

# Hey Nostradamus!

"I THINK THE KILLERS GET FAR TOO MUCH ATTENTION"

Douglas Coupland



Douglas Coupland (1961-) is a Canadian fiction writer and cultural commentator. He is best known for his bestselling novel, *Generation X*, from 1991. *Hey Nostradamus!* was inspired by a news report (see below) about the shootings at Columbine High School. In the 2003 novel, the action has been moved to a fictional school shooting in a high school in the author's hometown Vancouver, British Columbia.

## Inside the Columbine Investigation

by Dan Luzadder and Kevin Vaughan

"[...] Moments earlier, [ATF] agent Marcus Motte had gone inside the school with bomb technicians. He was peering into the flooded [Columbine] cafeteria, looking at the hundreds of backpacks left behind 11 hours earlier by panicked students. Some floated in the water covering the floor. Others sat on top of tables. The instant the fire alarm went dead, Motte heard a strange, almost surreal sound welling up faintly from inside, like birds chirping. Across the cafeteria, telephone pagers in the abandoned backpacks were going off, unanswered calls from desperate parents."

### In pairs

- 1 Match the English and Danish words from the passage above.
  - peer – flooded – float – surreal – well up – faintly – chirp – abandoned
  - kvadre – flyde – forladt – kigge – surrealistisk – svagt – vælde frem – oversvømmet
- 2 Translate the passage above. Compare it to the translation made by the pair sitting next to you. Talk about which lines and words were most difficult to translate and why.

- 3 Coupland was inspired to re-create the Columbine scenario as an art installation when he read the passage above while researching the Columbine High School Shootings. The art installation is called *Tropical Birds*. Go to Coupland's homepage [www.coupland.com/books/books01a.html](http://www.coupland.com/books/books01a.html) to view the installation. How would you explain the title of the installation?

- 4 Study Coupland's art installation on the homepage mentioned above. Write down a list of 5-10 adjectives which you think describe the thoughts and feelings it provokes. Explain your choices to another pair and agree as a group on the three most important adjectives. Prepare to present your work in class.

### Introduction to the scenes from *Hey Nostradamus!*

*Hey Nostradamus!* deals with a fictional school shooting and consists of four first-person stories. In the first part, Cheryl tells the story of her life up to the shooting. Her social life is dominated by her activities in the local Christian group *Youth Alive*. Her boyfriend, Jason, is also a member, but is eager to have sex, so they get a set of fake IDs and are married in Las Vegas. We meet Cheryl on the morning of the shooting. The next part is by Jason who describes what happens after the shooting when the media finger him as a suspect. The last two parts, which are not included here, are the diary entries by Jason's new girlfriend, Heather, and a letter written by Jason's father.

### PRE-READING

#### In pairs

- 1 What do you think Coupland gains from using more than one narrative voice in his novel?
- 2 Sort the following words into **nouns** and **adjectives**. Look up the words you do not know.
  - religiousness – converted – good – hypocritical – irreligiousness – evil – hypocrisy – hypocrite – morality – religious – justice – good – conversion – moral – convert – irreligious – just

## Hey Nostradamus!

by Douglas Coupland

2003

### PART ONE

#### Cheryl

I believe that what separates humanity from everything else in this world – spaghetti, binder paper, deep-sea creatures, edelweiss and Mount McKinley – is that humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to commit all possible sins. Even those of us who try to live a

good and true life remain as far away from grace as the Hillside Strangler or any demon who ever tried to poison the village well. What happened that morning only confirms this.

It was a glorious fall morning. The sun burned a girly pink over the mountain ranges to the west, and the city had yet to generate its daily smog blanket. Before driving to school in my little white Chevette, I went into the living room and used my father's telescope to look down at the harbour, as smooth as mercury, and on its surface I could see the moon dimming over East Vancouver. And then I looked up into the real sky and saw the moon on the cusp of being overpowered by the sun.

My parents had already gone to work, and my brother, Chris, had left for swim team hours before. The house was quiet – not even a clock ticking – and as I opened the front door, I looked back and saw some gloves and unopened letters on the front hallway desk. Beyond them, on the living room's gold carpet, were some discount warehouse sofas and a lamp on a side table that we never used because the light bulb always popped when we switched it on. It was lovely, all that silence and all that calm order, and I thought how lucky I was to have had a good home. And then I turned and walked outside. I was already a bit late, but I was in no hurry.

Normally I used the garage door, but today I wanted a touch of formality. I had thought that this morning would be my last truly innocent glance at my childhood home – not because of what really ended up happening, but because of another, smaller drama that was supposed to have unfolded.

I'm glad that the day was as quiet and as average as it was. The air was see-your-breath chilly, and the front lawn was crunchy with frost, as though each blade had been batter fried. The brilliant blue and black Steller's jays were raucous and clearly up to no good on the eaves trough, and because of the frost, the leaves on the Japanese maples had been converted into stained-glass shards. The world was unbearably pretty, and it continued being so all the way down the mountain

binder paper indbindings-  
papir til bøger  
ca'capacity evne  
grace (Guds) nåde  
Hillside Strangler medi-  
ernes navn for to fætre,  
Kenneth Bianchi og  
Angelo Buono, dømt for  
kidnapning, voldtægt,  
tortur og drab på ni piger  
og kvinder i 1977-1978 i  
Los Angeles  
well brønd  
'glorious herlig; strålende  
'mountain range bjerg-  
kæde  
'generate frembringe  
'mercury kviksølv  
dim sløre  
on the cusp (her:) på  
nippet til  
overpower overmande  
glance blik  
unfold udspille sig  
crunchy knitrede  
'batter fried paneret i dej  
og stegt  
'steller's jay skovskade  
'raucous hæst  
'eaves trough tagrende  
maple ahorn  
con'vert forvandle  
stained-glass 'shard  
stykke af en glasmosaik

to school. I felt slightly high because of the beauty, and the inside of my head tickled. I wondered if this is how artists go through life, with all of its sensations tickling their craniums like a peacock feather.

\*\*\*

I was the last to park in the school's lot. That's always such an uneasy feeling no matter how together you think you are – being the last person there, wherever *there* may be.

I was carrying four large binders and some textbooks, and when I tried shutting the Chevette's door, it wouldn't close properly. I tried slamming it with my hip, but that didn't work; it only made the books spray all over the pavement. But I didn't get upset.

Inside the school, classes were already in session and the hallways were as silent as the inside of my house, and I thought to myself, *What a day for silence.*

I needed to go to my locker before class, and as I was working my combination lock, Jason came up from behind.

"Boo."

"Jason – don't do that. Why aren't you in class?"

"I saw you parking, so I left."

"You just walked out?"

"Forget about that, Miss Priss. Why were you being so weird on the phone last night?"

"I was being weird?"

"Jesus, Cheryl – don't act like your airhead friends."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. You're my wife, so act like it."

"How should I be acting, then?"

"Cheryl, look: in God's eyes we're not two individuals, okay? We're one unit now. So if you dick around with me, then you're only dicking around with yourself."

And Jason was right. We were married – had been for about six weeks at that point – but we were the only ones who knew it.

\*\*\*

I was late for school because I'd wanted everyone out of the house before I used a home pregnancy test. I was quite calm about it – I was a married woman, and shame wasn't a factor. My period was three weeks late, and facts were facts.

Instead of the downstairs bathroom I shared with my brother, I used the guest bathroom upstairs. The guest bathroom felt one notch more medical, one notch less ringed by personal history – less accusatory, to be honest. And the olive fixtures and foil wallpaper patterned with brown bamboo looked swampy and dank when compared to the test's

sensation følelse  
'peacock påfugl  
lot = parking lot  
un'easy utilpas  
binder ringbind  
locker (afåseligt) skab  
in 'session i gang  
priss = prissy sippet  
'airhead friend tomhjer-  
net ven  
dick around (her:) lave  
numre med  
'period menstruation  
"one notch more ...", one  
notch less ..." "en tak  
mere ..., en tak mindre ..."  
ring omgive  
a'ccusatory anklagende  
the 'olive fixtures det  
olivenfarvede inventar  
'foil wallpaper tapet med  
metalagtig plast på en  
papirbagbeklædning  
'patterned mønstret  
swampy sumptet  
dank kold og fugtig

scientific white-and-blue box. And there's not much more to say, except that fifteen minutes later I was officially pregnant and I was late for math class.

\* \* \*

5 "Jesus, Cheryl ..."

"Jason, don't curse. You can swear, but don't curse."

"Pregnant?"

I was quiet.

"You're sure?"

10 "I'm late for math class. Aren't you even happy?"

A student walked by, maybe en route to see the principal.

Jason squinted like he had dust in his eyes. "Yeah – well, of course – sure I am."

I said, "Let's talk about it at homeroom break."

15 "I can't. I'm helping Coach do setup for the Junior A team. I promised him ages ago. Lunchtime-then. In the cafeteria."

I kissed him on his forehead. It was soft, like antlers I'd once touched on a petting zoo buck. "Okay, I'll see you there."

He kissed me in return and I went to math class.

\* \* \*

I was on the yearbook staff, so I can be precise here. Delbrook Senior Secondary is a school of 1,106 students located about a five-minute walk north of the Trans-Canada Highway, up the algae-green slope of Vancouver's North Shore. It opened in the fall of 1962, and by 1988, 25 my senior year, its graduates numbered about thirty-four thousand. During high school, most of them were nice enough kids who'd mow lawns and baby-sit and get drunk on Friday nights and maybe wreck a car or smash a fist through a basement wall, not even knowing why they'd done it, only that it had to happen. Most of them grew up in 30 rectangular postwar homes that by 1988 were called tear-downs by the local real estate agents. Nice lots. Nice trees and vines. Nice views.

As far as I could tell, Jason and I were the only married students ever to have attended Delbrook. It wasn't a neighbourhood that married young. It was neither religious nor irreligious, although back in eleven- 35 enth-grade English class I did a tally of the twenty-six students therein: five abortions, three dope dealers, two total sluts, and one perpetual juvenile delinquent. I think that's what softened me up for conversion: I didn't want to inhabit that kind of moral world. Was I a snob? Was I a hypocrite? And who was I to even judge? Truth be told, I wanted 40 everything those kids had, but I wanted it by playing the game correctly. This meant legally and religiously and – this is the part that was maybe wrong – I wanted to outsmart the world. I had, and continue to

curse bande  
en route på vej  
'principal rektor  
squint knibe øjnene sammen  
homeroom break en slags  
klassens time  
'setup opstilling  
Junior junior high school  
(svarer til 7., 8., og 9.  
skoleår)  
'antlers gevir  
'petting zoo børnezoo  
buck dåhjort  
'Senior Secondary senior  
high school (10., 11. og  
12. skoleår, svarer til  
gymnasium)  
'algae-green algegrønne  
slope skråning  
'senior year sidste år af et  
studium  
'graduate person der har  
taget afsluttende eksamen  
wreck ødelægge  
'tear-down nedriv-  
ningsmodent hus  
'real estate agent ejen-  
domsmægler  
lot (parcel)grund  
vine vinranke; vinstok  
tally optælling  
'dope dealer pusher  
perpetual evig; evindelig  
'juvenile delinquent ung-  
domsforbryder  
conversion omvendelse  
inhabit bebo  
'hypocrite hykler  
legally juridisk  
outsmart narre

have, a nagging suspicion that I used the system simply to get what I wanted. Religion included. Does that cancel out whatever goodness I might have inside me?

Jason was right: *Miss Priss*.

\* \* \*

5 Math class was x's and y's and I felt trapped inside a repeating dream, staring at these two evil little letters who tormented me with their constant need to balance and be equal with each other. They should just get married and form a new letter together and put an end to all the 10 nonsense. And then they should have kids.

I thought about my own child-to-be as I stared out the window, turning the pages only when I heard everybody else turn theirs. I saw fleeting images of breast-feeding, prams and difficult labor, my knowl- edge of motherhood being confined mostly to magazines and cartoons.

15 I ignored Lauren Hanley, two rows over, who held a note in her hand that she obviously wanted me to read. Lauren was one of the few people left from my *Youth Alive* group who would still speak to me after rumors began spreading that Jason and I were making it.

Carol Schraeger passed the note my way; it was a plea from Lauren 20 to talk during homeroom break. We did, out by her locker. I know Lauren saw this meeting as being charged with drama, and my serenity must have bothered her.

"Everyone's talking, Cheryl. Your reputation is being tarnished. You have to do something about it."

25 Lauren was probably the key blabber, but I was a married woman, so why should I care? I said, "Let people say what they want, Lauren. I take comfort in knowing that my best friends are squelching any rumors from the start, right?"

She reddened. "But everyone knows your Chevette was parked at 30 Jason's all weekend while his parents were away in the Okanogan."

"So?"

"So you guys could have been doing anything in there – not that you were – but imagine what it looked like."

Truth was, Jason and I were doing everything in there that weekend, 35 but I have to admit that for a moment or two I enjoyed watching Lauren squirm at my nonresponse. In any event, I was far too preoccupied to have any sort of conversation. I told Lauren I had to get to my home- room and sequence some index cards for an oral presentation later that afternoon on early Canadian fur trappers, and I left.

40 In homeroom I sat at my desk and wrote over and over on my pale blue binder the words GOD IS NOWHERE/GOD IS NOW HERE/GOD IS NOWHERE/GOD IS NOW HERE. When this binder with these words

nagging nagende  
cancel out strege ud;  
ophæve  
trap fange  
torment pine; plage  
fleeting flygtig  
pram barnevogn  
labor fødsel  
confine begrænse  
plea bøn  
charged ladet  
serenity ophøjet ro;  
sindsro  
reputation omdømme  
tarnish plette  
blabber sladderhank  
take comfort trøste sig  
med  
squelch (her:) kvæler  
squirm vride sig  
preoccupied fordybet i  
tanker  
'sequence ordne i række-  
følge  
index cards kort med  
stikord  
fur trapper pelsjæger



was found, caked in my evaporating blood, people made a big fuss about it, and when my body is shortly lowered down into the planet, these same words will be felt-penned all over the surface of my white coffin. But all I was doing was trying to clear out my head and think of  
5 nothing, to generate enough silence to make time stand still.

\* \* \*

Stillness is what I have here now – wherever *here* is. I'm no longer a part of the world and I'm still not yet a part of what follows. I think there are others from the shooting here with me, but I can't tell where. And for  
10 whatever it's worth, I'm no longer pregnant, and I have no idea what that means. Where's my baby? What happened to it? How can it just go away like that?

It's quiet here – quiet like my parents' house, and quiet in the way I wanted silence when writing on my binder. The only sounds I can hear  
15 are prayers and curses; they're the only sounds with the power to cross over to where I am.

I can only hear the words of these prayers and curses – not the voice of the speaker. I'd like to hear from Jason and my family, but I'm unable to sift them out.

20

Dear God,  
Remove the blood from the souls of these young men and women. Strip their memories of our human vileness. Return them to the Garden and make them babes, make them innocent. Erase their memories of today.

25 As I'm never going to be old, I'm glad that I never lost my sense of wonder about the world, although I have a hunch it would have happened pretty soon. I loved the world, its beauty and bigness as well as its smallness: the first thirty seconds of the Beatles' "Lovely Rita";  
30 huckleberries both bright orange and dusty blue the first week of June; powdered snow down to the middle gondola tower of Grouse Mountain by the third week of every October; grilled-cheese sandwiches and the sound of lovesick crows on the electrical lines each May. The world is a glorious place, and filled with so many unexpected moments that I'd  
35 get lumps in my throat, as though I were watching a bride walk down the aisle – moments as eternal and full of love as the lifting of veils, the saying of vows and the moment of the first wedded kiss.

\* \* \*

The lunch hour bell rang and the hallways erupted into ordered hubbub.  
40 Normally I wouldn't have gone to the cafeteria; I was part of the Out to Lunch Bunch – six girls from the Youth Alive! program. We'd go down to one of the fast-food places at the foot of the mountain for salad bar,

caked (her:) indsmurt  
e'vaporating (her:) ind-  
tørret  
'felt-penned skrevet med  
filpen  
'surface overflade  
strip fjerne  
human vileness men-  
neskelig modbydelighed  
sift 'out udskille  
hunch (forud)anelse;  
fornemmelse  
huckleberry blåbær  
crow krage  
aisle kirkegulv  
e'ternal evig  
veil slør  
vow ægteskabsløfte  
wedded ægteskabelig  
e'rupt bryde ud  
hubbub hurlumhej  
bunch slæng

fries and ice water. Our one rule was that every lunch we had to confess a sin to the group. I always made mine up: I'd stolen a blusher from the drugstore; I'd peeked at my brother's porn stash – nothing too small, either. In the end, it was simply easier to be with five people in a restau-  
5 rant booth than three hundred in a cafeteria. I was antisocial at heart. And if people knew how dull our lunches were, they'd never have both-ered to waste energy calling us stuck-up. So, I was surprised when I went into the cafeteria to meet Jason to find the Bunch hogging one of the cafeteria's prime center tables. I asked, "So what's this all about?"

10 Their faces seemed so – *young* to me. Unburdened. Newly born. I wondered if I'd now lost what they still had, the aura of fruit slightly too unripe to pick.

Jaimie Kirkland finally said, "My dad got smashed and took out a light post on Marine Drive last night. And Dee's Cabrio has this funny  
15 smell in it since she loaned it to her grandmother, so we thought we'd go native today."

"Everyone must be flattered." I sat down. Meaningful stares pin-balled from face to face, but I feigned obliviousness. Lauren was the clique's designated spokeswoman. "Cheryl, I think we should continue  
20 our talk from earlier."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

I was trying to decide between Jell-O and fruit cocktail from the caf-eteria counter.

25 Dee cut in: "Cheryl, I think you need to do some confessing to us." Five sets of eyes drilled into me in judgment.

"Confess to what?" Forcing them to name the deed was fun.

"You," said Lauren, "and Jason. Fornicating."

I began giggling, and I could see their righteousness melting away  
30 like snow on a car's hood. And that was when I heard the first gunshot.

\* \* \*

Dear God,  
I'm going to stop believing in you unless you can tell me what possible good could have come from the bloodshed. I can't see any meaning or  
35 evidence of divine logic.

I can discuss the killings with the detachment I have from being in this new place. The world is pulling away from me, losing its capacity to hurt.

40 For starters, nobody screamed. That's maybe the oddest component of the killings. All of us thought the first shots were firecrackers – part of a Halloween prank, as firecracker season starts in early October. When

confess bekende; tilstå  
blusher rouge (make up)  
'drugstore forretning der  
foruden medicin også  
sælger fødevarer, legetøj  
og parfume  
peek (smug)kigge  
stash skjult samling  
booth bås  
at heart = at (the bottom  
of one's) heart inderst  
inde  
dull kedelig  
stuck-up storsnudet  
hogg lægge beslag på  
unburdened utyngtet  
unripe umoden  
smashed dødruken  
take out a 'lightpost køre  
ind i en lygtepæl  
go 'native gøre som de ind-  
fødte (de andre elever)  
'flattered smigret  
'pinballed udtryk afledt  
af pinball machine. "...  
stares pinballed from  
face to face ..." "... blikke  
fløj hurtigt frem og tilbage  
fra ansigt til ansigt ..."  
feign foregive  
o'bliviousness uvidenhed  
'clique klike  
'designate udpege  
'Jell-O frugtgele  
'drill into bore sig ind i  
deed gerning  
'fornicate bedrive utugt/  
hor  
'giggle fnise  
'righteousness (her:) selvretfærdighed  
melt away smelte bort  
hood (am.) motorhjel  
'bloodshed blodbad  
di'vine guddommelig  
de'tachment følelsesmæs-  
sig afstand  
'firecracker kineser;  
fyrværkeri  
prank drengestreg; spøg

the popping got louder, people in the cafeteria looked to its six wide doors with the expectation of being slightly amused by some young kids doing a stunt. And then this kid from the tenth grade, Mark Something, came tottering in, his chest red and purple from what looked like really bad makeup, and there were some nervous laughs in the room. Then he fell and his head landed the wrong way on the corner of a bench, like a bag of gym equipment. We heard some guys yelling, and three grade eleven students walked into the caf wearing duck-hunting outfits – military green fatigues with camouflage patterns, covered with bulging pockets and strips of ammunition – and right away one of them shot out a bank of overhead fluorescent lights. One of the suspension cables broke and a light bank fell down onto a table of food – the not-very-popular photo club and chess club table. The second guy, in sunglasses and a beret, plucked out two grade nine boys and one girl who were standing at the vending machines. These were messy shots that left a mist of blood on the ivory-colored cinder-block walls. A group of maybe ten students tried bolting for the doors, but the gunmen – gunboys, really – turned and showered them, with buckshot or bullets, whatever it is that guns and rifles use.

Two of them got away cleanly and I could hear their footsteps echoing down the corridor. As for the rest of us, there was no escape route, so we clambered underneath the tables, as if in some ancient nuclear drill from the 1960s.

25

## PART TWO

### Jason

You won't see me in any of the photographs after the massacre – you know the ones I mean: the wire service shots of the funerals, students felt-penning teenage poetry on Cheryl's casket; teenage prayer groups in sweats and scrunchies huddled on the school's slippery gym floor; 6:30 A.M. prayer breakfasts in the highway off-ramp chain restaurants, with all the men wearing ties while dreaming of hash browns. I'm in none of them, and if you *had* seen me, I sure wouldn't have been praying.

[...]

Let me follow another thread. On the day of the massacre, Cheryl arrived late to school. We'd had words on the phone the night before, and when I looked out my chem. class window and saw her Chevette pull into the student lot, I walked out of the classroom without asking

popping knaldende lyd  
totter vakle  
caf = cafeteria  
fatigue uniform  
bulge bugne  
strip of ammunition  
patronbælte  
bank række  
fluorescent lights lysstof-  
rør  
su'spension 'cable  
ophængningskabel  
beret baskerhue; baret  
pluck out (her:) skyde  
vending machine salgs-  
automat  
mist (her:) forstøvet sprøjt  
ivory-colored elfenbens-  
farvet  
cinder-block en slags  
mursten  
bolt stikke af; (her:) løbe  
mod  
buckshot dyrehagl  
cleanly uskadt  
clamber kravle  
ancient gammeldags  
nuclear atom-  
drill øvelse  
wire service shot tele-  
grambureaufoto  
casket ligkiste  
sweats træningstøj  
scrunchy hårelastik  
huddle krybe sammen;  
trykke sig op ad hinanden  
off-ramp frakørsel  
hash 'browns kartofler i  
små stykker, presset sam-  
men og friteret i olie  
thread tråd  
have 'words diskutere;  
skændes  
chem. = chemistry

permission. I went to her locker and we had words, intense words over how we were going to tell the world about our marriage. A few people noticed us and later said we were having a huge blowout.

We agreed to meet in the cafeteria at noon. Once this was settled, the rest of the morning was inconsequential. After the shootings, dozens of students and staff testified that I had seemed (a) preoccupied; (b) distant; and (c) as if I had something "really big" on my mind.

When the noon bell rang, I was in biology class, numb to the course material – numb because I'd discovered sex, so concentrating on anything else was hard.

The cafeteria was about as far away from the biology classroom as it was possible to be – three floors up, and located diagonally across the building. I stopped at my locker, threw my textbooks in like so much Burger King trash and was set to bolt for the caf, when Matt Gursky, this walking hairdo from *Youth Alive*, buttonholed me.

"Jason, we need to talk."

"About what, Matt? I can't talk now. I'm in a hurry."

"Too much of a hurry to discuss the fate of your eternal soul?"

I looked at him. "You have sixty seconds. One, two, three, go ..."

"I don't know if I like being treated like a –"

"Fifty-three, fifty-two, fifty-one ..."

"Okay then, what's the deal with you and Cheryl?"

"The deal?"

"Yeah, the deal. The two of you. We know you've been having, or rather, you've been ..."

"Been what?"

"You know. *Making it*."

"We have?"

"Don't deny it. We've been watching."

I'm a big guy. I'm big now, and I was big then. I took my left hand and clenched it around Matt's throat, my thumb on top of his voice box. I lifted him off the buffed linoleum and cracked the back of his head on a locker's ventilation slits. "Look, you meddling, sanctimonious cockroach ..." I bounced him onto the floor, my knees locking his arms as surely as cast-iron shackles. "If you dare even hint, even one more time, that you or any other sexless, self-hating member of your Stasi goon squad have any (slug to the face) right to impose your ideas on my life, I'll come to your house in the dead of night, use a tire iron to smash your bedroom window and then obliterate your self-satisfied little pig face with it."

I stood up. "I hope I've made myself clear." I then walked away, toward the caf, climbing up flights of stairs, but I felt like I was walking on an airport's rubber conveyor belt.

blowout opgør  
inconsequential lige-  
gyldig  
testify bevidne  
pre'occupied fordybet i  
tanker  
numb lammet  
hairdo frisur  
buttonhole hage sig fast i  
fate skæbne  
et'ernal evig  
clench klemme sammen  
voice box strubehoved  
buffed poleret  
crack knalde  
ventilation slit ventila-  
tionsåbning  
meddlesome geskæftig  
sanctimonious skinhellig  
cockroach kakerlak  
bounce (her:) smide  
cast-iron støbejern  
shackle lænke  
hint antyde  
goon fjog  
squad gruppe  
slug hårdt slag  
impose sth on sb  
påtvinge én noget  
tire iron dækjern  
obliterate udslætte  
con'veyer belt transport-  
bånd

I was maybe halfway across the middle floor when I heard sounds like popping fireworks, no big deal, because Halloween was coming up shortly. And then I noticed two grade nine students running past me, and then, some seconds later, dozens of students stumbling over themselves. One girl I knew, Tracy, who took over my paper route from me back in 1981, yelled at me there were three guys up in the cafeteria shooting students. She fled, and I remembered the ship turning upside down in *The Poseidon Adventure*, and the looks on the actors' faces as they clued into the fact that the ship was flipping: smashed champagne bottles, dying pianos, carved ice swans and people falling from the sky. The fire alarm went off.

Against the human stream, I rounded a stairwell – one with a mural of Maui or some other paradisiacal place. The wall was pebble-finished and rubbed my right arm raw. At that point the alarm bell felt like crabs crawling on my head.

At the top of the stairs Mr. Kroger, an English teacher, stood with Miss Harmon, the principal's assistant, both looking besieged, life doesn't prepare you for high school massacres. When I tried to pass, Mr. Kroger said, "You're not going up there." Meanwhile, the gunshots were coming fast and furious around the corner and down the hall in the caf. Mr. Kroger said, "Jason, leave." The sprinklers kicked in. It was raining.

"Cheryl's in the cafeteria."

"Go. Now."

I grabbed his arm to move him away, but he toppled down the stairwell. Oh, Jesus – he went down like a box of junk falling from a top cupboard.

The shots from the caf continued. I ran toward the main foyer leading there. Bodies lay all around, like Halloween pumpkins smashed on the road on the morning of November first, I slowed down. Only one of the foyer's front windows hadn't been blasted out, and sprinkler water was picking up patches of light reflected from the trophy cases and the ceiling's fluorescents. Lori Kemper ran past. She was in the drama club and her arm was purple and was somehow no longer connected properly. On the linoleum was Layla Warner, not so lucky, in a disjointed heap by a trophy case. Two other students, equally bloody, ran by, and then there was this guy – Derek Something – lying in a red swirl of blood and sprinkler water, using his arms to drag himself away from the cafeteria doors. He croaked, "Don't go in there."

"Jesus, Derek." I grabbed him and hauled him back to the stairwell.

Inside the caf's glass doors I saw three of the school's younger loser gang wearing camouflage duck-hunting outfits. Two of them were arguing, pointing rifles at each other, while the third guy with a carbine

stumble snuble  
flee flygte  
*The Poseidon Adventure*  
actionfilm om en luksu-  
susliners forlis og pas-  
sagerernes forsøg på at  
redde deres liv  
clue into blive klar over  
flip (her:) dreje rundt  
mural vægmaleri  
pebble-finished overflade  
bekendt med småsten  
besieged (her:) hårdt  
trængt  
topple down vælte; styrte  
ned  
trophy case  
(sports)præmiemontre  
disjointed usammenhæng-  
ende  
heap bunke  
swirl hvirvel  
croak kvække  
haul slæbe  
carbine kort gevær

looked on. Students were huddled under the banks of tables. If they were talking, I wasn't hearing anything, maybe because of the fire alarm and the sirens and helicopters outside. Once I entered the main foyer, what I remember is the silence in spite of the noise. In my head it might just as well have been a snowy day in the country.

I thought to myself, *Well, a rifle's a rifle. You can't go in there unarmed.* I scanned the immediate environment to find something, anything, I could use to kill a human being. The answer was just outside one of the blown-out windows: smooth gray rocks from the Capilano River, inside tree planters as a means keeping cigarette butts out of the soil. I walked out the window hole and saw riflemen and ambulances and a woman with a megaphone. Up the hill were hundreds of students, watching the events from behind cars; I could see their legs poking from below. I grabbed a river rock the size of a cantaloupe – it weighed as much as a barbell – and walked into the cafeteria. One of the gunmen lay in a heap on the floor, dead.

I yelled to the guy standing over him, "Put that gun down."

"What? You have got to be ..."

He took a shot at me and missed. Then, in the best shot of my life, I estimated the distance between us, the mass of the rock, and the potential of my muscles. One, two, three, *pitch*, and the evil bastard was dead. Instantly dead, as I'd learn later. Justice.

And then I saw Cheryl. The carnage of the room was only now registering, the dead, the wounded, the red lakes by the vending machines. I climbed under a table and held Cheryl in my arms.

I whispered her name over and over, but her gaze only met mine once, before her head fell back, her eyes on the third gunman, who had been captured beneath a large, heavy tabletop. Students were now fighting each other for a place on top of the table, like people on the Berlin Wall in 1989, and then they all began to jump in unison, crushing the body like a Christmas walnut, one, two, THREE; one, two, THREE; and the distance between the tabletop and the floor shrank with each jump until finally, as I held Cheryl in my arms, the students – unbeknownst to the forces of the law outside – might just as well have been squishing mud between the floor and table.

[...]

\*\*\*

As I disrobed for the shower, flecks of blood fluttered onto the bathroom's gold linoleum. I bundled up my clothes and tossed them out the window onto the back patio, where, I learned later, raccoons pilfered them in the night. I showered, and my thoughts were almost totally focused on how cool and sensible the medic's injection had made me.

scan afsøge  
immediate environment  
nærmeste omgivelser  
planter stor urtepotte  
poke stikke frem  
cantaloupe en art melon  
barbell vægtstang til  
vægtløftning  
estimate beregne  
pitch kast!  
carnage blodbad  
only now registrering først  
nu ved at trænge ind  
gaze blik  
capture fange  
in unison på samme tid  
shrink svinde ind  
unbeknownst uden  
vidende om  
squish mase  
disrobe klæde sig af  
fleck flage  
flutter flagre  
bundle up bylte sammen  
patio (her:) terrasse  
raccoon vaskebjørn  
pilfer rapse; stjæle  
medic læge

I could have piloted and landed a 747 on that stuff. And with a newly minted junkie's bloodless logic, I was already trying to figure out how soon I could locate more, and at least I had something else to focus on besides Cheryl's death.

5 When I walked back into the living room, the TV was on. Mom was transfixed, and the RCMP officers were on walkie-talkies, the phone – you name it. Mom grabbed my hand and wouldn't let me go, and I saw for the first time the helicopter and news service images that trail me to this day, images I have yet to fully digest. My mother's grip was so hard  
10 that I noticed my fingers turning white. I still wonder how things might have gone without that delicious injection.

"We need to ask your son some questions, ma'am."

Reg walked in from the carport door just then. "Son?"

"I'm okay, Dad."

15 He looked at me, and his face seemed – for reasons that will become evident soon enough – annoyed. "Well then. Good. Mrs. Elliot at the school said you'd been taken away unhurt."

An officer said, "We have to question your son, sir."

Mom wailed, "Cheryl's dead ..."

20 "Why do you need to question Jason?"

"Procedure, sir."

"Jason, why are they questioning you?"

"You tell me."

Mom said, "Didn't you hear me?"

25 Dad ignored Mom, and by extension, Cheryl. "What does my son have to do with any of this?"

"He was right there in the cafeteria," said one cop. "If he hadn't thrown that rock, who knows how many more fatalities there might have been."

"Rock?"

30 "Yes. Your son's quick thinking –"

The other cop cut in, "That boulder killed the main gunman."

"Gunman? He was fifteen, tops."

Dad turned to me. "You killed a boy today?"

A cop said, "He's a hero, sir."

35 "Jason, did you kill a boy today?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did you intend to kill him?"

"Yeah, I did. Would you rather have had him shoot me?"

"That's not what I asked you. I asked if you intended to kill him."

40 "Mr. Klaasen," the first cop said. "Perhaps you don't understand, your son's actions saved the lives of dozens of students."

Reg looked at him. "What I understand is that my son experienced

pilot styre  
'minted nyskabt  
trans'fix blive lamslået  
RCMD = Red Cross Doctor  
of Medicine  
trail følge  
di'gest fordøje  
'evident indlysende  
by ex'tension dermed også  
fatality dødstilfælde  
boulder kampesten  
intend have til hensigt

murder in his heart and chose not to rise above that impulse. I understand that my son is a murderer."

While he was saying this, the TV screen was displaying the death and injury statistics. The cops didn't know how to respond to Reg's – my father's  
5 – alien logic. I looked over at my mother, who was by no means a slight woman. I saw her grab one of a pair of massive lava rock lamps, shockingly ugly and astoundingly heavy. Mom picked up the lamp by its tapered top, and with all her force whapped it sidelong into Reg's right kneecap, shattering in into twenty-nine fragments that required a marathon eighteen-  
10 hour surgery and seven titanium pins to rectify – and here's the good part: the dumb bastard had to wait two days for his operation because all the orthopaedic surgeons were busy fixing massacre victims. Ha!

My mom, bless her, kicked into full operatic mode: "Crawl to your God, you arrogant bastard. See if your God doesn't look at the slime  
15 trail you leave behind you and throw you to the buzzards. You heartless, sad little man. You don't even have a soul. You killed it years ago. I want you to die. You got that? I want you to die."

An ambulance was summoned to squire my screaming father to emergency. The police never officially reported the incident, nor did  
20 Reg. But in that one little window of time, many lasting decisions were made. First, any love for my father that might have remained either in my mother's heart or my own – vaporized. Second, we knew for sure that Dad was unfixably nuts. Third, upon discharge a few weeks later, he was coolly shipped off to his sister's daffodil ranch in the most extreme eastern agricultural reaches of the city, in Agassiz, a soggy and  
25 spooky chunk of property surrounded by straggly alders, blackberry brambles, dense firs, pit bulls, Hell's Angels drug labs and an untold number of bodies buried in unmarked graves.

But my parents never got divorced. Dad always paid support and ...  
30 who knows what ever really goes on inside a relationship. Dad probably felt guilty for wrecking Mom's life. No, that would imply feeling on his part.

slight spinkel  
a'stoundingly forbløffende  
'tapered tilspidset  
whap dunke  
'sidelong sidelæns  
shatter knuse  
'rectify afhjælpe  
ortho'paedic ortopædisk  
ope'rativ operaagtig  
'buzzard grib  
'summon tilkalde  
squire ledsage  
'vaporize fordampe  
upon 'discharge ved  
udskrivelse  
ship 'off skibe af sted  
'daffodil påskelilje  
agri'cultural reaches  
udkantsområde med  
landbrug  
soggy våd  
spooky spøgelsesagtig  
'straggly alder vildt elletræ  
'blackberry bramble brom-  
bærbusk  
dense firs tætvoksende  
(ædel)gran  
support børnebidrag  
imply forudsætte

**PART ONE****Cheryl****In pairs**

- 1** True or false? Take turns to correct the false statements.
  - a. Cheryl feels upset about the home pregnancy test.
  - b. Cheryl joins the Out to Lunch Bunch because she is a devoted Christian.
  - c. Cheryl has stolen a blusher from the drugstore.
  - d. Cheryl is a hypocrite and a snob.
  - e. Cheryl is ashamed of being pregnant and feels that she has committed a sin.
  - f. Even beyond death Cheryl finds comfort in her faith.
- 2** Agree on 5 (or more) adjectives which you think describe Cheryl as a character, and note down the places in the text that support your choices. Prepare to present your work in class.
- 3** How would you characterise the Out to Lunch Bunch? You may choose from the following adjectives. Look up the words you do not know.
  - truthful, biased, honest, intolerant, domineering, compassionate, judgemental, helpful, religious, loyal, sincere, overbearing, hypocritical, conceited, narrow-minded, brave
- 4** Cheryl says to her friend Lauren, "I take comfort in knowing that my best friends are squelching any rumors from the start, right?" How would you characterise her tone of voice?
- 5** What is different (and crucial as it turns out) about today's lunch break?
- 6** According to Cheryl, "people made a big fuss" about the words she wrote on her binder. Why did she write them? Why do you think such a fuss was made about it?
- 7** Where is Cheryl now? What do you think is the effect of her telling the story from where she is now?

- 8** On page 54, line 42 to page 55, line 3 Cheryl states that, "I had, and continue to have, a nagging suspicion that I used the system simply to get what I wanted. Religion included. Does that cancel out whatever goodness I might have inside me?"
  - a. What "system" is she referring to?
  - b. What would be your answer to her question?

**PART TWO****Jason****In pairs**

- 1** True or false? Take turns to correct the false statements.
  - a. Jason is seen praying in one of the wire service shots.
  - b. Jason only married Cheryl so that they could have sex.
  - c. Jason is happy about the pregnancy.
  - d. Jason is a murderer.
  - e. The students who squashed the third gunman under the table in the cafeteria are murderers.
  - f. Jason's father never divorced his mother because he never stopped loving her.
- 2** Agree on 5 (or more) adjectives which you think describe Jason as a character, and note down the places in the text that support your choices. Prepare to present your work in class.
- 3** What are Matt Gursky's motives for being concerned about Jason? How does the conversation evolve?
- 4** On page 60, lines 7-10 Jason compares his experience to a film about a sinking ship. Study the paragraph and discuss why the image of the ship appears in Jason's mind when he runs towards the cafeteria. What do the two situations have in common?
- 5** "Justice", says Jason on page 61, line 22. What does he refer to? Do you agree? Why/why not?
- 6** How would you characterise Jason's father? His behaviour, beliefs, and attitude to his family? Find places in the text to support your arguments.
- 7** Make a comparison of Jason and Cheryl. What are the similarities and differences between the two main characters? Find places in the text to support your arguments.