

KAREN SEGAL

UPSIDE DOWN

IN WARM WEATHER, I CAN'T ESCAPE MRS. LEWIS. No matter how quickly I walk, she is always at the end of the double driveway between our two houses.

This Saturday morning, I am going to indoor floor hockey at my school gym, supervised by my teacher, Mr. Prass. It is 1978. I am twelve years old and in grade six. Mr. Prass is a father figure to me and a pedophile, although I won't understand either of these things for years.

"Nice day for March," says Mrs. Lewis. Her voice is raspy from smoking. In all my life I have never seen her without a cigarette dangling from her mouth. She seems ancient to me but is really only forty-four, the same age as my mother.

"Yeah," I say, eager to get to school and away from my house. Because the windows are open, I can still hear my dad yelling at my mom. I understand that Mrs. Lewis can hear it too, dad screaming about how my mom doesn't comprehend how a furnace works. When I was leaving, he ripped one of our encyclopedias from the shelf—the E to G one—and frantically flipped through it, spit forming at the corners of his mouth.

"John, John, it doesn't matter," I heard my mom pleading.

"You are wrong, you are wrong, and I am right!"

If I'd had nowhere to be I would have run to my room and carefully closed the door. If I slammed it during his tirades, dad would often turn on me and yell, "Don't slam the fucking door!"

I figure that Mrs. Lewis heard the shouting, and I am embarrassed. I don't wonder now, as I will much later, why she never came to my rescue. Not only did she not do that, but she and Mr. Lewis had my parents over every Christmas Day before my mom's relatives came over for supper. My sister and I dreaded this, as there was always drinking, and my dad always returned belligerent. Mrs. Lewis, whose tight greying curls look overpermed, will herself die of cirrhosis of the liver twenty-two years later.

Mrs. Lewis is right: it is an unusually warm day for March. There is still dirty snow piled up all around, but this week a lot of it will start to melt. March can really go either way in Winnipeg. Just last week another neighbour, Mr. Godin, said it was “too cold for man or beast” as he drove us to church. All of us are Catholics, my sister and me whether we like it or not. My dad is a Jewish atheist, who derides the pope every chance he gets. Dad has no problem eating bacon except when he wants to shout, and then suddenly there is an issue with the Saturday breakfast mom sometimes makes. You never know when bacon or ham or mom’s watching of soap operas will set him off. I always wish she would stop serving pork products completely.

Dad is six feet tall and seems like a giant. He doesn’t tend to yell at my sister, who is four years older and spends most of her time in her room or out with her friends. My mom says dad and I are like oil and water, too much alike. She is prescient about that. Through my adult life I will struggle to keep a handle on my own anxiety and anger, which will hamper my relationships and my work life to difficult degrees. In saying that, of course, she makes me partially responsible for our dynamic, for his abuse. But she herself, one of fourteen children brought up on a small farm sixty kilometres outside of Winnipeg, was both sexually and certainly verbally assaulted by members of her own family. I will never once doubt her deep love for me or her desire to reign my father in, and I will realize later how difficult—how to-the-bone difficult—it had to be for her. My father’s history was unknown to me, as his parents and brother disowned him when he married my mother because she was Catholic. Rumour was that it was his mother, Rachel, who spearheaded the disowning, the sitting Shiva for him like he was dead. She will die an old woman in Toronto, where she will move to be near her other son, who also cut off all contact with my father. I’ll always wonder what it must have been like to grow up in that house, but I’ll never know.

“What’s your mom doing now?” asks Mrs. Lewis.

“Don’t know. Maybe going to go grocery shopping. I’m not sure.”

“I’ll give her a call.”

“Okay,” I say, and I’m off and running.

I decide not to take the short cut through the open field in order to avoid getting any unnecessary mud on my runners. The bottoms of our shoes have to be clean to use the gym, as rinky dink as it is.

When I arrive, ten other students are already there, hockey sticks in hand, running around scoring goals into empty nets. Mr. Prass is stand-

ing at the side, a whistle around his neck. He has a moustache and thick black hair that is greying at his temples. I worship him. I want to live at his house.

Among other things, Mr. Prass taught me to look at people when I talk, not at the ground. He did this by lifting my chin to him over and over again until it finally stuck. I recently won the “Laura Secord Essay Contest” for an essay I won’t be able to remember when I’m older, but I will remember winning a book about nature with a black bear on the cover. I was disappointed because it looked boring, but I received it during a small ceremony in the classroom, in which I shook hands with the presenter and looked her straight in the eyes while Mr. Prass beamed. Later, book in hand, I sat on Mr. Prass’ lap in the teachers’ lounge, and he told the other teachers what a great writer I was. I felt so proud and then so jealous when one Saturday after hockey I saw Nancy on his lap. She says there are problems in her family, but she won’t say what they are, and I sense that I shouldn’t ask. I do, however, feel relieved that her family has issues too.

“Hey Karen,” Mr. Prass says in a way I think is a bit gruff. I tense up. I look right at him. He smiles. “Grab a stick. You’ll be on Jeff, Lisa, Robin, and Nancy’s team.”

“Loser!” shouts Jeff.

“Say that again and you’ll be sent home,” says Mr. Prass.

“Go on, Karen.”

I’m a shitty hockey player. I don’t have the coordination, and I panic when the puck comes my way. I generally just end up in skirmishes trying to get the puck, which turns out to be the other team’s way of running down the clock.

“Stop!” screams Mr. Prass when I do this today. “Jesus, Karen, stop! Let the puck go.”

I run to the bench, put my head down, and start crying.

“Don’t worry,” he tells me later, ruffling my hair. “We’re only playing for fun.”

Mr. Prass coaches our community kids’ softball team as well. He either never plays Debbie or me or puts us in right field. When we team up and ask him to play us more, he tells us not to be so silly, that he knows who to play and where. I cry and nod my head. When I go up to bat, he tells me not to even try to hit the ball, to always get a walk. I decide that sports are very important to Mr. Prass because that is the only time I ever see him upset.

Otherwise, he is tender and kind, so very kind. He constantly tells me that I am smart, that I am creative, that I will succeed in whatever I set out to do. If someone looks sad at school, he asks them if anything is wrong. He sometimes brings his guitar to work, and we do singalongs.

Sports are really important to some people, I decide. My dad loves watching American football. If he leaves the room to go to the bathroom or something, and I change the channel, he always snatches the remote and switches it back after he returns. I feel like I don't exist in those moments.

After hockey is the best part of the morning. Some students go home, but others stay. Mr. Prass buys us pop from the vending machine, and we move into our classroom.

The Orange Crush has just the right amount of fizz, and I chug it down thirstily. The classroom always looks so different than it does during the week. Smaller, lighter. It's exciting. There are six students left: me, four other girls, and one boy, Darryl, who is chunky and has greasy hair.

Mr. Prass asks us what we are going to do with the rest of the weekend. I say that I am going to do some creative writing. I generally write stories about girls on vacation with their families at cottages. They swim in the lake, and their dads let them dive from their shoulders again and again. Then the whole family—the girl, her two brothers, and her three sisters—all play Rummoli together in the evenings. There is no tension in the stories except for one where the younger brother drowns because he gets entangled in weeds after jumping off the dock. I got this idea from a young man who did drown in the weeds after jumping off a dock in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, where my family and I go every summer. That was the same year my mom took a Polaroid of my dad standing on the dock, ready to dive in. Dad will still look humungous when I find the photo decades later, after he passes away. Right before he dies I'll visit him in his Ottawa nursing home, where he'll move to be near my sister after mom dies. As I turn to leave, he'll call me back to the room and thank me for coming. I'll weep later in the parking lot. He has so much regret, my sister will tell me.

"Writing is a great idea," says Mr. Prass. He read five of my stories during creative writing week at school. We were only supposed to give him ten pages double-spaced foolscap, but I handed in fifteen and got an A plus plus—something Mr. Prass says he rarely gives out.

I might read too, I tell him. And that's true. I am a voracious reader, and I try to read well above my grade level so that during reading time at

school Mr. Prass will come around and be impressed. I am currently reading a book about a woman who has been paralyzed in an accident, and her name is Karen too. Most of the vocabulary is beyond me, and it is a struggle, so it remains my at-school reading book. At home I am partial to anything by Judy Blume except a book called *Forever* because it has sex in it, and my mom says I can't read it yet. She'll relent one year at a Holiday Inn in Fargo, North Dakota, after our annual trip to Detroit Lakes. When I read it, I'll feel kind of grossed out by Michael and the stuff about stuff coming out his penis, and I'll decide that I don't ever want to see a penis.

"You're quite the reader," Mr. Prass says, and I smile. "That's why you're such a good writer."

Teresa Tampini pipes up that she likes writing and reading too. She says her dad knows a book publisher. Six months earlier she was caught plagiarizing a social studies assignment from a textbook. Mr. Prass yelled at her in front of the whole class, and she cried uncontrollably. The next day I ran into her as she was heading into school, and she was ecstatic.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"He forgave me!" she shouted.

"Wow," I said, knowing exactly who she meant.

Our Saturday morning at school is winding up, and as always I have a feeling of yearning that I can't explain, that I don't understand. I feel like something is being ripped away from me, and the only thing that keeps me from becoming hysterical is knowing that we have eleven more Saturdays, not including the week off at Easter, to play hockey and have pop. I start the hour countdown the second I leave the school, even though I'll see Mr. Prass on Monday. School is great, but it isn't the same somehow.

Teresa stays behind so that Mr. Prass can help her with her math homework. I don't know whether I believe her or not. Two years later, Teresa will be the first of many girls in my class to testify that Mr. Prass took her to the nurse's office and fondled her breasts while helping her with her homework.

The next Tuesday at school, Mr. Prass tells us about a volunteer opportunity at the St. Paul Centre—a home for kids with special needs. Mr. Prass says they are looking for volunteers to come and play with the children on Tuesday evenings starting next week. He has a van and can take six of us. It will be for two hours from 6:30 to 8:30pm. We will meet him at the school, and he will drop us each off at home after.

"That sounds cool," says Teresa.

"No, it doesn't," snorts Ralph. "It sounds dumb. Dumb like the kids."

"Shut up, Ralph," says Jack. Jack is tall with feathered brown hair, and he asked me to dance a slow dance at the school gala last Friday evening. It wasn't to "Stairway to Heaven," but still. Later, I asked Darlene if she asked him to ask me, but she said no.

"I want to come," says Audrey, "but we don't eat dinner until six."

"We eat sup—dinner at five," I exclaim. "I'm sure I can come."

I feel ecstatic as Mr. Prass hands out permission slips and tells us to return them by Friday.

Other students ask what we will have to do, and Mr. Prass says it is mainly playing games with the kids in the gym. My mom does patterning with the neighbour down the street's son, who has Down Syndrome, and I tell everyone this.

"But you don't do it, do you?" asks Teresa.

"No," I say, "but I sometimes go along."

"That sounds like perfect experience," says Mr. Prass.

It is at the St. Paul Centre where Mr. Prass will turn me upside down for the first and only time. Almost every day in class, Mr. Prass turns one of the female students upside down. A girl comes to his desk with a question during individual study time, and he stands up, grabs her legs, flips her over, and swings her to and fro while she giggles.

One afternoon after social studies, I go up to Mr. Prass after all of the other students have left, after Nancy and even Teresa have gathered their things and gone. They are the two who hang around the most and who I am usually too tired to wait out. Not this day. This day I sit and pretend to keep writing in my social studies notebook.

"What do you need help with Karen?" Mr. Prass asks as I step up to his desk.

"Well," I say and start to cry.

He lifts my chin to his face. "What is it? Is there something you don't understand?"

His voice is soothing, and I feel desperate, but I don't know how or why I feel that way. The ache is there again—the terrible ache that I don't understand. "It's just, well . . ."

"Yes," he says. He is smiling gently as he looks into my face.

"How come you don't ever turn me upside down?"

"What?" he shouts, looking startled. Caught, I'll realize years later. He looks caught.

I put my head down. I'm crying audibly now.

"That's ridiculous. Don't be stupid."

"I'm sorry," I say, sobbing. This isn't sports, I think. We aren't playing a game.

"What a stupid thing to ask for." He hands me a tissue from his box on the desk and then turns away and starts putting his books into his brown leather case. "Go home. I'll see you tomorrow."

The next day, Mr. Prass doesn't turn anyone upside down, and he tells me that my social studies project is really good, really creative. He says this in front of all the other students. I can see Teresa rolling her eyes, but I don't care because I'm so excited. My hands start to shake. I smile, laugh, and put my head down on the desk. A few students snort, and one of them throws a rolled-up piece of paper at my head. It hits me and then falls to the floor.

Two days later, I skip almost the whole way to the school parking lot to meet Mr. Prass and the six other students who are also going to volunteer. Teresa can't make it, as it turns out. She says her parents don't want her to go to places like that. My parents think it will be good experience.

The weather has warmed again, and I only have to wear my winter jacket and not my long parka. When I get there, Mr. Prass is standing by his light brown van, smoking a cigarette. Jennifer Auster and Scott Wulff are outside throwing a softball back and forth. I can see three other kids already in the van: Barbara, Nancy, and Darryl.

"Great," says Mr. Prass. "Karen is here, so we can get going."

The rest of us scramble into the vehicle. I sit in the back back with Jennifer, whose parents got divorced last year. Scott is the tallest kid in our class, so he gets to sit beside Mr. Prass. I think that is so unfair, but I don't complain.

During the fifteen-minute ride to the St. Paul Centre, Mr. Prass tells us that we will have fun and that it will be a great experience. He says that we can have fries and a pop in the cafeteria after we play with the kids.

We pull up. The other students and I are giggling and excited, and I am also a little scared. Other than Craig, the boy with Down Syndrome, I've never met anyone who has special needs.

We go into the gym, and a woman named Erica comes over and introduces herself as the head of recreation. I notice her long straight brown hair

that goes all the way down to her bum. Her face is thin, and her nose is kind of large. She is going to pair us each off with a child, she says.

There is a slightly built blond boy, who is pacing back and forth, swinging his arms, and humming. I think he is about ten years old. My classmates are being paired up with the other children, and I feel afraid. I don't want to be with this boy. How will I get him to stop swinging his arms? Will he be able to play with me? I'm bouncing a basketball that I've taken from a bucket in the corner of the gym.

"This is Richard," Erica tells me. "He loves to run around the gym. Great that you have a basketball. He loves to throw balls back and forth."

"Oh," I say and rub my hands on my cords. "Okay."

Erica takes the ball from me and starts talking to Richard.

"Karen is going to play with you for awhile, okay?"

Richard grabs the ball and stops humming and flapping. I stand a few feet away from him, getting ready to catch it. My hands start to tremble. I hope that Erica doesn't notice.

We pass the ball back and forth a few times, and then Richard starts to roll it to me. I begin to feel more relaxed. My chest feels less heavy.

Suddenly Mr. Prass is upon me and grabbing my legs. Then I am upside down, and he is swinging me back and forth, my head barely above the gym floor. My hands begin to shake harder. Sudden movements always startle me.

"Karen likes to hang around," he tells Erica and Richard. I can't see their expressions, but I do hear Erica and Mr. Prass laughing.

I start to feel lightheaded when Mr. Prass finally turns me right side up again. I feel dizzy for a second and stumble but don't fall.

"There you go," Mr. Prass says to me. "Now go play catch with Richard."

Later, we sit in the cafeteria eating fries and drinking pop. I sprinkle salt on my fries and pour ketchup over them. Yum. I'm so excited to start eating them. They look like the good kind. I look over at Mr. Prass sitting at the next table with Jennifer and Scott. He laughs and reaches over to touch Jennifer's shoulder. I make a split-second decision and take the pepper shaker, loosen the top, and then pour it over my food.

"Oh no!" I shout. "The pepper shaker is broken or something. I got pepper all over my fries!"

Darryl starts to laugh, to snort.

Mr. Prass looks over, and I smile at him.

“Why did you do that, Karen?”

“What? I didn’t! The shaker is broken or . . .”

“Well, you can’t get more fries,” he tells me.

I sneeze. My eyes well up.

“Time to go anyway,” Mr. Prass announces and stands up, wiping the ketchup from his moustache with a serviette.

We all get up, and soon we are walking down the hall toward the exit. I try to hold them back, but tears are running down my face. I dread the ride home and want to be dropped off first rather than last, but I can’t say this because I know I’ll choke up if I try to speak.

Soon Mr. Prass is walking beside me. Then he has his arm around me and is pulling me to the side.

“Keep going everyone,” he says. “We’ll be right there.”

My classmates keep walking, and Darryl and Scott run ahead acting goofy.

Forty years later, I’ll search my memory many times, but I won’t have a clue what Mr. Prass says to me in the hallway of the St. Paul Centre. I’ll only remember that my yearning becomes even fiercer when he puts his arm around me and that it feels like a drug I’ll always crave.

On the van ride home, I stare out the window at the passing cars, not talking. I start to count the hours until it will be time for school again.