

“Our Daughters, Ourselves”

By Stevie Cameron

On December 9, 1989 the article “Our Daughters, Ourselves” appeared in the Globe and Mail. Three days earlier had occurred one of the worst crimes in Canadian history: a 25-year old man murdered 14 engineering students in Montreal because they were women and he left a suicide note blaming feminists for ruining his life. While Cameron’s lyrical and devastating essay is directed at the 14 young women who had aimed at the profession dominated by men, it also examines the context of this crime – the problems of sexism routinely faced by all daughters our society. Cameron’s elegy aroused such public response that the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women later named it best feminist article of the year, and on the first anniversary of the murders the Globe printed it again.

They are so precious to us, our daughters. When they are born, we see their futures as unlimited and as they grow and learn, we try so hard to protect them: This is how we cross the street, hold my hand, wear your boots, don’t talk to strangers, run to the neighbors if a man tries to get you in his car.

We tell our bright, shining girls that they can be anything: firefighters, doctors, policewomen, lawyers, scientists, soldiers, athletes, artists. What we don’t tell them, yet, is how hard it will be. Maybe, we say to ourselves, by the time they’re older it will be easier for them than it was for us.

But as they grow and learn, with aching hearts we have to start dealing with their bewilderment about injustice. Why do the boys get the best gyms, the best equipment and the best times on the field? Most of the school sports’ budget? Why does football matter more than gymnastics? Why are most of the teachers women and most of the principals men? Why do the boys make more money at their part-time jobs than we do?

And as they grow and learn we have to go on trying to protect them: We’ll pick you up at the subway, we’ll fetch you from the movie, stay with the group, make sure the parents drive you home from babysitting, don’t walk across the park alone, lock the house if we’re not there.

It’s not fair, they say. Boys can walk where they want, come in when they want, work where they want. Not really, we say; boys get attacked too. But boys are not targets for men the way girls are so girls have to be more careful.

Sometimes our girls don’t make it. Sometimes, despite our best efforts and all our love, they go on drugs, drop out, screw up. On the whole, however, our daughters turn into interesting, delightful people. They plan for college and university and with wonder and pride we see them competing with the boys for spaces in engineering schools, medical schools, law schools, business schools. For them we dream of Rhodes scholarships, Harvard graduate school, gold medals; sometimes, we even dare to say these words out loud and our daughters reward us with indulgent hugs. Our message is that anything is possible.

We bite back the cautions that we feel we should give them; maybe by the time they’ve graduated, things will have changed, we say to ourselves. Probably by the time they’re out, they will make partner when the men do, be asked to join the same clubs, run for political office. Perhaps they’ll even be able to tee off at the same time men do at the golf club.

But we still warn them: park close to the movie, get a deadbolt for your apartment, check your windows, tell your roommates where you are. Call me. Call me.

And then with aching hearts we take our precious daughters to lunch and listen to them talk about their friends: the one who was beaten by her boyfriend and then shunned by his friends when she asked for help from the dean, the one who was attacked in the parking lot, the one who gets obscene and threatening calls from a boy in her residence, the one who gets raped on a date, the one who was mocked by the male students in the public meeting.

They tell us about the sexism they're discovering in the adult world at university. Women professors who can't get jobs, who can't get tenure. Male professors who cannot comprehend women's stony silence after sexist jokes. An administration that only pays lip service to women's issues and refuses to accept the reality of physical danger to women on campus.

They tell us they're talking among themselves about how men are demanding rights over unborn children; it's not old dinosaurs who go to court to prevent a woman's abortion, it's young men. It's young men, they say with disbelief, their own generation, their own buddies with good educations, from "nice" families, who are abusive.

And our talks, this last week, have also been about politics. Why, our daughters ask us, are men so patronizing about Audrey McLaughlin's victory in Winnipeg last week? So many male commentators have written that she won only because the New Democratic Party wanted a woman leader. Now interested in politics, our daughters say that they believe she won because she was the best of the candidates, with the best organization. They tell us they notice that that is also what the women commentators said.

What can we say to our bright and shining daughters? How can we tell them how much we hurt to see them developing the same scars we've carried? How much we wanted it to be different for them? It's all about power, we say to them. Sharing power is not easy for anyone and men do not find it easy to share among themselves, much less with a group of equally talented, able women. So men make all those stupid cracks about needing a sex change operation to get a job or a promotion and they wind up believing it.

Now our daughters have been shocked to the core, as we all have, by the violence in Montreal. They hear the women were separated from the men and meticulously slaughtered by a man who blamed his troubles on feminists. They ask themselves why nobody was able to help the terrified women, to somehow stop the hunter as he roamed the engineering building.

So now our daughters are truly frightened and it makes their mothers furious that they are frightened. They survived all the childhood dangers, they were careful as we trained them to be, they worked hard. Anything was possible and our daughters proved it. And now they are more scared than they were when they were little girls.

Fourteen of our bright and shining daughters won places in engineering schools, doing things we, their mothers, only dreamed of. That we lost them has broken our hearts; what is worse, is that we are not surprised.