

Tell

CAITLIN FISHER

Caitlin Fisher is an Assistant Professor of Fine Arts/Cultural Studies at York University. Research interests include hypertext, feminist theory, and narratives about childhood. Caitlin has a longstanding interest in integrating autobiographical and critical writing and is a member of the Stern Writing Mistresses collective, based in Toronto. Her hypertext about girlhood and sexuality, These Waves of Girls, has been shortlisted for the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards for fiction.

I always knew, early on, it's a cliché, I know, but it's also true – skipping in the alleyways with my friends, including Bobby Ruskin sometimes, and boy could he skip ... we never made fun of him, but, come to think of it, no one kissed him during no rules tag, either – back then, it's true that I knew, just knew, that I liked girls instead of boys, knew in a way that meant more than just not wanting to kiss poor Bobby Ruskin. I held this secret to the soundtrack of the strange skipping songs and the dull, rhythmic thwack thwack of third grade ever-enders – “Back Door Suzie miss a beat you're out, Backdoor Suzie miss a beat you're out ...” We were so good, even with only two or three skippers, that we sometimes had to sing that song a hundred and fifty times, an all-out furious running zazen, screaming running meditation, opening all sorts of strange chakras, before we made a mistake. I was good at “Had a Little Car, 1948,” but dreaded the stupid wind song. That gentle lovely one that finishes with the nasty fast whipping and you end up with your true love, or not. “The wind the wind the wind blows high, blowing Susan through the sky, he is handsome she is pretty, she is the girl from the golden city, they go marching one-two-three, may I ask you will you marry me? – yes no maybe so ...” Before you started, you were supposed to tell everyone the name of your true love. How could I tell them it was either Madame Renault or Cindy Ashford? I often searched the

eyes of the other girls but none ever seemed conflicted or anxious, the names of boys running off their tongues through giggles without effort or regret – Kevin! Neil Sunderland! Gavin McKnight! I mostly stuck to my old standby – Micky Dolenz from the Monkees, or, later, one of the Bay City Rollers (not the blond guy). In my head I'd whisper the True Name, but I always felt I was cheating the skipping oracle and could never count on the answer to “yes no maybe so” being true.

At home sometimes I'd tie one end of the skipping rope to the water tap in the driveway and turn the rope for myself (you aren't allowed to do skipping songs just holding both ends and doing single skipping) but I couldn't turn pepper like that and, by that time, I was such a good skipper at more gentle speeds that whispering “Cindy” and doing yes no maybe so meant I never tripped up, just had to choose my answer and stop. Yes. I decided the oracle would hate me forever unless I pledge never to trick it again.

Knowing the truth went beyond skipping. Cindy held her grade six party in her recroom (“It cost my dad ten thousand dollars to remodel it and he had the money!”) and her older sister Pamela held dancing contests, which mostly meant she smoked out the tiny sliding window and chose Julie Kazer who took jazz dancing on Saturdays at the community center. Cindy was a good dancer, too, but couldn't really expect her own sister to pick her at her own birthday party – so I would say things like, “You're such a great dancer, Cindy, really, you should win,” and even in grade six she had a fantastic hair flip thing she'd do and her hair was like Golden Curling Hair Barbie and she would spin away and ignore me. I decided, then, that I was the type of girl who was better at watching other girls dancing than dancing myself. I ask myself now – do I look weird, there in the recroom, as I put my hands to my sides in defeat, no chance of winning this contest, feet barely shifting on the floor, moonily staring at Cindy Ashford? What does the terribly sophisticated Pamela – now in high school, French inhaling in my direction – think when she hears me say to her little sister, “No, really, you're the best dancer here. And ... your hair smells good.”

Cindy is dressed in a sea-green chiffon party dress. I am wearing stretch jeans with rivets on the pockets, brown oxfords and a Charlie's Angels t-shirt. I know Cindy deserves better as she twirls to the center of the room for “Dancing Queen” and I head for the chip table.

Cindy and I do have a secret, though. When she comes to my house we sing "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" – that duet by Elton John and Kee Kee Dee – about a million times. She's Kee Kee Dee and I'm Elton John, of course, but even when I'm singing "Don't go breaking my heart" and she's singing "I couldn't if I tried" ... and then we both sing the part that goes "Ooh-ooh, nobody knows it. Nobody know-ooh-ohs. But right from the start, I gave you my heart. Wow-wow, I gave you my heart ..." I know it's not a secret for her the same way it is for me.

More ABBA! The six grade girls are going wild. It's "When I Kissed the Teacher." Oh no. Our teacher is Madame Turcotte now, and though I still like Madame Renault my allegiance has shifted. We have no male teachers for our class, and, really, for guys there's just the principal and one grade four teacher for the whole school. Cindy says she'd like to kiss Pamela's math teacher – she saw him at River High School's grade nine drama night. So would Mariko (she was there, too). Everyone seems to have a male teacher in mind ... like they've been missing kissing him for ages. It doesn't make sense. I'm trying to come up with a name, but can't. During these anxious minutes I realize I'd be happy to kiss almost every teacher in the school – Mlle. Summers, Mrs. Olivette, even the kindergarten teacher with adult braces and the librarian who also works at Dairy Queen, in addition to Madame Turcotte. They're all girls. Although it totally fits with the song, I think, I vow silently never ever to tell about the dream I used to have about Madame Renault just before I went to sleep where she was in bed with me – well, really, I was sneaking into her bed and under the covers – and she looked at me and said, "But Susan, you're a girl!" and I said, "Who cares?" And we slept all curled up together until morning. I don't kiss her in the dream, but it's fair to say it's still kind of a kissing dream. I know telling them about the dream wouldn't be a good idea. Think! Even Julie, whose mother doesn't let her go out except to that stupid community center, comes up with a name: "I like Smitty." Smitty!? Smitty's the janitor. How can it be worse to like a girl than the janitor who has food stuck in his moustache and is always asking us to scratch his back? But it is. The girls are screaming-delighted with the Smitty answer. They turn to me expectantly – "Me, oh, I don't know, I guess I'd kiss Mr. Lewis." The principal. But I wouldn't, no way.

I always knew, early on, to keep my mouth shut. At Lincolnwood

playground, swinging full out and letting our heads drop back toward the ground, staring at rushing sky, Cindy sings the “Lez-be-friends” song. I don’t say anything, just swish back and forth. I know Cindy’s gold hair must be sweeping the sand by now, back and forth, and that she’s singing about lesbians. I don’t say a single, single word. Swoosh. “Oh, I’m just kidding,” Cindy says. She starts to sing a song in mock-baritone instead: “Strangers in the night, exchanging rubbers. This one is too tight, let’s try another. This one is too loose, I’m losing all my juice. Da, da!” I’m not sure I know what a rubber really is. I know what a lesbian is.

Lesbians live in Dalewood, near our school. Libby Watley says two of them live in a house near her and do we want to throw ice balls at the house? I’m not sure. Everyone throws ice balls at the house. Eggs, too. Libby tells us all to run fast, fast past that house and I do. “What are lesbians?” I ask Libby. “Girls who hold hands.” “But we hold hands.” (I’ve done more than hold hands, but not with her). Libby shakes her head, “No, not like that. They don’t like boys and they’re grown up.” She tells the story. The lesbians were holding hands in the park, well, right by the park, and Steven Brown’s mother said if she ever saw them near that park again she’d call the police – she would! And-come-away-Steven-you-too-Libby-Good-Lord. I nod. I wonder where the lesbians will walk now since their house is so close to the park. While I wonder this, other people wonder out loud if the lesbians have a cat because that would be so sad for a cat ... to have to live with that. Plans are made to kidnap the cat. If there is one. I need to decide – am I the kind of person who will throw iceballs and steal someone’s cat, or will I have iceballs thrown at me and have my cat stolen?

The next year I am in junior high and all grown up and everyone that year is gay and stupid faggot and in junior high almost all of our teachers are men and we have different subjects in different classrooms and the homeroom teacher for 7B is Mr. McFagan but we call him Mr. McFaggot. One day I’m waiting for the city bus to take me to the school and I’m at the transfer point near the woods and a bus comes by the other side and the art teacher gets out – Mr. Vogel, the one who goes to Swish Chalet with Mr. McFaggot. He motions me to get on the bus. I pretend I don’t see him. He gets the driver to wait. “Susan? Are you coming to school? Hop on!” Oh-go-away, Mr. Gay-Art-Teacher-who-will-probably-abduct-me! But there are dozens of

people on the bus waiting for me to make up my mind, so I cross over and get on the bus with him. He tells me it's a special express bus and much faster than waiting there and asks me how am I liking school. I stare at him hard because I know all about him, how he bakes cookies in the pottery kiln and how he took Richard Blake and lots of other boys into the little back art supply room after school or during art detention and made Richard kiss him. And I know how he's in love with Mr. McFaggot and they deserve each other and thank god I'm not in 7B. But I'm not abducted and it's the right bus after all, and I wonder if Mr. Vogel could tell, all the way from across the street, from a bus, that I'm a lesbian.