

FICTION

GIDEON FORMAN

McClure's Monologue

(Spoken by a retired schoolteacher)
Transcript No. 1 Recorded 19 May 1998

WELL, I NEVER MEANT TO hurt anyone. I was brought up, near King City, to do just the opposite (*laughs*) I told the boys at MAGU (my young robins of the 1970s) that "true friends, like diamonds, are precious and rare." That's largely true, I see now, from this vantage Here like Alan Eagleson You begin your career and at the start (but you never *call* it "the start") there are wide possibilities

I had a golden hamster named Roberto. I would place him in my palm and he would sniff the tips of my fingers. Then he would lift his muzzle, nosing at the air.

In October 1971 I pulled my Ford station wagon into the school parking lot and loaded the kids: three jumped over the mid seats, two next to me up front. Was I their daddy? We bowled five pin and I put my coffee cup on the table and showed them how to score each frame. Then I stood at the red line, my hands together with ball at my chest, and crouched to deliver. Back surgery let me engage in no other sport.

They said I had a big ass—and nephew Ken wanted to bite a big chunk of it—and many years later he passed away, like a number of them—without *ever* biting it I wouldn't have minded if nephew Ken had strung the live boa constrictor behind his neck and let it slide over his haired red chest ... and if nephew Ken had called me "Papa."

I had my favourites—one was Joshua Robinson, age approximately nine when I met him at MAGU free school ... twenty-seven years ago.

The hamster lived in a terrarium that sat on my bedside table. I filled it with wood shavings and fitted it with the rodent wheel. Attached a glass water bottle that hung down from a brace I'd made. In the morning I would hear him scuttling, his claws nicking the glass. I also kept a boa constrictor in the apartment (muscular Raymond) who once bit Joshua when he was changing the water—and left a triangle of pinpricks in his thumb.

I grew up north of Toronto, near Lady Eaton's estate; who knows but I wanted to *be* Lady Eaton. We went to her stable and rode their horses I was overweight, my navel was a deep hole surrounded by fat, and I was larger than the other boys, walked down Main Street challenging them to fight by my mere swagger.

Mother wintered in Florida, I went to boarding school and eventually came back; Visiting Day I wouldn't stop hugging her, and the prefect had to peel me away when the Day grew to a close At King Secondary I still imagined the pussies of girls and drew stylized ladies' faces on the inside cover of my science books—the pug-nosed profiles and big hair of fifties glam models. I put them in short dresses, sketched their slim legs and high heels And I wrote my name, Master Lawrence McClure, in flowing letters next to the drawings—in a neat, well-proportioned script that bordered on calligraphy. I was hulking, rounded, and held a pop bottle on my stomach in summer. That was adolescence.

Eventually I gave the science texts to Joshua. And I told him, "These are the first nature books I had—the ones that got me hooked." I handed them to him and he climbed onto my couch, sat campfire style, putting his foot under his thigh. And began to leaf through. "These are so old and old-fashioned," he said, smelling the book's spine.

I had a circle of students—boys and one emotionally disturbed twelve-year-old girl (Holly)—who formed my "Reptiles and Science Club" at MAGU. The first day of school I opened my briefcase, took out a wooden recorder and Indian choker made of bleached bone, and the kids began climbing on me.

At the trial in 1997, I walked with a walking stick and looked like Colonel Sanders—his round face, glasses, goatee. Quite distinguished for an alleged felon, *I* thought (*laughs*). It was a long hearing and of course everyone was aware of the situation—former students, parents, colleagues, some of my principals Some were sympathetic and stood with me, showing they had a morsel of

decency and understanding, some idea of what a man such as myself goes through, what I had endured But others, predictably, were little pricks, all accusation and anger and open hostility ... hissing at me. And throwing things—even before the proceedings were over, before the facts were all out I tried to be big about it I brought a book (Harold Robbins, with a silver bookmark) to College Park and planted my keester on the bench and waited until I was called

Once, I took this fourth-grader Joshua to the Beach Boys. Well, he was fuckin' thrilled. At every song he knew—"California Girls," "In My Room," "Surfin' Safari"—we jumped from our seats (they sprang up) and gyrated in the aisle. It was difficult for me because, as I said, my back is bad. Just getting up was hard. I rose slowly and had to put my jacket (of smoked moose hide from Manitoulin Island) on the seat beside me. It had fringes along the sleeves and beadwork over the breast pocket.

Afterwards at my apartment we made a casserole and listened to "Endless Summer"—and we probably had a glass of wine and candles, and probably some goddamn popcorn too (*laughs*), because that's what the kid liked Was that a felony? I mean the kid invited *me* to the concert *He* bought the tickets I just drove us down—because he was too young to (and would be for seven years).

I had a Gila monster who bit me once, not a terrible wound but some poison got in. Still, I had a number of errands planned for that afternoon. I put the lizard back in his cage. I drove to Dominion, did my shopping—pushing the cart with my one good arm—put a box of Corn Flakes under my elbow. I loaded the bags (paper, then) into the wagon, drove home, unloaded. Then I made out the February rent cheque, using my mouth to get the envelope open. I had some time so I took down a screwdriver and pliers from my tool kit and tried again to fix the toaster I'd been given. And then I headed for hospital My arm had swelled to twice its size.

A sweet boy, the family was Jewish, not strictly observant but still practising in modest ways Once I was doing a unit with the kids on foods people eat around the world—grasshopper, dogs and cats, bumble bee—and I took out some pemmican we'd gotten from Manitoulin Island. Joshua was sitting campfire style on his

desk, and when I showed it to him he put up his hand and said, "Mr. McClure, is this *kosher*?" Brought the house down. His hair was the early Beatles bowl-cut and he had a dark blue T-shirt.

Before I came to the school, Joshua would walk through the halls and run his finger over the walls' pebbled brick. Students' art work was taped up—red and blue splash paintings done on poster paper—and Joshua told me he was afraid to touch because he thought his mere fingering would ruin them, that he'd knock them down. I said I'd take him out for lunch and he climbed into the station wagon, remarking how the panelling looked like "real wood." We drove to a neighbourhood deli and I ordered him a roast beef on kaiser. He bit into it and sipped the apple juice. Later he swung the sandwich in its brown bag as we walked back to the car.

I held Joshua to myself *once* We were at a science school weekend retreat near Georgetown, Ontario. It was a spontaneous and dignified hugging. I put my hands on his small shoulders and said simply ... something to the effect that ... well, the precise words elude me now He was standing with his blue safari hat, slim legs crossed. He looked up at me. He had thin eyes and a long nose. Then I petted the back of his head a moment and ushered him into the dining room.

Once Joshua and I threw a baseball back and forth. I lent him a catcher's mitt I had. We were playing at a green in High Park. At one point he stopped throwing the ball and stood there, hand at his forehead to block the sun. He was squinting because of it. He said, "Do you still like me, Mr. McClure?"

My apartment in that period was a dark room constructed largely of wood, the floors oak strips, the panelling coming half way up the wall. On the far side my thick-as-cream drapes which bunched generously at the floor. The TV on a wheeled stand and across from it the red leather couch with its three plush pillows. Beside that, the tea cart. And in my bathroom I had a tub which sat on four lions' paws.

What did I need in the early seventies? Someone to take me out and play with me; I needed to be handled A feeling of this, a sense of it, must've been going through me at thirty-six and thirty-seven In fact, play-partners are an issue all through my

life—from kindergarten to the final teaching days. I was always, consciously or not, looking for friends to jump around with: on the slide, on the jungle gym, on my back, in my bathroom.

When I arrived home at 9:00 or 10:00 or whatever first thing I switched on the TV, I called nephew Ken, lit incense, cooked in the kitchen with the radio—talk shows, never music I held the muffin mix in a bowl next to my chest and watched the evening news as I whipped the batter with a whisk.

I wasn't supposed to keep a boa or hamster there. Once a television producer phoned—he was doing a program on exotic pets, could he come to my place and tape me talking about the animals? All right. Well, they had a whole crew in there: six guys, cameras, makeup, thick electrical cables. The next week I was walking down the back stairs and ran into my landlady. "Lawrence!—I saw you on television with your pets. Quite extraordinary. And they re-created your entire apartment!"

I kept the boa in a terrarium in the spare room, a deep orange heat lamp over the mesh top and a dog's enamel dish in there for water I didn't want to arrive home only to the aroma of hamster urine and boa dung—which has white fur stuck in it, the parts of rat the snake can't digest Sometimes taking meals in solitude my own digestion suffered But when Joshua came over he helped me bake the casserole; put a padded oven mitt over each hand and pulled down the oven door ... through the window he watched it gel.

He slept down next to me. I kept my arm under him; he had underwear with fishnetting on the front. I told him to put his arms around my neck and he did He lay on his side. Later, as I was getting dressed and splashing cologne over my chest, he lounged on the couch (in clothing and shoes) and went back to sleep.

It may surprise some to discover that my political leanings were never "progressive," never left-wing. I voted in the main Conservative and had high regard for the Ontario Tories of the sixties and seventies, Mr. Davis' government in particular At no time was I a socialist. I was sucked briefly up into Trudeaumania (*laughs*) but soon returned to the fold of my childhood. Mother and her father and her father's father voted Tory blue and members of the family would not speak to each other months and years if any crossed this. I was, and continue to be, a quite traditional Christian

gentleman. I was certainly more of a gentleman than the judge who tried me—Mr. Justice Cummings—of that you can be sure.

I lied. I did vote for the New Democratic Party once—some school trustee. I was friendly with Joshua's mother, she was a socialist, and I remember laughing and saying to her: "Frances, I did it for *you*."

In 1972, I got my students the first tour of the new Metro Zoo grounds given by the director himself—Gunther Voss. (Voss recently passed away, but a number of years ago was charged with some fraud stuff for getting kickbacks on animals the Zoo purchased. So he had a little thing going.) Anyway, he walked us through the Zoo site before all the buildings had gone in. A lot of munched-up turf and small man-made hills. Dr. Voss climbed to the top of one, raised his arm and pointed to where the Eurasian Pavillion would stand. I was taught to respect these sorts of figures—and never lost that deferential streak. The director *himself*. I called him "Dr. Voss" even when it was just the two of us talking.

This is the sort of thing I was doing on warm afternoons in the early 1970s: plying my vocation as educator, without an overarching life-strategy I crouched in the Cedar Vale Ravine and put my hand out to grasp a square of cast-off sheet metal ... and beneath it found three coiled garter snakes; one I pinched back of the neck and raised it writhing, its tail curling up. Joshua stood beside me, a cotton pillowcase open between his hands.

I opened the forest for Joshua and this was formative. But it was always crucial—for both of us—that even as we uncovered we left much hidden. We wanted the woodlot to continue to know more than we did, to hold out on us, despite our revelation of its serpents and salamanders. Joshua would say, "Mr. McClure, there's so much I don't see here (like the underside of the leaves)—and I'm happy about that." Or (when he felt sufficiently bold to use my first name), "Lawrence, I think there are animals in this ravine no one will ever find—which is good."

We kept tortoises, lizards and snakes at the school. Every ten days or so we fed the boa constrictor live white rats. I would remove their water bottle and raise the wire mesh off the cage. Then grasp him round his furry midriff.

Lift the screen from snake's tank and drop Mr. Rat down. He landed on all fours, his tail streaming out behind him. Then he would sniff-sniff at the ground. He would raise his muzzle And then begin sniffing at the ground again

Squeals like a pig and he's wrapped in boa's buttered leather coils. His pink feet are twitching; his eyes bulge out. From his anus pop a couple of black tic-tacs I was never sentimental at the time. "What you're witnessing here is the natural process," I told Joshua and the others as they crowded and fingered the terrarium.

But today I feel I could've taught them the beauty and dignity of *sparing* rats ... from time to time. The way we practised our feeding the rodent stayed in as long as necessary I'm puzzled now at my easy willingness to do this. I know they were the only thing snake would eat ... still ... I'm perplexed that their predicament didn't speak to me—or if it *did* that I chose to put it aside Why didn't I acknowledge or lean toward the rat's little experience? It was a small experience, but for the rat it carried great weight.

I also put live minnows in the watersnake's bowl—and let him devour them. Watersnakes—I called mine Frances after Joshua's mother: a compliment!—open their gullets and eat prey whole. As it proceeds, there's a fish tail flopping in snake's mouth.

Tortoise, snake, rodent, minnow—some animals we understood as substantial and weighty, others as victuals and nourishment. I'm mindful of all that now ... of the distinctions I drew, setting aside some for care and study, and others for feeding to the lions I admit my hand in that.

But I was never a cruel man. And any of the principals or students or rats and snakes I dealt with and knew from about 1955 onward can attest to that Mistakes were made, God knows, but this one never set out to harm—or even truly disturb.

MAGU was an acronym for "Multi-Age Grouping Unit." An icy name, it conveyed little of the school's fertility and noise and sprawling anarchic nature. I was actually too "straight" for MAGU. Most teachers there had no set courses, no lesson plan, no fixed structure; they were "resource people," "facilitators" (in the parlance of the day). By contrast, I set up a schedule: recorder on

Tuesdays at 10:00 a.m.; singing Thursdays noon; bowling each Friday, 1:00 p.m.—we did not neglect the body in developing the soul!—natural history and dissection Monday and Wednesday at 11:00.

When I taught singing I played the piano as if at home for Christmas—lots of opening my mouth wide and throwing the head back laughing: “Oh, they built the ship Titanic to sail the ocean blue / and they thought they had a ship that the water wouldn’t go through.” The students crowded in from both sides as I sat on the piano bench. Holly, who wore thick glasses and needed extra attention and reassurance, placed herself next to me. I remember she began to menstruate around this time and I was forbidden by the school board from discussing the matter of personal hygiene with her. Well, at times it was rank Some students had arms around the others’ backs as they sang.

I took my students to Niagara Falls. This was at night. They didn’t see the rainbow that arches over the falls permanently but gazed at the colourful man-made lights that blast the cascading water: reds, greens, whites. It’s a spectacle, if not spectacular. We went for dinner there—a large Chinese restaurant and we all sat at a round table fitted with dark red tablecloths and water pitchers. I ordered for Joshua—he was too young and besides I knew what he liked: vegetarian egg rolls and chicken fried rice.

We walked up a hill in Niagara Falls to get to the restaurant. This would’ve been April, 1972. We crossed some railroad tracks. I remember the hill’s incline. That stands out. Pulling Joshua up as he was tired. Drawing him by the wrist. That’s the memory. “The Bruce Trail starts near here,” I told him as we walked. “At Queenston—down the river.” He said, “Oh?” I said, “The trail’s a non-road way of moving through the land. It breaks with the grid pattern and heads cross-country. Almost unheard of now.”

We went to a McDonald’s in Buffalo and I ordered Fillet-o-Fish. For some reason that name sticks out. You know, it’s their processed fish patty, fried, served with a bun and tartar sauce. It was fine for eating with the kids. They liked it and I wanted to show I was with them on this. I had a sip of strawberry shake and pounced with fingers on a group of fries in their little bag; and

then carefully with both hands lifted the sandwich and took a bite. I used my middle finger to wipe tartar sauce from my mustache, first a stroke on the right side, then a couple of quick strokes on the left. I pushed my glasses up my nose and took another sip of shake. "Sit down and finish your meal," I roared. Joshua was talking continuously and not eating.

How similar I am at sixty-three to the boy I was at fifteen, and the man of twenty-one and thirty-eight One looks for keys, understanding, self-revelation—especially starting at sixty. I haven't found such I'm still a youngster from King City with all the exuberance, naïveté and limitation that implies. I wasn't born in Vienna, London, Dublin or other urbane intellectual settlements; my big novelist was Hugh MacLennan who, I realize now, is middling when held up to the world's great I didn't grow up in a house surrounded by *The New York Review of Books*.

I was never a particularly dark man. I laughed a deep laugh, throwing my head back at staff parties as I held a drink and a plate of carrots; at parent-teacher night. I did my share of banter, of small talk in the bank line Fridays.

Small things like riding a horse excite me still I continue to be in awe of Lady Eaton's great stone stables which we grew up beside.... I haven't (in my seventh decade now) been struck by the bolt of insight. Nor am I smarter, surer or more self-assured today than at thirty.

All down the years I was largely the McClure I had always been—living with a certain degree of spice but predominantly safe. Once I spent three months crawling across Europe. But I never had the obsession and passion of a man like Bruce Chatwin, who did nothing but travel and write continuously every day of his life Or if I *did* have that passion I never gave myself over to it. But Chatwin did.

McClure, how would you sum it up? I *wouldn't*. I've known the life of the independent hamster-owner but don't think from that I'm kind to all comers, to all small-pet fanciers

I put into, but also take out of, the blind man's cup.