

**THE
HEALTHY
TAN**

YES, YOU
DO NEED
SOME SUN

**FALL
FASHION
WHAT'S
CHIC NOW**

150+

**WEARABLE
IDEAS** (WE PROMISE!)

**DRESSES,
JACKETS,
SHIRTS, BOOTS,
JEANS, BAGS**

**PLUS:
SEDUCTION
STYLE**

WILL FALL'S
TRENDIEST
LOOKS GET
YOU NOTICED?

**SARAH
JESSICA
PARKER**

HER STYLE SECRETS!
HER NEXT MOVE!

AND...
**THE SEX AND
THE CITY MOVIE!**

**SMOOTHER
TIGHTER
SKIN**
NO DOCTOR
REQUIRED

**TEACH ME,
TEACHER**
THE SEX APPEAL
OF AUTHORITY
FIGURES

**EDITORS'
PICKS**
29 BEAUTY
PRODUCTS
WE CAN'T
LIVE WITHOUT

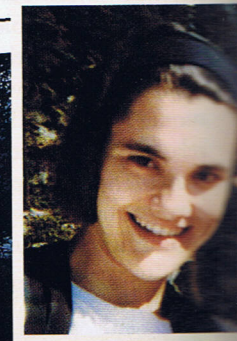
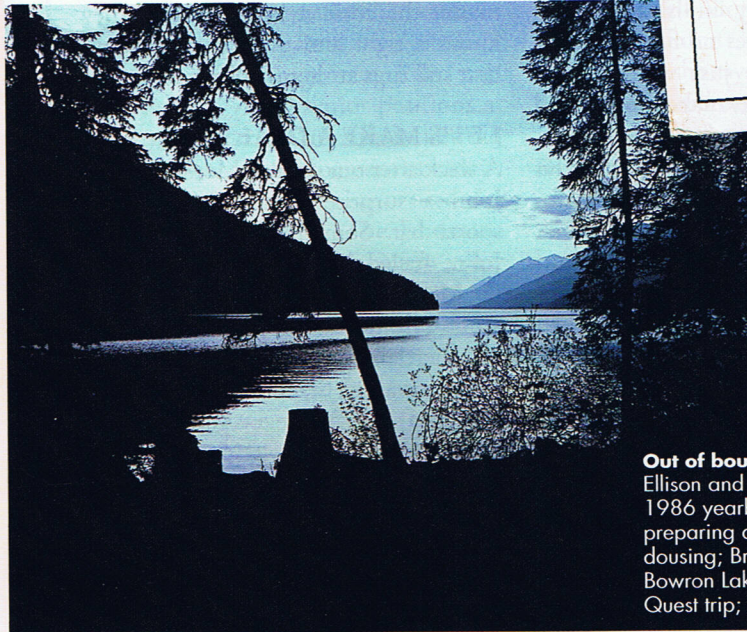
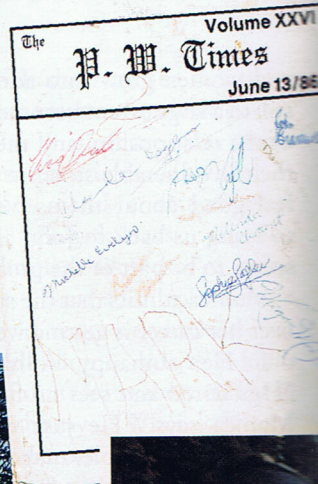
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LOVE CRISIS

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AUGUST 2007

MY YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY



Out of bounds: (From left) Tom Ellison and Stan Callegari in a 1986 yearbook photo, preparing a Quester for a dousing; British Columbia's Bowron Lakes, scene of a 10-day Quest trip; the author at 16.

HE PUSHED GIRLS TO BE STRONG, TO BE SELF-SUFFICIENT—AND, ACCORDING TO SOME OF HIS FORMER STUDENTS, HE PUSHED THEM INTO SEX. KATRINA ONSTAD RECALLS A TIME OF FEAR AND FREEDOM AND WONDERS, IN THE FRENZY OF HER TEACHER'S PROSECUTION, ABOUT WHAT'S BEEN LOST

In the newspaper photos, my teacher looked changed, but just a little. He had grown very thin, so that when he attempted to out-walk the TV cameras, his knees jutted through his suit pants like wire hangers. But even at 63, standing in a courthouse awaiting testimony about what he had done—salacious details of fingers and tongues and a boat in the middle of nowhere and the teenage girls inside it—he was still handsome: his white hair boyishly thick, his body tree-tall. The creases in his face had deepened, but just with age, not shame, settling around a smirk that I instantly remembered. Twenty years later, I had a flash of recognition: *him*.

It was not the face of a contrite sexual predator, which is probably why newspapers across Canada chose to run that particular shot so often last fall. The hint of defiance suited the narrative of a smooth-operating molester facing 16 charges for sex crimes. According to reporters, Tom Ellison—always Tom to us—the leader of an Outward Bound-style program for high school students called B.C. Quest, handpicked the prettiest teenage girls from a pool of naive applicants and took them to the forest. The forest part made it irresistible copy.

Starting in the '70s and continuing until he retired from teaching in the mid-'80s, Ellison had been having sexual relations with present and past Questers, often on his sailboat, *Nostradamus*, moored in a harbor in downtown Vancouver. What went on there wasn't really contested in the trial, not even by Ellison. The crux was whether these liaisons were illegal at the time. Ellison faced four counts of indecent assault (using force during a nonpenetrating sex act) and 12 counts

of gross indecency. To find him guilty of gross indecency, the court had to decide that Ellison's conduct was a marked departure from what the average Canadian at the time would have deemed decent. This silly standard was replaced in 1988 by a more clear-cut law prohibiting an adult in a position of authority from sexual contact with a person under 18 and in his charge. But all the complaints against Ellison predated 1988, meaning that at the time he was sexually involved with his students, there was no law against it. Unprofessional and unethical, yes, but not automatically criminal.

For more than a month, titillatingly graphic testimony fed enraged editorials and hang-him-high blogs: He performed oral sex but hardly ever penetrated! He thought he was some kind of sex coach! The families who handed over their daughters had no idea what was going on! At the victim-impact hearing (in which victims participate in the sentencing of the offender by explaining to the court and the offender how the crime has affected them) a woman addressed Ellison directly: "I have carried this burden of shame and guilt in the pit of my stomach... You may not think you did anything wrong, but you crippled me to the point that I was unable to have a healthy sexual relationship with a man. What kind of teacher did you think you were?" Another woman, deeply traumatized, told the court that after being involved with him at 16, she didn't date until she was 27.

People who knew I had done the program in the mid-'80s began to ask, Are you okay? How much do you hate him? They assumed damage, offering sympathy and outrage. But nothing had happened to me. With my androgynous looks and gangly body,



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was hardly babe enough to have attracted his attention, and that year, I was untouched, and in a way, largely unnoticed. This seemed to surprise people, and even, I sensed, to disappoint them.

One day I read about a woman who testified, only when compelled to by the prosecutors, that she had sex with Ellison frequently over four years, beginning just before her eighteenth birthday. "He definitely, in my case, did not commit a crime, and he doesn't deserve to be convicted for a crime with respect to my charges," she told the court. "I told him that I really wanted him to be the first. And I begged him to be the first." Another reluctant witness said, "I would say I probably wanted to sleep with him, because everybody wanted to."

Those statements rang true to me. I saw an arrogant bully, but Ellison's image of macho woodsman in the city worked with many girls. He is not someone I want to defend, and I won't. Yet I can defend my memory of that time. Quest was the sole year of high school in which I didn't weigh myself daily, or fill journals with overwrought imaginings about boys who didn't know my name, or find myself in dimly lit basements with boys whose names I didn't know. It was a year in which I got muscles and I didn't drink and I felt alert to the world in a way that now, at 36, I keep trying to get back to.

It was also a year in which I observed that a number of the girls who went with Tom seemed pleased by whatever was happening on the boat or in the woods. But the girls' agency was rarely reported as the scandal heated up; it's still taboo for anyone to admit that teenage girls want sex, especially the girls themselves. Even as I don't doubt that most of Ellison's accusers sincerely felt abused, I loathe the way the press turned complicated stories into something reductive: She was a fresh young girl, he was a dirty old man. Ellison was lecherous, but no one described him as physically or mentally threatening. Though some of the encounters were brief, many went on for months and even years. One woman who pressed charges against him had been involved with him, on and off, for 13 years. Ellison's lawyer presented evidence at the trial that she brought charges only after he refused to have a child with her. (He does have a daughter with another ex-Quester, a pretty blond roughly 25 years his junior who has said publicly that she and Ellison got together long after she graduated from high school. Fourteen years later, they are still a couple.)

The trial, which dominated the Canadian media, made me think about how many women, looking back on their first sexual encounters, raw and stupid, want to erase their own desire from the story. So much of the indignation around Quest has a retroactive quality—the need to rewrite history, embarrassment about the people we were and the lenience we practiced in the past. In her book *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality*, Deborah Tolman, professor of human sexuality at San Francisco State University, interviewed dozens of girls, almost all of whom admitted they did have sexual desires but found it socially unacceptable to cop to them. In dress and attitude, these girls mirrored the booty-shaking pop culture they consumed, yet they could never actually be sexual for fear of being labeled "slutty." They talked about their sex lives through what Tolman calls "cover stories"—"It just happened" being the most common how-I-lost-my-virginity recap. Of course girls feel the pull of desire, like everyone else on the planet. But is there still something

in us as women that makes us ashamed to admit our lust, especially when it looks so bad from here?

One of the women pressing charges said that the births of her daughters had spurred her to speak out about her relationship with Ellison. I heard that comment while watching the news as my own baby daughter pulled every sheet of Kleenex from the box. The time in which we did Quest, just before the dawn of total political correctness, seems Paleolithic now: teenagers gone into the wilderness for days at a time without cell phones, injuring themselves on mountains, barely supervised. Ellison exploited the liberated atmosphere that made Quest so significant, especially for girls. He took the mental and physical freedom we were experiencing for the first time—that year in the outdoors I learned to be voracious, to be powerful, to be free—tossed in sex, too, and everything fell apart. My daughter will never do a program like Quest because it could never exist today. We will design our lives to keep her safe from all risk: emotional, physical, and sexual. She will be electronically shadowed and chauffeured, all precautions taken to keep her away from threats like Tom Ellison and the great unknown. Such private experiments on the way from girlhood to womanhood won't be available to her. I suppose I should be comforted, yet I can't help but think that with all this safety comes a great loss.

THE GIRLS WHO'D
DONE QUEST
SEEMED LIKE
SURVIVORS OF SOME
GRAVE, IMPORTANT
EXPERIENCE.

I was raised in an upper-middle-class enclave near the University of British Columbia. Vancouver has now become a gleaming city of beachfront condominiums

and gourmet organic supermarkets; a place so upscale I can't afford to live there anymore. But in the '70s and '80s, when I was growing up, our neighborhood still harbored a collection of draft dodgers, academics, and hippie moms who thrilled to send their kids to the alternative public high school I attended, a '70s experiment in decline. We called the teachers by their first names, designed our own curricula, and learned as little as possible.

In spite of all the enlightenment, when I recall who I was before I did Quest, I see a teenager manically trying to shape and reinvent herself every other week: a perm, then a geometric haircut; a love of Corey Hart followed by an all-consuming worship of the Velvet Underground. I was reading Ralph Ellison and discussing nuclear proliferation with my parents, then staying up late under a pink bedspread with a flashlight and Sweet Dreams romances.

My body was my biggest hobby. It seemed borrowed; it shocked me. My height skyrocketed and my weight plummeted within months, followed by binge-eating in the dark of night. Then back to exercise and deprivation, using teen novels on anorexia as how-to manuals. All this longing for food and thinness was matched by unspoken lust for boys. I was obsessed with the miasma of male sweat and unconcern at one end of the hallway. I wanted everything to happen to me, and on occasion, I would find some drunken boy-receptacle for all that wayward need. On weekends, my friends, a diseased group of cells always gathering and dividing, and I would drink wine coolers behind the 7-Eleven and ride the buses through the city, looking for something to do. Coming home from beach parties, late at night, I remember our attention only briefly diverted through the window by the mountains that surround Vancouver, melting down into miles of rough coast. We were 15, 16, 17, and inured to beauty. >

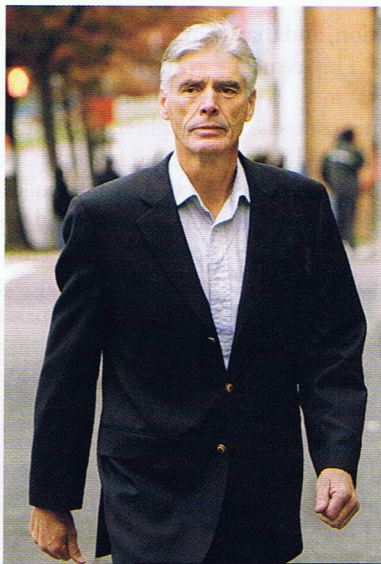
The Questers, though, were something different. They would leave our little school for a semester in the Canadian wilderness and return happier and louder, having made it through a program rumored to be mentally and physically grueling. The girls, particularly, seemed like survivors of some grave, important experience. Though the fisherman's sweaters and makeup-free faces offended my black-eyeliner aesthetic, the Quest look secretly appealed to me: a clear uniform at last. A fixed identity.

The program was founded in 1973. Based in a giant room in a bigger high school in a richer neighborhood than mine, it attracted motivated kids from prominent families and was regarded by its supporters as a one-of-a-kind successful experiment in public education—it had even garnered the praise of world-renowned environmentalist David Suzuki. Students who were accepted did one semester of academics, cramming all of tenth grade into five months of intense classes in the regular school. In the nonacademic semester, they hiked, canoed, cycled, and cross-country skied, under the tutelage of Tom and his colleagues, Dean Hull and Stan Callegari. They were known as “the Boys,” though all were in their forties by the time I did the program in 1986.

I do remember talk of military-style tactics and sexual improprieties, and to some at my high school, all those smiling, touching ex-Questers, linked together like paper-chain Christmas-tree ornaments, were suckers and followers. However, on the strength of a few stories told by the fisherman-sweater girls as they gave each other massages in the quad, I identified Quest as an adventure, the first piece of a future I imagined for myself. I would become fearless, a valued attribute in our family. My parents thought nothing of leaving my brother and me with friends and relatives for weeks at a time while they visited Nicaragua (where my dad went to help the Sandinistas rebuild their education system), China, Italy. They hosted supremely '70s slide-show parties upon their return, and I would find a place on the crowded purple corduroy couch, concentrating through the cocktail chatter on the Asian women in slippers and cafés in the shadows of cathedrals. There were keys to these places: legends and languages to help you navigate. I wished something similar existed for high school. I had a hunch that Quest would give me that, and I wasn't wrong.

I did all of tenth grade in an exhausting sprint through the regular school in the fall of 1985. After Christmas break, I felt giddy to be out from behind a desk. The gigantic Quest classroom was in fact an anticlassroom emptied of furniture, its walls hung with environmental posters and broken canoe paddles. My class of about 50 sat on the floor, no longer answering to the bells that rushed the other kids in and out of their paces.

Quickly, it became clear that the room was primarily a stage for Stan, Dean, and Tom. Dean had the true grizzly-man look, with a nimbus of frizzed hair and a beard halfway down his chest. He was the funniest of the three, and the most humane. Stan, a sniggering, younger jock, possessed a hard strain of aloofness. Tom was the oldest, and so crippled by back problems that many



Benefactor or manipulator? Ellison in Vancouver last year, as his sensational trial was unfolding in court—and in the overheated Canadian press.

days he didn't show up at all. He could usually be found at the marina fixing the boat from which he ran expensive sightseeing trips to the Queen Charlotte Islands, an archipelago off the coast of northern British Columbia.

On the first day, they summoned a few thick-necked hockey players to the front of the room and called them out as smokers. A long, jokey “scared straight” session began. One of the Boys asked the smokers if they were losers, if they could “keep it up.” The tone for the year was set: a semiarticulated indoctrination into environmentalism (clear-cutting, acid rain = bad) and leftist politics (those opposed to clear-cutting, acid rain = good), mixed with fratty high jinks and boot-camp humiliations (teachers giving wedgies to teenagers = cool).

Our days were spent learning to rock climb on the city's North Shore or kayak in a nearby pool. We had a few silly academic assignments, presumably to satisfy the host-school's principal. (I did a presentation, using my father's slides, about the U.S.-backed war in

Nicaragua.) And we trained for our trips. Jogging, sports, and weight lifting were punctuated by the Boys' macho idiocy. They poured buckets of water on students who weren't working hard enough. They made the slowest kids piggyback the heaviest up mud-slick hills in the rain, laughing from below.

If the Boys had an overarching philosophy, and I don't think they did, it might have been to return us to a state of nature, to let us choose good or bad without constraint. But they had been blithely degrading their students for years: We were rich kids who had skipped through life in a haze of clueless entitlement, and we deserved our comeuppance. One day, one of the three wheeled a cage that had been holding volleyballs and basketballs to the front of the room. A boy was put inside the cage in either his gym shorts or his underwear—it's unclear to me now. But I do remember Stan and Dean laughing as they told him to suck his thumb like the little rich baby he was. It was Tom who picked apart our bodies: “Go fat-ass!” I remember him yelling at a girl as she ran sprints. During the trial, an ex-Quester testified that the Boys would pinch girls' breasts and slap their butts.

Everyone talked about the skinny-dipping and pot smoking that went on during the Quest summer-reunion trips, but I never saw anything that overt. Instead, sex was a persistent undercurrent in the room. The Questers and Tom, Dean, and Stan were constantly massaging each other—especially Tom, with his bad back. Anointed popular Questers past and present hung out with the Boys in the equipment room. The two prettiest girls in our semester would emerge from amid the backpacks and camping stoves, seeming as happy and confident, as sly and smiling, as all pretty girls did in my 16-year-old eyes. They looked like they could handle anything.

Of course we speculated about what went on in there. The Boys were all either married to or dating ex-Questers barely older than we were. To me, this seemed like interspecies mingling; older men, tufted and expansive, looked repulsive next to the hairless boys in my grade. I was fascinated by the possibility that girls who had recently been more or less like me were flirting or even having sex with grown men. This spoke to my immediate future. Where was I

on this spectrum of desire? How and who would I want to touch?

Quest was definitely a mental torture chamber, but the word “cult” isn’t right; it presumes we weren’t aware. Maybe some people bought into the games without question, but most of us were entirely conscious that year—consciously laying low in the classroom, totally conscious in the outdoors. The Boys, their arrogance and assholeness, were our favorite topic. We were young, but bright and precocious, and many of us were sexually active. When rumors started circulating that a girl in the semester before us had a breakdown under the Tom-Dean-Stan pressures and left the program, we talked about that, too, and empathized.

So if we knew it was creepy and corrupt, why did we stick it out? Why didn’t we say anything to our parents, to the principal of the school?

In part, their contempt—for the authority of the regular school system, for us—was intriguing. They gave us our first taste of the routine indifference of adulthood, and not being of interest also meant we weren’t being watched. There were no grown-ups around—we quickly ascertained that the Boys didn’t count—and very few rules, except for how to survive in the outdoors (water bottle, sunscreen, hat). That’s the trade-off, I see now; bad things happen to some girls while no one is watching. But for others, the slow walk toward some semblance of self requires freedom and privacy.

We were let loose for long runs through the city, and I recall how, during one grueling 10K run along the seawall, my eyes dropped back into my head and I felt a surge of adrenaline: My body could be a source of power instead of repulsion. I learned to be alone with myself, bicycling a painful hill on an island that peaked into a view of the Pacific. With a couple of other kids, I made a snow cave up in the Coast Mountains, digging until dark, sleeping in a hole carved into the side of an icy slope. I still think of the black silence of that night, the slick cocoon I had dug with my friends wet in the beam of the flashlight. “Do you remember that?” asks my old friend Christy, now an accountant. “I would never be that brave now.”

These were the moments we stayed for. Somehow it was my least sexual year of high school. Boys weren’t abstractions, but allies in situations where they needed me as much as I needed them. On a 10-day canoe trip through a difficult chain of lakes in the interior of the province, I told my male partner, a heavy-metal-head, that I would take the front of the boat, where less skill and strength is required. Dean overheard this and told me off: “I partnered you with that guy because you’re a stronger canoeist. Why are you being such a wimp?” He was right; I took the stern and drove us through barely thawed water for much of those 10 days. Each night, collapsing in my tent, my wrists on fire with pain, I was thrilled.

The boys I knew all had informal initiation rituals, their Boy Scout Vision Quests and Tom Sawyer disappearances. Anthropologists have noted that for girls, most rites of passage have to do with menstruation, and therefore, with breeding and marrying. To become a woman in most cultures is to become a person on your wedding day or the day you become a mother. But

in Quest (a word now synonymous in my hometown with the exploitation of girls), I had moments of feeling utterly singular and maximized. I didn’t know it then, but I was outrunning the narrowing expectations waiting on the other side of my girlhood.

In the course of the trial, it emerged that Ellison had had close to 20 relationships with students between 1972 and 1982. Often, he performed oral sex on the teenagers, preferring to get them off rather than himself. Many of the women testified that Ellison saw himself as an educator, preparing inexperienced girls for future lovers. He positioned himself as the great benefactor. Of one former student, now a complainant, on whom he had performed oral sex, he said, “I’m not making light of this and I don’t mean to be flippant, but it was the longest time I have ever made love to a person... [and]

she really responded. She worked really hard at finally having an orgasm [and] she thanked me.” He also testified, “I gave to them as much as I could.”

I don’t buy it; the Don Juan posture is just another manipulation that excuses his own turn-on and drive to dominate. But I can see why students—of both sexes—sleep with their teachers. Bell Hooks has written that teaching is infused with “erotic energy”: Both teacher and student are caught up in the desire to impart, the desire to learn, the mutual desire to please. Nor does it surprise me

that budding adolescent desire would sense a safe place in the bed of an older man, someone presumably at a distance from the vicissitudes of adolescent politics. I remember hearing anecdotes in school about students having sex with their teachers, *Election-style*. These girls (and one boy) survived and moved on. For some people, it’s like that. For some, it’s not.

In the end, the judge found Ellison guilty of two counts of indecent assault, one count of common assault, and four counts of gross indecency (two of which were stayed, or thrown out). He called Ellison’s actions “a monstrous breach of trust.” Ellison will spend two years under house arrest and has to provide DNA samples to authorities. Meanwhile, Stan Callegari and Dean Hull are under investigation by the Vancouver Police Department, says a spokesman.

When Ellison’s sentence was announced, message boards and talk-radio phone lines lit up with fury. Editorials complained that the punishment paled beside the crimes. Maybe that’s true. But for me the uneasily resolved case means that a freedom that mattered is now impossible to imagine for my own daughter. Quest as I knew it ended in early 1987, after Ellison had been pushed out of the program to defuse an approaching scandal (according to a recent article in *Vancouver* magazine, parents were beginning to call and complain that their daughters had been abused). Dean and Stan were gone soon after that. Later that year, Quest became a program called Trek. Trek still exists, staffed by both men and women, monitored by parents and officials. On the overnight trips, at least one female teacher is always present.

So now we watch our daughters, pretending that we can save them from themselves. As if they won’t find their own ways into the forest. □



Canada campfire stories: The Quest program culminated in a 10-day backcountry canoe trip across the BC interior—a trip the author remembers as a pivotal experience of her young life.