

My Life As a Cow

By Fran White

Hey diddle diddle
The cat and the fiddle
We jumped over the moon

L'auteure de cet article, une mère seule, explique pourquoi elle a choisi de reprendre ses études plutôt que d'accepter du travail mal rémunéré, et met en question le stéréotype ridicule de la « surfemme » —mère, épouse, femme de carrière et de ménage qui voltige d'une tâche à l'autre —que nous présentent les médias.

Every time I see that milk commercial, where the young, attractive, smiling, impeccably dressed and coifed, super-energetic, flawlessly air-brushed woman is depicted actually flying through her child care, domestic and career duties, I have an overwhelming desire to moo.

When I was a kid, I used to dream about being able to fly. I didn't realize then that our society literally dictates that flying is essential to being a mother. "Hey out there," I want to say, "I've given life, and I am providing the major source of socialization to this country's future! Wake up!"

It was a period of extreme stress in my life when I decided to end my marriage. His emotional abuse was beginning to hurt my daughters. It wasn't until we had been separated for over a year, and I had started college, that I realized how much his abuse had affected me.

I received straight A's in my first semester. I really believed it was only because my teachers felt sorry for this poor old mother on Family Benefits. I chose to go back to school, instead of returning to a back-breaking, low-paying, dead end



Tino Costa

domestic bovine

job (or—hooking another man). You got a problem with that? A lot of people do. I've lost touch with a number of people I was once close to, because the girls and I are on welfare. Lazy? I don't think so. Perhaps I haven't been able to accomplish the art of flying, but my children are well-adjusted, healthy, very bright, athletic, clean, and possess the greatest gift that life has to offer: they have self-esteem, empathy, and sincere caring for other people.

I wonder if they would be as "together" as they are if Mom had gone back to work without a proper education—back to work in the female job ghetto. Our income wouldn't have been much higher than it is now. We wouldn't have as much time to spend together. Mom's self-esteem wouldn't have blossomed like it has the last two years. Mom wouldn't have had the time to realize that the problem is not with Mom. The problem is this corporate society that discourages workers' kids—especially female workers' kids—from seeking a substantial education. The problem is family courts that set unrealistically low amounts of child support, child support that men still aren't really expected to pay. The problem is the low amount this country is willing to contribute to assisting husbandless women and their children.

I do count my blessings. I have a good analytical mind, despite the fact that the first schools I attended viewed me as just another female to be streamed into the intellectually unchallenging, training mode of worker education. I wanted to be a writer or an actor when I was young. There was only one special teacher who recognized my potential. Most told me I was being unrealistic, and to stop my daydreaming. So, in conjunction with subtle conditioning throughout my young life to become docile, caring, hardworking, cute, and sweet, I stopped dreaming. Almost.

I was pretty enough to have the man I wanted to support me financially, so that I could dedicate myself to my primary responsibilities: child care and domestic work. And it *is* work. It's hard work. Staying up all night with a feverish, vomiting child is work. Shopping, cooking, cleaning (including—yuck—toilets), sewing, laundry, kids (loving kids, worrying about kids, caring for kids, teaching kids): all this is work. It's hard work. So how come this monthly cheque is so low? How come I had to use foodbanks to feed my beautiful girls? How come so many people turn up their noses and assume I'm dirty and stupid and lazy? Perhaps because they're ignorant. Perhaps because the corporations that control the lives of

the people of this country see women and children as unprofitable. Blaming the victim is always easier than change which requires financial investment.

Oh, still I count my blessings. I have great housing. Co-operative housing—it's safe, it's clean, and it's adequate.

I'm 42 years old, and the government is assisting me to achieve my education—an education that, oddly enough, with the proper guidance and support, I should have received 20 odd years ago. It's going to be different with my girls. They can be whatever they want to be. And they realize that if the society in which they live continues to be patriarchal, they will probably also be emotionally and financially responsible for their children. If they choose to have children. Children are an enormous responsibility—to women.

Our society dictates the impossible goal of blissful, subservient perfection for women. As the milk commercial suggests, women are considered to be domestic work animals. The first step to bring about change in my life was becoming acutely aware of how and why I was being socialized, and by whom. Education opened the doors of personal empowerment for me.

Yes, when I was a kid I used to dream about flying. Maybe I'm not superwoman, but lately I've begun to soar.

Fran White is a 42 year-old single mother with two lovely daughters—Kirryn, eleven, and Tara, five. She is presently attending the Social Service Worker programme at Centennial College.

FRAN WHITE

Welfare Case

Please don't hurt my self-esteem
It's such a fragile thing
And though I might look tough
and strong
I'm not what I may seem

I've heard you call me welfare
case
You thought, behind my back
You patronize and moralize
With your obscene attack

I lie awake sometimes at night
And tears come to my eyes
I never asked for such a life
I don't want to beg or fight

But it was this same society
That trained and educated me
To bring forth life, and to care
But ask for help, how do I dare!

You see, I love my children
And do the best I can
The reason for my problem is
I wasn't born a man

I just can't do it all you see
My back's not quite that strong
Walk a mile in my old shoes, and
then tell me
If what I say is wrong

There's something very wrong
you see
With this corporate society
Women and children are valued
less
And too often fall prey to bureau
cratic mess

Call for Papers

"Writing a Minor Literature: Intersections of Gender and Cultural Difference in Canadian Literature"

Preparations are underway for a critical anthology exploring the intersection of gendered and cultural ("ethnic") difference in the work of women writers of ethnic minorities in Canada. We are seeking contributions of approximately 3000 to 4000 words. These should use the post-1988 MLA style for documentation. Contributions should reach the editors by March 31, 1993. They may be mailed to either Barbara Godard, 350 Stong College, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3 Fax (416) 736-5735; or, to Coomi S. Vevaina, 513 "D" Royal Towers, I.C. Colony, Borivali (West), Bombay, 400103, India.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

- The divorce rate in Canada is about 40%. After a divorce, a woman's income drops by 30% to 40%, while a man's income increases up to 70%.
- Women continue to care for children in about 85% of all divorces. The number of children living in poverty rose by 23% between 1980 and 1985.
- The lack of child care programs and the high cost of existing programs keep women from getting ahead financially or even from joining the work force.
- Enforcement of maintenance payments from ex-husbands is inadequate: 75% of husbands default.
- Social assistance levels are inadequate to support a single mother with children.

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