

**Pushed Through and Second Chances:
Stories About the Right to Read**

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Edited by Ed Kavanagh

**Pushed Through and Second Chances:
Stories About the Right to Read**

Libby Creelman

Ed Kavanagh

Agnes Walsh

The 'Longside Centre

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The 'Longside Centre
41 Shaw Street
St. John's, NL
A1E 2W8
709-722-4338
fax: 709-722-4868
e-mail: longside@datamail.ca

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Preface

Pushed Through and Second Chances: Stories About the Right to Read is based on interviews with adult learners conducted in 2002 by Libby Creelman and Agnes Walsh. This book contains both the interviews/essays as well as the finished play. Names have been changed in both.

The idea for the project was twofold: (1) to explore, through interviews, some of the less obvious reasons why people end up with poor literacy skills; (2) to prepare a theatrical presentation based on these real-life stories.

It seemed appropriate to call the play *Pushed Through and Second Chances* because the theme of “pushing through” the school system, combined with the lack of personal attention for those who most needed it, was common.

Pushed Through and Second Chances: Stories About the Right to Read was first performed in November 2003; the response, from the general public as well as from literacy providers and students, was excellent. We are now making the play and original research available to anyone who may be interested.

This project was funded in part by the National Literacy Secretariat. Thanks also to the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council.

Theatrical Notes

This play is subject to a royalty of \$25 for the first performance and \$5 for each subsequent performance. For information regarding permission and payment, please contact The 'Longside Centre, 41 Shaw Street, St. John's, NL, A1E 2W8.

Music for “Margaret’s Song” and “Mirror, Mirror” may be obtained by contacting the publisher.

Certain scenes in this play are adaptations of parts of the novel *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney* by Ed Kavanagh, and are used by permission of the publisher (Killick Press).

Adult Learner Profiles by Agnes Walsh

Larry Dawe

He's Going to Work

Larry Dawe always knew he'd keep moving. He just didn't know for sure how he'd get to where he wanted to go. He knew he had energy to burn and he knew he had ambition. What he didn't have was a high school education. He also didn't have a family inheritance or luck at the lottery and so he knew he had to keep moving or else he'd sink. His background spelled failure and there was no room for advancement in failure. Larry knew that in order to move ahead he had to go back.

Larry dropped out of school in grade seven. He had only completed grade six when he decided to leave. He grew up in St. Anthony where he did very well in school. There was never a problem for him except that he didn't understand everything he read. He had some problems concentrating but the teachers didn't consider the problem major and they figured he'd work it out. Instead, Larry got restless and quit.

Larry's family moved from St. Anthony when he was twelve years old. He came into school in St. John's and it was not long after that when he quit. When asked why he gave up school if he was doing well he says he simply got restless. He didn't see the sense in staying on when he could be out earning money. There were job possibilities in the city that were not available in the small town of St. Anthony on the Northern Peninsula. When he came to the city he wanted to be working. He said that back in St. Anthony no one would think that was strange. "You get a certain age," Larry says, "and you go to work. No one thought that was strange."

There were thirteen in Larry's family. Education was respected but so was work. Work meant cash in the hand and that made a difference in a family of thirteen. His father was often away working on the boats and his mother was home raising the children. He doesn't remember a lot of encouragement for education—perhaps, he says, because his parents were not educated themselves. "Work was everything. It was no big thing to quit school in rural Newfoundland. My parents weren't shocked even though I was so young when I quit." When I asked Larry what his parents said when he told them he was leaving school, he told me that they said, "Oh, he's going to work."

Larry believes that his story is not uncommon. With so many mouths to feed and work so hard to find Larry thinks his parents were glad to have the help. He found a job in a pizza shop. His reading wasn't the best but he didn't have to know a lot, either. "Everything was abbreviated," Larry says. "Cheese was C, pepperoni was P. It was its own language." After a while he got his own business going on Topsail Road. It was a franchise pizza business. It was moving along pretty well but then Larry had some problems with the contract. "I couldn't read it properly," he said, "and so I got screwed big time. So I gave it up because I was fed up. I gave it up and went back to school." Larry really started enjoying his return to school. He went to the Rabbittown Learners' Program and in no time at all he was moving through the program with ease. He earned five credits in less than four months. Still, at the beginning he found it hard to make the jump into it. He was nervous about simply entering the classroom and sitting down. After all, he had been out of school for almost fifteen years. He was older and not so sure about how he'd be able to handle being in a classroom for six hours a day. He has always been used to movement, to being on the go. Sitting still was not on Larry's agenda. Plus he began to pick up flus and colds from being in a room with so many people. He wasn't used to it. But he stayed with it and before long he was sailing through the program with flying colours. He says he remembers there was a man in the program who was seventy-five years old. The man had worked on the American base in Argentina as an electrician. He didn't know how to read or write the whole time that he worked as an electrician. He'd work by matching the coloured wires. Black goes here, green there. "Now, of course," Larry says, "he'd have to be educated. "Now he'd be working paperwork and on computers." Work has changed and so the need for education is more demanding.

When Larry quit school in grade seven his reading skills were not too good. But he didn't have any real problems in school, and he believes that if he had stayed in school he would probably have gone on to university. He says he would have liked to study something interesting like naval architecture. If he had been encouraged more he probably would have stayed in school back then. It was just so easy to quit. To quit and go after the money. He said he had no long-term goals when he was young because none were discussed in his family. It was a day-to-day existence to put bread on the table, and anyone who could work got out into a job as soon as they were able. He happened into the pizza business when he was young and that's where he stayed.

Before Larry went to the Rabbittown Learners' Program reading a newspaper was a problem. He'd have to go over it again and again. He'd make himself slow down and approach it slowly. "I had to realize that punctuation was there for a reason. I also had to learn that every word in a sentence is important." He used to skip over words and hope for the best, but he often came away from what he read not having a clue what it was about. He had to train himself to concentrate on what he was reading and actually learn how to read. "That may sound simple to some people," he says, "but for me it was a huge effort. Oh, boy, you see, when you are an active person, sitting still and reading is a real trial. But I took to it once I learned how to slow down. Now I love reading."

Larry is an avid reader now. His wife buys him novels that he devours. Yes, he reads fast, he will admit, but he says that now he retains what he reads. He reads newspapers every day from beginning to end.

Larry has been in the pizza business for over twenty-one years. He says that it is only now that he is getting a handle on the business aspect of it. Now that he knows how to do his books better he doesn't have to work as hard. When he first went at the business on his own he didn't have a clue about what he was getting into as far as the business part of it went. "You've got to know where to put the money, what shortcuts to take, when to jack up the prices. You've got to see things coming at you and you've got to keep the money going round."

Larry is a firm believer that education is about more than jobs. He says that aside from wanting to improve his reading and writing skills he also wanted help with his self-esteem. He thought maybe learning was a way to make him feel more confident. "I got so poisoned with being in a conversation with people and not knowing what they were saying to me. Oh, I'd have a general idea but I wanted to know more. I wanted to be able to be part of a conversation and feel confident in what I was hearing and saying."

Going back to school gave him that confidence. When he was at the Rabbittown Learners' Program he moved along so fast that he completed the program before he could be sent to a higher program. The administrator had to keep him there for six months because there was nowhere else available to put him at the time. In order to get into an Adult Basic Education program he had to be referred from another program. There was a long waiting list to get into ABE. "I was advised to stay at Rabbittown Learners even though I had learned all I could there,

because if I didn't I would miss my chance for a referral. That's just the way it works," Larry said.

So what did Larry do? He stayed at the Rabbittown Learners' Program and he helped the other students. He became a teacher's assistant, in a way. He said this gave him a wonderful feeling of satisfaction and a sense of pride. Last year Larry went to the university to do a General Education Diploma (GED) program. He said he got fed up with it, that he liked the ABE program better. He is only nine credits short of graduating from high school. "I can do the credits anytime," he says. Once his pizza shop is running the way he wants he'll go back and get those credits. "It may sound funny since I have my own business and all, but I want that certificate. For my sake, and I guess to show my kids."

For the past four and a half years he has concentrated on his store but he is not working seventy hours a week anymore. "Soon I'll go back to school," he says with a grin. "I'll have that diploma up there on the wall. Every day when I wake up I have to achieve something and that diploma is part of my plan."

Margaret Miller

A Dream of Being More

Margaret agreed to be interviewed at the Rabbittown Learners' Program in the fall of 2002. She is a small woman with a lot of energy to burn. Somewhat nervous in temperament, she was very eager to tell her story. She was born in St. John's and for reasons she does not know her mother put her into a series of foster homes. Her father died when Margaret was very young. There were six children in the family and all were put into foster care. She was in the same foster home from when she was four years old until she was sixteen. Before that, she tells me, she can't remember where she was. She was told that she was in several different foster homes before she turned four. Her mother lives in the city but Margaret does not contact her much. She told me that her mother could not give her a reason why she put her into foster care. She also has a sister whom she only recently met.

When Margaret was five years old she was put in the Vera Perlin school. She did not know that the school was for people with a mental or physical handicap. She thought it was a regular school. There was a regular school across the street from where she lived and she thought she'd be going there. When she was small she couldn't understand why she wasn't going to a school so close to where she lived when all the children in the community were attending that school. Then kids started calling her "handicapped" because she was going to the Vera Perlin school. At that school she wasn't taught much reading or writing. Mostly it was cooking, sewing, and knitting. There was no homework. Years later Margaret tried to find out why she was put in the Vera Perlin school but she couldn't get an answer. Because she was not taught the basics of reading, writing, and math at home or at school she feels that the schooling she did receive kept her back. "If one person could tell me why I was put in that school then I'd say, okay, maybe I should have been placed there." But she was tested when she started doing upgrading and she was told that there was nothing wrong with her, that she "caught on easy." Margaret thinks she just never had a chance. She also believes that the reason why she was put in the Vera Perlin school was because her foster mother got money for putting her there. She said that her foster mother was very cruel. She often would not let Margaret into the house and many times Margaret had to sleep under the cab of a truck that was in the yard. She had no friends because

they were not allowed. "All I did was housework with no time off to make friends," said Margaret. Whenever social workers came around to check on her she was not allowed to speak to them. She was ordered to keep quiet. "I suppose that made everyone think I was handicapped. But I understood everything that was going on. I simply was not allowed to speak my mind," she said.

At the Vera Perlin school Margaret was put in a program where she was taken out and shown how to do a job. She was brought to St. Luke's home where she worked with elderly people. She was restricted in what she could do there because of not being able to read. She left the Vera Perlin school when she was sixteen and got a job at McDonald's. Because she couldn't sign her name to cash her cheque it was passed over to her foster mother. She was told that the money was going into the bank for her. She worked five days a week at McDonald's and when she went to the bank to see about her money there was very little there. She was told by her foster mother that it was spent on clothes for her, but Margaret says that wasn't true. "I wasn't even allowed to have take-out. And when I used to babysit they'd ask me for that money, too. I used to take the money and hide it. When I got caught doing that they'd make me stay in my bedroom."

When Margaret turned seventeen she went to a social worker to get some help. She set herself up in a small apartment. It was hard going because she didn't have a job. Everywhere she turned she found it more and more difficult because she couldn't read. Then her brother took her into his place to help her out.

Margaret feels that the humiliation that she suffered while in foster care kept her down for a long time. Her self-esteem was deeply wounded from a very early age. She remembers having to keep her hair cut short and that she wasn't allowed to wear nice clothes, only old hand-me-down pants. "I felt like I had no rights. I didn't even know what human rights were. Everyone made fun of me. It's hard to get a sense of yourself and what you can do if you are not guided." Margaret tells me that no one stepped in to help her. No social worker knew what was going on and her mother didn't know. People simply called her handicapped and the label stuck. But the way she sees it is that her nerves were shot. "To this day there are times when I can't sleep. I'm nervous still. I don't know why but when I was young I was always a bit afraid. I'm still like it. Sometimes it is hard to concentrate."

While she still lived in foster care she tried to get upgrading but her attempts were stopped by her foster mother. She told Margaret that it would be too expensive. “It was only two dollars a month!” Margaret says.

She kept falling through the cracks. She took jobs all over the place, at a nightclub and at a fish and chips shop. Everyone she met told her she should go back to school and get an education because she was smart and had lots of energy and ambition.

Margaret has three children that she is raising on her own. While she was attending the Rabbittown Learners’ Centre she found out that her eleven-year-old daughter had blood cancer. She had to take a year off school to take care of her. She was also pregnant at the time. Her daughter’s cancer is now in remission so Margaret is back in school. She has a lot on her plate raising three kids and going to school full time, but she seems to thrive on all the activity. She said she has a good babysitter at home who helps her with the housework. Margaret is determined to stay in school because she says it is good to get out and learn and mix with people. “I want to be strong for my kids,” she says earnestly. “I know I’m doing a lot but I’m seeing results too. If I wasn’t, I’d quit. But I’m getting ahead in my schoolwork. It may be slow but I’m trying to make up for lost time.” Her children are doing well in school and this makes her proud.

Margaret says she always had dreams. Even in the lonely solitude of her childhood she dreamed of being a nurse. “I always had dreams of being more. I had the energy and I had the dreams. But not the direction.” So now Margaret is determined to try to become a nurse’s assistant or to work in a nursing home in some capacity. “I can’t work now”, she says, “but if I’m not too old when I finish school I’ll try and work.” She is forty years old. Her goal is to stay in school. “All I know is that if anything happens to me I do not want my children put into foster care. I’ve been there and I would not want them in one. I know that they may not be all bad but that experience never left me.”

Margaret isn’t bitter about her past. She only wants to move on. “It was a mistake that was made about me. I should have been put in a regular school. I should have been given a chance.”

Reports in the media about the abuse of children in some foster care homes show that Margaret was not alone in her story. The neglect marred greatly her chance to receive a basic

education. Learning to read and write was not on the agenda in Margaret's childhood. Given the chance she believes she would have moved ahead like any other child.

Lorraine Cheesman

Just Go Away Out of It

Lorraine was one of half a dozen people that I interviewed at the Rabbittown Learners' Program in the fall of 2002. Her story is ordinary, if a life of struggle can be called ordinary. What I mean by ordinary is that Lorraine, like all the other people I interviewed, did not have extraordinary reasons why they had difficulty with reading and writing. Most often the reason was lack of encouragement at home and at school. What struck me was that there was a long sprawl in age differences among the people I interviewed. They ranged from nineteen to into their sixties. So I can't say that the times had something to do with it. Not completely, although we are looking at about thirty years in the education system and family life in Newfoundland and Labrador. Things are supposed to improve with time. How we raise our kids today is better informed than in our parents' time. How our kids are taught in school should improve. And it has. But the themes of indifference and neglect still abound. I found that each person's story seemed to stem from this indifference and neglect.

Lorraine grew up in St. John's. She got as far as grade seven, but after being tested at the College of the North Atlantic she found out that she had grade four reading and writing skills. She grew up in a household of eight siblings. Her mother had grade eleven but had an unstable childhood after her mother died young. She was passed around from one foster home to another and her father was never around for her. Lorraine's mother and her mother's uncle were treated very poorly. "Like animals," Lorraine tells me. She has been taking care of her uncle ever since her mother died some years ago. "He lives his life in his room," she says. "He was always put in rooms and locked in for days on end. There was nothing wrong with him, he just wasn't given any attention whatsoever except when he was beat up with sticks." Lorraine feels bad for her uncle's life and his lack of a chance to thrive. So she takes care of him now.

She told me that her mother never looked upon school as important. Lorraine would skip school all the time. Her mother would bring her to school and tell her to stay there, but she was never encouraged to study or helped with her homework. "There was eight of us," Lorraine says, "maybe that had something to do with it." She said that she felt her parents cared but they didn't have the time. She quit school over fifteen years ago when she was twelve years old and in the

early stages of grade seven. She said she never really thought about what she was doing. It seemed natural to leave school because the teachers weren't encouraging, either. She feels the attitude of the teachers stemmed from her being poor. She said that the middle class kids were treated differently than the poorer kids. No one expected anything out of the poor kids. It was almost as if the teachers were waiting for them to leave so they could get on with teaching the so-called better kids. Lorraine said there was no energy put into teaching her so she didn't think of an education as important for herself, either.

"If back then one person had taken me aside and said, 'Lorraine, put more effort into this,' or 'Let me help you,' then perhaps things would have turned out differently for me. I don't know. Maybe." Instead, one day Lorraine just up and quit at the young age of twelve. She started off by going to class less and less and then she just stopped. Some friends of hers quit too. They all had the same problems of no encouragement at school and no help at home. They would just walk around downtown or hang out in the parks or outside of bingo halls until it was three o'clock and time to go home. Yes, it was aimless, but being with peers made it seem less so.

Lorraine never liked school anyhow and hanging out was better than being in school. Being in school felt aimless since the teachers didn't care if they did their work or not. "I'd sit down at my desk and whether I did my work or not made no difference to anyone. So how could I take on any responsibility when my parents or the school didn't. I was so young," she tells me, shaking her head. It was in the early '70s that Lorraine quit.

Now Lorraine has four kids of her own and is a single mother. Things seem to be different now in the schools. She knows that she feels differently than her parents felt about education. She cares about whether or not her children finish school and she is there to encourage them. Her oldest is a girl of nineteen who has just moved out of the house. She finished school last year needing one credit to graduate. So she is now going to the College of the North Atlantic to get that one credit and then she plans to go to university. She wants to be a nurse and Lorraine fully encourages her. Lorraine's other daughters are thirteen, twelve, and four. Lorraine says she has always taken the time to sit with them in the evenings even if she couldn't help them. She feels that just to be there with them encourages them. She finds there is still a bit of class prejudice going on. "More is expected out of you if you dress well," she says.

When Lorraine went back to school over a year ago she did it for herself and her children. But mostly for herself, she said. She felt it was time to stop and do something for herself, to challenge herself and see how far she could get. She knew she could stay at dead-end jobs like washing dishes or cooking in take-outs but she didn't want that. She wants to work in early childhood development. "I figure I have good experience at it since I'm a single mother raising four kids. I want to put my experience to work and make a decent living from it," she says.

When I ask Lorraine if there was any problem that kept her back in school she firmly states that she had no disability whatsoever. She was a slow reader all right, she says, and by the time she finally got to a special education class she found that there was no help there, either. She found it no different than the regular class. She thinks that maybe it was all new then, the special education classes, and so maybe a lot of kinks weren't worked out. There was no extra attention paid to her problem with reading and writing. She said she liked school early on but that the frustration piled up. She also complained about the number of students in the classes. She said if you had a problem there was no one to really zone in on you and help you.

She says that her children have better skills and that they do get that extra help. Her thirteen-year-old daughter goes to a language arts class for that extra bit of reading. There is one teacher to six students in that class so there is more time and more effort put into it.

Lorraine is studying the new math. It is new to her anyway. Her other subjects include a bit of science, social studies, and English. She goes to the program five days a week.

Lorraine tells me that the school system didn't work for her because there was not enough attention and not enough time put into kids who were having problems. She says there were not a lot of parent-teacher meetings back then. Scare tactics were the rule of the day. When she showed up late, she was strapped. There was a constant atmosphere of fear that she feels held her back from learning.

"The whole system seemed against the slow learner, if that's what I was. See, the thing is we were never told what our problem was. We were simply ignored. I think they hoped that I'd just go away out of it."

Lorraine did go away but she didn't stay away. She's back for herself and her kids and her future.

Jim Oates

Pushed Ahead and Kept Back

Jim and I met at the Rabbittown Learners' Program in St. John's. We were introduced by the centre's administrator, Doris Hapgood. Doris told me straight off that she took a chance with bringing Jim into the program. Students are supposed to be nineteen years old and Jim was almost a year shy of nineteen when he asked to attend the centre. He has been there for a year now, so her hunch with Jim and Jim's promise paid off.

Jim is a soft-spoken and shy young man. When we met I sensed that he had a story he wanted to tell. He seemed eager to talk about how he thinks he fell through the cracks of the education system. He grew up in the Mundy Pond area of the city and went to the regular school system. He said that he felt that he never got any special help in school in his early days there. He was having trouble with reading and science but the teachers didn't seem to notice his difficulties. "The teachers used to push me ahead," he said. He couldn't understand why they did that. "What was the sense in pushing me ahead," he asks, "when I didn't know anything?" He was pushed ahead in every grade until he reached grade eight. It was then that he finally got some help from a teacher. She took him out of the regular classes and took him into her class for the day. He used to lag behind so much in the regular classes that it all became too much for him.

"There was stuff on the chalkboards and I didn't have a clue what it was," he told me. "I did fine in math, I really didn't have a problem there, but the reading really got to me."

In a class of thirty or so students Jim felt that to ask questions would be pointless because the teachers never had time to answer them. Especially if you had problems formulating the questions. After being so far behind in the reading material it all became a jumbled mess for him, and that only compounded the confusion and feeling of pointlessness. He quit in grade eight. He quit from frustration even though a teacher was finally there to help. He felt it was just too late.

I asked him how things were at home, if he got help with schoolwork at home. He told me that he did, that he got lots of help at home. At first his parents thought there was something wrong with him, so they took him down to the Janeway and had tests done. Nothing abnormal

turned up. There didn't seem to be any reason for him to be doing so poorly in reading and writing at school.

He attended another school, Holy Heart this time, but he only lasted a day and a half there. He saw that it would be the same—a lot of students and him lagging behind. So he left and never went back—to Holy Heart or any other regular school. He kicked around for three or four years trying to figure out what to do. Then he went to Rabbittown and asked if he could get in even though he knew he was a bit younger than the other students. He has been at the Learners' Centre for about a year and a half. "I've learned more in a year and a half than I ever did in all my years of schooling in regular schools," he told me. Jim believes that the regular school system isn't for everyone. "Not everyone wants to go to university," he says. "There should be more places like this." A lot of kids that Jim knows dropped out of school because they weren't getting the attention they needed to move ahead. He thinks there are too many students in a class for only one teacher to attend to—especially if a kid is having problems understanding reading and writing. He said he knows it is difficult for the teachers because of the pressure they are under. "Especially when you get saucy ones; then it's hard on everyone in the class to concentrate, and especially for the teachers to keep their patience."

There were two pivotal points in Jim's life where sudden change occurred for the bad and the good. The first was his father taking a heart attack. Jim was out of the house when it happened. "My mother and my uncle were with my father when he had the attack, and my uncle told my mother to leave me a note. My mother told him that there was no sense in leaving me a note because I couldn't read." His uncle was shocked to hear that, and when the crisis was over he contacted some people in an effort to help his nephew. It was his uncle who found out about the Rabbittown Learners' Centre.

Then another tragedy struck: a few months later his uncle died of a brain tumour. He was only forty years old. Jim was with him and the last words out of his mouth were to him. "Stay in school." Jim took this very seriously. He was very close to his uncle. It meant a lot to him that his uncle took special interest in trying to help him. He intends to stay with the program at the Learners' Centre because of his uncle and because he finds it really helps him. He said he wants to be there.

Jim goes to the centre five days a week, all day long. The atmosphere is relaxed. Everyone who goes there wants to be there. Sometimes there is homework and more times not. Most important for Jim is the fact that there are teachers there who have time for him. The teachers are relaxed, and they will joke around with the students and encourage them. "It's nice to be able to have a laugh when you're learning," Jim says. "It eases the demands of learning. It is actually fun to come here."

I asked Jim about his plans for the future. He told me he would like to be a mechanic. He says he has worked on cars for as long as he can remember. "Hardly a day goes by when I'm not working on some car," he tells me. "There isn't a car made that don't need fixing at some point. There'll always be cars that need to be worked on and I love the work." He told me that he can put a motor and a transmission in a car in about five or six hours. He said he was always like that. "I just took to it," he says. His uncles did that kind of work and he watched them at it. He wants to study mechanics so he can get even better. He also wants to stay in Newfoundland. "I couldn't leave this place," he says with a grin.

When I asked Jim to sum up how he feels about his education to date he told me that he felt the regular school system just didn't do him any good. He felt it wasted his time and the teachers' time. He thinks there should be more programs like the one at the Rabbittown Learners' Centre. Most of the students at the centre are older than he is. He knows that when most of them went to school they didn't have much help either: it just wasn't there. "I can't understand why I wasn't helped more," he tells me. "When I was going to school they had more access to helping kids with reading problems but for some reason it didn't reach me." He isn't bitter about it. He just wants to keep at it. "I'll be here for as long as it takes." Jim is determined because he has a vision of being a mechanic, of working with his hands.

I asked him how he likes reading now. He smiles and shrugs. "Well", he says, "I'm not a big reader really. I read while I'm here, but I just don't take to it all that much if you really want to know." But he keeps a journal as part of his schoolwork at the centre. He takes books with him when he goes to his cabin in the woods. "I like reading there, where it is quiet and I can concentrate."

Jim feels that he is finally on the right track. He knows what he wants and he knows how to get it. He feels he has come a long way from his struggles in regular school. Now it's worth it to make the effort to learn. He won't stop now while he's moving ahead.

Dave

The Buddha Is Smiling

Dave is not this man's real name. We have known one another for years and I have always found him to be a friendly if a very shy man. One day last summer we were standing in line in a small convenience store in the town where he is from and where he lives. We struck up a conversation about nothing in particular, and when he noticed the book I had in my hand that I was about to purchase he said, "Oh yeah, that's the one about Joey, isn't it? It's pretty thick, a lot of pages. Wish I had the concentration to read something like that." We both had a laugh about big books and getting to the end of them. He said then something that stayed in my mind but which I did not think too much about until I started investigating the various problems that people encounter when they are trying to learn to read or to improve their reading and writing skills. We walked out of the store together, and when I asked him if he really had problems reading he said to me, and he wasn't joking, "No, girl, it's different for me. I think my mind was scrambled by doing drugs in the seventies. I was a slow reader in school, but now I just don't have the concentration, no matter how hard I tries. Pity, too, because I loves reading."

It was those last few words that stayed with me. I remember the look on Dave's face as he stared down at my copy of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* by Wayne Johnston. It was with a look of longing. That look broke my heart. I decided I wanted to know Dave's story.

"Well, I was never really encouraged to read when I was young. I mean I was never told not to or anything, but for one thing there were no books in the house. Oh, there were pamphlets from the church and a scattered holy magazine from the missions. But sure the Catholics never really were big Bible readers, were they?"

Dave is a fifty-year-old bachelor who lives alone and works on the council garbage collection. It is not a high-paying job or a prestigious one, but his co-workers are friends and he does not need a lot of money. He pays no mortgage since his house was an inheritance from his parents who passed away some years ago. In the summer Dave has a small vegetable and flower garden that he takes great pride in. "Totally organic," he tells me. "You haven't lived until you've tasted an organic carrot. The sweetest thing on the face of the earth."

I called Dave and asked him if I could come out and ask him a few questions about how he felt about reading. He thought this was a funny request, but he said he would talk to me if I asked the questions. He said he hadn't really thought much about his lack of reading, but that he'd be interested in chatting about it. We had tea and I asked if I could take notes. I asked if I could ask personal questions about his life and what he had mentioned to me about drugs. He appeared flippant but said that he had nothing to hide since he no longer did drugs. He said with a grin, "Even if you're a narc, you can't arrest me for my past." I asked him how he knew about the Wayne Johnston book, and he told me that he watches a lot of television and listens to a lot of radio. It's there that he gets his information about the books that he doesn't read. "I suppose I am lazy in a way," he said. "I mean, I could tell you about who wins the awards for their writing and what the books are about." He reads magazines a bit because the articles are short, but even that takes time and a lot of concentrated energy.

Dave quit high school in grade nine. He started experimenting with drugs when hashish and marijuana came to his small town. He would get together with a bunch of fellows his own age and they would go into the woods and smoke to their heart's content. He thinks that the stuff may have been laced with something. "I don't know what, but it really had an effect on me." When I asked him if the other fellows were as affected he said, no, they were all right now, as far as he knew.

He was a slow reader in school but he could read. There were no special teachers to help then, and he was told that he did not put enough effort into learning. He thinks that the teachers may have been right about that, but still he thinks he should have been helped. Doing the drugs only added to the problems he was having with reading. So he quit school. He knew he was not particularly slow or mentally handicapped. He thinks the combination of not being helped and encouraged and the drugs kept him back.

Dave is pretty articulate. I noticed in our conversations that he often stuttered and was nervous and shy. But I don't think that Dave has any big mental problems that make him a slow learner or unable to learn. He feels that the inability to read well has kept him back economically and socially. He does not use computers even though he is aware of their availability in the public library. He thinks they would be too complicated to learn. He does not use a dictionary and never really has. "Using a dictionary is like manual labour for me now," he said. "It feels

painful to look up words, and half the time I am so off base with the spelling that I might as well be using a French dictionary. I wasn't taught how to use one in school. Or at least I can't remember being shown."

All this is familiar to me. I too grew up in rural Newfoundland, and while I was educated by the Presentation Sisters I have always felt that the basics were terribly lacking in my education. I talked to Dave about this and he agreed with me. "I was taught to memorize Latin grammar for God's sake, yet I couldn't use a dictionary or read a newspaper properly," he said with a melancholy laugh. He told me he left school against his parents' wishes but that they did not protest too loudly. His father was a fisherman who left school after the "third book," or the equivalent of a grade three schooling. His mother raised the family and stayed home. "I think they were proud that I got as far as I did. I'm not sure they really saw the value of an education. My father saw the value of work in that you could support yourself. I suppose he thought I'd go into the fishery because at that time it wasn't too bad a living. And, besides, he loved it. I used to think the ol' man would fish for nothing if he had to." But Dave wasn't cut out for the water. His older sister moved away to the States to take care of an aunt in New York, and she married there and never returned except to visit in the summers. I asked Dave if he writes to his sister much. "No, not at all other than a Christmas card. She calls me once a month or so." He told me that it's the same thing writing letters. He is not in the habit of it so he does not do it. He said he was shy of writing letters anyway, of sitting down to compose his thoughts on paper. "I think that if you get in the habit of reading and writing early on then that is what makes you a reader and better able to write. I think my brain can't handle it now. Plus, you know, I'm older. I'm no spring chicken. It gets harder to learn new tricks."

Dave went to Toronto in the mid-sixties. He left the Island with a few buddies and a pack on his back. "I was aimless then. Aimless and naive. A few of us hitch-hiked across the Island and took the ferry across the Gulf and then hitch-hiked the rest of the way to Toronto. I couldn't get over the place. I suppose I was like a kid at Christmas with all the bright lights." He came down to earth pretty fast after a few weeks of sleeping on floors and then on park benches. He knew he had to get a job somewhere and get on his own two feet. There were lots of jobs at the time, and so he landed one almost right away in a paint factory. "Maybe the fumes there didn't help the brain cells," he said with a laugh. It was also around this time that "me and the boys"

started smoking a lot of marijuana and popping amphetamines. “Speed,” Dave says. “We’d get together on the weekends with a couple of dozen beer, a carton of cigarettes, an ounce of weed, a bottle of pills, and a few guitars.” It was a release from the boredom and feeling of going nowhere that the week at the job left him with. Before long he started to notice that his concentration was slipping and his thoughts were jumbled. “Watching television was about the extent of my information gathering. I never read a newspaper. I can’t remember a single book that passed through my hands.” When I asked Dave if he had any desire to go back to school then, he laughed and told me no, not in the least. He said all he did was live for the day. For the weekend, really. He got away from the drugs but it took him a couple of years. He still drank alcohol. He got a job as a janitor in an apartment complex. He liked the job because he had some independence and more contact with people. He lived in the complex and worked at this job for almost ten years. “I had one girlfriend, but we didn’t last long. I think I liked her too much. I put everything into trying to keep her and I think that pushed her away.” He hasn’t had a long-term relationship since.

Sometimes during that time Dave would make attempts at trying to get ahead. He had dreams that were far below the surface of this reality. I asked him about the dreams. “Oh, I always had a fascination with airplanes. I was always making models from kits. Not when I was a kid now. I’m talking about when I was in Toronto. After work I’d sit down for an hour or so and work on a model.” He would give them away after a while to kids in the building. He became known as “the airplane man.” Did he want to be a pilot? Yes, he told me. But he thought that was way beyond a possibility for him. When I told him I thought that perhaps if he had been able to voice his dream and encouraged when he was young then there wouldn’t have been any reason not to become a pilot. He shrugged and nodded. “Yeah,” he said, “yeah, my parents kind of had a narrow vision of what was possible, I guess. I’m not blaming them or anything. But I think that if I had announced that I wanted to be a pilot they would have told me to get my head out of the clouds and go out in the yard and chop some wood for the stove.” There didn’t seem to be any expectations other than keeping food in your stomach and a roof over your head. His father thought he might come back home one day and take over the property. He knew he wouldn’t take over the boat and the fishing license, so his father sold that when he retired. Dave had no regrets about not taking up where his father left off. He said he felt a bit of guilt at not

being more of what his father was, of not carrying on the fishing in the family. But he really does not like the water at all. He knew from day one when he went on the water with his father and was sick the whole time that it would be impossible. His father knew it too and it was not talked about once he saw the colour of him on those trips out the bay.

While Dave and I were talking I noticed a small statue of the Buddha on a shelf near the living room table. I jokingly said, "You're a Buddhist, Dave?" To my surprise he shyly said yes.

"Really?" I asked. "Yeah, I guess I am, you know. It was something I started to get interested in when I got off the booze. I drank a lot after I gave up the drugs. In fact, I had a problem with alcohol, big time. One time I found a tape on meditation and I listened to it and started practising it. Then I really got into it. I sent off for magazines about it but, well, like I told you, I could never get much out of reading. So I started ordering tapes."

Dave bought a lot of tapes on meditation and Eastern religions. It was Zen Buddhism that kept his attention. He showed me a small section of his garden that he had formed out of sand. It was a "raked garden," a garden of sand that he tended every day in summer with a wooden rake that he made for the purpose. It relaxes his mind to slowly form the sand into concentric shapes. He places his Buddha statue near a shrine of rocks and beautifully cultivated flowers. "This is my religion, I suppose. I think my parents would have been horrified at me making a shine to what they'd call a pagan god. The Catholic church was all they knew. But that wasn't for me no more than fishing was. I don't make a big deal of this. But at the same time I'm kinda proud that I don't drink or do drugs and that I have this peace of mind here."

That afternoon Dave walked me to the gate in his backyard. We stood and looked over at his sand garden. The sun was slanting over the sand and throwing a full glare over the Buddha. Dave said he didn't think that he was much help to me about reading and writing but that I was welcome to write down anything that he told me. I thanked him for sharing his life with me. As I backed out of the parking space I looked over at Dave as he picked up his wooden sand rake. I looked at the small chubby statue. The Buddha was smiling

Adult Learner Profiles by Libby Creelman

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to examine the various factors that act as barriers to the acquirement of literacy skills. Many such factors, such as dropping out of school, poor schooling, and various physical and mental disabilities, are well known. Others are less well known, but may be equally damaging; often these stem from home life. Six individuals were interviewed and an attempt was made to determine specific aspects of their lives that may have presented barriers to the acquirement of literacy skills. In all cases, it was nearly impossible to identify a single factor; rather, a number of influences seem to have played a role. The names of individuals, with the exception of Tom Dawe, executive director of Teachers on Wheels, have been changed.

Robert

Robert is twenty-seven years old. He grew up in Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, and did not finish high school. From the beginning, he found learning difficult. For the most part, he was well behaved and not a discipline problem. “I knew that school wasn’t my thing. Reading, writing, spelling wasn’t my thing,” he says. “Basically, from the time I was eight years old, I knew I was going to quit school when I was sixteen.” Most of his friends were boys six years older than him. He looked up to them and watched them drop out of school in order to work. They made good livings, and many are still doing so despite a lack of education. Robert says he saw that and figured he could do it, too.

Like most of the individuals interviewed, Robert feels he was pushed through the primary and elementary grades; when they tried to help him in high school through special education classes, it was too late. By then, he was scraping by, and any interest he may have had was gone. It appears that in high school as well, an attempt was made by the school to get Robert through the system, whether or not he had actually earned it academically. He believes the teachers were “pumping him on,” giving him marks to keep him in school, something he says seemed helpful at the time, but not in the long run.

When Robert was twelve years old, the opportunity to earn wages arose. This was a major contributor to Robert's difficulties in school. He loved working. Every summer he would do whatever he could to make a few dollars, while during the school year he began skipping school in order to work instead. The promise of being active and making money would have been impossible to resist, especially for a boy who didn't like school and wasn't doing well, anyway. It seems that to a certain degree, staying in school was not highly valued by many members of his community, and in some cases, there was outright encouragement to skip school. For example, he waited for the bus near a service station. Frequently, one of the boys working there would come over and ask him if he wanted to work that day. It is not surprising that he would choose pumping gas over sitting in a classroom.

Although there was some encouragement from school authorities for Robert to stay in school, there seems to have been no penalty for missing school so frequently. After several days of absence, his teachers might ask him where he had been. He would tell them the truth: he'd been working, and most already knew this. They could see him pumping gas at the service station or out on the roads flagging. He says it was not uncommon for young people to leave school to work in fish plants. Perhaps if he had been doing well in school, he says, they might have called home and made inquiries, but he was doing so poorly he guesses they "just let him slide."

His stepfather was a fisherman all his life, while his mother worked in fish plants. She does respite care and babysitting now. Neither of them finished school. Initially, his parents encouraged him not to quit. Although they "got on his case a lot" about staying in school, they did not say much about him skipping a day here and there in order to work. In the early grades they would grumble and couldn't understand why he never had homework. "Then, I guess, they seen that I was going towards the working side more. They just left me alone like. But in the younger grades they did get on my case, a lot, right, where I was having so much trouble with learning."

In the end, Robert missed a lot of school, and eventually quit at Level Four, only three credits short of completing high school. He quit after Easter, after being out of school a week or so working. "When I went back to school me and one of the teachers got into it and I just walked out and never went back. ... He said something about I need his course... you'll never pass it

while I'm teaching it. And I looked at him and said well you can keep your fucking course and I left... Me and he got into it. Like I said to him, I kinda have to work after my money. My parents don't hand me money the way you do to your spoiled little brats, stuff like that, back and forth. I just left and never went back."

There was, however, another barrier to Robert's success in school that went undiagnosed until the summer of 2002. From an early age teachers told him he was lazy, and his parents couldn't understand "why he couldn't pick it out, figure it out." He, in turn, would tell them the words on the page looked like a snowstorm. When they tested his eyes, he had 20/20 vision. Yet all his life, print became blurry at close range and he had to struggle to focus. It was only recently discovered that he has a condition in which his eyes have great difficulty focussing in sync. He does eye therapy now and says he has noticed some improvement.

After leaving school for good in the spring of 1994, Robert worked for a while pumping gas at the same service station he had periodically worked at since he was twelve. The work was not steady, however, and after a brief stint at an oil patch in Alberta, he eventually worked in Ontario for a company installing paint systems. He worked there six years. He liked the job and there were a number of benefits. There was the opportunity for advancement every couple of months, and there was travel: to Alabama, Niagara Falls, Pennsylvania, Ontario. Then, in October of 2000, Robert fell through a roof while walking along a three-inch-wide high beam to remove a panel. He fell 11.5 feet, landed on his feet and broke his back. He has not worked since.

During his career in construction Robert had found some ways to hide his poor reading skills. Occasionally, he worked in one of the paint company's warehouses. Although parts were labelled, they were also numbered, which Robert could identify, and eventually he knew where things went, anyway. Also, if he knew what work was being done, he would know what parts were needed without having to struggle to read what was written down. He used the same combination of skills when installing paint systems, for which there were blueprints with both words and numbers, as well as diagrams. He says he is very good at following directions, but give him a bunch of parts with no diagram, just a sheet of text and it's better "to stick a needle in his eye." This situation often led to frustration and a feeling of lagging behind the other workers.

After his injury, Robert returned to school. When I spoke to him he had been attending the Rabbittown Learners' Program for several months and believed it was helping. He said his biggest challenge was picking up on his reading. When he was academically evaluated, it was found his reading was at grade one level. If all works out, he'll go to trade school when he's got his grade twelve. Unfortunately, he still finds sitting in a classroom difficult and now there are the additional health problems. While talking to him, it was clear he was uncomfortable, if not in pain. He is on a lot of medication, which interferes with his ability to concentrate.

Vince

Vince is in his mid-thirties. He grew up on the Southern Shore, and like Robert, was never interested in school, preferring, instead, to work. He grew up fishing, and wanted to be out on the boat all the time. He repeated grade eight, but the second time around was expelled and never went back. He experienced some discipline problems. When asked how his parents felt about his quitting school, he says they were “not too impressed at all, but I suppose they said, got to let him make his own decisions.” Vince doesn’t think his father had much education and is not sure about his mother. But he says his father was smart; when something broke people came to him. His mother was from St. John’s and had worked as a cook at the Battery Hotel before marrying and moving to the Southern Shore.

Although Vince says he did not find learning difficult, he seems to have had some trouble retaining information. “Didn’t like the classroom side of stuff. Just wanted to be out of it. Could read but couldn’t remember it. Couldn’t catch on to history, couldn’t remember. Just wanted to be out of school. Didn’t want to be in there.” It is impossible to know whether this was strictly a lack of interest or to some extent the result of a mild learning disability.

But ultimately, Vince just wanted to be “clear of school” and making money. He says things weren’t too easy economically, and yet at only thirteen or fourteen years of age he was making money, sometimes as much as \$200 to \$300 a week. After leaving school in grade eight, he fished during the summer months and in the winter cut wood. When he fished with his father, he got 25 percent of the earnings. He liked to spend money, and he liked to buy things. He bought an ax and chainsaw for cutting wood, and then a gun to hunt ducks. Although he can understand why he didn’t want to go to school when he could make money instead, he regrets it. He says he got used to that money and “wouldn’t recommend it for any youngster today.” He was incarcerated more than once. He says his ending up in jail was because he was trying to get money.

When the fishing dried up, Vince moved into town, at sixteen or seventeen years of age. But he would always have trouble getting a job. After various temporary positions, he moved to Toronto for seventeen years, where he did odd jobs. There was rarely steady work. He came

back to St. John's in 2000. He wants to have a trade now, to have his own company and be his own boss.

Tom

Tom is twenty-four years old and from Conception Bay. Because his birthday is in December, he was only four years old when he started kindergarten. From the start, he found school challenging, particularly reading; in grade two he was held back. He caught up, but he says not enough; he can remember the other students always being ahead of him. His parents tried everything, including tutors; he says they did everything they could. His mother believed that his poor performance in school was due to his being too young and always faced with being behind the other students. Now, looking back it, Tom agrees that it must have had a negative effect on him both emotionally and physically. But he mostly remembers finding it nearly impossible to concentrate in school.

Four years ago, Tom was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). When speaking with Tom he moves around a good deal and obviously struggles with his ability to concentrate. He says he was “just a little bit hyper, I guess . . . I used to act out a lot in school and stuff.” He repeated grade seven, and in grade eight was sent to the Newfoundland and Labrador Youth Centre in Whitbourne. He has also spent time in Her Majesty’s Penitentiary in St. John’s and the Atlantic Renous Maximum Security Prison in New Brunswick.

Today, Tom’s spelling is not great, but he can read. He taught himself when he was in the Youth Centre in Whitbourne at sixteen years of age. He just started reading and reading and reading. When asked if there was anything special about the school there, he said it was a lot more one-on-one. Similarly, when he came to Her Majesty’s Penitentiary at age eighteen he found working with the instructor there a lot better. “I found it hard to learn when you’ve got twenty or thirty students with one teacher.” Whereas at the Pen, “It’s good. One-on-one. There’s only five or six hands here at a time . . . If you need something Bill stays with you until you gets it, anyway, right?” Although it’s a credit to the program there at the prison, it’s unfortunate that it was not until he was incarcerated that Tom received schooling that met his needs.

Even now, Tom finds he must struggle to concentrate when he’s studying. If he’s interested in something, he does better. “When I found something that interested me then I can focus on it more. Like English and that, I really tried at that. Nouns, pronouns, stuff like that, I found that

hard. Adjectives, verbs, and all that. Got it down anyway, but it didn't interest me, right?... I'm good in math, cause I'm interested in it."

Today, Tom is a third-year apprentice welder in the Boilerman's Union. But he had to go to school a couple of times for that, six weeks at a time. "Got through it anyway. Good thing. Don't think I never would have finished high school the ordinary way."

Lewis

Lewis has cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that primarily affects the muscles, but which can also be associated with learning disabilities and mental retardation. He grew up in Avondale, one of twelve children, and says he liked school and liked his teachers. The nuns would strap him lightly because they were afraid they might hurt him, which he finds amusing. He was making satisfactory progress until grade five, but he says every year when they were doing spelling, he would forget what he had learned. He believes there was a tendency to pass students up through the grades even though they might not have learned what they should have. In his case it may have been even more extreme, as, he says, people tend to think that because he is physically handicapped he must be mentally handicapped as well.

When asked about what kind of encouragement he got from his family, he says his parents stood behind him. He says his father always told him to keep on going. His motto was “Never say can’t.” Lewis did Adult Basic Education at the Longside Club. Today he is not working, and says it is difficult for him to find work.

David

Like Lewis, David has cerebral palsy. He is originally from Conception Bay, but began living with a foster family in St. Philip's when he was two and half years old. He has an older sister who also has cerebral palsy, but it is milder and she stayed with their parents. Due to medical difficulties and frequent hospital stays, David did not start public school until he was nine.

When he was about five years old he began attending the Children's Rehab Centre in St. John's, where he would live for up to six months at a time. Although he recalls being told he was mature for his age, he found it very difficult to understand what everyone was doing. He wondered, "What's the purpose here? Where am I going to go?" He never paid a lot of attention because he didn't understand what was going on. He says he "failed" kindergarten at the Rehab Centre.

When he was nine, David returned to his foster family in St. Philip's and started kindergarten once again, now in the public system at St. Philip's Elementary. But he was not physically able to get to the kindergarten classroom because it was downstairs and not accessible—he says no one thought about accessibility then. As a result, he was placed in the grade one classroom. It was at this point that isolation began to factor significantly in David's life, resulting in a sense of frustration and apprehension, and of being *separate*. He couldn't participate in gym and had few interactions with other students. He still didn't know what he was doing in the classroom. He couldn't understand how kids could read a story and be able to answer questions. He says that if a teacher sat down with him and went through a page of math, he would have no trouble with it, but as soon the teacher walked away he would forget it all.

At the same time, like Lewis, David says if he didn't do the work, it was usually no big deal with his teachers. He feels they assumed that because he couldn't walk, he couldn't learn. Eventually, he left St. Philip's Elementary because it wasn't accessible and he needed someone to take him to the washroom. He is not exactly sure when this occurred.

David then attended Virginia Waters School, a day school for students with disabilities. He says that at least now there was not the feeling of being separate. Here he went to kindergarten again. He says he was ten or eleven years old and bored with kindergarten. His opinion is that this school was worse. He believes their approach was that a person with a disability couldn't do

academic work. The students had school in the morning, then in the afternoon they did gym, arts and crafts, and went on outings. He was aware the teachers thought the students weren't going to learn anything anyway, which frustrated him.

When David was sixteen a new approach to education found him suddenly integrated into the mainstream at Mount Pearl Central High. At Virginia Waters there had been fifty students; at Mount Pearl there were 1,200. He says he was lost. He had reached about grade six at Virginia Waters, but when he joined the regular system he was tested and found to be at grade four level. He was not put into a regular classroom. Again, he believes they assumed he wasn't going to learn anything, anyway. The teachers did not seem supportive and he felt forgotten. He would try to pay attention, but knew he was behind—by then several grades had been skipped; he recalls drawing pictures in his exercise book during class. The sense of isolation again affected him: he felt socially alone and did not have friends. He says he was unprepared for this school.

He attended Mount Pearl Central High about a year, then left when he was seventeen. Before leaving, a teacher sat down with him and said, "Look, you're seventeen, you can't come back here." He was told he had grade nine equivalency. Although he left not feeling very confident, he began taking night classes. But David knew he would have trouble.

Throughout his life, David has been aware of the perception others have about his ability to learn; this has often worked against him psychologically. When he was at Cabot College he overheard a conversation between a teacher and a staff person at the back of the classroom. They said, "What's he doing here? He's never going to get this." Hearing this made him very angry and he left in tears. He felt there was nowhere else he could go.

A few years ago David was administered a wide range of tests at the Miller Centre. He knew there was something wrong, and the results of the tests confirmed this. He has a memory problem, likely related to the cerebral palsy. He can't multi-task, which means he can't deal with too much information at once. His mind tends to wander onto other things and he forgets things easily. While he is trying to hold onto the memory of one thing, it is not possible for him to understand and retain anything else he's being told. For example, he could not listen to a teacher speak *and* take notes at the same time. This explains why he often got math and geography mixed up and had difficulty organizing his materials.

Although he suspected what the test results would show, David says they had been “a last hope... there was still hope that maybe, through some miracle, I would get, you know, a reasonable education, and yet they told me it wasn’t possible. Now I knew that, but it was like a knife to the heart... Because it was so important to me to *be* something. To do something. I mean I look at people, my next door neighbour, he’s got a degree in computers. How could he *ever* understand that, right? And when they told me that, my whole world fell apart.”

It has occurred to David that he knows too much about himself. Now he won’t go out on a limb anymore and has little confidence about doing something new for the first time. On the other hand, he’s learned that he can’t work at the same pace as others and he doesn’t put himself under the clock as much anymore. But he wonders what to do. He’s in his mid-thirties, he’s finished with education. Now and then he works. He realized that after a certain point, he would never get any further; it’s too complicated and takes too long. “Education, sure it’s important and sure I should have it, but it’s just not going to happen.”

Andy

Andy is sixty years old and differs from the other individuals interviewed in that he does not have, and has never had, any respect for education. As a young boy his family lived just outside town, but when he was eight or nine years old they moved into St. John's where he attended as many as four different schools, both Protestant and Catholic, in as many years. His family moved around a lot, he says, because "that's the way they were, they used to buy property and sell it, that's the way they were." His father was an electrician and worked for United Towns Electric (Light & Power). He had four brothers and one sister, and was the third oldest.

Regarding school, he says, "I went in through the front door and out through the back one... Father used to drop us off at school, and we'd go down to the waterfront down the South Side and go to work long shore." Like Robert and Vince, Andy wanted to work more than he wanted to sit in a classroom. But his story differs in some important ways, largely because his schooling took place fifty years ago, at a time when discipline practices and children's rights were much different than they are today.

Andy began skipping school in the early grades, usually in order to search for work. In grades four and five, he and his brothers would do anything they could get their hands on. They worked for farmers when they still lived out of town. Only his sister attended school. At first his parents were unaware of this, but then the school board—"the government"—came looking for them, wanting to know why the children were not in school. Andy says he got a few beatings for it. Did this make him go to school? "Not likely. Not when the pain stopped."

By grade six Andy had had enough. He attended a day and a half of school, then gave it up altogether. "That was enough." His tone is bitter, disgusted, and proud. He bought the books in the morning and went back in the afternoon. The teacher began asking everyone how old they were, and when he got to Andy, he said, "Andy, how old are you?"

"And I told him and he said, 'Jeez, Andy, you're almost as old as I am,' and I said, 'Fuck you,' and took me books out and sold them."

Did his parents accept his dropping out of school? "No choice. I wasn't going to school." It seems they accepted it as long as he brought in the money. He says that what his father made wasn't much. "Some days down the long shore, made more in two days than me father made in a

week.” Children would show up for work in the morning, and, “If you could lift a case of milk from here to there, you were given a badge and put to work.” The badge had a number on it that allowed them to get paid. When he and his brothers started working and bringing money home, there were obvious benefits; they could afford to buy special items, like sweet bread. “No luxuries, my ducky, like you got today.” He says dessert was usually a slice of bread with a spoon of sugar—or molasses—and a drop of water to hold it together. The children would come home in the evening, chop and bring in the wood, or coal, and lug water a mile and a half.

Andy got married when he was nineteen, in 1961. He and his wife had eight children. Only the two girls finished school; the rest left in grade nine, ten, or eleven. Andy’s attitude about them finishing school: “You got your own mind to chose. Just don’t come back looking for the handout.” Although he didn’t encourage them to leave school, he has never seen much good to education. “Nobody wanted to learn. We learned more on the street than we ever learned in school, anyway, because in school you get slapped up ’longside the head or strapped on the hand.”

As an adult, Andy worked everywhere: truck driving, taxi companies, ’longshore, fishing, bricklaying, construction, whatever he could get his hands on. When asked if he thinks his not finishing school held him back, he says, “Not a bit. Far from being stupid, pretends I’m stupid.”

But there is more to Andy’s story than being under-privileged and living in a time when it was easy to leave school in grade six. Like most of those interviewed, he did not like school and as a result did not pay attention. He said his mind wasn’t in school. But when asked if they could have improved it, made it more interesting, he says, “How could they? They could only use a big strap and pound the shit out of you every day.” Did they do that? “Oh, a good many times.” Did he get in trouble a lot? “No, never got in no trouble, just wouldn’t do what they told me... shoved you in a closet or they had a big long leather strap, about that long, about that wide and about that thick...” When they were beaten because they didn’t do homework, Andy says, “We didn’t mind that. Only toughened you up. That only made you hard case, see.” Was it easier not to do the work and take the strapping? “That’s all, yes.”

He tells a story that took place when they still lived out of town. In winter, the young boys stashed their skates out in a field. They would go to school in the morning and in the afternoon, when it had warmed up, they went skating. There were six of them, and they were found out.

The teacher “took us out in the corridor and lined us all up and I guarantee you, the blood is coming out of the hands. Six of us. And the one fellow wouldn’t cry, my brother Don. Wouldn’t cry, wouldn’t give into him. The more he wouldn’t cry the more he got strapped. Never did give in first nor last. Never did.”

When Andy talks about school and the beatings, he is proud that he “took it” and that the teachers were unable to force him to do work he did not want to do. Understandably, he did not like the teachers and did not appreciate their methods of encouragement. He says he *could* do it, but didn’t want to because he was made and told to.

Teachers on Wheels

Teachers on Wheels is a registered charity supported by government grants and fund-raising activities. It serve about fifty learners, each matched with a volunteer tutor. In most cases the tutor visits the client's home, but it is not uncommon for sessions to take place at the tutor's home or a neutral location such as a library or the Teachers on Wheels' office. The program services St. John's and surrounding areas and there is no fee. The arrangement is made to suit learners' schedules, since many are shift workers and/or have childcare problems. Participation usually lasts about one year, with one to two sessions per year, thirty hours per week. According to Tom Dawe, executive director, most clients tend to keep their participation quiet, which the program respects. A certain level of secrecy is not uncommon, although the more extreme cases are those where a learner keeps the fact of his/her participation from family members. At times, Tom says that he feels he is in some kind of spy movie, with arrangements for phone calls from learners set for particular times, and from pay phones.

Discussion

Earning a wage seems to have played a major role during Robert's, Vince's and Andy's early years. While their parents respected education they, perhaps understandably, had a greater respect for money. This is particularly true in the case of Andy, whose contribution to the family income seems to have had a significant impact on his family's quality of life. Indeed, as long as he and his brothers were bringing home money, their dropping out of school was accepted.

The sense of having been "pushed through" the system was also paramount. This would have obvious disadvantages; the further behind one got the more difficult it would be to catch up; eventually, perhaps, it would be impossible. It is interesting that for most, there was an obvious awareness of this taking place, both now, in retrospect, as well as at the time. This was particularly true for Lewis and David. Their sense of being pushed along, of always being behind, of being, eventually, marginalised, seems to have resulted in frustration and despair for David, and certainly in a lack of confidence for both. This was also true for Tom, whose failure to keep up lowered his confidence level. Lack of confidence, combined with a sense of isolation, would, in turn, have aggravated the situation for all these individuals. Disinterest appears to have ultimately, if not initially, played a major role.

Clearly in the case of four of these individuals, and possibly for the remaining two, a disability of some kind put them at a disadvantage from the start: for Robert, it was a vision problem; for Tom, ADHD; and for both David and Lewis, a serious learning disability. Unfortunately for Robert and Tom, these handicaps went undiagnosed until adulthood; had they been recognized in boyhood it is possible they may have had access to more appropriate schooling and their lives may have taken different paths. This is particularly true for Tom, who clearly had greater success at learning when the program suited his needs. Yet even for David, the true nature of his learning disability went undiagnosed for so long—until he was an adult—that he was at a constant disadvantage, both emotionally and academically. He was shuffled between two widely different school systems: in the public system he was isolated and forgotten, and expectations were minimal; at the Rehab Centre and Virginia Waters School, although he had a greater sense of belonging, he was equally frustrated by their low expectations. In both systems,

it was assumed his physical disability translated into a mental disability. This was also true for Lewis.

With the exception of Lewis and Tom, the men interviewed seem to have experienced a certain amount of parental ambivalence regarding education. Many of the parents did not complete high school, which may have been a disadvantage both in terms of role modelling and the fact that the parents may have lacked the skills to help a child struggling with homework. Although there was no evidence of discouragement or opposition to education by family members, the experience of Tom Dawe shows that situations do exist in which adult learners conceal the fact of their upgrading from family members and/or neighbours. Such secrecy could result for a number of reasons, including embarrassment, lack of confidence, the possibility that family members are not aware of a literacy issue, as well as the possibility that family members actually oppose the upgrading.

Andy's story differs from the others in that his response to school was not one of frustration borne of a sense of unbelonging, or that he could not "figure it out." Andy did not want to figure it out or belong. He attended school at a time when there was a great deal of freedom in the implementation of corporal punishment by teachers. For Andy, this punishment, although meant to encourage him to do school work, accomplished the opposite. Andy, at twelve years of age, would not be forced into anything. He hated his teachers. Even today, he has a fierce disdain of education in general.

All six individuals interviewed were men. This was not intentional, but it is interesting to note that for at least two of these, the sisters (and/or daughters) did complete school whereas the brothers (and/or sons) did not. This may be due in part to a lack of job opportunities for girls, and in part to a difference in attitude towards girls.

In most cases, there does not appear to have been a single, overriding barrier to the attainment of literacy skills, but a combination of influences, both situational and personal. With Robert, for example, an undiagnosed vision problem, the attraction and opportunity to work, and a certain amount of ambivalence by school, family and the community at large resulted in poor performance. As an adult, he was able to conceal his inability to read, although it cost him in terms of frustration and lack of confidence. He is now faced with the additional challenge of

physical pain and discomfort, and the dulling effects of pain medication, both of which, he says, interfere with his studies at Rabbittown.

*Pushed Through and Second Chances:
Stories About the Right to Read*

Ed Kavanagh

Pushed Through and Second Chances: Stories About the Right to Read was first presented by the 'Longside Players at the Arts and Culture Centre's Basement Theatre from November 12 to November 15, 2003, with the following cast in multiple roles:

Roger Fowler

Jenny Gear

Ed Kavanagh

Susan Kent

Written and directed by Ed Kavanagh

BOB and PAUL

Scene One

(Paul enters and, glancing nervously over his shoulder, moves to the telephone. Finally, he picks up the phone and carefully dials. Bob, on the other side of the stage, enters and picks up.)

Bob: Yeah?

Paul: *(under his breath)* Bob, it's me.

Bob: Hello, you. Who are you?

Paul: It's *me*—Paul.

Bob: Hey. Listen, you gotta speak up. I think we got a bum line.

Paul: Okay.

Bob: What?

Paul: *(louder)* I said okay. I'll speak up. *(He glances over his shoulder.)* Listen, we still on for tomorrow?

Bob: Hang on. Let me check. We are. Two o'clock. But I'm not going there, right?

Paul: No, no. You don't need to come here. I'll go there.

Bob: Fine by me. Saves me a trip. You got the stuff?

Paul: Yeah. Well, some of it.

Bob: Some of it? Some of it is not good, Paul. We've discussed this. I need all of it.

Paul: I know—

Bob: I mean, you've had a week.

Janey: *(offstage)* Paul, who are you talking to?

Paul: Ah, nobody. *(Janey enters.)*

Janey: Nobody?

Paul: *(flustered)* Just a . . . a telemarketer.

Janey: Funny. I never heard the phone ring. *(Wryly.)* What'd you do—call them?

Paul: No, no. The phone rang. I guess it just rang . . . softly.

Janey: *(Looking at him like he's got ten heads.)* Okay. *(She grabs the phone out of his hand and speaks into it.)* Whatever it is we can't afford it. *(She hands the phone back to Paul.)* Hurry up. Supper's nearly ready. *(She exits.)*

Paul: *(to Bob)* You still there?

Bob: What was that all about?

Paul: Oh, just Janey kidding around. She's a real little . . . kiddier around. So tomorrow at two?

Bob: Tomorrow at two. See you then.

Paul: See you then. *(Paul hangs up and exits.)*

(End of Scene One)

Scene Two

(Paul is waiting at Bob's house. He picks up some papers from the desk and looks at them. Bob enters.)

Bob: So you made it.

Paul: I did.

Bob: Great. Let's have a look. *(Paul opens his briefcase and takes out an exercise book. He hands it to Bob who begins marking it.)* Uh-huh. Not too bad. *(Wryly.)* Would have been better if you'd done the *whole thing* like I asked you. And the comprehension . . . ? Uh-huh. *(He hands it back to Paul.)* That's the idea.

Paul: I can feel I'm getting a bit better.

Bob: You are. *(Pause.)* You could be getting a lot better, though.

Paul: Well, I don't have a whole lot of time, right.

Bob: Why is that? I mean you're still on disability?

Paul: Oh yeah. But there's always stuff I got to do. Stuff around the house. Groceries. Little jobs. It's no trouble to fill out the day. But I hits the books whenever I gets a chance.

Bob: Whenever you get a chance?

Paul: Yeah.

Bob: (*pause*) How long you been studying with me now?

Paul: A couple of months.

Bob: Sounds about right. (*Pause.*) Listen, this is none of my business, so you can tell me to, you know, give it a rest if you want . . . but . . .

Paul: What?

Bob: Your . . . wife.

Paul: We're not married—not yet. Maybe next year if we can find a few bucks. Her name's Janey.

Bob: Janey. She ever help you with your assignments?

Paul: Oh yeah. The scattered time. I mean she's busy too, right. She works at the Co-op. (*Bob nods. The negative implication finally strikes Paul.*) Hey, hang on now. That's *my* work. She never done it for me if that's what you thinks.

Bob: No, no. I don't think that. I mean, what'd be the point of that?

Paul: No point. I'm doing this because *I* want to. Because I want to get ahead.

Bob: I know. (*Pause.*) Is that what Janey wants?

Paul: I don't get you.

Bob: Does *Janey* want you to get ahead? Improve your reading?

Paul: (*flustered*) Of course she do. Why wouldn't she?

Bob: (*shrugging*) I don't know. I really don't know that. (*Pause.*) Is there any particular reason why we never have class at your house? I mean, that's how this service is set up. Most of my other students—I go to their places.

Paul: No. No reason. It's just that our place is always so cluttered—you'd never find a place to sit down. And I like to get out—get some fresh air.

Bob: Well, I'm all for fresh air. But . . . you know, your upgrading, your ABE—sometimes I get the impression it's just our little secret.

Paul: What? Don't be so fool—

Bob: I've been at this racket a long time, Paul. Seen it lots of times before. Usually it's someone who's got a job—but they're keeping the upgrading from their employer. Worried they're going to get fired if they're found out. Sometimes it's someone keeping it from a family member. Maybe they're embarrassed. But sometimes . . . sometimes it's because they know the family

member wouldn't like it. Wouldn't approve. I could never understand that—why someone would be like that. You got any theories?

Paul: No.

Bob: Maybe they're worried their partner will show them up. Get too grand. Or maybe they think their partner won't be interested in them anymore—you know, once their prospects are looking a little brighter. I don't know.

Paul: Me either. Look, that's got nothing to do with me. Are we doing any work today?

Bob: In a minute. I just want you to know something. If you're really serious about improving your education—and I think you are—you can't do it by yourself. In secret. You're going to need some support.

Paul: I've got plenty of support.

Bob: You're going to need to convince anyone who might need convincing that this is a good thing—for everyone.

Paul: I don't know why you're talking to me about this.

Bob: All right. If you say so. Okay, let's have a look at this essay.

(End of Scene Two)

Scene Three

(Paul is at home. He is holding a book and looking very thoughtful. Janey enters.)

Janey: You want anything?

Paul: No thanks.

Janey: *(sensing something in his tone)* You okay?

Paul: Yeah. *(Pause.)* No. *(Janey sits next to him.)* There's something I've got to tell you.

(Slow blackout. End of scene.)

MARGARET'S STORY

Narrator: There used to be an old TV show called *The Naked City*. I remember seeing re-runs when I was a kid. It was shot in black and white and it took place in New York City. As it opened, the camera would pan along high-rises and streets clogged with cars and people, and the announcer would say—

Announcer: (*offstage and in a deep announcer-type voice*) There are a million stories in the Naked City. This is one of them.

Narrator: Anyway, I've often thought about that. A million stories in the Naked City. I'd say the same thing is true for any city—any place, really. A million stories. And they're not always the kind you find in newspapers. Not always. (*Narrator picks up a newspaper and begins to read. Enter Man who sits next to her. He begins to surreptitiously read the paper. Narrator becomes irritated and attempts to shield the paper. Finally, Man becomes immersed in a story and can't contain himself.*)

Man: (*taking the paper from Narrator*) Get a load of this. It says here that nearly 50 percent of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are functionally illiterate. Can you believe that? *Fifty* percent.

Narrator: It does seem a tad high.

Man: (*jabbing a finger at the paper*) You know what that is? That's a crime, that's what that is. (*Man heads offstage mumbling to himself.*)

Narrator: (*calling after him*) Ah, excuse me: my paper.

Man: (*handing it back to her*) A crime. (*Exits.*)

Narrator: A crime. Now that's an interesting concept. Because if illiteracy really is a crime, then it begs the question: Who is the criminal? The government?

Government Guy: Hey, education is a *top* priority. Do you know how much of your tax dollar goes to education? And don't even get me started on health care. (*Exits.*)

Narrator: Yeah, yeah. Pretty scary, I'm sure. Now let me see. Teachers?

Teacher: Listen here, Miss Know-it-all. Give me a break. You try standing up in front of a bunch of saucy, foul-mouthed, hormone-crazed kids for five or six hours every day. Let me tell you something: It ain't pretty. (*He storms off.*)

Narrator: (*calling after him*) Ah, excuse me. “Isn’t” pretty is the proper construction, I believe. “Isn’t.”

Teacher: (*sticking his head around the backdrop*) Stuff it. I’ve got classes to prepare.

Narrator: Charming, I’m sure. Now let me see: government, teachers . . . Well, maybe it’s the students themselves.

(*Margaret enters and takes a seat at a table. She busies herself studying.*)

Narrator: (*excited*) Maybe it’s like an Agatha Christie novel where the criminal is the person you’d least expect. (*Margaret looks up.*)

Margaret: Who are you?

(*Law Clerk enters with a lawyer’s gown.*)

Law Clerk: (*passing Narrator the gown*) She’s a lawyer.

Margaret: What?

Law Clerk: A lawyer. There’s a rumour circulating that a crime has been committed. (*Leading Margaret centre.*) Have a seat please. Raise your right hand; left on the book. (*Margaret does so.*) Thank you.

Lawyer: We’d like to have a few words with you. (*To Margaret.*) Name?

Margaret: (*slightly bewildered*) Margaret Miller.

Lawyer: Age?

Margaret: (*offended*) None of your business.

(*Judge enters.*)

Lawyer: (*to Judge*) Your Honour . . .

Judge: Sorry. Overruled. Smacks of sexism.

Lawyer: Your Honour, the age of this person may very well have a bearing on the case.

Margaret: Case? What case? (*Looks to Lawyer.*) What’s going on?

Lawyer: (*to Judge*) Surely, you would agree that things in our fair province are different now than they were, say, 20 or 30 years ago.

Judge: Hmm. (*To Margaret.*) You will answer the question.

Margaret: (*sighing*) Well, if it’s that important to you, I’m 40. Jeez.

Lawyer: Forty? I must say, you’re remarkably well kept for your age.

Judge: May we continue?

Margaret: (*exasperated*) Continue what?

Judge: Your story. I want—(*He gestures around the theatre.*) we want—to see if there’s a crime connected with your story.

Margaret: *My story?*

Judge: Well, not your *whole story*. I mean we have to be practical. We’re interested in your . . . illiteracy.

Margaret: Oh. I see. Well, in some ways my illiteracy *is* my whole story. (*Pause.*) Strange. No one was ever interested before. Well, not until I came back to school . . . until I came here.

Lawyer: Which was?

Margaret: About a year ago.

Lawyer: And you were born in 1963?

Margaret: I was.

Lawyer: Where did you grow up?

Margaret: In foster homes.

Judge: What led to that?

Margaret: I don’t know. My father died when I was just a baby or a toddler. Maybe that had something to do with it. Anyway, there were six of us and we were all put into foster care.

Lawyer: Many different homes? Or just the one?

Margaret: I was in the same home from when I was about four to when I was sixteen. I can’t remember where I was before that. I was told I was in different homes.

Lawyer: Haven’t you asked your mother?

Margaret: No. I guess I could. But, well, we don’t talk that much.

Lawyer: You mean she didn’t even tell you *why* you were placed in foster care?

Margaret: No. Look, we’re not exactly what you’d call a close family. I’ve got a sister a couple of years younger than me. I just met her for the first time.

Judge: Okay. Get back to your schooling.

Margaret: (*laughs grimly*) *My schooling?*

Lawyer: You did go to school?

Margaret: Well, that’s debatable. (*Pause.*) When I was five years old I was put in a . . . “special” school.

Judge: How so?

Margaret: It was a school for people with . . . “problems.”

(*Lawyer and Judge look at her uncomprehendingly.*)

Margaret: (*sighs*) Mental problems.

Judge: I see.

Margaret: I didn't know what I was doing there. I mean, at first I didn't even know it *was* that kind of school—that it was different. I thought it was just a regular school.

Judge: What tipped you off?

Margaret: There was another school just across the street from where I lived. (*Margaret becomes a child. Lawyer, as the Foster Mother, takes her hand. They mime getting into a car and driving.*) I thought I'd be going there. And I was kind of excited about it. I mean, all the other kids—that's where they were going. But on that first day . . . well, my foster mother drove right past it. (*We see Margaret look over her shoulder at the school.*) I never ever went there.

Judge: Were you ever told why?

Margaret: No.

Lawyer: Did you ask?

Margaret: (*shrugs*) I don't remember. I guess I must have. I was pretty shy as a child, pretty quiet.

Judge: What was the “special” school like?

Margaret: Well, I guess I didn't know any better—at first.

Judge: But you began to notice things—differences—as you got older?

Margaret: As I got older. Yeah.

Lawyer: Such as?

Margaret: Well, the other kids—the kids in the regular school—some of them started calling me names . . .

(*Saucy Kid enters and points at Margaret.*)

Saucy Kid : Hey, get a load of the retarded kid! (*Exits laughing.*)

Margaret: They started calling me “retarded,” “handicapped.” I didn't know why they were calling me that. At first, I didn't even know what *handicapped* meant. And once I found out, I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't *feel* handicapped. But then I began to notice other things, too . . . the other kids in my school . . . well, it was pretty definite that a lot of them *did* have problems. I mean, we were hardly ever taught reading or writing.

Lawyer: What *were* you taught?

Margaret: It was mostly cooking or sewing or knitting. (*Actor enters and hands her the knitting.*) And there was no homework. The kids in the regular school were always talking about homework—how the teacher had “piled on” the homework. And . . . well, it was funny to me hearing that. Because I never seemed to have any. (*Holding up the knitting.*) I had . . . knitting.

Lawyer: So you didn’t get the basics.

Margaret: To put it mildly. (*Earnestly.*) You know, if just one person could tell me why I was put in that school then I’d say, “Okay.” But when I started doing upgrading, you know what they told me?

Literacy Teacher: (*studying some papers*) Ah, Miss Miller. Margaret, right? Come for your marks, have you? Let me see . . . (*Points to a sheet.*) Excellent work, Margaret. You’re doing well.

Margaret: (*sighing*) There’s nothing wrong with me. I mean, I’m no Einstein, but . . . (*Shakes her head.*) I just never had a chance.

Judge: Okay. So here’s the million-dollar question: Why do *you* think you were put there?

Margaret: Well, you didn’t know my foster mother—lucky for you. She was . . . Lots of times she wouldn’t even let me into the house. I remember a few times I had to sleep under a truck cab that was in the yard. Maybe she got extra money if I was in a special school—or maybe that’s what she thought . . . I don’t know.

Judge: Did you have any friends?

Margaret: Friends weren’t allowed. Besides, all I did was housework. Where was I going to find time to make friends?

Judge: Margaret, surely you must have been checked on from time to time. Didn’t social workers or anyone come around to see you?

Margaret: Oh, they came all right.

Foster Mother: Now, my dear, you know the rules. What do you say when the social worker comes today?

Margaret: (*quietly*) I don’t—

Foster Mother: What was that?

Margaret: I don’t say anything.

Foster Mother: That’s right. You leave all the talking to me . . . to the big people. (*Social Worker enters. Foster Mother adopts a phony smile.*) Mr. Sullivan. How nice to see you!

Social Worker: Bertha! (*Patting Margaret on the head.*) And this is young Madeleine . . . Marian?

Foster Mother: Margaret.

Social Worker: Margaret.

Foster Mother: Quiet, isn't she? Hardly ever says a word.

Social Worker: Wish my brood was like that. You can't shut that crowd up. (*Foster Mother leads him off.*)

Margaret: I suppose that's why everyone thought I was handicapped—because I never said anything. But I understood everything. I simply was not allowed to speak my mind.

Judge: So what happened when you finally left the foster home?

Margaret: When I was sixteen I got a job at McDonald's. (*Margaret puts on a McDonald's hat.*) I was still living in the foster home. (*Manager enters and passes her a cheque. Margaret smiles and looks excited. But then the smile evaporates from her face.*) But when I got my cheque, I couldn't sign my name to it—you know, to cash it. So my foster mother would put it in the bank for me. (*Foster Mother enters and takes the cheque.*) I was working five days a week. But when I'd go to the bank to check on my money there'd be hardly anything there.

Judge: What happened to it?

Foster Mother: Clothes, Margaret. You needed some new smokes—clothes. And you know how expensive they are. It's only fair that you should contribute now that you're out and working.

Margaret: Clothes. What a laugh! Every stitch I wore was a hand-me-down or from the Sally Ann. She wouldn't even give me money to go to the take-out. Sometimes I'd get babysitting jobs and she'd ask for that money, too. I used to hide some of it. But if she ever found out . . .

Judge: So you left the foster home when you were seventeen?

Margaret: Yeah. (*Margaret picks up her suitcase.*) Social Services set me up in a small apartment. (*We see her gaze around at the apartment.*) It wasn't the Hilton but, well, at least it was mine. But I didn't have a job. You can't read, people aren't exactly breaking down your door begging you to come work for them. It was hard going. After a while, I went to live with one of my brothers. (*Pause.*) It was the humiliation that was the worst. I never had any self-esteem. I'd always have to keep my hair cut short. I had nothing nice. Education is more than

reading and writing. *(Pause.)* I felt like I had no rights. I didn't even know what human rights were. It's hard to get a sense of yourself if you're not guided.

Lawyer: No one helped.

Margaret: *(shrugs)* Maybe they didn't know. I was called "handicapped" and the label stuck. You hit a person over the head with an idea enough times . . . after a while they start to believe it.

Judge: How are you today?

Margaret: Well, I still get nervous. Lots of times I can't sleep. When I was young I was always a bit afraid. I'm still like that. Sometimes it's hard to concentrate.

Lawyer: But you'd work?

Margaret: Yeah, a nightclub, a fish and chips shop—you get the idea. But I went back to school. Even with three kids. Oh yeah, I'm a mom. Two boys and a girl. They're all in regular school and doing well. And I'm going to stick with school. I'm trying to make up for lost time. *(Smiles.)* You know, I always had dreams—dreams of being more. Even when I was a child I dreamed of being a nurse. I had the energy, I had the dreams. But not the direction. Mistakes were made about me. I should have been put in a regular school. I should have been given a chance.

(Margaret moves centre and sings.)

Margaret's Song

Oh my heart's filled with longing,
for the eyes of a child.
The sweet tangled beauty,
of a garden gone wild.
I've walked through the fire,
found shelter from rain.
Sent dark demons flying,
on an outward bound train.

Yes, I've burned those old bridges,

*turned my face to the wind.
Searched deep in the heart for
the power within.
I've watched the high moon
as it waxes and wanes,
in hopes of a cure for
a heart filled with pain.*

Now the night lifts around me,
throws off its black cloak.
And I look for the fire
that lights a new hope.
If the past is a bird that just never takes wing,
I'll catch it and tame it
and teach it to sing.

*For I've burned my old bridges,
turned my face to the wind.
Searched deep in the heart for
the power within.
And I've watched the high moon
as it waxes and wanes,
in hopes of a cure for
a heart filled with pain.*

(Margaret moves to the table, sits back down and resumes studying.)

Judge: Well, that's certainly a story.

Lawyer: Bit of a *horror* story, really. But that was thirty years ago. Surely something like that couldn't happen today . . . *could* it?

Judge: Well, we'll see. Now, who's next?

Lawyer: *(putting on a clown nose)* Surprise, surprise!

Margaret: It's you!

ROGER'S STORY

Clown # 1: (*donning circus garb*) Ladies and gentlemen, presenting the amazing, electrifying, *true* story of Roger Fowler and his pursuit of an education!

Clown # 2: Or "Where Do *I* Fit In?"

Clown # 1: (*with a touch of over-enthusiasm*) Starring Roger Fowler! With a supporting cast of millions . . .

Clown # 2: Not that many.

Clown # 1: Thousands!

Clown #2: No, not that many.

Clown # 1: Hundreds!

Clown # 2: With a really *big* supporting cast.

Clown # 1: Of acrobats, fine-line walkers . . .

Clown # 2: Double-talkers, naysayers . . .

Clown # 1: Pen-pushers, red-tape spinners . . .

Clown # 2: And clowns of all description! You'll laugh, you'll cry—

Clown # 1: But mainly you'll cry.

Clown # 2: Yes, indeed. Welcome to Roger Fowler's personal circus. (*To Clown # 1.*)

Ringmaster, take it away.

Clown # 1: (*to Roger*) When did you start school?

Roger: I was nine.

Clown # 2: Nine? That's awfully late.

Clown # 1: Terribly late.

Clown # 2: Why so late?

Roger: (*gesturing to his chair*) Open your eyes. I had "medical" problems.

Clown # 1: Of course you did. Your background?

Roger: I was born with CP.

Clown # 2: Canadian Pacific?

Clown # 2: Cat Pee?

Roger: Cerebral palsy.

Clown # 2: Huh?

Roger: I was sent to live with a foster family. But I had to go to the Rehab Centre.

Clown # 1: For?

Roger: Rehab. What d'you think?

Clown # 1: I *knew* that. I meant for how long. And how old were you?

Roger: I was five. Sometimes I'd be there for six months at a time.

Clown # 2: Did you go to school?

Roger: I did: Kindergarten. I failed.

Clown # 1: Come again?

Roger: I failed Kindergarten.

Clown # 2: Well, Roger, that's an amazing feat. That deserves a ribbon. (*She pins ribbon on him.*) How did you manage that?

Roger: (*shrugs*) Beats me. Maybe my colouring strayed a little too far outside the lines. Maybe I ate the silly putty. Who knows?

Clown # 1: How long were you at the Rehab altogether?

Roger: Pretty regularly until I was nine. Then I went back to my foster family. They put me in the public school in St. Philip's.

Clown # 2: What grade?

Roger: Kindergarten.

Clown # 1: Excuse me? At nine years old? After four years of school at the Rehab?

Roger: Uh-huh.

Clown # 2: And how was that?

Roger: Well, I actually wasn't *in* the Kindergarten classroom at all—not physically. You see, that room happened to be downstairs.

Clown # 1: What?

Roger: The classroom was inaccessible. (*One Clown pushes Roger frantically around the stage, while the other periodically stops him.*) I couldn't get to it. No one thought about accessibility back then—not that things have changed much.

Clown # 2: So?

Roger: So they put me in the grade one class.

Clown # 1: But you were doing . . . ?

Roger: Kindergarten work.

Clown # 1: What was it like there? (*Clown # 2 moves to the far side of the stage. She does gym exercises, then sits and reads. Roger looks at her.*)

Roger: I felt isolated—separate. I couldn't participate, couldn't do gym like the rest of the kids. I didn't really have much to do with the other students. And the other kids seemed so smart . . . I'd see them reading stories and being asked questions . . . (*We see Clown # 2, as a child, reading. Teacher enters.*)

Teacher: Now, I heard that you just read the story about Cinderella.

Child: Oh, yes, sir.

Teacher: And what's that story all about?

(*Child improvises an enthusiastic, breathless rendition of the main points of Cinderella. Roger stares at her.*)

Teacher: Well, I think that just about covers it.

Roger: I couldn't understand how they did it. How they could know so much. Have so much to say.

Clown # 1: How did the teachers treat you?

Roger: Oh, it wasn't that they weren't nice. But they didn't seem to care if I did any work or not.

Teacher: Hey, Rog. How about those Leafs?

Roger: I guess they thought that because I couldn't walk, I couldn't learn. Story of my life.

Clown # 2: And then?

Roger: I went to Virginia Waters—a school for kids with disabilities.

Clown # 1: (*cheerfully*) That must have been better.

Clown # 2: Much better.

Roger: In some ways. At least now I didn't feel so (*Both clowns pull their chairs up close to him.*) *isolated.*

Clown # 2: I can feel a "but" coming on.

Clown # 1: Definitely a big "but" coming.

Roger: But . . . they put me in Kindergarten again.

Clown #2 & Clown # 1: Again?

Clown # 1: That's one, two . . .

Clown # 2: *Three* times.

Roger: Yes. I've often thought it must be some kind of record. Anyway, I was ten or eleven years old. And you know something? (*Clowns look at him.*) I was *bored* with Kindergarten.

Clown # 2: No kidding.

Clown # 1: But, still, that school was better . . . wasn't it?

Roger: Worse. There was virtually no emphasis on academic work. If you were disabled . . .

Clown # 1: You couldn't do it.

Clown # 2: Same old story.

Roger: Same old story. We did some academics in the morning, but then it was gym, arts and crafts, outings. I don't think the teachers thought we *could* learn—at least not very much. I was there for five years. And then came the big move.

Clown # 1: To?

Roger: Mount Pearl Central High. I was sixteen. Times had changed. Walkmans were all the rage. Michael Jackson was at the top of the pop charts. Integration was the buzzword, and I was buzzed right over to Mount Pearl Central High. I went from a school with about fifty students to one with over 1200.

Clown # 1: Talk about culture shock.

Roger: It was *quite* a buzz.

Clown # 2: But at least now you were in a *real* school.

Roger: Depends on what you mean by real. You see, I had gotten to Grade 6 at Virginia Waters—

Clown # 2: There's another "but" coming.

Roger: But when they tested me at Mount Pearl they found that I was at Grade 4 level.

Clown # 1: So where did they put you?

Roger: Where do you think?

Clown # 1 & Clown # 2: Kindergarten!

Roger: No, no. The dreaded "SE." (*Teacher places sign with "Special Education" on it around Roger's neck.*) Special Education. And even there . . . Well, I tried to pay attention, but I knew I

was behind. It was the same old story—isolation. I felt forgotten. I remember drawing pictures in my exercise book to pass the time. I put up with it for about a year. I mean, where was I going to go? Then the teacher came to me one day . . .

Teacher: Look, you're seventeen years old. You can't come back here.

Clown # 1: Where did you go?

Roger: Well, I wasn't about to give up. Oh yes, I was spunky in those days. So I tried night school. But I always had the feeling that other people thought I couldn't learn. And—I'll admit it—I was beginning to wonder myself. Anyway, it all came to a head one day. We were working on an assignment. There were a couple of teachers at the back of the classroom.

Clown # 1: (*as Teacher*) What's he doing here?

Clown # 2: (*as Teacher*) He's never going to get this.

Roger: It was like a knife to the heart. I left in tears. (*Clowns begin to remove their clown garb.*)

Clown # 1: And since then . . . ?

Roger: At least the circus is over. I don't try so hard anymore. I did some more upgrading—just for myself, really. I managed to land a job or two . . .

Clown # 2: But?

Roger: Well, things are a bit slow.

Clown # 1: What do you think should have been done—I mean, to help you?

Roger: That's a tough one. When I was at Cabot College I was "assessed." Story of my life.

They found I have a problem multi-tasking—you know, keeping track of more than one thing at a time. It's probably got to do with my CP. But it doesn't mean that I'm not talented, that I don't have something to give. I'd like to be a counsellor, work with people with problems I can understand, relate to. I *know* I can do it. But you've got to have that piece of paper, and, well, that's not going to happen for me. Anyway, at least the circus has left down. Probably just as well. (*Pause.*)

Clown # 2: (*blows noisemaker*) Well, we said you'd cry.

(*Slow blackout*)

ANDY and ALLAN

(Enter Andy and Allan.)

Andy: Hard story. But sure you didn't need to be crippled—what do they call it these days?—"disabled"—to strike out with school. I had no time for school myself. School? I went in the front door and out the back one. Father used to drop us off at school, and we'd go down to the waterfront, down the Southside, and go to work 'longshore.

Allan : I dropped out in grade seven. It wasn't that I had too much trouble with school, but I couldn't understand everything I read. I guess it made me restless. Why stay in school when I could be out earning money?

Andy: Yes, that's right.

Allan : I mean, in a small town you get a certain age and you go to work. Education was respected but so was work. Work meant money and there was thirteen of us.

Andy: Oh yes. Big families back then.

Allan : Father was off working on the boats and Mom was raising the kids. What I brought in helped. And they didn't encourage me too much. I don't suppose I can blame them. They weren't educated either. And like I say, work was everything. When I told my parents I was leaving they just said, "Oh, going to work, are you?"

Andy: We started skipping in the early grades. Me and my brothers would do any kind of work we could get our hands on—farms, gas stations. After a while it was only the sisters that went to school. Of course, it was no time before the school board—the government—came looking for us. We got lots of strappings but that never changed my mind—not when the pain stopped. Anyway, I gave up for good in grade six. Went for a day and a half and gave up. The teacher, see, went around asking everyone how old they were, and when he got to me he said, "Andy, how old are you?" And I told him and he said, "Jeez, Andy, you're old enough to be my father." And I said, "Shag you and the horse you rode in on," took me books out and sold 'em.

Allan : You didn't.

Andy: I did. Sold them.

Allan : What about your parents?

Andy: They had no choice in the matter. I wasn't going to school, and as long as I was bringing in the money they didn't care. Sure, some days down on the long shore I made more in two days than me father made in a week. It made no difference how old you were. If you could lift a case of milk from here to there you were given a badge and put to work. Once me and the brothers had some money coming in we could get a few extras in the house. There was no luxuries back then—not like you got now. All we'd ever have for dessert was a slice of bread with a spoon of sugar or molasses and a drop of water to hold it together. And, sure, on top of the work we'd still have to chop wood, bring in the coal, lug water a mile and a half.

Allan : I found a job in a pizza place. My reading wasn't the best but I didn't have to know a lot either. Everything was abbreviated. Cheese was C. Pepperoni was P. It was like its own language.

After a while I managed to get my own pizza business going. It was a franchise. It went okay for a while but then I ran into some problems.

Andy: Oh yeah?

Allan : The contract. Basically, I couldn't read it properly. I ended up getting screwed big time. I got so fed up . . . went back to school. Not that I wasn't nervous when I started. I wasn't so young anymore, and I didn't know if I could handle being in a classroom six hours a day. I mean I was used to movement—being on the go. But I stayed with it. Good thing. I mean, work has changed. It's not like the old days anymore. There's this older fellow in the class with me. He used to be an electrician on the American base in Argentina. He didn't know how to read or write the whole time he worked there. Hard to believe, hey?

Andy: Oh, there was a good many like him.

Allan : What he'd do, he'd work by matching the coloured wires: black goes here, green goes there. I can see him getting away with that today. Yes, work has changed. Anyway, I guess I quit school because it was easy to quit—quit and go after the money. I should have stayed. Gone on to university.

Andy: Don't be so foolish, b'y. Sure, you're doing all right.

Allan : Yeah. But you know what I would've *liked* to have done?

Andy: What?

Allan : You'll laugh.

Andy: *What?*

Allan : Naval architecture.

Andy: Gentle God!

Allan : Although I'll admit it's a bit of a stretch from selling pizza to naval architecture. But when I was young there were no long-term goals. It was day-to-day existence: put bread on the table. No one ever said to me: Now, Allan, my son, you know what you should be? A naval architect. Some joke. Anyway, it's only now I'm getting a handle on the business side of it. I mean, I can do my books now without shaggin' them up. In the early days . . . well, it was a mess. I mean, you're running a business you got to know where to put the money, what shortcuts to take. And it's not just business anyway. It's self-esteem. Education boosts your confidence. That's what going back to school gave me.

Andy: Fair enough. Listen, you got your own mind to choose. Just don't come back looking for a handout. That's what I think about it. The crowd I grew up with? Nobody wanted to learn. We learned more on the street than we ever learned in school. School? All that happened there was that you'd get slapped up 'longside the head or strapped on the hand. No, my son, I worked. Truck driver, taxi companies, 'longshore, fishing, bricklaying, construction—whatever I could get me hands on. I'm not stupid—far from it. Pretends I am sometimes. But I mean, how was I supposed to like school? The teachers had straps the size of your arm and they poundin' you every day. Shovin' you into closets if you didn't have your homework done. Anyway, I didn't mind—only toughened you up. Only made you a hard case, see. I remember this one winter. We'd stash our skates out in the field on the way to school. Then, in the afternoon, when it had warmed up, we'd go skating. Anyway, sure enough we got caught. The teacher took us out in the corridor and lined us all up and I guarantee you the blood was coming out of the hands. And my brother Don wouldn't cry—wouldn't give in to them. Never did give in first nor last. Never did. God knows I'm no expert, but they had some funny notions about how to teach you—keep you interested in going to school. My son, the stories I could tell you. Like I knew this fellow—Nipper Mooney his name was. It was back years ago. We went to school together. We were only tots. Anyway, we had this old battleaxe of a nun . . . what was her name? Sister Mary Ig- something. Well, my son, what a hard case. Sure, it was a wonder I got to grade six . . .

FIRST NIPPER MOONEY SCENE

Sister Mary Ignatius: Sometimes Sister Mary Ignatius dropped into Nipper's class to give arithmetic bees and spelling bees.

Sister Bernadette: Sister Bernadette, Nipper's home room teacher, didn't like this, but Sister Bernadette was young and pretty and . . .

Sister Mary Ignatius: And Sister Mary Ignatius was old and she was the principal. If the principal wanted to barge into class and interrupt phonics or religion or vocabulary and give an arithmetic bee, why that's exactly what she was going to do.

Sister Bernadette: She could probably put Sister *Bernadette* in the arithmetic bee if she really wanted to. So Sister Bernadette just smiled tightly and put away her books and watched as Sister Mary Ignatius lined the children up around the classroom.

Sister Mary Ignatius: She gave each student a word to spell or a sum to do. If you gave the wrong answer she rapped you across the knuckles with her pointer: hard.

Nipper: Nipper was a good speller but he hated the sums; he hardly ever got the sums right.

Billy Abbott: Billy Abbott stood just across from Nipper under the painting of the Sacred Heart. Billy Abbott was smart. He never gave a wrong answer. But Sister Mary Ignatius made him nervous: he kept his eyes on her pointer; he fidgeted and shuffled his feet and bit his lips.

Nipper: And one day, between bites, Nipper noticed something: Billy Abbott mouthed the answers to himself. *Everybody's* answer. So when Sister Mary Ignatius gave Nipper a hard sum . . .

Sister Mary Ignatius: "Nipper Mooney. $6 \times 4 + 3 - 11$. Equals . . . ?"

Nipper: Nipper glanced at Billy Abbott and saw *sixteen* form on his lips. (*To Sister Mary Ignatius.*) "Sixteen, Sister."

Sister Mary Ignatius: Sister Mary Ignatius stepped back and looked at him. He had never answered so quickly. "Very good. You're getting better."

Nipper: Nipper wondered if watching Billy Abbott's mouth was a sin. If he forgot to say the Act of Contrition some night and the Russians dropped the atomic bomb, would he go to hell? Was he cheating? Was watching someone's mouth the same as copying? It wasn't his fault that Billy Abbott moved his lips, was it? Then one day Nipper noticed that Barb Cleary was looking at

Billy Abbott's mouth, and so was Alice Dillon. And then even poor old God Love 'im Roy Driscoll, the dumbest kid in the class, got the right answer to a sum, and Nipper knew *he'd* been looking at Billy Abbott's mouth, too.

Sister Mary Ignatius: Sister Mary Ignatius knew something was going on.

Nipper: Nipper saw her eyes squinting behind her glasses and her nose twitching just like Blackie's, Ronnie Sheehan's setter. He could tell what she was thinking . . .

Sister Mary Ignatius: "Has the Holy Ghost descended upon the children with all the right answers? And why has Nipper Mooney improved so much in the arithmetic bees, but he nearly always fails the written tests? (*To Sister Bernadette.*) Sister Bernadette, do you have an opinion on this matter?"

Sister Bernadette: But Sister Bernadette just smiled her pretty smile and shrugged.

Sister Mary Ignatius: So Sister Mary Ignatius turned to Nipper. "Well, young man?"

Nipper: "I . . . I guess I just think better standing up." Then the thing that Nipper Mooney hoped would never happen, but knew *would* happen, *had* to happen, finally happened.

Billy: (*with raspy voice*) Billy Abbott didn't come to school. Billy Abbott had to get his tonsils out.

Sister Mary Ignatius: And the next day Sister Mary Ignatius swept into the class and announced a surprise arithmetic bee. "You know the drill, boys and girls. Everyone line up. Chop, chop."

Nipper: Now it was Nipper who was fidgeting and shuffling. And so were Barb Cleary and Alice Dillon and God only knew who else.

Sister Mary Ignatius: Sister Mary Ignatius gave Nipper his sum. " $5 \times 8 + 3 - 31$. Equals . . . ?"

Nipper: He blinked and looked at her.

Sister Mary Ignatius: " $5 \times 8 \dots + 3 \dots - 31 \dots$ Equals . . . ?"

Nipper: But Nipper couldn't concentrate; it was all gobbledegook. Sister Mary Ignatius sounded just like the parish priest speaking Latin. And it was hard to think when everyone in the whole class was looking at you—

Billy: Everyone except Billy Abbott who was home hove off on his chesterfield watching the cartoons and eating tons of ice cream because when you got your tonsils out you couldn't eat *real* food.

Sister Mary Ignatius: And when Sister Mary Ignatius gave him the sum a *third* time . . . “5 x 8 + 3—“

Nipper: “I don’t know, Sister.”

Sister Mary Ignatius: “I don’t know? Was that what you said? *I don’t know?*”

Nipper: “Yes, Sister.”

Sister Mary Ignatius: “I don’t know is *not* an answer. That’s something little boys and girls who don’t go to school would say—boys and girls who don’t have the *privilege* of going to school: like the little boys and girls over in China and Africa. If someone gives *them* a sum they have the right to say ‘I don’t know, Sister.’ But you’re not a little Chinese boy, are you?”

Nipper: “No, Sister.”

Sister Mary Ignatius: “And are you a little African boy?”

Nipper: “No, Sister.”

Sister Mary Ignatius: “That’s right. You’re a little *Newfoundland* boy who has the *privilege* of going to St. Brigid’s so he can learn his sums and not grow up ignorant. Correct?”

Nipper: “Yes, Sister.”

Sister Mary Ignatius: Well, then. What is the answer to the sum? Concentrate.

Nipper: Nipper stared into Sister Mary Ignatius’s pale eyes; the light reflected off her gold-rimmed glasses. He felt dizzy. He clenched his jaw and prayed for the Holy Ghost to fly down from heaven with the right answer. Nothing happened. Nipper knew he wasn’t a little Chinese boy or a little African boy, but he said again, “I don’t know, Sister. I don’t know.”

Sister Bernadette: But even as he said this he saw Sister Bernadette get up from her desk and come toward him. She stood behind Sister Mary Ignatius and looked at him over the principal’s shoulder. Her mouth moved . . . silently.

Nipper: “Twelve. The answer is twelve.”

Sister Mary Ignatius: (*smacking her lips in satisfaction*) “Right. Twelve.” (*Brandishing her pointer around the room.*) “See, boys and girls, what happens when you concentrate?”

Nipper: Nipper Mooney and all the children in the class shuffled their feet and nodded. “Oh yes, Sister. We see. We see.”

SECOND NIPPER MOONEY SCENE

Narrator: The only books in the Mooney house, other than schoolbooks and Sunday Missals, were mostly religious books: *The Family Catechism*, *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, the Bible, *Irish Saints and Martyrs* and two volumes of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*. But there was also a ten-volume *Universal World Reference Encyclopaedia*. Nipper's mother often told how they got it.

Nipper's Mother:

We had no money, God knows—us just married and Pat with no job and not the one bit of interest in farming. Anyway, I was washing up the breakfast dishes this August morning—sweltering, it was—when there came a knock on the door. I thought it might be that fella Sparkes from Deep Harbour sellin' fish. I got my purse and went out planning on buying a couple of pounds of fresh fish, and there was this man—young man he was, nice-looking—standing there all dolled off in a jacket and tie, carrying a suitcase and sweatin' like ten workhorses. And, of course, the first thing I thinks is: Jehovah's Witness. I opened the door wondering how I was going to get rid of him—not that I got anything against the Jehovah's Witnesses, but if you starts talkin' to 'em, my dear, they'll *wear* you right out. Well, sure enough, the door was hardly cracked when he started in giving his spiel. But he wasn't a Jehovah's Witness at all. He was a salesman. Selling encyclopaedias. I was so relieved he wasn't a Jehovah's Witness I just let him talk. He asked me if I had any children and of course I said yes, and he said well this was my lucky day because the encyclopaedia would be a *wonderful* educational tool for the child—keep his school marks way above everyone else's. I was just about to tell him that Nipper was only a little baby and we wouldn't be wanting anything like that for years and years, when he was in the door and sittin' at the kitchen table with one of the books out showing me some picture in it—I don't know what it was now—some tropical place—Africa, I believe. Well, he had me right bewildered. It was like I was glamoured by the fairies. And he kept on yakking away until by the end of it I believe I would've bought *two* sets of the bloody books just to get rid of 'im. And Pat? Well, you can imagine. “You bought *what*? How much? For a set of *books*?” He was that upset and sure I couldn't blame him. I felt awful about it—offered to cancel the order. But he said, “No, no. You bought 'em, we'll keep 'em.”

Proud, see. Anyway, we got the encyclopaedias. And what use they are, I don't know. I never looked at 'em and neither did Pat. I don't know what ever happened to that salesman—became a politician, I suppose.

Narrator: Like the silverware and the good china, the encyclopaedia was something fragile, grand and best left untouched. Nipper's father made a walnut bookcase, and there the books stayed—always dusted but never opened since the day of their delivery.

Nipper: But although there were few books in Nipper's house and no library in the community, there was a library at school. Nipper soon came to know it very well.

THIRD NIPPER MOONEY SCENE

Narrator: Nipper read all kinds of books: novels, history, the encyclopaedias. Sometimes he found pictures of art nudes, which he shared with Joe Barnes. Those Manets and Raphaels were about the only thing that could get him into the library when he wasn't forced to be there. Barnes hated reading—especially poetry. Once he asked Nipper to help him with an assignment on E.J. Pratt's "Sea-Gulls."

Nipper: (*reciting*)

*For one carved instant as they flew/The language had no simile—
Silver, crystal, ivory Were tarnished./Etched upon the horizon blue.*

Joe: What the frig is a "carved instant?" It don't make no sense.

Nipper: It's not supposed to make *sense*. It's supposed to make you *feel* something.

Joe: Yeah. Sick.

Narrator: Later, in class, Barnes put up his hand.

Brother Crane: Yes, Mr. Barnes?

Joe: Hey, Burr, you know these famous authors we studies? You know, like E.J. Pratt and Shakespeare and Alfred, Lord Tennyson and all them guys?

Brother Crane: Well, not personally, Mr. Barnes, but I am acquainted with their work.

Joe: Well, like, they're the best writers in the whole world, right?

Brother Crane: Yes, Mr. Barnes.

Joe: So, like, they're supposed to be great . . . communicators, right?

Brother Crane: I believe an argument could be made for that position, yes.

Joe: The best communicators in the *whole world*, right?

Brother Crane: (*sighing*) Do you have a point, Mr. Barnes?

Joe: Well, I was wonderin', like, if they're such great communicators, how come we need someone like you to tell us what they're tryin' to say?

Nipper: It was the only time Nipper had seen Brother Crane lost for words.

PUSHTHROUGH

Narrator # 1: Those of you interested in the history and geography of our fair province will know of the community of Pushthrough. Resettled now, Pushthrough is located some 20 km northwest of Hermitage.

Narrator # 2: But although no one lives in Pushthrough anymore, research has shown that it could easily be repopulated, many times over, by all those citizens of Newfoundland and Labrador who were “pushed through” our school system.

Narrator # 1: Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Pushthrough is not just a dot on a map. For a long time pushing through was a practice that gave the impression of dealing with a problem. But, of course, that’s all it was . . .

Narrator # 2: An impression, an illusion. The reality . . . ?

Narrator # 1: Well, the time always comes when the piper must be paid. Welcome to *our* community of Pushthrough.

(Enter Robert and Tony. They sit centre stage and look around the room. Pause.)

Tony: What are you at?

Robert: Not much. Not too bloody much.

Tony: Me either. Lived here long?

Robert: My whole life, it seems like.

Tony: Me, too. Tony—from Town originally.

Robert: Robert. Grew up in Trinity Bay.

Tony: You didn’t finish school either?

Robert: Not likely. No, b’y. School wasn’t my thing.

Tony: No, b’y. Me, either.

Robert: Reading, writing, spelling—not my thing. From the time I was eight years old, I knew I was going to quit when I was sixteen.

Tony: Quite an ambition to have from such a young age.

Robert: *(pause)* Well, a lot of my friends were older than me—some of ’em by a good bit. Most had already dropped out, were working. Seemed to be doing okay. I just figured I could do it,

too. And school . . . I found it hard—right from the start. I didn't act up or anything; I wasn't a discipline problem. But . . . oh, I found it hard.

Tony: Did you ever pass?

Robert: Jeez, b'y, I passed all the friggin' time. That was the problem. Put it this way: I *moved*—went up through the grades with everyone else. But pass? (*Shakes his head.*) The only thing I ever passed in my life was the bloody salt shaker.

Tony: (*laughing*) Friggin' kidney stone.

Robert: I was pushed through. I knew from the beginning. They were just pumping me on. I guess they wanted to keep me in school. (*Laughs.*) Don't ask me why. And it wasn't easy, let me tell you. I loved working.

Tony: Me, too. Cars. Always wanted to be a mechanic. Hardly a day goes by when I'm not working on some car. I can put a motor and a transmission in a car in about five or six hours.

Robert: That right?

Tony: Yes, b'y. I was always like that. Just took to it. Too bad it wasn't the same thing with the books.

Robert: I got into working when I was twelve. Yeah, every summer. I'd do whatever I could to make a few dollars. Then I started skipping school to work instead.

Tony: You get caught?

Robert: (*shrugs*) No one seemed to care that much. I used to wait for the school bus near a service station. "Robert," the manager would say. "You want to fill in on the pumps for me today? Could probably scare you up a few bucks." What would you do? I mean, I hated school. I'd rather pump gas any day of the week.

Tony: What about your teachers?

Robert: They might ask where I'd been. And I'd tell them. Anyway, they all knew. They'd see me pumping gas or out on the roads flagging. Besides, lots of kids were leaving school to work in the fish plants. Maybe if I'd been doing better the teachers might have called home, asked where I was at. But I was doing so piss-poor . . . I guess they just let me slide.

Tony: Right. What did your parents think?

Robert: Sure, neither one of them finished school. My stepfather was a fisherman all his life; Mom worked in fish plants. At first, they told me not to quit—got on my case a lot about staying in school. Still, they didn't say much about me skipping a day here and there to work. In the

early grades they'd grumble—couldn't understand why I never had homework. Then, I guess, they seen that I was going more towards the working side. They just left me alone, like. But in the younger grades they did get on my case, a lot, right, where I was having so much trouble with learning. In the end, I missed a lot of school—quit at Level Four. Only needed four credits for my high school.

Tony: So why not stick it out?

Robert: It was just after Easter. I'd been out of school a week or so working. When I went back, me and one of the teachers got into it and I just walked out and never went back.

Tony: Pissed you off, did he?

Robert: He said something about I need his course . . . “You'll never pass it while I'm teaching it.” And I looked at him and said, “Well, you can keep your f'ing course.” And I left. Me and he got into it. Like I said to him, “I got to *work* for my money. My parents don't *hand* me money the way you do to your spoiled little brats.” Stuff like that, back and forth. I just left and never went back. (*Sighs.*) Anyway, it's probably just as well.

Tony: Why?

Robert: Well, right from Kindergarten I was told that I was lazy. *I* never thought that. But Mother and Father couldn't understand why I couldn't pick out the schoolwork, figure it out. But you know something? All my life, whenever I was reading—trying to read—the words on the page would look . . . like a snowstorm. They tested my eyes and told me I had 20/20 vision. But ever since I was a youngster, the words . . . they'd always look right blurry. I couldn't make 'em out right. I just found out what the problem is. I got some kind of condition . . . my eyes . . . it's hard for me to focus in sync. I'm doing eye therapy now. (*Laughs.*) Can you believe that? *Eye* therapy. Anyway, it's been getting a bit better.

Tony: What happened when you finally left school?

Robert: Worked for a while pumping gas. After that I headed off to the oil patch—Alberta. Then I went to Ontario. I worked for a company installing sprinkler systems. Worked there six years. I liked it.

Tony: Did the company know about your reading?

Robert: That's what they never. I had my own ways of gettin' by. Like sometimes I worked in one of the warehouses. The parts were labeled, but they were also numbered, see? I had no trouble with the numbers. And I knew where everything went, anyway—after a while. Also, if I

knew what work was being done, I'd know what parts were needed. Lots of times there were blueprints with diagrams. That kind of thing I can follow. But give me a bunch of parts with no diagram, just a sheet of instructions . . . well, it's better to stick a needle in my eye.

Tony: How did you feel about all that? Hiding stuff from people?

Robert: Got used to it, I suppose. But lots of times it was frustrating. The worst was knowing I was always lagging behind the other guys. But it was a good job. Every few months you might get a little nudge up the ladder, a few extra bucks. And travel—lots of travel: Alabama, Niagra Falls, Pennsylvania, all over Ontario.

Tony: Jeez, b'y, how come you didn't stick with it?

Robert: (*pause*) It was October, 2002. I was working. I had to remove this panel, and I was walking along a three-inch beam to get to it. Never made it. I fell. Eleven and a half feet. Landed on my feet and broke my back. I haven't worked since. On the goddamn painkillers. (*Pause.*) That's the one thing I never counted on when I was still shaggin' around with school—you know, just waitin' to quit. I'd say to myself: You can work. You're strong, you're not stunned. There'll always be something you can do. Never thought the body'd give out or I'd break meself up. It was quite the surprise when it happened. (*Pause.*) Anyway, I'm back in school. And it's helping. But the reading . . . it's still a challenge. Wanna have a laugh? You know what level they said I was at when they tested me for my upgrading? One. *One*. And they telling me I was four credits shy of graduating high school? I don't bloody think so. Pushed through. All my life. And what did it get me? A broken back in Ontario. Pills to control the pain. Anyway, I'm still not crazy about sitting in a classroom. Especially now, after the fall. But I'm gonna stick with the upgrading. If I ever get my grade twelve, I'll go to trade school. What about you?

Tony: Oh, same thing. You know how they're always talking about fellas like us falling through the cracks? Well, it was a bloody gorge I fell through. Yes, b'y, the ground opened right up. I mean, I knew from the beginning that I needed special help. Reading, science—it was like bloody Greek to me. But it was like the teachers didn't notice. They'd just push me ahead. What in the name of God was the sense in that? I didn't know anything. Still and all, they pushed me through—every grade up to grade eight. I finally came across this teacher then . . . She was nice. She took me out of the regular class and she'd put me in her class for the day. She knew I didn't have the first clue what was going on. She'd say, "Tony, don't be afraid to ask if you don't understand something." Like I said, she was all right. But there'd be stuff up on the chalkboard

and I wouldn't know what the hell it was. And how was I going to ask? Sacred Heart, I'd have me hand up every two minutes. And what would I be doing? Shaggin' up everyone else. If I had her to myself I might have made a bit of progress . . .

Robert: (*nudging Tony*) Oh, yeah. Hot piece, was she?

Tony: What? (*Indignant.*) No, b'y! It wasn't like that. Show some respect. She was the only teacher ever done anything special for me.

Robert: So what did you do?

Tony: Quit. Said "Shag this." The parents weren't too pleased. I mean, they used to try to help me, right—you know, with my schoolwork. They really got on my case when I said I wasn't going back. Anyway, a while after that I *did* go back—Holy Heart. But I only lasted a day and a half. I remember sittin' in the classroom looking around at the other students. I could tell right away it was going to be the same thing. So I left. Couldn't face it, b'y. Figured I'd have to write the education off for a bad job.

Robert: But you went back again. I mean, you're doing the upgrading too?

Tony: I am. And I've learned more in the last year and a half—you know, one-on-one—than I ever did in all my regular school time combined.

Robert: What made you go back?

Tony: It was a couple of years ago. My father . . . he had a heart attack. He's all right now. I wasn't home when it happened. He was there with my mom and my uncle. And when they were loadin' the old man into the ambulance my uncle told Mom to leave me a note so I'd know what happened. And she had to tell him there was no sense in leaving me a note. I couldn't read. I'll bet my uncle nearly had his own heart attack when he heard that.

Robert: He didn't know?

Tony: Why should he know? We were close but . . . listen, do you go around broadcasting to your whole family that you can't read?

Robert: Not exactly.

Tony: Goddamn right. Anyway, it was my uncle who set me up with the upgrading.

Robert: Sounds like a good fella.

Tony: He was. He died. Got a brain tumour just a couple of months after the old man's heart attack. The last thing he said to me was: "*Stay in school.*" So I am. And, like I say, with the one-on-one I'm doing okay. (*Shaking his head.*) You know, the regular school system just wasn't for

me. I can't understand why I wasn't helped more. They did have some programs for kids with reading problems, but they didn't reach me. At least I'm doing okay with the upgrading. And I'm earning it this time, too. I'd just as soon make it or break it on my own. But the regular school? Pushed through. Fell through the cracks—the gorge. Anyway, I'm sticking with the upgrading. Might end up being a mechanic yet. There isn't a car made that don't need fixing at some point and I love the work.

(They sit and resume looking around. Pause.)

Robert: Pushthrough.

Tony: Hell of a place.

Robert: You said it.

Tony: Come on. Let's get out of here.

Robert: *(looking around)* Think we're ready?

Tony: We friggin' well better be.

(They exit.)

Mirror, Mirror

Mirror, mirror false and changing, on my bedroom wall
Who's the girl so deep inside you, is she the fairest of them all?
In your frame a strange reflection, haunts my nights and days
Mirror, mirror, it's time to make a change.

Wandering lost through the streets and alleys, of this harbour town
Blown by winds that whip me coldly, can't keep my feet on the ground
But there's a voice that sings inside me, through the wind and rain
Mirror, mirror things are going to change.

Bridge

All my life I've searched the road, the secret path to me
But somewhere on the darkest night, I lost my way
Now I've finally learned to see.

When all the shops are blazing brightly, all the windows dripping rain
And I catch my own reflection, from the windowpane
The girl I see has light inside her, behind her eyes of pain
Mirror, mirror it's time to make a change.

Mirror, mirror ever-changing, on my many walls
I've finally seen the girl inside you, the very fairest of them all
In your frame her eyes are shining, full of light and grace
Mirror, mirror you've shown me my one true face.
Mirror, mirror you've shown me my one true face.

(CURTAIN)