Sara Munro

*SARA knocks on her teacher’s door, and enters. She is carrying some school books, and a hardcover copy of* The Diviners *by Margaret Laurence. It is late spring, 1975; school has ended for the day.*

Sir? Mr. Bales? It’s Sara – Munro. Oh, you’re there sorry for barging in, if you want to get home for dinner I understand, but there’s something I want to talk to you about, if you’ve got the time, I mean, it can wait, but I’d prefer it didn’t.

I saw you on TV last Sunday. It was weird because there was the news: first the helicopters airlifting people out of Saigon and then Margaret Trudeau disco-dancing…. Then you! It was ages before I even clued in it was you. You don’t expect to see your English teacher on national news. In colour. And you were great! Perfect grammar! Not one double negative the whole two minutes.

Seriously, I was really proud. I wanted to phone everybody up and tell them, “Mr. Bales, riding tall, Channel 12!” I was watching with Mom and she suggested I write an article on you for *Reader’s Digest*: “My Most Unforgettable Character”.

Hey – could I get a credit? Just joking.

*(Starting.)* I’ve been reading the letters in *The Gazette*. It used to be my Grandfather Munro’s paper, so I got in the habit, when I was younger. The letters were addressed to him, so it was like reading his mail. For the longest time I thought ‘editor’ was a synonym – synonym right? – for ‘Grandfather’. I persuaded all my friends that the old men they had over for Sunday dinner were editors.

Everyone’s got an opinion. Grandpa always said the job of his paper was to reflect community values. But, if that’s true, then I don’t like what I’m reading. Not if you use the letters to judge. I’ve noticed something weird; it’s the short letters that call you the names. There’s not so many long ones, but they stick up for you. I’ve been cutting them out, good and bad, because I want to have all the sides in case I write something for the yearbook, or somewhere.

When I was a girl, Grandpa would come over to the house at night with that day’s *Gazette* and sometimes it’d look like Swiss cheese, he’d cut so much out of it. Articles he didn’t think I should read. Stuff he thought was too adult or would gross me out. He said, “A newspaper’s job is to reflect the community, but a grandfather’s job is to protect his granddaughter and, when the two collide, you win.” I ‘win’? It drove me nuts. I had to go over to Anne Harvie’s and read their paper. But I don’t know, if I was your wife, maybe I’d be cutting those letters out before you had a chance to see them. I’d cut out the short ones and burn them, and I’d paste the long ones to your front door, so they’d be the first thing you saw when you got home from school.

When people talk about community values, how do they decide them? Do you just add up the letters, pro and con, and see who wins? Or – better – go by column inches, that way the smarter people win. There’s no getting away from it though. Even at the supermarket. I do the shopping for Dad and I stand in the Loblaws lineup and listen to what everyone’s saying. The cashier can lay on a judgment in the time she rings up your groceries. “Oxydol pounda oranges you a student? Can I get a price check on Joy? They teachin’ you that book by that dirty woman? Fleecy Minute Maid it’s filth, shouldn’t be allowed Tide you like kiwis eh if I were you I’d throw your copy in the river and be done with it Seventeen fifty-seven have a nice day.”

The next time I went through I asked her if she’d read *The Diviners*. Of course she hadn’t. “I don’t have to take LSD to have an opinion on it, now do I honey.”

Mr. Bales: how can these people be so sure? It’s not because they’re all stupid – my Grandfather was the smartest man I ever knew and he was always sure of everything. He said evil can exist without you even seeing it, so you have to be extra careful. “A tree falling in a forest kills as much whether or not you see it fall.” He said sometimes it’s necessary for other people to tell you what’s wrong, because there’s something in their eyesight that makes them see more clearly, maybe you can’t see through the forest quite as well. Meaning, I couldn't see what I shouldn’t see, but others can?

I really hope you don’t mind me barging in on you like this, but this is really important.

Anne Harvie and I went to their church last Sunday, the church that’s organizing everyone against you. I wanted to hear what they’re saying. If you’re thinking of writing a story you have to hear both sides. So, the minister said the book shouldn’t be taught, shouldn’t even exist, because it’s anti-Christian. This struck us as bizarre because just a few miles up the river there’s another church, and Margaret Laurence at that very minute is sitting in a pew there. And it sure would’ve come as a big surprise to everyone around her that they were rubbing knees with the tool of Satan.

Anyway, so what if *The Diviners* is anti-Christian – how’s that make a difference? You already taught us *Lord of the Flies* – it’s anti-children. My boyfriend, Ron, Ron Bloom, he says *The Merchant of Venice* is anti-Jewish – and we studied that way back in Grade 10. When we were really vulnerable.

But back to the church – here’s the best part. In the foyer, the minister’s stuck up parts of the book for reading. Anne and I go to the table and he whips over and says, “You girls, these are not for you to read!” I forgot to tell you – the only parts he’s got up are the juicy sections. He’s got them underlined in red, so you can’t miss anything. Oh – and yellow if it’s blasphemy. I say, “But sir, I can read all this in school.” He says, “Still, we can’t let you sign the petition if you’re under sixteen and we won’t let you read the excerpts from that pornographic novel unless you’re over eighteen.” Anne gets cross-eyed at this and asks about the seventeen year-olds who are apparently living in limbo. But the minister just says, “And we’d prefer if girls didn’t read these parts anyway.” Anne yells at him. “But a woman wrote them!” He says, “Why compound the sin?”

So I say fine, fine, we’re both over sixteen; we’ll just sign our names and go home to our Christian baking. And when he looks away, I write, real fast, “Morag Gunn, 17 Oral Sex Lane, Manawaka”. And Anne writes, “Jules Tonerre, best lay in town.” And then we run like hell.

Made you smile, sir.

You didn’t see me, but I was at the School Board meeting on Monday. When that minister demanded the Chairman read out the dirty parts of *The Diviners* I wanted to scream. Read the dirty parts from the Bible while you’re at it! See how they sound! And when the Chairman refused his request, when the preacher got up and read the parts himself, in that great rolling voice of his… Geez, I wonder if he realized how good he was making it all sound.

At least it sounded good at the start - he does have a great voice. For a goof. But after a while, well, it did start to sound dirty. He made the book sound like pornography, because it was him reading it, I think. *(Thinking.)* He was thinking of it as dirty, so it became dirty. I mean, the dirt – it was already in his mind, what he was reading was just a mirror of it. Like evil seeing evil.

That’s what Anne says. She says my Grandfather…

Anne came over last night and we were talking about you and the book and we read some of it again. I wanted to see if maybe we hadn’t seen the filth the first time through. We read a whole section of it out loud, really carefully, and we couldn’t find anything. Then we tried reading it with a different assumption, that instead of you being a good teacher and assigning us an important book, you and Margaret Laurence were really out to corrupt us pure high school girls. Still didn’t find anything.

That’s when Anne said something about only evil being able to see evil. Then she said she wasn’t just referring to *The Diviners.* She started telling me something else. She’s been my best friend for my entire life but there’s been something she’s held in for the last ten years. Her Dad – you know about him, don’t you? I mean, what happened to him…what he did… Well, Anne says it all happened because of my Grandpa. Because of Grandpa, back in 1965, before he sold the paper, because of something he printed…

You knew all this? How come everyone in this town knows about this except me!?

Yeah, so Anne and I had a big fight. She took off. This morning I skipped and went to the library and looked up the old Gazettes. She wasn’t making anything up. I feel like one huge pile of shit. Wouldn’t you?

*(Pause.)* But that’s my problem. I’ve been keeping you here and you probably want to go home and I could talk about stuff all night, but here’s what I really came to say:

I overheard you with the Principal yesterday. I was in the office waiting for someone and his door was open and I want to be a reporter… I mean, I wouldn’t have listened if the door was closed.

I heard him suggest you teach another book, there were other books by Laurence you could teach that wouldn’t cause such a stink.

And today in class - you told us you were teaching the other book. That it was better to do so. And I understand. I understand the pressure everyone’s putting on you and your family, and I know that the principal’s stopped sticking up for you – but Mr. Bales, you can’t do this, you can’t stop now, not after being on the news, not after getting yelled at for so long!

*(Opening book.)* Listen to this! Listen, it’s the first couple of lines from the book: “The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching.”

I think about you, and you leaving off teaching this book, which you say will be so good for us to read, and I think about my Grandfather and what he did, and I can’t help thinking the opening is so appropriate, that the current does flow both ways. For us it’s flowing forward and these books are going to be accepted; and it’s also flowing backwards, because the writers of all those short letters are pulling us that way, too.

And I’m thinking that, on one hand, we want to be open and, on the other hand, we’re pulling back in the direction of hiding things. And sometimes being too open about things can cause trouble, or is it only the real reason behind your being open that’s bad? And isn’t it weird how I can read this book and see nothing but beauty, but when someone else reads it out loud it sounds like filth. And it’s weird I can feel old and young and really convinced of things, and confused, and really stupid and, at the same time, I feel smarter than all of them put together, all of them.

“This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible…” How’d she know!

“The river flowed both ways.”

And these lines from the last page, actually I know them by heart: “The waters flowed from north to south, and the current was visible, but now a south wind was blowing, ruffling the water in the opposite direction, so that the river, as so often here, seemed to be flowing both ways. Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence.”

You can’t teach any other book, Mr. Bales. It has to be this one. It just has to be.