

The Metaphor

Budge Wilson

Miss Hancock was plump and unmarried and overenthusiastic. She was fond of peasant blouses encrusted with embroidery, from which loose threads invariably dangled. Like a heavy bird, she fluttered and flitted from desk to desk, inspecting notebooks, making suggestions' dispensing eager praise. Miss Hancock was our teacher of literature and creative writing.

If one tired of inspecting Miss Hancock's clothes, which were nearly always as flamboyant as her nature, one could still contemplate her face with considerable satisfaction. It was clear that this was a face that had once been pretty, although cloakroom discussions of her age never resulted in any firm conclusions. In any case, by now it was too late for simple unadorned prettiness. What time had taken away from her, Miss Hancock tried to replace by mechanical means, and she applied her makeup with an excess of zeal and a minimum of control. Her face was truly amazing. She was fond of luminous frosted lipsticks—in hot pink, or something closer to purple or magenta. Her eyelashes curled up and out singly, like a row of tiny bent sticks. Surrounding her eyes, the modulations of color, toners, shadows, could keep a student interested for half an hour if he or she were bored with a grammar assignment. Her head was covered with a profusion of small busy curls, which were brightly, aggressively, golden—"in bad taste," my mother said, "like the rest of her."

However, do not misunderstand me. We were fond of Miss Hancock. In fact, almost to a person, we loved her. Our class, like most groups that are together for long periods of time, had developed a definite personality. By some fluke of geography or biology or school administration, ours was a cohesive group composed of remarkably backward grade 7 pupils—backward in that we had not yet embraced

sophistication, boredom, cruelty, drugs, alcohol, or sex. Those who did not fit into our mold were in the minority and made little mark upon us. We were free to respond positively to Miss Hancock's literary excesses without fear of the mockery of our peers, and with an open and uninhibited delight that is often hard to find in any classroom above the level of grade 5. So Miss Hancock was able to survive, even to flourish, in our unique, sheltered environment.

Miss Hancock was equally at home in her two fields of creative writing and literature. It was the first time I had been excited, genuinely moved, by poems, plays, stories. She could analyse without destroying a piece of literature, and we argued about meanings and methods and creative intentions with passionate caring. She had a beautiful, deeply modulated voice, and when she read poetry aloud, we sat bewitched, transformed. We could not have said which we loved best, Miss Hancock or her subject. They were all of a piece.

But it was in the area of composition, in her creative writing class, that Miss Hancock made the deepest mark upon me. She had that gift of making most of us want to write, to communicate, to make a blank sheet of paper into a beautiful or at least an interesting thing. We were as drugged by words as some children are by electronic games.

One October day, just after Thanksgiving, Miss Hancock came into the classroom and faced us, eyes aglitter, hands clasped in front of her embroidered breasts. "Today," she announced, clapping her dimpled hands together, her charm bracelets jingling, "we are going to do a lovely exercise. Such *fun!*" She raised her astonishing eyes to the classroom ceiling. "A whole new world of composition is about to open for you in one glorious *woosh.*" She stood there, arms now raised, elbows bent, palms facing us, enjoying her dramatic

pause. "After today," she announced in a loud, confidential whisper, "you will have a brand new weapon in your arsenal of writing skills. You will possess" (pause again) "The Metaphor!" Her arms fell, and she clicked to the blackboard in her patent leather pumps to start the lesson. Her dazzling curls shone in the afternoon sunlight and jiggled as she wrote. Then, with a board full of examples and suggestions, she began her impassioned discourse on The Metaphor. I listened, entranced. Miss Hancock may have been in poor taste, but at that time in my life she was my entry to something I did not yet fully understand but which I knew I wanted.

"And now," Miss Hancock announced, after the lucid and fervent presentation of her subject, "The Metaphor is yours—to *use*, to *enjoy*, to *enrich.*" She stood poised, savoring one of her breathless pauses. "I now want you to take out your notebooks," she continued, "and make a list. Write down the members of your family, your home, your pets, anything about which you feel *deeply.* Then," she went on, "I want you to describe everyone and everything on your list with a pungent and a telling metaphor." She gave a little clap. "Now *start,*" she cried. She sat down at her desk, clasping her hands together so tightly that the knuckles looked polished. Smiling tensely, frilled eyes shining, she waited.

All but the dullest of us were excited. This was an unfamiliar way of looking at things. Better still, it was a newfangled method of talking about them.

Miss Hancock interrupted us just one more time. "Write quickly," she urged from her glowing expectant position at the desk. "Don't think too hard. Let your writing, your words, emerge from you like a mysterious and elegant blossom. Let it all *out,*" she closed her lacy eyes, "without restraint, without inhibition, with *verve.*"

Well, we did. The results, when we read them out to her were, as one might expect, hackneyed, undistinguished, ordinary. But we were delighted with ourselves. And she with us. She wrote our metaphors on the blackboard and expressed her pleasure with small delighted gasping sounds.

“My dog is a clown in a spotted suit.”

“My little brother George is a whirling top.”

“The spruce tree was a tall lady in a stiff dress.”

“My dad is a warm wood stove.”

And so it went. Finally it was my turn. I offered metaphors for my father, my grandmother, my best friend, the waves at Peggy’s Cove. Then I looked at the metaphor for my mother. I had not realized I had written so much.

“Miss Hancock,” I hesitated, “the one for my mother is awfully long. You probably don’t want to write all this stuff down.”

“Oh *heavens*, Charlotte,” breathed Miss Hancock, “of *course* I want it! Read it all to us. Do, Charlotte. Oh, *do!*”

I began: “My mother is a flawless, modern building, created of glass and the smoothest of pale concrete. Inside are business offices furnished with beige carpets and gleaming chromium. In every room there are machines—computers, typewriters, intricate copiers. They are buzzing and clicking away, absorbing and spitting out information with the speed of sound. Downstairs, at ground level, people walk in and out, tracking mud and dirt over the steel-grey tiles, marring the cool perfection of the building. There are no comfortable chairs in the lobby.”

I sat down, eyes on my desk. There was a pause so long that I finally felt forced to look up. Miss Hancock was standing there at the front of the room, chalk poised, perfectly still. Then she turned around quickly and wrote the whole metaphor verbatim (verbatim!) on the board. When she faced us again, she looked normal once more. Smiling brightly, she said, “Very *very* good, class! I had planned to discuss with you what you all *meant* by your metaphors; I had hoped to probe their *significance*. But I have to leave early today because of a dental appointment.” Then, with five vigorous sweeps of

her blackboard eraser, the whole enticing parade of metaphors disappeared from the board, leaving us feeling vaguely deprived. It also left me feeling more than vaguely relieved. “Class dismissed!” said Miss Hancock cheerily, and then, “Charlotte. May I see you for a moment before you go.”

When everyone had gathered up their books and their leftover lunches, they disappeared into the corridor. I went up to the front of the room to Miss Hancock’s desk. She was sitting there soberly, hands still, eyes quiet.

“Yes, Miss Hancock?” I inquired, mystified.

“Charlotte,” she began, “your metaphors were unusually good, unusually interesting. For someone your age, you have quite a complex vocabulary, a truly promising way of expressing yourself.”

Ah. So this was why she wanted to see me. But apparently it was not.

“I wonder,” she continued slowly, carefully, “do you have anything you would like to discuss about your mother’s metaphor?”

I thought about that.

“No,” I replied. “I don’t think so. I don’t really know what it means. It just sort of came out. I feel kind of funny about it.”

“Lots of things just sort of come out when you’re writing,” said Miss Hancock quietly, oh so quietly, as though she were afraid something fragile might break if she spoke too quickly, too loudly. “And there’s no need to feel funny about it. I don’t want to push you even a little bit, but are you really sure you don’t want to discuss it?” I could tell that she was feeling concerned and kind, not nosy.

“Lookit,” I said, using an expression that my mother particularly disliked, “that’s really nice of you, but I can’t think of anything at all to say. Besides, even though you say there’s no need to feel funny, I really do feel sort of creepy about it. And I’m not all that crazy about the feeling.” I paused, not sure of what else to say.

Miss Hancock was suddenly her old self again. “*Well*,” she said cheerfully, as she rose. “That’s perfectly fine. I just wanted you to know that your writing was very intriguing today, and that it showed a certain

maturity that surprised and delighted me.” She gathered up her books, her purse, her pink angora cardigan, and started off toward the corridor. At the door, she stopped and turned around, solemn and quiet once more. “Charlotte,” she said, “if you ever need any help—with your writing, or, well, with any other kind of problem, just let me know.” Then she turned abruptly and clicked off in the direction of the staff room, waving her hand in a fluttery farewell. “My dental appointment,” she called merrily.

I walked home slowly, hugging my books to my chest. The mid-October sun shone down upon the colored leaves that littered the sidewalk, and I kicked and shuffled as I walked, enjoying the swish and scrunch, savouring the sad-sweet feeling of doom that October always gives me. I thought for a while about my metaphor—the one Miss Hancock had asked about—and then I decided to push it out of my head.

When I arrived home, I opened the door with my key, entered the front porch, took off my shoes and read the note on the hall table. It was written in flawless script on a small piece of bond paper. It said: “At a Children’s Aid Board Meeting. Home by 5. Please tidy your room.”

The hall table was polished, antique, perfect. It contained one silver salver for messages and a small ebony lamp with a white shade. The floor of the entrance was tiled. The black and white tiles shone in the sunlight, unmarked by any sign of human contact. I walked over them carefully, slowly, having slipped and fallen once too often.

Hunger. I went into the kitchen and surveyed it thoughtfully. More black and white tiles dazzled the eye, and the cupboards and walls were a blinding spotless white. The counters shone, empty of jars, leftovers, canisters, appliances. The whole room looked as though it were waiting for the movers to arrive with the furniture and dishes. I made myself a peanut-butter sandwich, washed the knife and plate, and put everything away. Then I went upstairs to my room, walking on the grey stair carpet beside the off-white walls, glancing absently at the single lithograph in its black frame. “My home,” I said aloud, “is a box. It is

cool and quiet and empty and uninteresting. Nobody lives in the box.” Entering my room, I looked around. A few magazines were piled on the floor beside my bed. On my dresser, a T-shirt lay on top of my ivory brush and comb set. Two or three books were scattered over the top of my desk. I picked up the magazines, removed the T-shirt and put the books back in the bookcase. There. Done.

Then I called Julia Parsons, who was my best friend, and went over to her house to talk about boys. When I returned at 6 o’clock, my mother, who had been home only one hour, had prepared a complicated three-course meal—expert, delicious, nutritious. “There’s food in the box,” I mused.

Since no one else had much to say at dinner, I talked about school. I told them about Miss Hancock’s lesson on The Metaphor. I said what a marvellous teacher she was, how even the dumbest of us had learned to enjoy writing compositions, how she could make the poetry in our textbook so exciting to read and to hear.

My father listened attentively, enjoying my enthusiasm. He was not a lively or an original man, but he was an intelligent person who liked to watch eagerness in others. “You’re very fortunate, Charlotte,” he said, “to find a teacher who can wake you up and make you love literature.”

“Is she that brassy Miss Hancock whom I met at the Home and School meeting?” asked my mother.

“What do you mean, brassy?”

“Oh. You know. Overdone, too much enthusiasm. Flamboyant. Orange hair. Is she the one?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh,” said my mother, without emphasis of any kind. “Her. Charlotte, would you please remove the dishes and bring in the dessert. Snow pudding. In the fridge, top left-hand side. Thank you.”

That night I lay in the bath among the Estée Lauder bubbles (gift of my father on my last birthday) and created metaphors. I loved baths. The only thing nicer than one bath a day was two. Julia said that if I kept taking so many baths, my skin would get dry and crisp, and that I would be wrinkled before I was 30. That was

too far away to worry about. She also said that taking baths was disgusting and that showers were more hygienic. She pointed out that I was soaking in my own dirt, like Indians in the fetid Ganges. I thought this a bit excessive and said so. “For Pete’s sake,” I exclaimed, “if I have two baths a day, I can’t be sitting in very much dirt. Besides, it’s *therapeutic*.”

“It’s *what*?”

“Therapeutic. Water play. I read about it in *Reader’s Digest* at the doctor’s office. They let kids play with water when they’re wild and upset. And now they’re using warm baths to soothe the patients in mental hospitals.”

“So?”

“So it could be useful if I happen to end up crazy.” I laughed. I figured that would stop her. It did.

In the bath I always did a lot of things besides wash. I lifted up mounds of the tiny bubbles and held them against the fluorescent light over the sink. The patterns and shapes were delicate, like minute filaments of finest lace. I poked my toes through the bubbles and waved their hot pinkness to and fro among the static white waves. I hopefully examined my breasts for signs of sudden growth. If I lay down in the tub and brought the bubbles up over my body and squeezed my chest together by pressing my arms inward, I could convince myself that I was full-breasted and seductive. I did exercises to lengthen my hamstrings, in order to improve my splits for the gymnastics team. I thought about Charles Swinimer. I quoted poetry out loud with excessive feeling and dramatic emphasis, waving my soapy arms around and pressing my eloquent hand upon my flat chest. And from now on, I also lay there and made up metaphors, most of them about my mother.

“My mother is a white picket fence—straight, level. The fence stands in a field full of weeds. The field is bounded on its other sides by thorny bushes and barbed wire.”

“My mother is a lofty mountain capped by virgin snow. The air around the mountain is clear and clean and very cold.” I turned on more hot water. “At the base of the mountain grow gnarled and crooked trees, surrounded by scrub brush and poison ivy.”

Upon leaving the bath, I would feel no wiser. Then I would clean the tub very carefully indeed. It was necessary.

Not, mind you, that my mother ranted and raved about her cleanliness. Ranting and raving were not part of her style. “I know you will agree,” she would say, very oh ever so sweetly, implying in some oblique way that I certainly did not agree, “that it is an inconsiderate and really ugly thing to leave a dirty tub.” Then she would lead me with a subtle soft-firm pressure into the bathroom, so that we might inspect together a bathtub ringed with sludge, sprinkled with hair and dried suds. “Not,” she would say quietly, “a very pretty sight.”

And what, I would ask myself, is so terrible about that? Other mothers, I know, I had heard them, nagged, yelled, scolded, did terrible and noisy things. But what was it about my mother’s methods that left me feeling so depraved, so unsalvageable? But of course I was 13 by now, and knew all about cleaning tubs and wiping off countertops and sweeping up crumbs. A very small child must have been a terrible test to that cool and orderly spirit. I remember those days. A toy ceased to be a toy and began to be a mess, the moment it left the toy cupboard. “I’m sure,” she would say, evenly, “that you don’t want to have those blocks all over the carpet. Why not keep them all in one spot, over here behind Daddy’s chair?” From time to time, I attempted argument.

“But Mother. I’m making a garden.”

“Then make a little garden. They’re every bit as satisfying as large, sprawling unmanageable farms.”

And since no one who was a truly nice person would want a large, sprawling unmanageable farm, I would move my blocks behind the chair and make my small garden there. Outside, our backyard was composed of grass and flowers, plus one evergreen tree that dropped neither fuzzy buds in the spring nor ragged leaves in the fall. No swing set made brown spots on that perfect lawn, nor was there a sandbox. Cats were known to use sandboxes as community toilets. Or so my mother told me. I assume she used the term “toilet” (a word not normally part of her vocabulary) instead of

“washroom,” lest there be any confusion as to her meaning.

But in grade 7, you no longer need a sandbox. My friends marvelled when they came to visit, which was not often. How serene my mother seemed, how lovely to look at, with her dark-blond hair, her flawless figure, her smooth hands. She never acted frazzled or rushed or angry, and her forehead was unmarked by age lines or worry marks. Her hair always looked as though a hairdresser had arrived at 6 a.m. to ready her for the day. “Such a peaceful house,” my friends would say, clearly impressed, “and no one arguing or fighting.” Then they would leave and go somewhere else for their snacks, their music, their hanging around.

No indeed, I thought. No fights in this house. It would be like trying to down an angel with a BB gun—both sacrilegious and futile, all at the same time. My father was thin and nervous, and was careful about hanging up his clothes and keeping his sweaters in neat piles. He certainly did not fight with my mother. In fact, he said very little to her at all. He had probably learned early that to complain is weak, to rejoice is childish, to laugh is noisy. And moving around raises dust.

This civilized, this clean, this disciplined woman who was and is my mother, was also, if one were to believe her admirers, the mainstay of the community, the rock upon which the town was built. She chaired committees, ran bazaars, sat on boards. When I first heard about this, I thought it a very exciting thing that she sat on boards. If my mother, who sat so correctly on the needlepoint chair with her nylon knees pressed so firmly together, could actually sit on *boards*, there might be a rugged and reckless side to her that I had not yet met. The telephone rang constantly, and her softly controlled voice could be heard, hour after hour, arranging and steering and manipulating the affairs of the town.

Perhaps because she juggled her community jobs, her housework, her cooking, and her grooming with such quiet calm efficiency, she felt scorn for those less able to cope. “Mrs. Langstreth says she is too *tired* to take on a table at the bazaar,” she might say. It was not hard to imagine Mrs. Langstreth lounging on a sofa,

probably in a turquoise chenille dressing gown, surrounded by full ashtrays and neglected children. Or my mother might comment quietly, but with unmistakable emphasis, “Gillian Munroe is having trouble with her children. And in my opinion, she has only herself to blame.” The implication seemed to be that if Gillian Monroe’s children were left in my mother’s care for a few weeks, she could make them all into a perfectly behaved family. Which was probably true.

Certainly in those days I was well behaved. I spoke quietly, never complained, ate what was put before me, and obeyed all rules without question or argument. I was probably not even very unhappy, although I enjoyed weekdays much more than weekends. Weekends did not yet include parties or boys. It is true that Julia and I spent a lot of our time together talking about boys. I also remember stationing myself on the fence of the vacant lot on Seymour Street at 5 o’clock, the hour when Charles Swinimer could be expected to return from high school. As he passed, I would be too absorbed in my own activity to look at him directly. I would be chipping the bark off the fence, or reading, or pulling petals from a daisy—he loves me, he loves me not. Out of the corner of my eye, I feasted upon his jawline, his confident walk, his shoulders. On the rare days when he would toss me a careless “Hi” (crumbs to a pigeon), I would have to dig my nails into the wood to keep from falling off, from fainting dead away. But that was the extent of my thrills. No boys had yet materialized in the flesh to offer themselves to me. Whatever else they were looking for, it was not acne, straight, brown stringy hair, or measurements of 32-32-32.

So weekdays were still best. Weekdays meant school and particularly English class, where Miss Hancock delivered up trays of succulent literature for our daily consumption. *Hamlet* was the thing that spring, the spring before we moved into junior high. So were a number of poems that left me weak and changed. And our composition class gathered force, filling up with a creative confidence that was heady stuff. We wrote short stories, played with similes, created poems that did and did not rhyme, felt we were capable of anything

and everything; if Shakespeare if, Wordsworth could do it, why couldn’t we? Over it all, Miss Hancock presided, hands fluttering, voice atremble with raw emotion.

But best of all was *Hamlet*. Like all serious students, we agonized and argued over its meaning, Hamlet’s true intent, his sanity, his goal. Armed with rulers, we fought the final duel and its bloody sequence, and a four-foot Fortinbras stepped among the dead bodies between the desks to proclaim the ultimate significance of it all. At the end, Miss Hancock stood, hands clasped, knuckles white, tears standing in her eyes. And I cannot pretend that all of ours were dry.

At the close of the year, our class bought an enormous, tasteless card of thanks and affixed it to a huge trophy. The trophy was composed of two brass-colored Ionic pillars that were topped by a near-naked athlete carrying a spiky wreath. On the plate below was inscribed: “For you and Hamlet with love. The grade 7 class. 1965.”

When my mother saw it, she came close to losing her cool control.

“Who *chose* it?” she asked, tight-lipped.

“Horace Hennigar,” I answered. Oh don’t spoil it, don’t spoil it.

“That explains it,” she said, and mercifully that was all.

Junior high school passed, and so did innocence and acne. Hair curled, makeup intact, I entered high school the year that Charles Swinimer left for university. But there would be other fish to fry. Outwardly blasé, single-minded and 16, I came into my first grade 10 class with a mixture of intense apprehension and a burning unequivocal belief that high school could and would deliver up to me all of life’s most precious gifts—the admiration of my peers, local fame, boys, social triumphs. During August of that year, my family had moved to another school district. I entered high school with a clean slate. It was terrifying to be so alone. I also knew that it was a rare and precious opportunity; I could approach life without being branded with my old failures, my old drawbacks. I was pretty; I was shapely; I was anonymous; I melted into the crowd. No one here

would guess that I had once been such a skinny, pimply wretch.

Our first class was Geography, and I knew enough of the material to be able to let my eyes and other senses wander. Before the end of the period, I knew that the boy to pursue was Howard Oliver, that the most prominent and therefore the most potentially useful or dangerous girl was Gladys Simpson, that Geography was uninteresting, that the teacher was strict. To this day I can smell the classroom during that first period—the dry and acrid smell of chalk, the cool, sweet fragrance of the freshly waxed floors, the perspiration that travelled back to me from Joey Elliot’s desk.

The next period was English. My new self-centred and self-conscious sophistication had not blunted my love of literature, my desire to write, to play with words, to express my discoveries and confusions. I awaited the arrival of the teacher with masked but real enthusiasm. I was not prepared for the entrance of Miss Hancock.

Miss Hancock’s marked success with 15 years of grade 7 students had finally transported her to high places. She entered the classroom, wings spread, ready to fly. She was used to success, and she was eager to sample the gift of a group of older and more perceptive minds. Clad in royal blue velour, festooned with gold chains, hair glittering in the sun pouring in from the east window, fringed eyes darting, she faced the class, arms raised. She paused.

“Let us pray!” said a deep male voice from the back row. It was Howard Oliver. Laughter exploded in the room. Behind my Duo Tang folder, I snickered fiercely.

Miss Hancock’s hands fluttered wildly. It was as though she were waving off an invasion of poisonous flies.

“Now, now, class!” she exclaimed, with a mixture of tense jollity and clear panic. “We’ll have none of *that*! Please turn to page 7 in your textbook. I’ll read the selection aloud to you first, and then we’ll discuss it.” She held the book high in the palm of one hand; the other was raised like an admonition, an artistic beckoning. The reading was from Tennyson’s *Ulysses*. I had never heard it before. As I listened to her beautiful

voice, the old magic took hold, and no amount of peer pressure could keep me from thrilling to the first four lines she read:

“I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where-thro’
Gleams that untravell’d world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.”

But after that, it was difficult even to hear her. Guffaws sprang up here and there throughout the room. Gladys Simpson whispered something behind her hand to the girl beside her, and then broke into fits of giggles. Paper airplanes flew. The wits of grade 10 offered comments: “Behold the Bard!” “Bliss! Oh poetic bliss!” “Hancock! Whocock? Hancock! Hurray!” “Don’t faint, class! *Don’t faint!*”

I was caught in a stranglehold somewhere between shocked embarrassment and a terrible desire for concealment. No other members of the class shared my knowledge of Miss Hancock or my misery. But I knew I could not hide behind that Duo Tang folder forever.

It was in fact 10 days later that Miss Hancock recognized me. It could not have been easy to connect the eager, skinny fan of grade 7 with the cool and careful person I had become. And she would not have expected to find a friend in that particular classroom. By then, stripped of 15 years of overblown confidence, she offered her material shyly, hesitantly, certain of rejection, of humiliation. When our eyes met in class, she did not rush up to me to claim alliance or allegiance. Her eyes merely held mine for a moment, slid off and then periodically slid back. There was a desperate hope in them that I could hardly bear to witness. At the end of the period, I waited until everyone had gone before I walked toward her desk on the way to the corridor. Whatever was going to happen, I wanted to be sure that it would not be witnessed.

When I reached her, she was sitting quietly, hands folded on top of her lesson book. I was reminded of another day, another meeting, but the details were blurred. But I knew I had seen this Miss Hancock

before. She looked at me evenly and said quietly, simply, “Hello, Charlotte. How nice to see you.”

I looked at her hands, the floor, the blackboard, anywhere but at those searching eyes. “Hello, Miss Hancock,” I said.

“Still writing metaphors?” she asked, with a tentative smile.

“Oh, I dunno,” I replied. But I was. Nightly, in the bathtub. And I kept a notebook in which I wrote them all down.

“Your writing showed promise, Charlotte.” Her eyes were quiet, pleading. “I hope you won’t forget that.”

Or anything else, I thought. Oh Miss Hancock, let me go. Aloud I said, “French is next, and I’m late.”

She looked directly into my eyes and held them for a moment. Then she spoke. “Go ahead, Charlotte. Don’t let me keep you.”

She did not try to reach me again. She taught, or tried to teach her classes, as though I were not there. Week after week, she entered that room white with tension and left it defeated. I did not tell a living soul that I had ever seen her before.

One late afternoon in March of that year, Miss Hancock stepped off the curb in front of the school and was killed instantly by a school bus.

The next day, I was offered this piece of news with that mixture of horror and delight that so often attends the delivery of terrible tidings. When I heard it, I felt as though my chest and throat were constricted by a band of dry ice. During Assembly, the Principal came forward and delivered a short announcement of the tragedy, peppered with little complimentary phrases: “...a teacher of distinction...” “...a generous colleague...” “... a tragic end to a promising career...” Howard Oliver was sitting beside me; he had been showing me flattering attention of late. As we got up to disperse for classes, he said, “Poor old Whocock Hancock. Quoting poetry to the angels by now.” He was no more surprised than I was when I slapped him full across his handsome face, before I ran down the aisle of the Assembly Room, up the long corridor of the first floor, down the steps and out into the parking lot.

Shaking with dry and unsatisfying sobs, I hurried home through the back streets of the town and let myself in by the back door.

“What on earth is wrong, Charlotte?” asked my mother when she saw my stricken look, my heaving shoulders. There was real concern in her face.

“Miss Hancock is dead,” I whispered.

“Miss who? Charlotte, speak up please.”

“Miss Hancock. She teaches—*taught*—us grade 10 English.”

“You mean that same brassy creature from grade 7?”

I didn’t answer. I was crying out loud, with the abandon of a preschooler or of someone who is under the influence of drugs.

“Charlotte, do please blow your nose and try to get hold of yourself. I can’t for the life of me see why you’re so upset. You never even told us she was your teacher this year.”

I was rocking back and forth on the kitchen chair, arms crossed over my chest. My mother stood there erect, invulnerable. It crossed my mind that no grade 10 class would throw paper airplanes in any group that *she* chose to teach.

“Well then,” she said, “why or how did she die?”

I heard myself shriek, “I killed her! I killed her!”

Halting, gasping, I told her all of it. I described her discipline problems, the cruelty of the students, my own blatant betrayal. “For goodness’s sake, Charlotte,” said my mother, quiet but clearly irritated, “don’t lose perspective. She couldn’t keep order and she had only herself to blame.” That phrase sounded familiar to me. “A woman like that can’t survive for five minutes in the high schools of today. There was nothing you could have done.”

I was silent. I could have *said something*. Like thank you for grade 7. Or yes, I still have fun with *The Metaphor*. Or once, just once in this entire year, I could have *smiled* at her.

My mother was speaking again. “There’s a great deal of ice. It would be very easy to slip under a school bus. And she didn’t strike me as the sort of person who would exercise any kind of sensible caution.”

“Oh dear God,” I was whispering, “I wish she hadn’t chosen a *school bus*.”

I cried some more that day and excused myself from supper. I heard my father say, “I think I’ll just go up and see if I can help.” But my mother said, “Leave her alone, Arthur. She’s 16 years old. It’s time she learned how to cope. She’s acting like a hysterical child.” My father did not appear. Betrayal, I thought, runs in the family.

The next day I stayed home from school. I kept having periods of uncontrollable weeping, and even my mother could not send me off in that condition. Once again I repeated to her, to my father, “I killed her. We all killed her. But especially me.”

“Charlotte.”

Oh I knew that voice, that tone. So calm, so quiet, so able to silence me with one word. I stopped crying and curled up in a tight ball on the sofa.

“Charlotte. I know you will agree with what I’m going to say to you. There is no need to speak so extravagantly. A sure and perfect control is what separates the civilized from the uncivilized.” She inspected her fingernails, pushing down the quick of her middle finger with her thumb. “If you would examine this whole, perfectly natural situation with a modicum of rationality, you would see that she got exactly what she deserved.”

I stared at her.

“Charlotte,” she continued, “I’ll have to ask you to stop this nonsense. You’re disturbing the even tenor of our home.”

I said nothing. With a sure and perfect control, I uncoiled myself from my fetal position on the sofa. I stood up and left the living room.

Upstairs in my bedroom I sat down before my desk. I took my pen out of the drawer and opened my notebook. Speaking extravagantly, without a modicum of rationality, I began to write.

“Miss Hancock was a birthday cake,” I wrote. “The cake was frosted by someone unschooled in the art of cake decoration. It was adorned with a profusion of white roses and lime-green leaves, which drooped and dribbled at the edges where the pastry tube had slipped.

The frosting was of an intense peppermint flavor, too sweet, too strong. Inside, the cake had two layers—chocolate and vanilla. The chocolate was rich and soft and very delicious. No one who stopped to taste it could have failed to enjoy it. The vanilla was subtle and delicate; only those thoroughly familiar with cakes, only those with great sensitivity of taste, could have perceived its true fine flavor. Because it was a birthday cake, it was filled with party favors. If you stayed long enough at the party, you could amass quite a large collection of these treasures. If you kept them for many years, they would amaze you by turning into pure gold. Most children would have been delighted by this cake. Most grown-ups would have thrown it away after one brief glance at the frosting.

“I wish that the party wasn’t over.”

