Our Daughters, Ourselves

Every democracy has its muchrakers, journalists who probe the dark side of public life and bring it into the open. Stephanie "Stevie" Cameron is the best of ours. When her blockbuster exposé On the Take: Crime, Corruption and Greed in the Mulroney Years was published in 1994, its massive documentation of alleged graft, backroom politics and even suspicious deaths prompted Globe and Mail reviewer Clark Davey to write, "Conservatives who read this book will weep for their party. Other Canadians must weep for their country." Some hated the book: Toronto Sun columnist Douglas Fisher called it "trash." Stevie Cameron has travelled a long path from her beginnings as food and lifestyle writer to a controversial investigative journalist whose wrath can shake political parties and governments. Daughter of a soldier of fortune who flew in the Spanish Civil War, who may have been a CIA agent, and who was then killed in a 1956 plane crash, Cameron grew up in Switzerland, Venezuela and Canada. It was her love of cooking that led her to the famous Cordon Bleu School in Paris, and from there to her beginnings in food journalism.

Cameron now probes wider issues in society. It was on December 9, 1989, that her 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 had murdered 14 engineering students in Montreal because they were women, and had left a suicide note blaming feminists for ruining his life. (See a fuller account of the Montreal Massacre in the introduction to Nathalie Petrowski's essay "The Seven-Minute Life of Marie Lepine," also in this chapter.) While Cameron's lyrical and devastating essay is directed at the 14 young women who had aimed at a profession dominated by men, it also examines the context of this crime — the problems of sexism routinely faced by all daughters of 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 boy friend 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 resi-
dence; 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 ten-
ture. 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 education, from “nice” families, who are abusive.

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 promo-
tion 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 feminists
for his troubles. They ask themselves why nobody was able to help the
terrified women, to somehow stop the hunter as he roamed the engi-
neering building.

So now our daughters are truly frightened and it makes their moth-
ers 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 engi-
neering 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

Explorations:

Doris Anderson, The Unfinished Revolution
Jane Gaskell, Gender Matters from School to Work
Jesse Vorst, ed., Race, Class, Gender: Bonds and Barriers
Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale (novel)
Manuel Puig, Boquitas pintadas (novel, Argentina; available only in
Spanish)
http://www.whiteribbon.ca

Structure:

1. How well does Cameron’s title reflect the essay that follows?
2. In opening with the word “They,” what strategy does Cameron use?
3. Identify the THESIS STATEMENT.
4. Is Cameron’s chronological order a good choice for showing what hap-
   pens to the daughters of our society? Give reasons.
5. To what extent does comparison and contrast help organize the essay?
   Cite passages based on it.

Style:

1. Paragraph 3 asks five questions in a row. Why? What is their overall
effect?
2. What FIGURE OF SPEECH is the term “dinosaurs” in paragraph 11?

Argumentation and Persuasion:

1. Cameron’s many examples lead through induction to her conclusion.
   Cite those which best show why the mothers, at the end, are “not
   surprised.”
2. Stevie Cameron wrote “Our Daughters, Ourselves” in the heat of
   reaction to the Montreal massacre — the murder of 14 women engi-
   neering students by a male who blamed feminists for his problems.
   Though her examples do argue through logic, her appeals to emo-
   tion are so deep that this selection is one of the most persuasive in the
   book. Point out examples of all these techniques of persuasion:
   A. Repetition
   B. Figures of speech
   C. Irony
   D. Fright
   E. Climax
3. In what ways does this eulogy to a generation of daughters transcend
   PROSE to become POETRY?