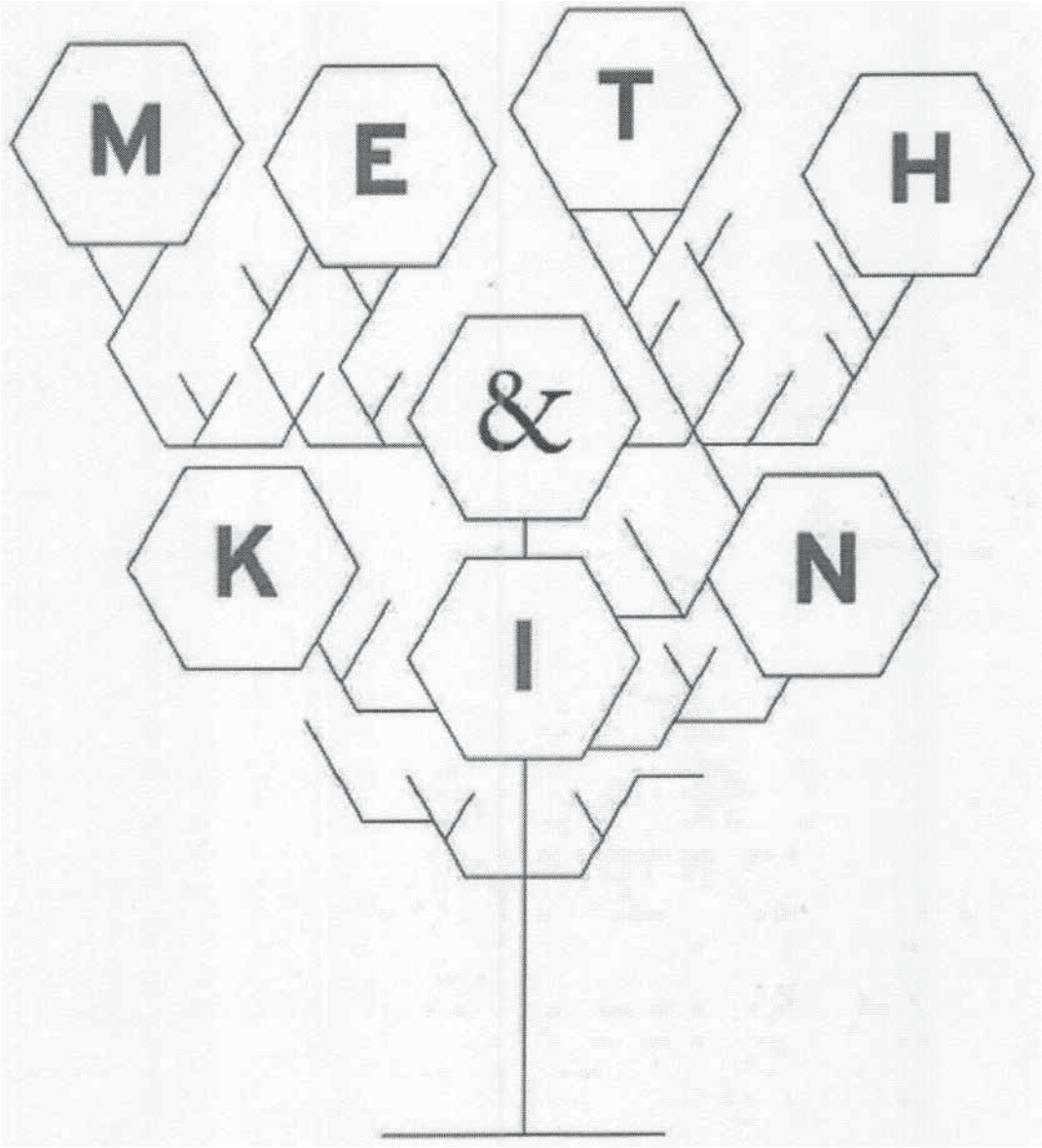
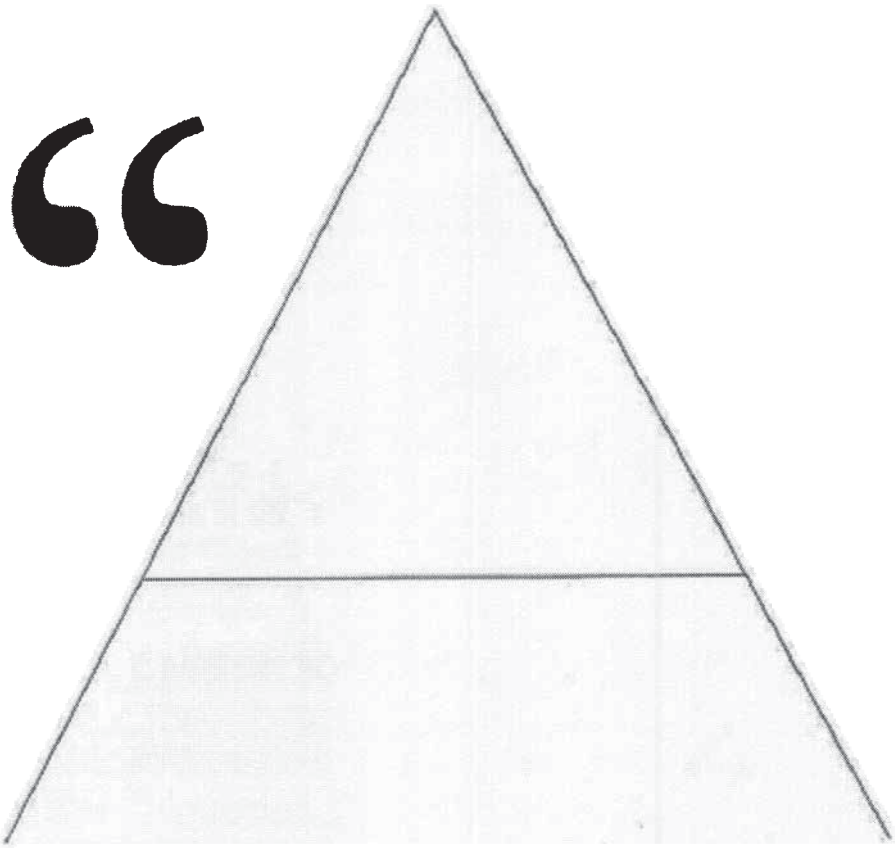


SEAN WAS THE CHILD SHE NEVER WANTED, THE SON OF A SUBSTANCE-ABUSING SISTER TOO MESSED-UP TO BE A GOOD PARENT. ONE WOMAN'S TALE OF FIGHTING THE AUTHORITIES —AND LEARNING TO LOVE HER TROUBLED NEPHEW.

BY COLLEEN FRIESEN



"Auntie, is crystal meth a compound word?"

My 12-year-old nephew, at the computer, swivels in the oak chair to await my answer. At the counter, I turn to see his sky-blue eyes, widening and narrowing repeatedly. I will the espressomaker to go faster.

"I'm pretty sure they're two separate words." I can't believe we're discussing compound words; a year ago he couldn't spell c-a-t. "Do you know how to spell crystal?"

The chair squeaks. "Uh-huh." He's back at the keyboard.

"You know meth is a short form of methamphetamine?" I continue casually, as if conversing about crystal meth is part of my morning routine.

"Yeah..." He's engrossed in his morning chore of writing in his journal before school. Months later, he'll let me read it.

...and I woke up with the cell phone not under me and Jim ordering crack on it and I spazzed out on Jim and I attacked him with a bat because everything he said to me was building upon me so I said in my mind fuck it an I went bizerk...

In February 2004, Sean had been in sixth grade at an alternative school in Mission. His Grade 5 attendance record showed 110 absences. His list of suspensions, expulsions and behavioral problems was extensive. With the many acronyms behind his name—ADD, ADHD, ODD—he could have had a very official-looking business card.

According to Sean's principal, this was his last stop on the education trail. This was the place they send kids who don't fit anywhere else. Sean wasn't fitting there, either. In fact, he was walking out. But not before he gave the finger to his teachers and screamed expletives at the other kids.

One day the principal phoned me in Sechelt to say, "Sean can't attend any more if he continues to live with his mom. The neglect is too profound. My next call is to the ministry. You and your husband have been involved—couldn't you take him?"

If life is what happens while you're busy making other plans, my husband, Kevin, and I had were about to experience life. Our plans had not included raising my addicted sister's very, very angry 11-year-old boy. We were living a carefully constructed dream. Seven years earlier, when Kevin was 39 and I was 36, we'd retired. This was not the retirement of mutual fund ads with their cruise ships and golf course homes. This was a 625-square-foot cottage on leased oceanfront First Nations land in Sechelt, a small apartment in Vancouver, and trips with backpacks. We had each lost a parent to cancer, his dad at 49, my mom at 63. We'd decided making more time was more important than making more money. I'd discovered travel writing and the world it opened. Kevin was living three days a week in Vancouver as he completed his masters in economics at SFU. The end was in sight.

I spoke to my sister's social worker in Abbotsford. "My supervisor has approved an order to remove your nephew," she said. "But we're sure if we put him in foster care, he'll run back to his mother. Can't you and your husband take him?"

Kevin and I talked. This was not what we'd worked and saved and planned for. There are foster families. Sean was not our responsibility. We'd done our part raising Kevin's sons, and besides, I'd chosen not to have children. We were happy to help pay for schools filled with other people's kids, for other women's maternity leaves. We liked it that our taxes paid for hospital beds whether we needed them or not. We called ourselves small "l" liberals. Besides, I was just one aunt. There were other aunts and uncles. And what about Sean's construction worker dad?

Yet I felt guilty. For various reasons, the other relatives were unsuitable. Doesn't family have a primary obligation to take care of its own? Does that responsibility end just because your sister is a substance abuser who made her child sleep on a tiny outdoor balcony while she "rented out" his bedroom? It takes a village to raise a child—didn't we want to build a world where there is less dependence on the state, where the extended family takes care of its own?

Kevin, the economist, burst my bubble. In fact, he assured me, those countries where care is left up to the family have a poorer quality of life. Productivity falls as the burden on families leaves them unable to cope. Apparently, the closest we have to utopia is those northern European nations with their low crime rates, low unemployment and strong social safety nets. In the end, our discussions amounted to little more than an intellectual exercise. The state was involved—and now, we decided, so were we.

As instructed, I went to the Sechelt courthouse and filled out a form. Its simplicity was deceptive. After I'd declared my sister unfit, I found myself staring at the wall, trying to understand how we'd got here. I'd always believed we were like every other family—or at least every other Mennonite family. Dad was an elder at the church

and ran a wood-products brokerage business. Zero tolerance was invented at our house in Mission. Life was strict. Piano lessons, for instance, were mandatory, and so was up to four hours of daily practice. Every spring Mom insisted that we all scrub our house from top to bottom—on the outside.

I sat in an orange courthouse chair, letting the images come flooding back. Rhonda leaning against Mom in the front seat of our 1965 Laurentian, her long brunette hair falling over the dark green vinyl. She's 14 years old and beautiful. At 10, in the back, I'm in awe of my big sister, honoured to be brushing her hair until it shines brighter than her horse's mane. Or Rhonda, tanned and grinning, with those perfectly white and newly straightened teeth, the summer she was the lifeguard at Aldergrove Lake. She saved a man's life that year. That was about the time the rebellion started, the fighting with Dad, the experimenting with drugs.

Three weeks after I filled in the form in Sechelt, I saw my sister at the Abbotsford courthouse. The woman standing with the social worker reminded me less of Rhonda than of the shivery addicts I'd seen on East Hastings. She looked wasted and ill. Her pale wrists poked out of her sleeves. Her teeth looked like they'd been soaked in black tea.

The social worker said that Rhonda had agreed to let us take Sean; we didn't even need to go into the courtroom. Kevin headed back to SFU, and I drove the VW van to pick up Sean from his 28-year-old sister in New Westminster. He'd made his way to New West from Mission, by himself, and had been staying in her home for three weeks. He had one small daypack.

Sean was even more withdrawn than when I'd last seen him, months earlier. He didn't talk. He didn't smile. His eyes were flat. Later, it would be explained that he was a "child who has no affect." He'd completely shut down.

AT DAVIS BAY ELEMENTARY in Sechelt, a 10-minute walk from our house, I met with the principal. He'd already talked to the principal of Sean's last school. "We've received his file. It's bad. We can't afford the inevitable disruption, and funding for an aide for him would have stayed at his last school. With a child like this, we can only allow him to attend two hours a day." So Kevin and I became full-time home school teachers for a child in Grade 6 who did not know the months of the year.

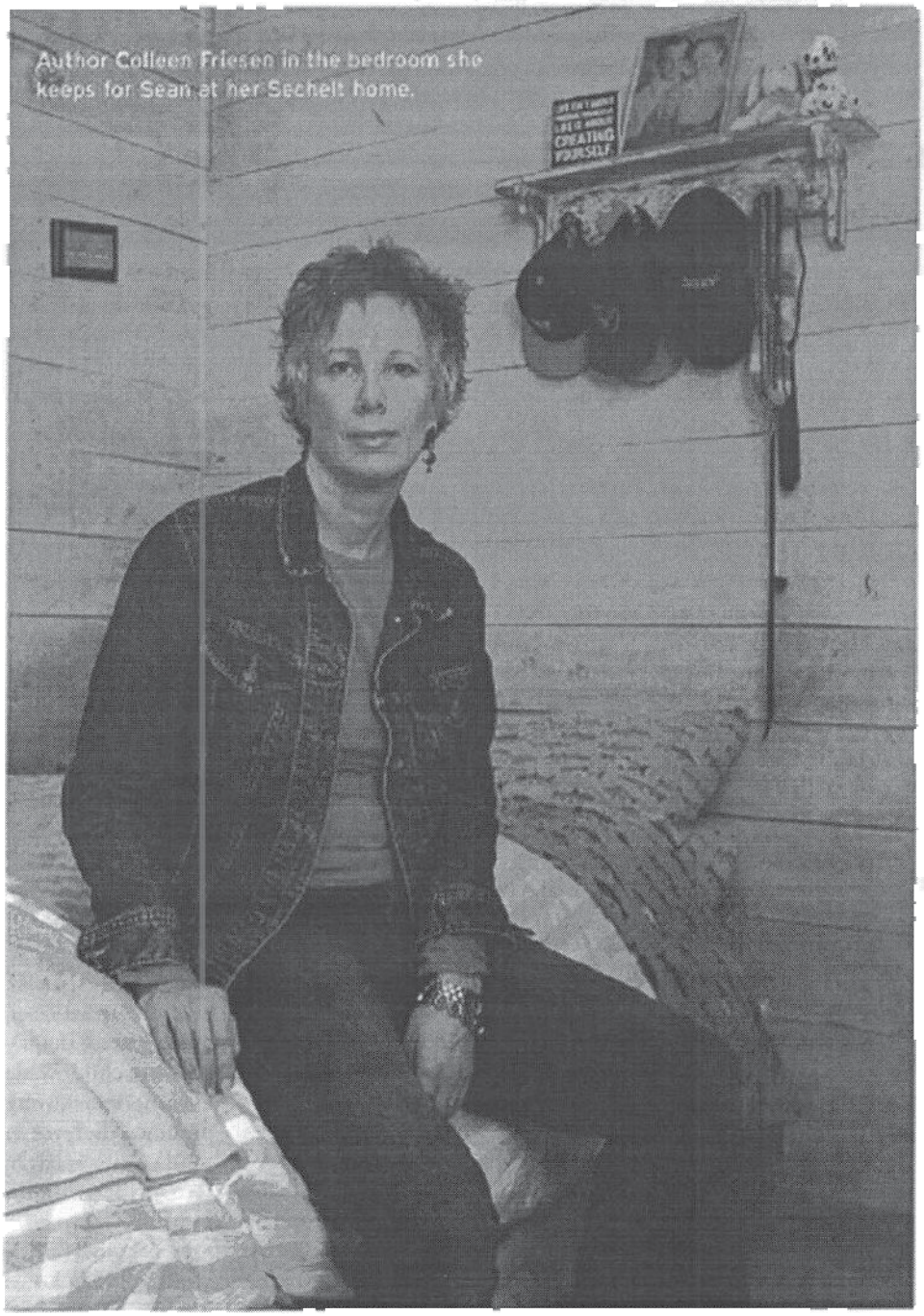
It quickly became apparent that we needed help; I went to the Ministry of Children and Family Development in Sechelt. They weren't sure why I was there. Because Sean hadn't been officially "removed" from Rhonda, there was no file. The ministry now simply had one less "child in care." The only person qualified to have a ministry worker, I was told, was Sean's mother. Kevin and I couldn't be foster parents because we were related to Sean. We'd entered an Alice in Wonderland world. But wait: children with this many behavioural problems would be assigned a once-a-week visit from someone from Project Parent, which consulted to the ministry. So there was no file, but maybe there was? The ministry worker sent me across the hall to Human Resources.

"We'll give you $357.82 a month for Sean's care," said the HR worker.

"Welfare? We certainly don't qualify for that."

"This has nothing to do with your income or assets—this is money for Sean's needs." I had no idea how it all worked, but I was too overwhelmed to pursue the bureaucratic maze further.

I woke each morning thinking of ways to occupy Sean. Our friends dropped off a basketball hoop. We shot baskets. I chased after him down the beach. I shopped for socks, shirts, gumboots and groceries.



Author Colleen Friesen in the bedroom she keeps for Sean at her Sechelt home.

BRIAN HOWELL

I couldn't leave him alone and had no one to leave him with. I walked him to school for his two-hour stint and cried on the way home.

I got duo-tangs filled with simple exercises from the school's resource room teacher: spelling, grammar, comprehension. Kevin focused on math. Sean knew nothing. How could a child live on the planet for 11 years and know so little? I printed the vowels on the fridge blackboard. Repeat this: A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y. I took a blank red duo-tang, filled it with lined pages and told Sean, "You are going to write one page in this journal every day." His rage was magnificent.

"There will be consequences," I warned, "a reaction to every action." I realized I was running my fingertips over the hives that now covered my throat and chest.

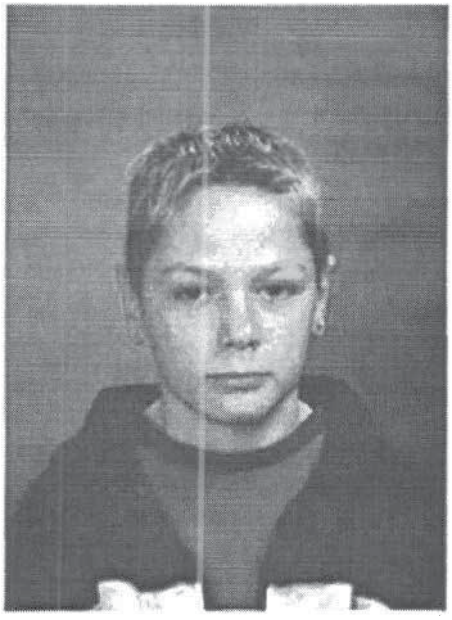
Finally, he began copying words from a book. "I am the king of cool. I am cool. I am no fool." His printing was stiff and large. P's interchanged with B's and D's. It was a long and arduous task to fill a line, another, a page. Tears dripped onto the ink, blurring line after stumbling line of his new favourite sentence: "I want my mom."

"Yes," I said, "you must really miss your mom."

At night, he screamed violently, "Why can't I go home!"

I stroked his sweating forehead. We were on the floor of our den where he lay on a bed of inflatable camping pad, sheets and duvet. Our one-bedroom cottage wasn't built for three. There was a tiny cabin in the backyard but it was uninsulated and it was February. Sean shuddered, began to whimper; finally, he slept. I fell into our bed around the corner. I could hear his breathing, this poor, terrified, terrifying intruder. I wanted Kevin to be home. I hated my sister.

During the day, it was worse. I imagined wearing a T-shirt that said, "This is NOT my child!" Clerks with their tightly righteous lips glared their disapproval. Sean was everywhere, grabbing things, yelling, running through their stores. Silently I screamed at them, "You don't know the whole story. Quit judging me!" Sean yelled for me every few minutes. He had no boundaries, no limits.



Sean's Grade 6 photo from September 2003, when he was still in his mother's custody and exposed to life in the raw.

I declared inviolable zones: "When I am in the bathroom, you will never, ever yell for me or bang on the door unless the house is burning to the ground." I ran the tub and sat on the floor in my new quiet space, unable to take off my clothes.

Kevin explained the dining rules. "You must sit at the table to eat." "You cannot run back and forth." "This is how you use your knife."

In one area there was no argument: bedtime was 9 p.m. He grew to love it. I read to him every night and encouraged him with endless variations on the same theme: "You're smart and it's not your fault, but because you've missed so much school you need to work hard to catch up." I massaged his back through his T-shirt—he insisted on wearing his clothes to bed.

At the end of March 2005, we met in Mission: the Ministry of Children and Family Development and their lawyers, my sister and her lawyer, Kevin and I. Rhonda agreed to counselling, parenting courses, Narcotics Anonymous and other programs to enable her to be a better mother. We all signed a kith and kin agreement, by which a family member who's not the parent is granted custody of a child for 18 months. We would receive $450 a month while it was in place.

The woman assigned from Project Parent, Chris, was invaluable, firm and straightforward. "This boy long ago learned that, in order to survive, he has to be an adult—so he speaks to adults as peers, or worse. Adults are not worthy of any respect. Power will not be wrested from this child. After all, it has kept him alive."

... the last fight I had with Jim he thretned to kill me but I said I would rather kill myself before he kills me so I went crazy on James Hayward Sutton stupid guy thank God for the tool box that is in the back of a pick up truck.

Chris's next words were more hopeful. "You need to reparent this child. At first you will have to negotiate with him as an equal—most likely about everything—but as he feels safer and sees you in control, he will give some of this up. Let him be as childlike as possible. If he wants a teddy bear or a blanket, let it happen. He needs the chance to have a safe childhood. Speak in absolute terms of black and white with consequences and rewards. Structure is key."

And so, a few months later, Kevin held Sean down on the new plywood floor. The screams were incredible—"I hate you! You can't make me!"

I'd asked him to take the wood scraps to the pile outside. It was summer. We had ripped off the old roof to add another storey. Sean would be getting our old room and moving in from the newly insulated cabin, a nice step up. But apparently I would not be telling him what to do. He threw the garbage can down and began to kick and scream.

"Hit me!" he screamed. "I know you want to hit me!" How far down the beach could they hear this?

When we weren't silently exhausted, Kevin and I argued. The renovation was way over budget. Life was sawdust and unfinished mess and Sean's incredible anger. I still resented the nights I'd handled on my own, and Kevin resented the interruptions to his studying. We could only get away by covering each other. I felt beaten down, numb. When my oldest sister and her husband came for three days to give us a break, Kevin and I left on separate trips.

THE KITH AND KIN AGREEMENT ended last September. It's intended as a temporary arrangement until the child can be returned to his parent, but it's also a clever way for the ministry to offload a problem child. What relative would voluntarily resubmit a child to dysfunction and chaos? The Human Resources funds had ended a month earlier; we were phoned and told we'd been receiving those monies in error. Apparently you can't get help from Human Resources while in a kith and kin arrangement. We've been informed we must repay all the money we'd received.

In October 2005, Kevin and I met with the ministry social worker and her team leader in Abbotsford to see about other cus-

Courtesy Caitlin Fraser

tody options for Sean. "You could become restricted foster parents," they said, though they made clear their discouragement. "You need to understand, there would be a stigma on Sean because he was in care, and you'd have the ministry involved in every move you make." They said they'd let us know the options by the end of October. We heard nothing. Then, in November 2005, our dentist's invoice for Sean's teeth-cleaning was returned with a handwritten note: "The ministry informed us that Sean's coverage was cancelled."

I tried again to clarify our custody options. MCFD Abbotsford responded by asking us to attend a family planning meeting. Drive all the way from the Sunshine Coast for yet another meeting? What was this meant to achieve? The e-mailed reply was to the point: "The purpose is to see if family, and other supports, can come up with a long term plan for Sean that excludes MCFD."

Sean was allowed to attend Grade 7 full-time, though he never did get an aide worker. He received the Most Improved Student award for Grades 1 through 7. He passed the Grade 7 spelling test only after he begged his teacher to test him at 4 p.m. on the last day of school. Grade 8 presented a different problem. The Davis Bay principal felt that Sean's outbursts could be handled within an elementary school, but high school would be a different story. And home schooling, Kevin and I knew, was not an option. Not if we wanted to stay married.

So we found a private school in Alberta. St. John's, near Stoney Plain, emphasizes personal accountability, one-on-one tutoring and lots of physical exercise. There are only nine other boys in Sean's Grade 8 class. He has earned the most merit points of any new boy. He's learned to snowshoe and dogsled. He plays hockey on an outdoor rink he helped flood. He doesn't get in trouble at his new school. He understands the rules and expectations. We're hopeful he's learning the study skills and self-discipline to make the next five years of school easier for him. He calls almost every day, often with specific requests: "Please rub Maggie's ears and tell her it's from Sean." We fly him home on the breaks. His room in Sechelt has flannel sheets with fish and is filled with all the junk a kid collects. He wants to be a writer.

My sister made her last trip to Sechelt in August 2004. She's quit all the programs she agreed to take. She has moved at least five times, one eviction notice accusing her of running a crack house. She has no phone; her calls are infrequent now. Sean went to see her last Christmas. It wasn't a visit he plans to repeat. I saw her, too, and am surprised that she's made it to 50. It is not easy watching a slow-motion train wreck, knowing there is nothing you can do.

We've filed a human rights complaint against the Ministry of Children and Family Development for discrimination based on familial status. Our claim asserts that Kevin, Sean and I are being denied the help to which we'd be entitled if we were unrelated foster parents. We have little idea of what to expect as Sean moves into his teens. Having never been permitted access to his files—medical or otherwise—we have no diagnoses, no test results. At some point, I expect, the future will include intensive therapy.

Though the renovations continue, Kevin and I are laughing more than we have in a long while. We look forward to travelling together again between Sean's breaks. The neighbours all adore him and pay him to mow their lawns. They miss his whistle and ask when he'll be back home. I miss him, too. Somewhere in all of this I've come to love him. I hope that my love will help sustain him through what lies ahead. I hope it will be enough.●