

How School Is Failing Our Kids  
(And What We Can Do About It)

— ONE FAMILY'S STORY —

# DROPOUT

LESLIE GAVEL



MOTHERWELL

*To Avery, Terry, and Lucy with much love*

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

MOST OF THE memories depicted here are my own. I've also drawn on Avery's memories of school and Lucy's as well. Timelines might not be exact and some dialogue has been recreated. Most of the names of people and schools have been changed to protect certain individuals.



## PREFACE

**I**N THE fall of 2000, while in Grade 7, my daughter Avery began what would be a four-year disengagement from school. Avery didn't fit the stereotype of the dropout—a term I've grown to hate. Why would a privileged, middle-class adolescent choose this when dropping out was nothing short of taboo and would complicate her life beyond what any of us could have ever imagined?

These school problems triggered conflict, pain, and loss for our family. For all four of us—Avery, her younger sister, my husband, and me. A family loses its equilibrium when a child deviates so far from the expected.

When Avery's school performance began to deteriorate, I found myself obsessed with two questions: *Why isn't she doing her schoolwork?* and *How can I get her to do it?* When things really fell apart, one of many coping strategies I used to quiet my anxiety was to pore over articles and books on every aspect of school both by school supporters (the vast majority of the literature) and by school critics. Much of the boundless body of literature places the blame on parents. Uneducated parents. Lackadaisical parents. Single parents. Drunk parents. Young parents. Poor parents. Indigenous parents. Any combination thereof.

Coming to understand what was happening with Avery meant honestly examining myself. I wondered if I had laid the

foundation, through nature or nurture, for school problems once she grew into adolescence. Although I didn't fit the parent demographic most often blamed in the literature, ultimately, I did wonder if all of her troubles were my fault.

My reading forced me to remember my own experiences of school. I was shocked at how little had changed in how school operated from one generation to the next. I too had been a borderline student in junior and senior high school—in elementary school as well.

Avery's school experiences, my school experiences, and all of my research led not to answers but to further questions. Did school—its history, structure, practice—play any role in underachievement? Was the problem of marginal or failing grades, chronic student dissatisfaction, and disruptive classroom behaviour always the fault of the student—and, by extension, her parents—or could it be the fault of the school system itself?

I found myself asking big-picture questions about school as well, such as: Should we place children in a classroom for six hours a day, five days a week for twelve years of their lives, force-feeding them information that they don't, for the most part, care about?

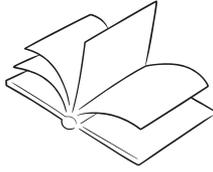
This book brings together the personal and the political of rethinking school. I want to challenge conventional thinking, but my greatest hope is to encourage others to wipe away the shame of a painful school experience. I hope to offer solace to parents suffering along with children who have had just about all they can take of their institutional existence before the diploma arrives. And I hope to counter the stigma of the dropout. There are many reasons for student apathy and underachievement, and not all of them originate with the student or parents. Responsibility also rests with the schools.

My realization that the public school system considered my daughter disposable wounded me. Those within the system, I saw, had no investment in her well-being if she wasn't compliant. In time I came to understand that the system was

broken—and yet still, I couldn't imagine life for Avery if she didn't complete high school.

My biggest failing was that I lacked imagination. I could not imagine a way forward that did not involve school. My fears and wavering resolve drove me, at times, to be as inhumane to her as the institution itself.

In the end, it was Avery who found her way and Avery who pushed me to ask what it really means to be a success.



## INTRODUCTION

I'M STANDING in the classroom closest to the school administration office. Although the classroom is empty, it still smells like musky, junior high bodies.

I'm wearing my concerned, conscientious mother outfit: black pants, denim jacket, a scarf. Not too dowdy, not too hip.

I dig through my purse for a Kleenex in case a tear escapes. I'm wandering around looking for something to distract me from the problem at hand. I find pamphlets on a table at the back of the room about helping your child prepare for diploma exams. I'm not concerned with diploma exams at this particular moment.

Avery and I have our second appointment with the educational psychologist in thirty minutes, and we'll be hard-pressed to make it on time. I hate being late and this is an important appointment.

I greet the teacher as she enters the room and immediately ask, "Do you have Avery's psychological profile?"

The pretty thirty-something math teacher looks at me.

"I left a message on your voice mail about two weeks ago asking you to fill out a psychological profile for some testing we're doing. I left it in your mailbox. I left another message yesterday to remind you I needed it today. I checked with the office and they said you didn't leave anything for me."

“Things get lost in the office. I never got it.” There is a blankness about her. No smile, no real interest in my request, no big hurry as she searches through the drifts of papers on window ledges around the classroom. I describe the envelope and what it held—the BASC (Behavior Assessment System for Children), an assessment tool that measures a range of behaviour and emotions from a parent’s, teacher’s, and child’s perspective.

In this case the subject is my fifteen-year-old daughter, Avery, a Grade 9 student. The teacher’s task was to shade in the most appropriate answer out of five possibilities for each of the questions, about a twenty-minute chore.

She finally unearths it. Although she says she’s sorry, her demeanour indicates otherwise. A little effusiveness on her part, a little “Oh my god, I forgot” is all it would take for me to respond, magnanimously, “Don’t worry. These things happen.” Her indifference is eating up my patience.

“I’ll do it now,” she says.

“No,” I tell her, “I have to go. But I’ll come back for it.” I know I’m being snippy. Her negligence is costing me time. I’ll have to return later to school for the completed profile, and then drive back to the educational psychologist’s office in order for her to collate the results by our next appointment in a few days.

I retrieve Avery from her classroom. I’m still getting accustomed to the dramatic change in her appearance over the last few months. She has grown six inches, now measures five foot nine. Every trace of prepubescent fat has fallen from her face, shaping her blue eyes rounder and her jaw perfectly square. I’m uncomfortable with how thin she is—collarbone obvious above her T-shirt, hip bones looking as if they could slice through her jeans—but I tell myself it will take time for her weight to catch up with her height.

The educational psychologist welcomes Avery into her private office. I sit in her light, tidy waiting room sipping my coffee, staring blankly at the pages of my book, and thinking about the math teacher—and then something dawns on me. I now fully

understand the meaning of “she couldn’t have cared less” in a way I never had before. She. Could. Not. Have. Cared. Less. I roll the words around and around in my head. She is the teacher Avery chose when the educational psychologist asked, “Do you have someone in your corner at school?”

If this is the teacher in her corner, she’s sunk. Does she feel as invisible in her math teacher’s presence as I did?

The staff at Avery’s junior high has complained consistently about her over the past two and a half years, since the beginning of Grade 7—about the incomplete assignments, the lack of engagement in class, and how she distracts other students.

The calls have been so numerous I have indulged in a fantasy where I possess a magic button on our phone and when the call display reveals the school’s number, I push it and it replaces our usual message with “You’ve reached the home of Leslie Gavel and Terry Skrypnek. I’d like to inform you *we* have completed junior high, so quit calling.”

Instead we are consulting an expert as all other attempts to get Avery down to work have failed. We’re trying to determine if there is some learning problem, anything that may explain her behaviour. She has not resisted coming to these appointments and tells me she doesn’t mind doing the exercises required of her.

None of the Board of Education’s school psychologists or any other support services contained within their sprawling bureaucracy have offered any assistance, and we haven’t asked.

The math teacher has been present and joined the chorus of complaints at team meetings where all of Avery’s teachers have articulated how poorly she is doing. My husband and I have absorbed a great deal of their frustration and at times felt their outright hostility toward our daughter.

Couldn’t she just have filled out the goddamn form? That was all I asked of her. I shine with anger.

Slowly, over the next few days, my anger melts into something else. A sadness that I can’t shake or pin down. It hounds me from the time I wake up, follows me through the course

of my day—driving kids, making meals, sitting at my computer—causes me to weep at the most inopportune times. Then I get it: Avery is disposable. To the school staff she is difficult and noncompliant. She has become nothing more than a one-dimensional problem. They don't see the fifteen-year-old who has a wit that cracks us up, loves her dog, worries about her dad who had bypass surgery only a year ago. What they don't know about her could fill a book.

With their utter lack of concern and kindness, with their proclivity for shining a glaring light only on her shortcomings, the school staff are pushing Avery out. They don't want to deal with her any longer. Any illusions I've held of the school being part of my community, a place to turn to when the going gets tough, a place of warmth or caring, are destroyed.



# 1

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

*You can drag my body to school but my spirit refuses to go.*

BILL WATTERSON

**E**ARLY SEPTEMBER 2000. A gentle blue morning. You could taste the newness, the potential September brings. It looked as if an army of giants had picked up the Rocky Mountains, all mauve with jagged lines, and marched them closer to Calgary's city limits.

Avery was off to junior high registered in a program called "Late French Immersion." She consented to our ritual first-day-of-school pictures taken on the front lawn, our flowerbeds as a backdrop, all of us revolving through the photos with many configurations of parents and sisters. Lucy looked so delighted you would have thought the first day of Grade 4 was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Avery smiled wide for the camera, revealing her braces.

My husband, Terry, had highlighted Avery's pale brown hair just a few days before so it glowed blond on top, as if licked by the sun. Her body was preparing for puberty—thick through the middle, with long, skinny legs. She was decked out in dark blue jeans and a T-shirt with South Asian flare, lots of gold paisley

and flowers painted on fuchsia that blended into the petunias. Although she was initially pleased with her new top, after she saw others in class wearing more muted dark blues and greys, it hung in her closet for months until I finally donated it to charity.

I was proud of Avery for taking on the challenge of a second language. In Alberta students were given the opportunity to begin French immersion in kindergarten as well as in Grade 7; I knew of a few families who had chosen the early immersion option, but it wasn't the norm. We had never seriously entertained it. Terry and I didn't even discuss it.

From the beginning, I held high hopes for Avery as a student. I never announced it to anyone else, but I quietly carried a desire for her to exceed my abilities and become a competent student. Inadequacy had trailed me through grade after grade after grade, so I intended to launch Avery with a strong start. I planned to be present and involved, aware of what my child was learning. Even if her studies were on track, reading and writing at the rate her teachers deemed acceptable, math skills at grade level, it couldn't hurt to know what she was up to all day. I couldn't count how often I'd read that a parent's involvement in school was crucial to a child's success. And all of that would have been impossible if her lessons were being taught in another language.

Besides, I had no idea what Avery's strengths and struggles would be in this milieu, not a clue if she would find school a breeze or a trial. I thought it wise to keep things simple.

I knew, of course, that there were indisputable advantages to gaining exposure to another culture, especially one that exists within our Canadian borders—advantages of being able to work in The Public Service of Canada, the country's largest employer, or anywhere in Quebec, where most workers are required to be bilingual. At the same time, future careers seemed so distant and difficult to conjure when considering my five-year-old's school options. But I also liked the idea of my children going to our designated school, as I had done growing up, and French immersion wasn't an option there.

Children's needs are fluid, ever changing. Here we were seven years later and I was pleased that Mrs. Denard, Avery's Grade 5 and 6 teacher, believed Avery was up to the task of completing junior high and high school in a second language. She told Avery so, then called to alert me to the Joyce Junior High late immersion parent orientation.

Terry and I had read to the girls long after they could read to themselves, were happy to help with assignments, and never missed a parent-teacher interview. We had done everything in our power to help them be successful and now, as Avery entered Grade 7, it didn't seem as imperative that we have a grasp on everything she was taking. She had always been invested in school and it never occurred to me that this could change. And while our neighbourhood school had been a fine place for an elementary education, now she was entering junior high, where the stakes, both social and scholastic, were higher. Why send her to our designated junior high, rumoured to be a tough place, when this other opportunity was presenting itself?

With this on our minds, we pushed concerns aside as her teacher of two years steered her in the direction of French immersion. It must be the right choice.

Our introduction to Joyce Junior High occurred on the day I accompanied Avery to an pre-admission interview with Mr. Schmid, the principal at the time. I had no way of knowing on this spring day that before long I would be climbing these concrete stairs with my legs turning to string, my pulse drumming so loud in my ears that it drowned out the din of hundreds of students released from class.

Joyce rested in an inner-city community well off the main thoroughfares, surrounded by 1950s bungalows, infills, and walk-up apartments. There was an old-fashioned corner store a couple of blocks away, an anachronism in the age of 7-Elevens.

I coached Avery as we entered the principal's office that first time: "Remember to make eye contact. Remember a firm handshake."

“Yes, Mom.” I was barely being tolerated.

Once we were seated in his office, Mr. Schmid lost little time in getting down to the purpose of the interview. He asked questions about the attitude problems recorded in Avery’s Grade 6 report card. In the first reporting period, her teacher, Mrs. Denard, had noted *improvement required* in a few personal-growth categories—*accepts responsibility for own behaviour, respects the rights of others, relates to others in appropriate ways*—but these were all pulled up to *average* or *above average* with a few *very goods* and *excellents* thrown in during the next reporting periods. Avery assured Mr. Schmid she was working on these matters.

He took this opportunity to explain what late immersion entailed: science, math, and social studies were taught in French, and then there was French language arts and a smattering of options taught in English.

A couple of weeks later she received a letter informing her she had been admitted. *Give me a break*, I thought, *Joyce is a public school*. Any student who wanted to go was eligible; that is the very definition of a public school. But at the same time I experienced a little shiver of pride.

Avery was enthusiastic about the prospect of the French program—or maybe she was just flattered Mrs. Denard saw her as capable. I’ve often wondered how things might have been different if we had just left it at that.

When friends and family asked us about this foray into a second language at the advanced age of twelve, I paraphrased a linguist I had heard on public radio: “Kids are really well equipped to learn French in Grade 7,” I told them. “The question of how kids are able to deal with being educated in a second language is a non-issue in Europe. Everyone does it.”

I neglected to consider we didn’t live in Europe, where most parents are bilingual or multilingual and children have the opportunity to acquire languages and switch between languages often.

IN MID-SEPTEMBER I discovered through a chance encounter at the grocery store that it was “Meet the Teacher” night at

Joyce. Avery had never passed on the invitation to us, and when I mentioned it to her, she told me she couldn't go because she had too much homework and synchronized swimming practice.

I had noticed through the glass pool enclosure girls on deck with a boom box, rehearsing synchronized swimming routines, one day after working out, and thought it would be the perfect sport for Avery, a strong, graceful swimmer. She'd been enthusiastic when I mentioned the possibility. Terry had waited in line at our local YMCA at 6 a.m. one August morning to secure her a spot in the popular fall program.

I never gave the event or her excuse much thought. I suppose Terry and I could have attended without Avery, but parent-teacher night was just one more commitment during that start-up time of year when I'm forced out of my languid summer days and plunged into obligation.

And on top of it all, I was getting ready to fly to North Carolina to visit a good friend. Looking for ways to simplify things, I crossed "Meet the Teacher" from the to-do list. I remembered a friend, a parent with older kids, telling me these things were a bit of a free-for-all anyway. She thought they were a waste of time, with hundreds of parents jostling for the teacher's attention. What was the purpose of the event if you couldn't discuss your child, their strengths and foibles, in a meaningful way? Terry and I would wait a couple of months, then introduce ourselves at the parent-teacher interviews that would roll around in early November.

That evening, after synchronized swimming practice, I noticed Avery decorating a folder for health class with cut-outs from magazines. It was only three weeks into the term, but it struck me as odd that most nights she only did about five minutes of homework here and there, lots of colouring. In Grade 6 she'd worked for hours; at times we'd even insisted she stop. That was certainly not the case now.

I told myself Avery always had trouble with transitions and the leap to French immersion in junior high was bound to be fraught even for the most accomplished of students—managing

eight different teachers with varying expectations and working alongside all of these dedicated students. Add to that the matter of finding your place in the social hierarchy, not to mention boys, and it was a lot for a twelve-year-old to handle.

I recall my own desire for affection, the romantic yearning that marked my early adolescence; it always trumped what was being lectured about in the classroom. During that time of mystery and magic, danger and pain, I never made school a priority. The grey monotone of the lockers lining the halls, the colourless linoleum floors, the glare of fluorescent lighting drained the life from me. Only a pane of glass separated me from the bright blue sky and green grass, as vibrant as the paint-by-numbers I used to do in my spare time when I was younger. It's a wonder I ever went to school. It's a wonder anyone does.

When it came to my own daughter, however, I suffered a serious case of amnesia, forgetting how unimportant course content was to me at that age, as the world, with all of its possibilities, was opening up. Somehow, I expected her to flourish in this same environment.

MY HEAD MUCH preferred rationalization and sometimes out-and-out denial, but my body wasn't fooled. It started about a week after I returned from my visit to North Carolina with a muscle spasm that stabbed me in the lower back while I was in the shower, pain washing over me with such severity I knew I was going to faint. I tried to make it to my bed but blacked out and fell to the floor by my bedside table. That's where I stayed for the next week—on the floor, while Terry and the girls waited on me. I had a theory that our mattress was the problem.

Now I realize my body was telling me to stop and pay attention. And this wasn't the first time my body had sent such strong messages. In the past it had told me, *Your mother is very sick, This job will make you unhappy*. In September 2000 it said, *Your oldest is in trouble*. Eventually I began to listen, but I am a slow learner. I suffered on and off all year, the pain migrating

through my body as I tried with limited success to fix Avery's school problems.

After one more week of no homework in a program known to require lots of it, I finally questioned Avery about how things were going at school. She told me a new friend at school had been grounded because Madame Caspari had called home to report she wasn't completing her homework. "They would call home if I wasn't doing my work," she said. She was already becoming adept at throwing her dad and me off the trail.

I called Madame Caspari—Avery's homeroom, French language arts, and social studies teacher—because she had the most contact with Avery. In her dignified Eastern European accent, she told me that Avery had neglected to turn in several assignments, she was disorganized and inattentive. I had never heard these adjectives in relation to my daughter, but they would soon come to define her.

"She isn't a behaviour problem," Madame Caspari said, trying to reassure me. It didn't work. My stomach soured with worry.

Many golden fall days looked like this: Avery abandoned her backpack, heavy with books and binders, at the front door and charged upstairs to the computer. I heard the *blub, blub, blub* of the conversation windows opening, the *click, click, click* of the keys typing instant messages.

"Avery, do you have any homework?"

"Just a bit. I did most of it at school." Eyes glued to the screen.

"Avery, your computer time is limited. You have to get off in half an hour."

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

"I don't know when you decided homework was optional," I said in my best whisper-scream. "This is your job."

"You never believe me. What's your problem anyway?"

A note on my daughter's name. (While pregnant I told my mom I liked the name Avery and she said it sounded like it had something to do with birds. That's an aviary, I told her.) Usually I called her Avy or Honey, but when discussing school,

I dragged out her name, enunciating each syllable with venom. A-ver-ee.

Sometimes, when I grilled her, Avery told me details about her homework. This may have been a strategy she used to try to hold herself to completing it, but it rarely worked. Eight times out of ten her backpack never moved from the front door. Later in the evening, as it became apparent no work would be done, I'd spout admonitions:

*Your teachers won't respect you.*

*You'll get a bad reputation that will be difficult to change when you want it to.*

*If you don't start working, you will always be behind.*

*Don't be afraid to try. We all make mistakes.*

I thought if I could find the magic words, she would push through her lethargy or disdain or anxiety and open those books. I thought I could criticize her into being a better student.

Avery had her own litany of responses:

*I hate you.*

*I wish I had a different mother.*

*Mind your own business.*

*Fuck off.*

To be fair, there were intermittent gusts of hard work. Occasionally she received grades in the excellent range after working slavishly on one assignment—usually at the expense of not completing many others.

When she was at her friend's house or at swimming practice, I would rifle through her backpack. I knew I shouldn't do this but I couldn't stop myself. I hoped to find proof everything was okay, but what I found confirmed my fears—crumpled exams with grades as low as 30 percent, fill-in-the-blank assignment sheets with most of the blanks empty.

I began to think I had imagined Avery's elementary school success. I dug up her Grade 6 report card. Tucked inside I found *excellent* written in the slot for language arts, social studies, and math, *average* in physical education and art. There was a red flag

in her November 1999 report that Mr. Schmid had raised at our initial meeting, a comment about having trouble working with some students and taking responsibility for her behaviour, but these concerns evaporated in the next two reports, both of which noted *creativity* and *consistent effort* and *quality work*.

I'd forgotten about Avery's provincial achievement test results—a standard test conducted in Alberta when students are in Grades 3, 6, and 9. I came across them in the school years album that I kept for each of the girls. She fell into the excellent range in math, in the top 21 percent of Alberta students taking the test. She was in the top 25 percent in language arts and social studies. In science she scored in the *high acceptable* range, where she had much more company. The evidence existed, was right there in front of me: Avery was a capable student and she was capable of French immersion. So what was happening?

Avery must have been on the same mission. A few days later I found her sifting through old school projects as if she was on an archaeological dig unearthing past success. The smell of paper, the colourful title pages, a high mark acting as a slender thread to hold on to through the confusion of those first months.

I volunteered at the elementary school Avery had attended, where Lucy was now in Grade 4, one morning a week helping Grade 6 students. It was here that I ran into Charlotte, a teacher and mom to Meredith, Avery's good friend from Grade 2 until Grade 6, when the relationship cooled. Meredith was a student in late immersion as well. I asked Charlotte how things were going.

"She's working really hard, at least a couple of hours a night. That's a lot, don't you think?" Charlotte's slight smile suggested more pride in her daughter's efforts than actual concern.

"It's a demanding program," I said as adrenaline oozed through my veins. Students filing into her classroom cut our conversation short.

At the time I wished it was my child doing more than two hours of work a night, but as I look back, I'm certain the workload heaped on the Joyce Junior High students was extraordinary.

Not only for the classes taught in French—where students were required to translate the course materials, as well their notes and assignments, until they had picked up the language—but for *English* language arts as well.

One particular assignment in that class stands out. The students were to choose a book from a list provided and complete an assignment related to the novel. Avery slogged through the mass-market science fiction book *Timeline* by Michael Crichton, all 512 pages of it, as preparation for writing a journal that alternated between the points of view of each of the main characters. She spent hours on the computer, churning out pages of composition. She didn't seem to mind, I'm guessing because she felt confident in her English writing ability. Then it was time for intricate decoration, which included tying ribbons to bind the pages together and burning corners of pages to lend an air of medieval authenticity.

There were also ten-page short stories and endless chapter responses to *The Master Puppeteer* to be written. (I've always thought chapter responses were a great way to ruin a book.) It took hours to complete these assignments, and that was only one class out of eight. Avery often took on language arts assignment with gusto, but that wasn't usually the case with most of her other courses in Grade 7.

Her efforts at homework, however inconsistent, acted as an antidote to my anxiety. They reminded me of the old days in elementary school when all was well, and I would temporarily relax.

More often, though, Terry and I both fought with Avery, trying to wrestle her down to her homework. Our battles were demoralizing, with me yelling at first, later bribing and threatening. It must be Avery—must be that she was lazy or stubborn, or both. Or was it that we simply didn't know how to approach the problem? Weren't other families doing quite nicely, especially those with kids in the late immersion program, where the students were brighter, harder-working than most? They probably dove into their homework every day after school.

Or maybe not. In 2007, a full 72 percent of parents surveyed by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) said that homework had been a source of household stress.<sup>1</sup>

The survey report listed those who suffered the most stress (parents with higher levels of educations and parents of lower-achieving students, for example) but didn't describe the level of stress. Stress could mean minor irritation at having to assist a child with math problems when both parent and child would rather be watching *Degrassi* together to full-out yelling matches. When *Globe and Mail* reporter Roy MacGregor opened the floodgates with a column about homework overload, one mother, highly educated and busy with her own demanding job, wrote to him, "It's the reason I smoke pot. Honest to God, I'm completely stressed out. I can't count how many nights both kids and I have been in tears after hours and hours of homework, long nights that end up with them going to bed too late, exhausted, and frustrated..."

That response may seem extreme, but according to Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, authors of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Children and What Parents Can Do About It*, there are lots of parents struggling with the same problem. Their survey and interviews revealed that over one-third of the families admit to feeling crushed by their children's school workload.<sup>2</sup>

The CCL's 2007 survey reported that the "overwhelming majority of Canadians" believe that homework plays an important role in the learning experience of students. There is a disconnect here. I can only explain it this way: We believe that our children must be given so much work to complete at the end of the day, over the weekends, even during holidays because it will enhance their learning. All the fighting and crying must be worth it in the end. That was what Terry and I assumed and why we entered the ring repeatedly with Avery in the name of homework. We didn't want her to be left behind. We believed there was a point to all the writing projects and fill-in-the-blank assignments. But was there?

Bennett's and Kalish's short answer is "not likely." "The overwhelming majority of teachers have never taken a course in assigning homework. Contrary to popular belief, there is little solid research demonstrating benefits from the current homework system—if you can call it a 'system.'"<sup>3</sup>

The literature gives me pause. A sixty-one-page systematic review of eighteen studies on homework published between 2003 and 2007, completed in spring 2009 by the Canadian Council on Learning, was more generous than Bennett and Kalish in its evaluation, but its assessment was rife with caveats. The key findings were summarized in the article "Homework Helps, but Not Always." Of particular interest to me was the comment, "Common sense indicates classes where students do more homework seem to produce students with higher scores. Nonetheless, some studies indicate a point of diminishing returns for the amount of homework assigned."<sup>4</sup> Duke University Professor Harris Cooper, a highly regarded and frequently referenced researcher on homework, also found that for junior high students the positive relation appeared for even small amounts of time on homework (less than one hour per night) but disappeared entirely after students reported doing between one and two hours each night.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that Avery was overwhelmed by the amount of homework assigned to her. Especially in view of her perfectionist streak; she'd always been an "all or nothing" kind of person. It took me a long time to figure out that Avery doing very little was just the flip side of her overdoing it in Grade 6; both approaches stemmed from her anxiety about her performance. The excessive amount of homework her teachers demanded of her was worse than counterproductive; it was destructive. It may have played a central role in her eventually quitting school.

I once asked the principal at a school council meeting if Joyce had a homework policy. He said that in Grade 7 the students shouldn't have to do more than one hour a night. That was in keeping with many schools in Calgary that had adopted

an informal policy of ten minutes per class, per night. These requirements sounded completely reasonable and I went away thinking, *It's us. We can't get it together.* But according to Bennett and Kalish, “Ten minutes is never ten minutes.”<sup>6</sup> Children work at such different rates, some are perfectionists, and they have different interests. How would adults feel if we came home to hours of work from five different bosses?

In our less charged conversations, Avery told us each teacher gave her and her classmates homework almost every day and it was difficult to manage.

I look back at all of the consternation we experienced in the name of homework. It makes me shake my head at the toll it took on each of us—including Avery's sister, Lucy, the sister who shrank from conflict, who had to bear witness to it all.

But I wasn't yet considering any of this research on homework or anything else to do with the school system when all this began. I was too stuck in my own worries about Avery's performance and looking for an immediate solution. Pushed into action by my conversation with Charlotte about all the work Meredith was doing, I called Ms. Kearney, the guidance counsellor at Joyce, for an appointment.

EVERY WAS ALREADY in Ms. Kearney's office when Terry and I arrived. She had tears trailing down her face; her unwashed hair was gathered in a ponytail. Her vulnerability broke my heart. As I reached for her she scowled in response, knowing I was likely the one behind this meeting. She wouldn't or perhaps couldn't find the words to answer Ms. Kearney when she asked what was wrong. I knew my daughter wished things were different; success mattered to her.

“Avery, your Grade 6 marks and provincial test results illustrate your capabilities,” Ms. Kearney said. She offered some good tips for getting organized and Avery appeared to be taking it in, but I sensed the problem was bigger, more layered. Just a few months ago, in Grade 6, she had been organized enough

to receive stellar grades. She could be organized if she chose to be. When Ms. Kearney reviewed her progress class-by-class, Avery said little but insisted her science teacher, Madame Oudet, didn't like her. When Ms. Kearney offered to help work things out between them, Avery refused.

After Avery was dismissed from our meeting and sent back to class, Ms. Kearney told us she had been rebellious as a teen, belligerent to her parents. One day her mother threw her clothes into garbage bags and dumped them on the curb. However, she added, she always did what was expected of her at school.

On one hand I liked this young, too-thin Ms. Kearney. On the other, although I was sure she was trying to make us feel better by implying, "I turned out okay. I'm a guidance counsellor," I wished she wouldn't go on about her own turbulent adolescence, especially if she had toed the line at school. It wasn't helping.

Ms. Kearney organized another meeting a few days later, shortly before November report cards. This one included "Learning Team B," those who taught English language arts, French language arts, science, and math.

Terry and I met outside of the school the day of the meeting. I was afraid of what we were going to hear, close to tears as we entered the school office. Pain pulsed through my right shoulder.

We were led by a smiling secretary to Classroom 3, right beside the office, where we all introduced ourselves and shook hands. Terry and I wedged ourselves into the two desks placed across from the four teachers. I felt like a child, an outnumbered one at that. They wasted little time on small talk, getting straight to the point: Avery wasn't completing many assignments, or at least she wasn't turning them in. She refused to ask teachers for help. She was easily distracted, often chatted with other students during class.

On that day, it seemed as if Avery was the greatest problem they had ever encountered.

Madame Fonda and Madame Caspari nodded their heads while Madame Oudet and Mr. Callis did most of the talking. Mr.

Callis was experienced working with students who had been labelled as gifted and although that wasn't the case with Avery as far as I knew, he seemed to understand kids who harboured perfectionist tendencies. They often completed their assignments but didn't hand them in for fear they might not measure up to the competition, he said, and suggested this might be what was driving Avery's behaviour. Her language arts mark currently stood at 82 percent, which was fine by any measure, but he predicted this subject too would succumb as her focus deteriorated. He told us he had isolated her in the class because she talked constantly.

When I realized even English language arts wasn't cause for celebration, I folded my arms on the desk and put my head down. "Oh, my God," I moaned, trying to add a bit of levity by being melodramatic. I knew if I didn't, I would cry, and I didn't want to do that there.

Terry chucked me a dirty look. He rarely passed judgment on my behaviour. *Who does he think he is to do it now?* I thought. But I decided in that moment it was anxiety about the situation rather than actual anger with me and I let it slide. There was little point in adding further conflict to our situation.

Mr. Callis's parting words to us: "If she isn't doing her work, don't let her lie around watching television for hours."

*Right, if only it were that simple.*

This meeting played havoc with all of my expectations for Avery. I had imagined, just a couple of months ago, that she would be at the top of her class, involved in extracurricular activities, maybe on the debate team. I assumed we would have a pleasant little chat with all of these same teachers in the gym where the regular parent-teacher interviews were being held.

After the interview I sent cards to each teacher thanking them for their time and consideration. I cared what this group of teachers thought of us. I wanted them to see us as conscientious even if Avery wasn't. Mannered. Concerned. Parents who would do anything for their child. People who valued education.

People who showed up when the going got tough. I wanted them to be baffled by Avery's behaviour. We couldn't possibly be causing it at our end.

Being gracious at the interview was one thing, but I didn't need to be mailing off thank-you notes. How pathetic. I cringe now just thinking about it. I was so anxious for them to like me and approve of me. It could be that for once, finally, I wanted to please teachers.

My secret wish was that Avery would produce the grades I never achieved, that she would be my second crack at experiencing the status and approval bestowed upon A students. I had forgotten the price to be paid for this prestige. Forgotten, too, how secondary schooling, for the most part, had threatened to send me into either narcoleptic seizures or spasms of anxiety when I was my daughter's age.

EVERY HAD DONE so well, so much better than I had, in elementary school, that I never once considered it might all come to a halt so abruptly, so early. I marvelled that it could all change so quickly, as if someone had flipped a switch in her brain.

The first highly anticipated record of Grade 7 performance arrived. Avery pulled the wrinkled brown envelope from her backpack, handed it to me, and walked upstairs to her bedroom. She didn't hang around like she always had in the past, waiting for me to congratulate her.

Her highest score was in English—82 percent (*Good work, keep up the effort*). Her lowest was in social studies at 57 (*Better test preparation is needed. Should complete and submit all homework and assignments. Needs to show more interest in work*). Science slid in at 64 percent (*Needs to develop better listening skills. Better test preparation is needed*). Math hovered in the B range at 69 percent, which was disappointing, as this had always been one of Avery's strengths.

My memory wandered back to when Avery was not yet five, asking a woman how old her baby was. When the mother

replied ten months, Avery said, “Oh, he is almost a year.” I was surprised she came to that conclusion so quickly. Starting when she was six or seven, Terry would ask her to solve multiplication problems like “What’s thirty-four times eighteen?” to keep her occupied on road trips. She would do the calculation in her head in a few seconds and was pleased when she got it right, which was most of the time.

Figuring in Avery’s optional courses, band and foods, made for an average of 70 percent. This wasn’t awful, yet so much drama had been stirred up by her teachers, and Terry and I had fallen for it.

The morning after report cards, irritation itched at both Avery and me as we began our days. I blew off steam lecturing her about how she should eat breakfast. Later we slipped and slid down the paved alley that was our shortcut to the bus stop. It was a shadowy, icy path, a tunnel the sun never glimpsed, which served our mood that morning.

“What’s wrong, Avery?” I asked her, not in a caring way but in a what’s-your-problem way, referring to her all-pervasive bad mood. I wasn’t prepared for what I was about to hear.

“I hate myself... I want to kill myself... I’m going to get a gun... you’re part of the problem... I hate school... I don’t like anything about my life... Don’t worry I wouldn’t kill myself... I don’t have the courage.” Her words hung in the blue-black morning, pulling the breath from me.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know how bad it was. Do you want to get out of the French program? Dad and I don’t want you to be somewhere you’re miserable.”

Our conversation was cut short as she dashed off to catch the bus.

As I left the bus stop I vowed to myself I would watch her closely, consider professional help, try to inject some fun back into our lives, and contain my own anxiety. Tears blurred my vision on the walk home. I wrote down what she said so the words and the pain behind them wouldn’t dim with time. Was

school and its expectations capable of breeding this type of distress? Was it her social life at school, or maybe a lack of one?

Avery didn't have a packed social calendar. She occasionally hung out with her good friend Clare, almost two years younger and one grade behind, who lived on our crescent. They watched movies, had sleepovers, baked cookies. But Clare seemed to have lots of friends and we saw her only every couple of weeks. Avery and Kristen, a polite, animated girl with soft brown eyes and dark hair, found instant chemistry at Joyce French Camp before Grade 7 started, but Kristen's parents kept her close to home, only occasionally allowing her to visit. Most of their socializing took place at school.

Besides swimming, besides obsessive amounts of instant messaging, one of Avery's favourite school distractions entailed hanging out at the bookstore Chapters. Before things got really bad she'd bought me a fish cookbook there. I consoled myself at the time with the thought that if Avery wasn't going to do her schoolwork, reading was a good alternative, but uneasiness about the shift in her behaviour made me want to stop her from going to the bookstore, hoping she would stay home and do schoolwork if she didn't spend so much time there.

One evening as Terry was taking Lucy to her swim club practice at our local YMCA, Avery, in a rush of defiance, charged out to the garage and climbed into the backseat of the car. She was intent on stealing a lift to Chapters, just across the street from the Y. Terry followed her out to the garage.

"Get out of the car and do your homework," he said, irate.

She refused.

Being a reasonable man, her father didn't attempt to force her out of the car and into the house.

"I win," Avery said.

Terry came back into the house, grabbed his shoes, and sat down on the bottom step in the front entrance to tie them up. "I can't even look at her," he muttered. "I can't even look at her."

The disgust on his face made me crazy. I hit him hard across the top of the head. My hand was red, pulsing with pain. I had

never heard him say something like this before. I had never hit him.

He looked up, shocked. “Say you’re sorry.”

“Forget it.” I felt entitled to my rampant anger toward Avery but he wasn’t. His outburst scared me.

Our house echoed rage.

Anxiety steals your ability to attend to much of anything except anxiety. It steals your focus, your attention to other matters. The crazy monkey chatter inside my head went like this: *It will be okay... everything will change soon... no, it will get worse... Avery will get kicked out... then what... is it the French... is it a learning problem... oh hell, it’s Grade 7... it could get worse... what if she gets kicked out... maybe she’s being bullied... maybe the teachers are mean... no, this is her fault... she can be so difficult... how to approach this... will she get tired of Chapters... how else will she distract herself... must be kind... must be very strict... must not yell... must be consistent... something very wrong... no, just adolescence... must read more on this...*

During the turmoil, I often drove to the local library, a place of refuge for me. Avery and I had literary escape in common, but I chose the library just as often as bookstores (Avery told me libraries were too institutional for her). I have always felt at a library like others might feel in a cathedral or hiking in the mountains—a sense of great reverence. Now, when I went there, I lugged out armfuls of books on school achievement and solving school problems with titles like *The Secrets to Good Grades*, *Overcoming Underachieving*, *Finding Help When Your Child Is Struggling in School*, and *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women*.

Over-anxious people tend to believe there is one tidy solution to every problem. I believed that solution resided in a book. I just had to find it.

I don’t recall which book it was, but one of them advocated a daily study time. The author believed that if children were consistently instructed to sit down where parents could supervise for a specified period every day to attend to their homework,

all would be fine. They simply required structure. You were to have your child sign a contract, which I did, that stated Avery must work for one hour each weekday and ninety minutes on Sunday at the kitchen or dining room table. No talking, eating, or drawing. No radio, television, or telephone conversations.

Some days this seemed to work, but ultimately it was just another way to continue in this ridiculous contest of wills that we were both determined to win. Avery leafed through crinkled papers that never found their way into her binder. Or she tried to read comic books under the table. She constantly asked how much time she had left. We carried on with that charade for about two months.

One child psychologist wrote of a rigid, intricate system of daily parent-teacher communication logs carried back and forth between home and school. The student in question approached her teachers for signatures to confirm assignments due or completed. I wanted to ask the author why she thought a student who was avoiding homework and becoming disengaged at school would carry through with these tasks. Marginal students often duck teacher contact at all costs when things are bad. I dismissed that plan.

Around the same time as I was reading these books, most of which found fault with the student or parent, I stumbled across *99 Ways to Get Your Kids to Do Their Homework (and Not Hate It)* written by Mary Leonhardt, an American teacher for over thirty years. A clever editor with an eye for sales must have insisted on that title. A more accurate title would have been: *How to Love Your Child Regardless of How Little They Do at School* or *How to Raise a Reader*.

Rather than prescriptions for getting kids to do homework, Mary Leonhardt's book provided perspective, a much wider lens through which to view school. She wrote with such obvious care and empathy for students, underlining the fact that they could be driven to do poorly by so many factors other than laziness or insubordination—like social or family issues, learning problems,

or even an emotionally abusive teacher. She stressed the need to keep children reading and writing regardless of whether they were completing homework.

Avery's excursions to Chapters now seemed less troubling.

In regard to junior high, Leonhardt's most useful tips were:

- Tip 52: Resign yourself to the fact that junior high is often the low point for homework completion.
- Tip 53: Also resign yourself to the fact that social issues will often crowd out homework for junior high kids.
- Tip 57: Take a more casual interest in their work than you did when they were in elementary school.
- Tip 61: Encourage them to express their opinions about their assignments and teachers.<sup>7</sup>

It was reassuring to read of a seasoned junior high teacher's experience with her students and homework completion (or lack thereof).

I discovered other evidence that junior high was a time of substantially decreased motivation for reasons other than individual students' disinterest or laziness. According to Eric M. Anderman, professor and interim director of Ohio State University School of Educational Policy and Leadership—author of hundreds of articles and book chapters on classroom motivation, many concerned with adolescent development—school is set up to encourage failure. In an article called “Motivation and Schooling in the Middle Grades,” Anderman writes of the huge mismatch between junior high students' needs and their school environment. The typical student goes about their day with few opportunities to make important decisions, he says. They experience excessive rules and discipline, poor teacher-student relationships, homogeneous groupings by ability, and strict grading practices. All of this flies in the face of what we know about young adolescents' development and need for autonomy, independence, and strong relationships with adults. He argues that the curriculum must have meaning, be

connected to something real and serious; it must be more than textbook questions.<sup>8</sup>

Anderman also addresses the shift early-adolescent students experience in beliefs about ability. They tend to view ability more as a stable, internal trait and less related to effort than they did in their younger years. You either have it or you don't. For them, putting forth effort and failing means you're dumb. Not only is this a risk to a student's self-esteem, but failure, even poor results, affects how you are valued in the school setting. This competition for grades and other academic recognition, Anderman says, may cause some to drop out of the race—psychologically or physically. Even students who seemingly have all it takes to do well.<sup>9</sup>

School often exacerbates the problem by focusing on ability rather than progress in learning. This is done by fixating on rewards like grades (despite significant research that shows these external motivators to be ineffective, even detrimental, in persuading students to hit the books). Posting the honour roll students' names on a bulletin board, for example, screams, "We value marks over just about everything."

While there is ample evidence that the environment in many middle schools is antithetical to the needs of early adolescents, few reform efforts have emerged that consider the motivational and developmental needs of youth. The focus remains on treatment of individual students' problems rather than prevention by changing the environments that encourage this "maladaptive" behaviour.

If you consistently fail at school, it makes you wary of trying and possibly failing in the future. Poor performance at school follows some of us throughout life. I worried that choices Avery was making now would hound her beyond her school years.

Mary Leonhardt's Tip 99: "Remember to let your children know that while schoolwork is important, it pales before the really important things in life: kindness, helpfulness, love, respect. Don't ever make the mistake of allowing your kids to

think that their worth to you somehow depends on how well they do in school. Schoolwork is, in any final reckoning, only a very small part of life.”<sup>10</sup>

I tried hard to take all of the Leonhardt’s sage advice to heart. But more often than not my anxiety acted as a shield, blocking out new possibilities no matter how much I wanted an alternate, more expansive view of schoolwork. Change is a complicated, one-step-forward, two-step-back process, and with that book I took a small step forward.

I understood that fighting about school every day would ruin my relationship with Avery, possibly drive her to distractions beyond Chapters and instant messaging. But I realize now that my fears were galloping away with me. I envisioned Avery getting kicked out of school. Dropping out. Getting into drugs. Booze. I was certain that if I couldn’t influence her behaviour at school, I would be unable to guide her behaviour in the rest of the world.

I NEEDED TO mop up the damage from a couple of days ago. The last thing we needed was more tension in our house. I called Terry at work and asked him to meet me so I could apologize for whacking him in the head. We settled into lush chairs in a cafe in the hotel across the street from the office tower where he worked.

“I’m so sorry for hitting you. I can’t believe I did that,” I said to my husband over coffee.

“That’s okay,” he said. “These are tough times. It will all turn out. Don’t worry about Avery. She’ll be fine.”

I sat awash in affection for him.

I not only had a solid marriage, a husband who would never let me down, but I also had great friends: Donna, a close friend from Regina, who had moved to Calgary at the beginning of that school year, and Laura, a friend a few years my senior. A daughter of a mutual friend once said Laura reminded her of a female Mick Jagger—the compact, toned body and boundless

energy. What I really loved about her, though, was what a good listener she was; she never judged Avery or me and always provided perspective.

I forgot that everyone wasn't Donna or Laura, however, and one evening I failed to read my audience. I belonged to a book club and it was at our October meeting that worry seeped out of me, flooding the Chinese restaurant where we gathered to discuss Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. Carol had chosen the book and, I found out later, wasn't at all pleased that I yanked the conversation away from her selection to discuss my problems. I felt compelled to talk about Avery because all of the women were about my age and had adolescent kids, and I thought they might have some insight for me. Carol, mother of four, had experienced no shortage of adolescent strife.

About a week later, her voice taut with resentment, she called to ask when she could pick up the book reviews that I had taken home that night to read more carefully.

"I threw them out. I'm sorry. I didn't know you wanted them back."

"You are so inconsiderate. Everything is always about you. You were going on and on and we barely even discussed the book." Carol's words lashed me. Although I blamed her for a complete lack of empathy, I realized then I needed to censor myself. Just because someone had talked about similar problems in the past didn't mean they wanted to hear about mine.

DECEMBER 10. DONNA was hosting an afternoon party for old friends and new neighbours where she was selling homemade chocolate truffles she'd whipped up with her daughters, the proceeds going to the Food Bank. Avery was excited, looking forward to seeing Donna's girls, who were around the same age. Lucy's good friend, Casey, called in the midst of the three of us getting ready to head out across the city and invited her to a movie. Casey's father was going to take them. I consented, knowing how much Lucy enjoyed being with him; he was a

noncustodial dad, which made him novel to her, more fun than most parents.

Too late, I realized that I had violated one of the lessons I always tried to instill in my kids: honour your commitment regardless of a more appealing offer. And giving Lucy permission for this released something huge in Avery.

“Lucy, you are so stupid, an idiot, a loser with only one friend,” she raged. “You’re ugly, an ugly fag.”

“You got a bad report card, Avery,” Lucy responded, a half-hearted attempt at self-preservation.

I despised the word “fag” and had never heard Avery use it. I didn’t understand the complete etymology of it but knew it was pejorative, a slur, and she had no right to utter it—not at Lucy, not at anyone. I left the house for a quick walk around the block. White, ear-ringing rage followed the tears. Finally, I cooled down enough to regain my composure and returned home.

“I don’t think we should let Lucy go,” I told Terry when I got back. “Tell Avery it has nothing to do with her despicable behaviour, but I don’t think I should have given Lucy permission in the first place.”

“Casey and her dad are already on their way to pick her up,” Terry said. “And Lucy apologized to Avery while you were gone.”

This made no sense whatsoever, but Lucy had a much lower tolerance for conflict than Avery.

I asked her what had upset her so badly. “You always make mistakes. You shouldn’t have let Lucy go to the movie.” I left the house. Terry stayed home and so did Avery, lying on her bed. I put my shitty mood on hold while I socialized at Donna’s. After her guests left and her girls went off to do their homework, I told Donna about Avery’s outlandish, puzzling behaviour over a glass of wine.

When I returned home at about ten that night, Terry said, “I thought you would be home before this.”

“I couldn’t have come back any sooner,” I said. “Don’t wake me up tomorrow. I don’t want to see her.”

“Avery said she was sorry to Lucy.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I was holding on to my anger. She had crossed a line. A big line.

At times, like that one in particular, I reacted like an adolescent myself.

The next day, I didn’t talk to Avery until supper.

“Please go ahead and tell me you’re sorry so we can move on,” I said.

“Mom, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I meant to tell you sooner.”

“Okay. Can you tell me why you were so mean to Lucy, why you called her those awful names?”

“Lucy’s never around anymore. She’s always with Casey. I want her to do more with us.”

“Could you say that next time?”

As I replay that scene I realize how ill equipped I was to deal with Avery’s fury. And it always felt so damn personal. When it was directed at Lucy, I felt I needed to protect her. These outbursts were about Avery’s own turmoil, but it was so hard to be left in the wake, trying to regain equilibrium. I eventually got better at remaining rational, managing my own emotional eruptions, but it was as difficult as quitting smoking.

Luckily, I had already made an appointment to see Jennifer.

Dr. Jennifer Walsh practised talk therapy, which had worked for me in the past. She had been my mooring while I struggled with huge blows to my identity brought on by losing my mother just as I was becoming one myself. For about three years in the late ’80s, anxiety had consumed most of my waking hours. It was Jennifer’s skill as a psychotherapist that had saved me. Now I needed her again.

I hadn’t been to Jennifer’s downtown psychiatric office for at least six years. After a short stint in the waiting room, I landed in the chair in her office and began to cry before she even closed the door.

“How are you?”

I gave her the lowdown on the past three months, including Avery’s problems at school and the scene caused by Lucy going to a movie with her friend just a few days ago.

“What are you afraid of?”

“That the teachers will think Avery is stupid or we are negligent parents or her self-esteem will plummet with her grades and she won’t get into university.”

She asked me to describe my experience of junior and senior high school. I told her of my adolescence in Regina, my complete absorption in my social life. I told her how I’d cared about fun and love and relationships and having the opportunity to pursue them. How school had held no meaning for me other than being a social club.

“You turned out okay,” Jennifer said. I thought about this. Although I’m as flawed as anyone, I had built a good life for myself, one I valued. I was glad to wake up most mornings.

We had some friends in common, and I remembered hearing that Jennifer’s son was struggling at school. “How is your son doing?” I asked.

“He doesn’t do too much. He’ll get 50 percent in a class by getting 100 percent on a test, but he won’t ever do projects. He goes to Chapters and reads entire novels.”

“Avery does that too. What do you make of it? Why doesn’t he work harder or do assignments?”

“I don’t think he knows. I believe it’s probably a combination of things— anxiety, rebellion, arrogance. He did more in junior high, but high school is a big problem. I did tutors, the whole nine yards. If I could do it over again, I’d butt out.”

“When I bring up school, she has told me to fuck off.”

I expected a flicker of shock to register on Jennifer’s face. Instead, she smiled.

“For the longest time I was nothing but a stupid, fucking bitch.”

My turn to smile. “Thanks so much. That makes me feel much better.”

“That’s fine. Do you need to come back?”

“Not for a while.”

I figured I could coast for at least a few weeks on the soothing feeling I got from knowing I wasn’t alone in my child’s

obnoxious behaviour. And Jennifer was a psychiatrist, someone I had great respect for.

“Just confirm one thing for me. You can’t control your kids, can you?” I asked as I brushed by her out the door.

“Nope.”

“All I can do is try to control my anxiety, right?”

“Right.”

“Do things that make me happy?”

“Right again.”

That session reminded me of what a comfort Jennifer had been to me during difficult times. She listened ten times more than she talked, the exact opposite of teachers and administration. She never pretended to have answers she didn’t or couldn’t have. In future sessions I would beg her to answer questions like “Why is Avery doing this?” and she would always say, “I don’t know.” I appreciate this quality even more as I think of the many professionals we consulted who had loads of answers. Labels galore. Mostly off the mark.

I wished I could carry a miniature version of Jennifer around in my purse, available whenever I needed her, when small things turned into huge things, to give me the courage to stop myself from doing what I knew was useless. Like trying to control Avery for the sake of control.

Fear propelled me into battle. One day after school when Avery told me she was going to see Clare, her friend a few doors down, I told her no three times, working from the misguided notion that she would buckle down and do schoolwork if she stayed home.

“You suck shit as parents,” Avery told me, throwing shoes from the garage entrance to the front door, barely missing the vase on a table in the foyer.

In frustration, I shoved her out the front door.

My behaviour made no sense. One minute I wouldn’t let her go and the next I was pushing her out the door.

Boiling with resentment, I stomped upstairs, locked myself in our bathroom, not knowing what to expect next, not wanting

any further confrontation. Thuds against the door, then softer plops told me Avery had returned. When I opened the bathroom door, I found books littering the floor. Some had landed open, looking like wounded birds. Avery was gone, I assumed to Clare's.

I found Lucy peering out of her bedroom, the door open a few inches, concern written all over her face. I kissed her round cheek. "It's okay," I whispered. "I know how to handle teenagers." A lie or rather two lies—Avery wasn't yet a teenager, and I didn't hold one shred of certainty about anything.