the cemetery gate as I was going in. Wes “looks after” the cemetery, and I sometimes take a shortcut through it on
my way to work. I should say that Wes is our local “character.” His tiny house up behind the ballpark is furnished with almost nothing but books, and he can quote anyone from Seneca to Henry James. But that’s his job: caretaker-about-town.

When I spoke to him about Miss Tretheway, a curious change came into his face. You couldn’t say that he turned pale, but his stillness was quite different from the conventional one on such occasions. I had expected him to come out with some quote or other, but he didn’t say a word.

He didn’t go to her funeral. But he sent her flowers of his own. Or brought them, rather. The following day, when I took the shortcut again, I surprised him on his knees placing them.

His little bunch of flowers was the most incongruous thing you could imagine. It was a corsage. A corsage of simple flowers, such as a young boy sends his girl for her first formal dance. And more incongruous than its presence in the circumstance of death was its connection with Miss Tretheway herself. I’m quite sure that Miss Tretheway never once had a beau send her flowers, that she’d never been to a dance in her whole life.

I suppose it would never have occurred to me to question anyone but Wes about his motive for doing a thing like that. But I asked Wes about it with no thought of rudeness whatever. Wes’s privacy seemed to be everyone’s property. There was probably a little self-conscious democracy in the gesture when we talked to him at all.

“She was so beautiful,” he answered me, as if no other explanation was needed.

That was plainly ridiculous. That Miss Tretheway was a fine person for having spent a lifetime in small, unheralded services could not be disputed—but obviously she hadn’t ever been beautiful. Her sturdy plainness was never transfigured, not even for an instant, by the echo of anything winsomer which had faded. Her eyes had never been very blue, her skin very pink, or her hair very brown. She wasn’t very anything. Her heart might have been headlong (I think now that it was), but there was always that curious precision and economy in her face which lacks altogether the grain of helter-skelter necessary to any kind of charm. In short, even when she’d been a girl, she’d been the sort of girl whose slightest eagerness, more than if she were ugly or old, a young man automatically shies away from.

“But, Wes,” I said, half-joking, “she wasn’t beautiful. What made you say that?”

His story went something like this. He told it with a kind of dogged, confessional earnestness. I guess he’d come to figure that whenever we asked him a personal question he might as well satisfy our curiosity completely, first as last.

“Perhaps you remember how the kids used to tease me at school,” he
Look Closely said. (I didn’t. I guess those things stick in your mind according to which end of the teasing you happen to be on.) “If the boys would be telling some joke with words in it to giggle over, they’d look at me and say, ‘Shhh … Wes is blushing.’ Or if we were all climbing up the ladder to the big beam in Hogan’s stable, they’d say ‘Look at Wes. He’s so scared he’s turning pale.’ Do you remember the night you steered your sled into mine, going down Parker hill?”

“No,” I said. “Did I do it on purpose?”

“I don’t know,” Wes said. “Maybe you didn’t. I thought you did.”

Maybe I did. I don’t remember.

“I was taking Mrs. Banks’s wash home on my sled, and you were coasting down the hill. The basket upset and all the things fell out on the snow. Don’t you remember … Miss Tretheway came along and you all ran. She helped me pick up the stuff and shake the snow off it. She went with me right to Mrs. Banks’s door and told her what had happened. I could never have made Mrs. Banks believe I didn’t upset the stuff myself.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I probably had done it on purpose.

“That’s all right,” he said. “I didn’t mind the boys so much. It was the girls. You can’t hit a girl. There just wasn’t anything I could do about the girls. One day Miss Tretheway was showing us a new game in the school-yard. I don’t remember exactly how it went, but that one where we all made a big circle and someone stood in the centre. I put my hand out to close up the ring with the biggest Banks girl, but she wouldn’t take it. She said, ‘Your hands are dirty.’ Miss Tretheway made us both hold out our hands. She said, ‘Why, Marilyn, Wes’s hands are much cleaner than yours. Maybe Wes doesn’t like to get his hands dirty, did you ever think about that?’ She took Marilyn’s place herself. Her hand felt safe and warm, I remember … and I guess that’s the first day I thought she was beautiful.”

“I see,” I said.

I did, and yet I didn’t. The Wes I remembered would hate anything with the suggestion of teacher’s pet about it. The only Wes I could seem to remember was the Wes of adolescence: the tough guy with the chip on his shoulder.

He was coming to that. But he stuck in an odd parenthesis first. “Did you ever notice Miss Tretheway,” he said, “when … well, when the other teachers would be talking in the hall about the dances they’d been to over the weekend? Or when she’d be telling some kid a story after school and the kid would run off right in the middle of a sentence when she saw her mother coming to pick her up?”

“No,” I said. “Why? What about it?”

“Oh, nothing, I guess.” He drew a deep breath. “Anyway, I decided I’d be stronger and I’d study harder than anyone. And I was, wasn’t I? I did. Do
you remember the year they voted me the best all-round student in High School?” (I didn’t. It must have been after I’d graduated.) “I guess I just can’t remember how happy I was about that. I guess I was so happy I could believe anything. That must have been why I let the boys coax me into going to the closing dance.” He smiled. “I thought since they’d voted for me … but you can’t legislate against a girl’s glance.”

Those were his exact words. Maybe he’d read them somewhere. Maybe they were his own. I don’t know. But it was the kind of remark which had built up his quaint reputation as the town philosopher.

“I didn’t want to go out on the dance floor,” he said. “I’d never danced a foxtrot or anything. The girls all had on their evening dresses, and somehow they looked different altogether. They looked as if they wouldn’t recognize themselves in their day clothes. Anyway, the boys grabbed hold of me and made me get into a Paul Jones. I was next to Toby Wenford in the big ring. Jane Evans was right opposite me when the music stopped, but she danced with Toby instead—and the girl next to Jane just glanced at me and then went and sat down. I guess it was a pretty foolish thing to do, but I went down in the basement and drove my fist through a window.”

“Is that the scar?” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Oh, it was a lot worse than that,” he said. He pulled up his sleeve and traced the faint sickle of the scar way up his arm. “You can hardly see it now. But I almost bled to death right there. I guess I might have, if it hadn’t been for Miss Tretheway.”

“Oh?” I said. “How’s that?”

“You see, they didn’t have any plasma around in bottles then,” he said, “and in those days no one felt too comfortable about having his blood siphoned off. I guess no one felt like taking any chances for me, anyway. Mother said I could have hers, but hers wasn’t right. Mine’s that odd type—three, isn’t it? Miss Tretheway was three, too … and that’s funny; because only seven percent of people have it. She gave me a whole quart, just as soon as she found out that hers would match.”

“I see,” I said. So that was it. And yet I had a feeling that that wasn’t it—not quite.

“She used to come see me every day,” he said. “She used to bring me books. Did you know that books … well, that for anyone like me that’s the only way you can … ?” He hesitated, and I knew that that wasn’t quite it either.

Not until he spoke again, when he spoke so differently, was I sure that only now was he coming to the real thing.

“Do you know what Miss Tretheway said when I thanked her for the transfusion?” he said. “She made a joke of it. She said: ‘I didn’t know whether an old maid’s blood would be any good to a fine young specimen
like you, Wes, or not.’ The thing I always remember, I knew that was the first time she’d ever called herself an old maid to anyone, and really felt like laughing. And I remember what I said. I said: ‘Miss Tretheway, you’re making me blush.’ And do you know, that was the very first time I’d ever been able to say that, and laugh, myself.”

There was quite a long silence.

“She was beautiful,” he added softly. “She was a real lady.” The cemetery is right next to the river. I looked down the river where the cold December water lapped at the jagged ice thrown up on the banks, and I thought about a boy the colour of whose skin was such that he could never blush, and I thought about a girl who had never been asked to a dance. I thought about the corsage. My curiosity was quite satisfied. But somehow I myself had never felt less beautiful, or less of a gentleman.

### Activities

1. **In groups, role-play a situation in which someone is made to feel left out and different.** Draw straws to determine who will play “the loner.” Afterwards, listen as each student describes his or her feelings during the role-play: how does it feel to be “one of the gang”? How does it feel to be the outcast?

2. **Imagine that you are a reporter for a local newspaper.** Using evidence from the story, create an obituary for Miss Tretheway. You may wish to look at some obituaries from various newspapers as models.

3. **Imagine that Miss Tretheway had lived to see her fiftieth anniversary in teaching.** Write the speech she might have given at the awards ceremony. Use details from the story to recreate her character and to identify what was important to her.

4. **Is there someone in your life who has helped you out or supported you at a time of need, the way Miss Tretheway did Wes?** Write a portrait of that person, explaining what he or she meant to you, and the effect he or she had on your life.
Imperfectly

ANI DIFRANCO

i’m o.k. if you get me a good angle
you’re o.k. in the right sort of light
we don’t look like pages
from a magazine
but that’s allright

i crashed your pickup truck
then i had to drive it back home
i was crying i was so scared
of what you would do
of what you would say
but you just started laughing
so i just started laughing along
saying it looks like a little rough
but it runs o.k.

we get a little further from perfection
each year on the road
i think that’s called character
i think that’s just the way it goes
better to be dusty than polished
like some store window mannequin
touch me where i’m rusty
let me stain your hands

when you’re pretty as a picture
they pound down your door
but i’ve been offered love
in two dimensions before
and i know that it’s not all
that it’s made out to be
let’s show them all how it’s done
let’s do it all imperfectly.

Focus Your Learning
Studying this poem will help you:
■ analyse images in magazines
■ experiment with figurative language
■ write your own poem
■ describe video effects

Activities
1. Select an image of perfection from a fashion magazine. Cut it out and paste it on a piece of paper. Label its parts to identify what makes it perfect. Contrast this with an image of an “average” person. Label the same parts, to show the contrast with the “perfect” model.

2. The songwriter uses the metaphor of a crashed pickup truck to describe her own imperfection. With a partner, think up a list other metaphors to describe imperfection. Share your list with the class, and then vote on which you like best.

3. Write a poem to an anonymous someone, acknowledging his or her imperfections. Use a tone of friendship and love, not criticism, to express the idea that imperfection is okay.

4. Work with a partner to down write your ideas for a music video to accompany this song. What images would you include? Consider lighting, setting, and camera angles in your description.
All

LEONA GOM

all he would have to say is,
remember the time I came home
with a beard and Dad didn’t know me,
and we would all laugh,
Mom would say, just by your voice,
I knew your voice, and my sister
would say, the dog kept barking, and
I would say, that was the
summer I got a camera.
it pulls around us
like a drawstring, that time,
when we come together,
awkward and older,
our frayed conversations
trying to thread some memory
of each other,
one of us will only have to say,
remember the time you came home
from the bush with your beard,
and we were all easy again
with each other,
someone will say how
Mom knew his voice, someone
will remember how the dog barked, I
will remember my new camera,
and we are a family again,
young and laughing
on the front porch.

Focus Your Learning
Reading this poem will help you:
■ read closely for clues to meaning
■ create a family album
■ recount a story
■ discuss ideas about families

Activities
1. Explain the significance of the title.
2. a) Compile an album of pictures that evoke
shared family memories. Label the pictures, to create a narrative of your child-
hood.
   b) Recount one of your family stories to the
   class. Consider how you can create ten-
sion or humour in the way you tell the
   story.
3. Role-play the family reunion: how would the
tension be evident before the ice-breaker?
What would happen afterwards?
4. Why are memories like the one evoked in
the poem important for families? What
other things hold families together? Discuss
in a small group, then share your ideas in a
class discussion.
It’s rained the entire summer, and the air is heavy with the smell of an old basement.

The rain and the smell and the worrying about how to tell Renata what’s happening are driving me crazy, and I’ve hardly been able to put the dictionary down. I know there’s some old joke about reading the phone book. I can’t remember it, but it’s not flattering. I tell myself that a dictionary is nothing like a phone book, except that it’s in alphabetical order. This is the very thing I find calming—the predictability of the next word. I’ve been reading the dictionary my whole life, it seems, although sometimes I can forget about it for a while. But for the last few months I’ve really needed it.

Our summers are known for their unrelenting prairie heat, so this cool, wet one is a real change. Not knowing how to talk to Renata is nothing new.

Renata is my mother—though I’ve never called her anything but Renata.
for as long as I can remember—and this is the way she’s always dealt with
things. By ignoring them. Maybe it’s because she’s been on her own, except
for me, pretty much all of her life, and there was never anyone else for her
to talk to.

But even now that she’s had Jerry around for almost two years, things
still haven’t changed much with the way we try to communicate.

Renata’s OK, as far as small things go, but keeps quiet on anything large
and frightening. This is how I see it—she must think if the scary stuff is
pushed to some far, webby corner of her cranium, shrouded and silent,
then perhaps it doesn’t really exist, and can’t be turned into a fact.

Maybe it works sometimes; after all, what’s scaring me hasn’t become an
actual fact.

But it’s only a matter of time.

*Chimera* (ka mir a) n. An absurd
creation of the imagination; a foolish
or horrible fancy.

School starts in eight days. I know I should be getting out my supply list,
should go and try to find my gym clothes at the bottom of my closet,
should get my hair trimmed, should do all those back-to-school things that
some people say they enjoy. But I can’t seem to get motivated; like I said, all
I’ve been doing is the dictionary thing.

The most interesting word I found last night was *chimera*. I had a rush of
hope; maybe what seems to be happening is all a chimera, just the old
imagination working overtime.

I held on to the word, whispering it over and over as I tried to fall asleep
after Renata had left for her shift at the Muffins Day ’N Night over on
Provencher. I kept my eyes fixed on the lamp beside my bed, the pink glow
through the faded shade. I leave it on now, the nights Renata works.

As I chanted it, my word took on the pulse of a prayer, the syllables mov-
ing in rhythm with this summer’s night sounds—the rising and falling mur-
mur of the television in the living room, the slow ticking of the rain off the
eaves outside my window, and the stealthy rush, then triumphant clang as
the trains coupled in the yards across the river.

And even though there wasn’t any air coming in through the screen, just
that musty, underground smell, I kept the blankets wrapped around me,
and I held on to my word for all the comfort I could wring out of it.

*Realization* (re el i za shen) n. The
conversion into fact or action of plans,
ambitions, fears, etc.
The problem is that Renata loves Jerry. When he moved in, she had seemed all sparkly, and almost pretty. I think it was the first time I’d seen her totally happy. For a whole year, Jerry remembered all the important times, like her birthday and Valentine’s Day, and he took her out for dinner, twice a month, on payday.

I’m not exactly sure when things started to go bad, but I remember feeling weird one night, when Renata was at work and Jerry and I were watching some National Geographic show about whales. I was really into the show, when it slowly dawned on me that Jerry was looking at me, and not the television. But when I turned toward him his eyes flicked back to the screen. The next time I felt his eyes on me I got up and went to my room.

He did it a lot, after that first time. Watched me, but pretended he wasn’t. It didn’t seem like such a big deal. I didn’t like it, but I could live with it.

Then one evening, some time around the beginning of the summer, I was cutting a tomato at the counter. He walked up behind me and put his hand on the back of my neck. I kept on cutting, hoping he’d go away, but he just stood there, his hand still and warm, getting heavier with each second. When the tomato was all sliced I put the knife down, and he gave my neck a squeeze, just a little one, and then slowly moved his hand down my back.

After he left I noticed I’d sliced into my finger with the paring knife, and it was bleeding everywhere, but the strange thing was it didn’t hurt until a lot later.

Since then I feel like my life has become this big bubble, and I’m walking around inside it, trying not to break through. It’s hard to concentrate on anything. I feel like I can’t hear properly; the bubble is causing pressure in my ears so I have to keep swallowing and swallowing to clear them.

Not being able to hear makes it hard for words to come too. No matter how I rehearse what I’ll say to Renata, it sounds wrong in my own head.

I guess I figure that either way it’s going to kill her, and we’ll both lose. If she doesn’t believe me, she’ll hate me, thinking I’m lying about the guy she loves. Or maybe she will believe me, and hate me even more.

*Ripe* (rip) adj. Grown to maturity, fully developed. 2. In full readiness to do or try; prepared.

I knew, after waking up sometime in the middle of the night to see Jerry standing in my doorway again, that I couldn’t count on chimera. I knew that time was running out—knew with that same awful certainty that you know the dull throbbing in your back molar is a cavity you’ll have to get filled.
Lying in bed in the thin grey morning light, understanding that today was the day I had to do it, I was overwhelmed with a sensation of heavy lightness, or maybe it was light heaviness. Relief, mixed with terror. Sort of like deciding that today is the day you’ll finally jump off the high diving board at the community swimming pool.

It was late in the afternoon before I had a chance. I came into the kitchen after I finished work, my summer job at the California Fruit Market. I’m not officially old enough for a job, not until I turn sixteen next year, but my friend Lindsay MacJannet’s father owns the market. She got her dad to pay us cash to do odd jobs around the place. We’d unpack the boxes, pick over berries for mushy ones, check the apples for bruises, those kinds of things.

As I came into the kitchen I shifted my watermelon from arm to arm. It was a dense, tubular, dark green melon, a gift from Mr. MacJannet. He gave me whatever was too ripe to wait any longer. Between my soft strawberries and speckled bananas, and the two-day-old stuff Renata could bring home from Muffins Day ’N Night, we’d covered at least two of the food groups at no expense all summer.

Renata was sitting at the kitchen table. She was in her uniform, a pink, short-sleeved dress that buttoned up the front, the skirt of the dress covered by a white apron. She was pushing back her cuticles with a small pointed stick. I could hear the television, so I knew Jerry was in the living room.

“What’s going on?” I don’t know what made me ask; Renata working on her nails and Jerry watching TV is a totally normal scene in our house. But there was something else, something I couldn’t quite catch, like I just missed the last few words in a whispered conversation, or someone quietly slipped out the back door.

Renata didn’t answer, or even look up at me. I set the watermelon on the counter with a dull thud, then sat down on the scratched wooden chair beside Renata and watched her.

“School starts in less than a week,” I said to Renata’s bent, blond head, noticing that there was half an inch of darker hair, light brown mixed with coarse threads of silver, along her part. I didn’t really expect a response, but after a minute she looked up, right into my eyes.

“So soon?” she asked, and put down her stick.

I nodded, and the way her eyes held on to mine brought a sudden, hopeful surge of blood into my throat.

“So, are you ready?” she asked. “Are you scared, about starting high school?”

“Not really,” I said, not caring which question she thought I was answering, and then, “Mom?” It was weird, how it just came out. Like I said, I’ve always called her Renata. As soon as I said the word, Mom, I saw her pupils get big, then immediately shrink, like a match had been lit in front of them.
She lowered her eyes, picking up the stick again, but just studied the pointed end, holding it out in front of her like a tiny sword. I wanted to say it again, Mom; it had felt good on my tongue and lips, but I didn’t want to push it. Instead, I reached out and pressed the pad of my index finger against the point of the stick.

“Renata? I need to talk to you. There’s something I need your help with.”

Renata kept looking at the stick, and I looked at it, too. It was creating a minuscule hole in the soft flesh of my finger as I pressed harder and harder. The stick joined our hands on the smooth, brown arborite of the table top, and as I stared at it, I felt the far-off flutter of a wing. Black, its weight shutting off my air supply. I took short, furtive sniffs through my nose, afraid that even those would break the spell, not let me say what I had to.

Suddenly Renata’s head jerked up, from my hand to a spot over my head. I turned. Jerry was in the doorway. He was good at that, appearing in doorways.

Without taking her eyes off Jerry, Renata said, “Well, Jacinda, I need some help, too. With supper. If I don’t get a start on it I’ll be late for my shift.” She sort of hoisted herself out of the chair, even though she’s really thin, and then slowly walked to the sink.

Jerry followed her. He put his hand on the watermelon, then looked at me.

“Should we have this for dessert?” he asked.

I shrugged, looking at Renata, standing still and straight, her hands flat on the counter on either side of the sink. I saw that her pink dress was creased across the seat, and the ends of her apron were tied at the small of her back in a loose, lopsided bow. Even without lifting my eyes from the bow, I could tell that Renata had turned her head and was staring at Jerry again. I kept my gaze on the bow, and took a slow, deep breath.

I had gone to the edge of the diving board and was looking over. There was no room to turn around.

_Illuminate_ (i loo me nat) v. 1. To give light to; light up. 2. To shed light upon; clarify. 3. To enlighten, as the mind.

Supper had the flavour and consistency of cardboard; all the swallowing was affecting my taste buds, too.

“Pass the butter, please,” I said to Renata. As she handed it to me, I asked, as casually as I could, “How much longer will you be on nights?” I set the butter dish down and pressed the tip of my knife into the soft yellow rectangle.
For at least another three weeks,” Renata said. “But they’re changing my
shift on Monday. Instead of eight to four I have to move to the later shift,
midnight to eight.”

I made a sound that could have meant anything. What I was thinking
was that I would tell her when she got home from work, even if it was 4:30
in the morning.

And that I wouldn’t stay in this house without her one more night.

After I was done the dishes I wrote a note, Went to stay overnight with Lindsay,
and propped it against the toaster. I didn’t want Jerry to start looking for
me and call Renata. Grabbing my jacket, I slipped out the back door. I
wanted to avoid going past the living room, where the television was trans-
mitting its sad blue light.

I took a bus downtown and went to the Salisbury House on Garry Street,
the one that stays open until one o’clock. I sat there with a plate of fries
until closing time, then started walking home. I knew it would take over
two hours, giving me less than an hour and a half to wait for Renata. I
planned to sit out in the backyard on a lawn chair, so I could see the car
lights as she pulled into the driveway. Then I could catch her before she
went into the house, sit down on the front step, and tell her, without any
interruptions.

Every time I thought of the words rolling out of my mouth, and what
her face would look like, I got this thick greasy feeling in my stomach, even
though I hadn’t even eaten any of the fries. The greasiness kept threatening
to push its way up my throat.

To take my mind off feeling sick, I concentrated on walking, thinking
of nothing else except the pressure of the rubber soles of my sneakers on
the pavement. But after a while I couldn’t help but notice that there was a
mist rolling around me, and my left heel had a burning blister. I started to
count off the streets before mine. One block away the mist turned to fine
drops, and within five minutes it was a regular downpour, and I was
soaked.

I looked at my watch. Only 2:45; I was ahead of schedule, and waiting in
the rain wasn’t appealing. But as I walked up our street, I could see that
Renata’s car was in the driveway. The fins of the old Chrysler Renata had
driven since I was a baby stuck up over the low hedge around our yard like
some ancient, displaced shark.

Renata never left work early.

As I reached out to put my key in the lock, I saw that the front door
wasn’t even closed all the way. I gave it a tiny push, and it swung open.

I stepped through and closed it silently behind me. The house was in
darkness except for one soft light, spilling into the hall from Renata and
Jerry’s bedroom. I took off my dripping jacket and dropped it on the mat, then moved down the hall as noiselessly as I could.

Renata was at her window, looking out through the black square. In the light from the lamp on the dresser I could see her reflection, but the rain drops rolling down the glass changed her features. They were blended into one another, creating a softer, smoothed out Renata, except for her mouth. It was still in its stitched, straight line. Her arms were crossed against the pink material of her chest.

I could see my own reflection, too, the distance and light and wet glass distorting my image so I looked like a bigger version of myself, filling the doorway.

I listened to the silence of the house, closing my eyes. When I opened them and looked around the room I noticed that the closet door was open, and something was different, but I wasn’t sure what it was.

My eyes moved from the empty hangers back to Renata’s reflection, and when I took my first step into the room, I saw her shoulders flinch, and I knew that she could see my image, there in the window. As I watched, the stitches that held her mouth started to loosen, unravel the tiniest bit.

And as I walked toward her, my sneakers moving faster and faster, making tiny, damp, mewing sounds on the bare wood floor, I saw my mother’s arms unfold from across her chest and rise, opening, as if caught in an unexpected, upward current of air.

Activities

1. We are given some indication by the narrator that Renata knew what her daughter was going to tell her. Reread the story carefully and identify all of these clues.

2. Using evidence from the story, write a description of the narrator’s relationship with her mother. Look for evidence to show how this relationship changes as the story progresses.

3. Imagine that you are a director who is going to film this story. Write a profile of each character to help you select a cast for the movie.

Consider their physical characteristics, as well as personality characteristics and behaviours.

4. Research and prepare a school display on the topic of sexual abuse. Include the following information in your display:

a) the legal definition of sexual abuse
b) statistics to show when it occurs, where, and to whom
c) local agencies and services that can help victims of sexual abuse.
Never list the troubles of my eight brothers and sisters
before hearing mine

Simply nod your head and say “uh huh,”
say “I hear you,” a lot
and the rest of the time say nothing.

When I am sick,
don’t list your ailments
before I tell you mine. Instead
ask if I need a blanket and a book
and let me eat ice cream bars dipped in dark chocolate.

Never call
the names of all my sisters
before calling mine.

When I doubt my creativity,
avoid listing the talents of my siblings first.
Instead dig out my 10th grade sketch book and
homesick letters to you and
tell me they are remarkable and
that they make you cry.

And never tell me
I’m “getting grey,”
but that I am wise in skin,
sturdy-minded in bone and
beautywise in the ways of old women.
Focus Your Learning
Reading this poem will help you:
■ present your ideas to a group
■ consider gender differences

Activities
1. Write an e-mail to a parent. Offer him or her tactful advice about how to interact better with you.

2. Write the poem from the perspective of a boy giving instructions to his father. In small groups, take turns reading your poems aloud, and discuss the ways that boys and fathers interact differently from girls and mothers.
Messages Are Everywhere

- The Toronto Blue Jays have an old logo (left), a new one (centre), and a 20-year anniversary one (right). What elements of the logo make it recognizable, despite the changes? List other logos that are easily recognizable. What does each communicate about the company it represents?

- Examine the statement on the magnet. Discuss what criticism is made of people who rely on stereotypes. Is this method of expression effective?

- Discuss the meaning conveyed by the metaphor on this button. Why do you think this metaphor was chosen? What other metaphors can you think of to express the same idea?

Stereotypes are devices for saving a biased person the trouble of learning
Consider the design of the message, and discuss it with the class. Why are the phrases set in the pattern of a mirror image? How does the arrangement of the words reinforce the meaning of the statement?

Ralph Waldo Emerson.
Design by quotable cards inc.®

Explore the Aboriginal Youth Network at http://ayn-0.ayn.ca/. In what way is the Internet an appropriate and useful medium for creating community? Give examples from the website to show how this group has used the medium to its best advantage.