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Premature Adulthood: Alcoholic Moms and Teenaged Adults in the *ABC Afterschool Specials*

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In 2005 Brentwood Home Video released a DVD compilation of twenty-six of Martin Tahse's made-for-TV movies, many of which were created for ABC's *Afterschool Specials* series, a long-running anthology program that aired throughout the school year from 1972 until the mid-1990s.¹ Tahse and other producers crafted these teen-focused *Specials* around topics such as suicide, school bullies, unplanned pregnancies, and both teen and parent alcoholism. Squire D. Rushnell, then Vice President of Children's Television at ABC, described the *Specials* as "realistic problem dramas" that featured "relevant and entertaining" stories meant to help teenagers find resolutions to their troubles (Rushnell 36). As George Woolery notes, the "high quality" *Specials* "encouraged young people to understand more about themselves, their relations with their families and peers, and the problems of living in today's world," framing their protagonists as young adults who had the potential to make their own decisions and thrive with a little guidance from their peers (3-4).

The DVD compendium of Tahse's *Afterschool Specials* sparked a resurgence of interest among media studies scholars, including Julie Passanante Elman and Kirsten Pike, both of whom focus on what they see as somewhat contradictory messages encoded in select episodes. In conjunction with two interviews with Martin Tahse, Elman analyzes two *Specials*, "The Ice Skating Rink" (1975) and "The Gold Test" (1980), that feature imperfect bodies dealing with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and stuttering, respectively. These two *Specials*, Elman writes, construct adolescence as a process of "overcoming disability" in order to offer "the promise of eventual normalcy through endless rehabilitation" (261). She finds that the *Specials* frame teenaged viewers as "already-always disabled and in need of rehabilitation" to be molded into more socially acceptable, "productive" citizens (284). Specifically, Elman maps the idea of disability onto the way that the *Specials* repair the "problem" of adolescence and how they frame the problematic teenage body as an object requiring peer intervention in order to normalize aberrant bodies into heterosexual, "able-bodied" teenagers now capable of growing into functioning adults (261). By situating the *Specials* among a number of social, cultural, and industrial factors occurring in the 1970s, Elman notes that the *Specials* "represented" a way that television could create programming suitable for children and teenagers that had the possibility to educate audiences as well as entertain them (270).

Kirsten Pike similarly connects several tomboy-focused episodes, including "Rookie of the Year" (1973) and "My Mom's Having a Baby" (1977) to larger social and cultural tensions around feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Pike notes that while this set of *Specials* "was an important vehicle for the transmission of feminist ideals during the formative years of second-wave feminism" these episodes also "produced tensions between girlhood and liberation and subjugation—a pattern that likely encouraged young female viewers to feel ambivalent about feminism" (96). As she demonstrates, this ambivalence was communicated to viewers through episodes that were "riddled with contradictions," and that "represented tough, feminist-minded heroines while simultaneously insisting that they uphold white, middle class ideals" (109-10). In Pike's conclusion she locates the central contradiction of the tomboy episodes in their conflicting messages to young women, in that they "encouraged girls to defy gender

boundaries yet tamed their transgressive ways and/or punished them for straying too far from the norms of femininity" (110).

Both Elman and Pike make compelling arguments for the complexities of how these *Specials* addressed and educated teenaged viewers in two distinct ways. In light of these analyses it does appear that the *Specials* were preoccupied with "fixing" teenagers by pushing them to transform and conform to contemporary parameters of normalcy. While these two sub-sets of the *Specials* feature teenagers in the process of coming to terms with their bodies and/or appearances, not all of the *Specials* functioned in the ways that Elman and Pike describe, and thus these studies cannot account for every topic that the *Specials* covered. The sheer diversity of subjects over twenty years of *Afterschool Specials* demands multiple approaches to interrogate how other episodes presented their stories about young people and their problems. This paper examines a third group of *Specials* that featured female teenagers coping with family issues resulting from their alcoholic mothers. "Francesca, Baby" (1976) and "First Step" (also called "She Drinks a Little," 1981) both deal with the complications that arise from living with an alcoholic parent. In line with Elman's argument about *Specials* that seek to help young people "overcome disability," these episodes set up their protagonists as needing to "overcome" adulthood. Specifically, in "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step" the teenaged protagonists, Francesca and Cindy, have been prematurely thrust into performing a version of adulthood that pressures them to serve as surrogate mothers for their younger siblings. Stemming from their absent fathers and drinking mothers, these young women are emotionally drowning in situations that are far beyond their actual level of maturity as teenagers. I argue that these two *Afterschool Specials* feature protagonists who work towards removing themselves from premature adulthood and moving back into "normal" teenage lives. Unlike the protagonists Elman and Pike discuss, who toil towards "hard-won adulthood achieved through struggle" by way of "overcoming disability" or shifting into heteronormative ideals, Francesca and Cindy's maturation sends them back in time (Elman 284). Only by resuming the carefree lives of "normal" teenagers can they recover from the premature adulthood forced upon them by their dysfunctional families.

This article brings together the previous scholarship on the *Afterschool Specials* while suggesting that this third group of *Specials* deserves closer examination. To begin, I will contextualize the *Specials* within the television industry and programming for young adults when they emerged in the 1970s. Next, I will show how the *Specials* merged a number of popular genres and formats into a new, unique television form. Since many of the *Specials* were adaptations of young adult novels, I will also introduce ways of thinking about the *Specials* using scholarship on Young Adult and adolescent literature. Finally, I will examine "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step" in order to illustrate how these two texts depict their protagonists' construction of a troubled adolescence and each young woman's devolution from "premature" adult to "normal" teenager.

FORMAT AND CONTEXT

The ABC *Afterschool Specials* began in the middle of television's "network era," defined by television scholar Amanda Lotz as the 1950s through the 1980s, before the emergence of niche-audience focused cable channels (7). Until the arrival of cable channels designed for younger viewers, such as Nickelodeon and MTV, which debuted in 1977 and 1981 respectively, few programming options specifically targeted teenagers. As Joanna Weiss describes it, the *Specials* attempted to reach a specific but overlooked audience: "Small kids had cartoons. Adults had prime time. The teenage audience was out there, untapped" (N1). They were "targeted to fill an existing vacuum for ten- to fourteen-year-olds," to bridge the divide between programs for young children, such as *Sesame Street* (1969-), and the evening prime time aimed at reaching adults and families (Woolery 4). Kathleen Bell notes that the networks eventually realized "that a large portion of their viewing audience" fell in the middle of what television programming had to offer in the 1970s (82). These "emerging adults," as Bell terms them, were "bored by the guests on adult talk shows, and usually unimpressed by the unrealistic adventures of contrived super-heroes" (82). Out of this desire to appeal to this vast, untapped audience, ABC's *Specials* aimed to give teenagers their own niche programming that treated them with respect by creating television stories about them and for them. The *Specials* aimed to entertain, educate, and inform anyone with access to a television in the mid-afternoon. They aired in what might be termed the after-school block,

a programming slot in the late afternoon (4:30pm) meant to attract young people arriving home from school, as well as any parents who might be home. In considering the age and limited attention span of their intended audience, the *Specials* were relatively short—most of the episodes introduced and wrapped up their stories in an hour. These concise dramas used this short amount of time to present the characters and their lives efficiently, many times with the characters already in the midst of the conflict that the episode sought to address.

The *Specials* blended several existing film, television, and literary genres into a new format, mixing the anthology television program style, the made-for-television movie, the mid-century social hygiene classroom film, and the young adult “problem novel.” Popular in the first decade of US television, previous anthology series such as *Studio One* (1948-1958) and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1962) relied on a formula that “presented a different story and a different set of characters in each weekly episode,” built around a common theme or format, such as live drama or horror/science fiction stories (Raw 91; Hersey 723-33). As Jon Kraszewski writes, the anthology’s “original, stand-alone script” style gave writers and producers the freedom to “customize narrative structures on a script-by-script basis,” a successful formula that the *Afterschool Specials* would rely on a decade later (345). In the 1970s the popular made-for-television movie became a way to regularly program anthology-like television stories. In Elayne Rapping’s work on the made-for-TV movie genre she asserts that they were the perfect programming vehicle in which to address “serious issues from a socially critical and informed perspective,” much like Rod Serling had done with his scripts for his anthology series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64) (Rapping ix; Smith 138-55; Kraszewski 343-45). Rapping’s description of the format, style, and content of made-for-TV movies illustrates the general function of the *Specials* as well. She writes that many of these telefilms “begin—and end—with the family; all other matters are subsumed into that never-questioned ideal institution. They begin with a problem or crisis that threatens, or at least has an impact on, the functioning of a nuclear family or the values that generally accrue to that idealized structure. Midpoint, the crisis escalates, but by the end of the movie it is, one way or another, resolved and family values are reinstated as inalienable and transcendent” (Rapping 33-34). In this regard, the family and its dysfunctions are at the center of both of the *Specials*

under discussion here. While the family may be at the center of most of these conflicts, the solution offered to the teenaged protagonists rarely comes from adults within their own family, breaking from the tradition of the idealized, nuclear families of 1950s and 1960s television sitcoms and dramas. The adults in the *Specials*, as Joanna Weiss writes, often “lingered in the periphery, drinking or dying or offering mild support” (N1). More often than not, the adults were the cause of, rather than the solution to, these young people’s problems. As an alternative the *Specials* showed young people relying on a constructed, extended family—the concerned teachers, helpful neighbors, and friends from school who could be counted on to help when a parent could not.

Likewise, the *Specials* found a way to bring the subject matter of mid-century educational classroom films—stories of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and the dangers of drugs and alcohol—to the living room. Also sometimes called social hygiene films, these films “were produced specifically to regulate the social behavior of the viewer” (Stemm-Wade 611). These types of formal, classroom educational films focused on adult fears about wayward youth, and in particular, teenagers who were “trying to enter adulthood without graduating from adolescence” (Garrison 15). Though this topic resonates through the *Specials*, they flipped the script and transformed these moralizing tales from an adults’ perspective into informal, living room education “from the youngsters’ point of view” (Rushnell 36). If the social hygiene films were adults talking down to teenagers, the *Specials* featured peer-to-peer interaction, a successful formula that relied on, as Frank Doelger described, stories “in which the resolution is brought about by the actions of the children rather than intervening adults” (in Bell 84). Martin Tahse verified in an interview that this was central to the *Specials*’ mission, noting that “the only rule of storytelling that ABC required we follow was this: The kid always had to figure out what to do and do it. No finger-waving by parents, no lectures by parents. It was a kid who was in a situation and found, through his/her own efforts, a solution” (Janisse 2004).

While these other visual media genres influenced the *Specials*, their television narratives were usually adaptations of young adult literature. The *Afterschool Special* “Francesca, Baby” is based on a 1976 young adult book written by Joan Oppenheimer, and “First Step”

is an adaptation of Anne Snyder's 1975 novel. Both of these books fall into the "young adult problem" genre, which Meg Tillapaugh defines as novels that "represent a refreshingly honest attempt to describe the lives of teens and the conflicts they face—emotionally, socially, physically" (22). Literary scholar Roberta Seelinger Trites notes that most adolescent literature focuses on teenagers who "need to overcome their immaturity and grow out of their subject positions as adolescents to become adults" (150). This common portrayal of the adolescents who work to evolve from immaturity to maturity, found in many young adult novels, relies on what some writers call the "single story," one that most often focuses on "raging hormones, rebelliousness, and defiance of authority" on the way towards adult maturity (Patel 68-69). These types of stories work to construct the paradox Lydia Kokkola describes, in which "adolescents are deemed to be non-adult because they do not engage in adult behaviour, but if they do engage in adult behaviour, that behaviour is deemed deviant and therefore non-adult" (37). The "single story" trope of young adult fiction mirrors perceptions of the real life maturation of teenagers. Writing about teen pregnancy, Nancy Lesko discusses the "proper age chronology" which assumes that all young people experience their teenage years in a way that is "assumed to be universal," and that any deviation of this standard narrative "violates the leisurely, extended adolescence thought proper and necessary" (146, 141).

Despite the abundance of young adult fiction that follows the normative, linear progression from immature teenager to mature adult, other stories exist that capture this reverse story, featuring premature adults transitioning back into "proper" adolescent behavior. For example, in their case study of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, co-authors Robert Petrone, Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, and Mark A. Lewis note how the character Katniss, in her transformation through the book series, shifts from self-reliance as the breadwinner of her family to an environment in which "she transitions from adulthood to adolescence" (522, emphasis in original). Much like *The Hunger Games*, "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step" complicate the "single story" or "proper age chronology" idea by breaking from the depiction of a tidy progression towards maturity and adulthood. Instead, they focus on the complex instability of the adolescence-to-adulthood progression experienced as part of life with an alcoholic parent. They feature the forced, premature adulthood of teenagers, who long

instead to step back into what they perceive to be a normal teenage life. As I will demonstrate in the next section, though the young women in these *Specials* are not the reason for their dysfunctional families, Francesca and Cindy have prematurely taken on adulthood in their roles as surrogate mother, internalizing the problems created through their mothers' drinking.

According to Elman, the subject matter in these *Specials* was close to Martin Tahse's personal experience, as his father was an alcoholic (287). In 2004 Tahse recounted this detail, explaining that "If kids watched any of my three specials dealing with alcoholic parents, they were never given a fairy tale ending. I saw to that, because I came from an alcoholic father and knew all the tricks, and I wanted the kids who watched—many dealing with the same problem or having friends who had alcoholic parents—to know how it really is" (Janisse 2004).² Tahse effectively crafts these *Specials* as models to show how their protagonists could successfully emerge from premature adulthood back into proper teenage lives. Over the course of each of these two *Specials* the protagonists shift out of their identity crises—the premature adulthood of taking care of their mothers and siblings—into the normative teenager modeled for them through friends and classmates.

"Alateen? Sounds like a breakfast cereal"

"Francesca, Baby" (6 October 1976) marked Tahse's first attempt to create an *Afterschool Special* around a family struggling with alcoholism. This episode focuses on high school student Francesca (Carol Jones) and her younger sister Kate (Tara Talboy), who are dealing with an alcoholic mother Lillian (Melendy Britt) and a nearly absent father (Peter Brandon). The opening scene of "Francesca, Baby" sets the story in motion by quickly disrupting what at first appears to be a normal suburban family scene in which Francesca and Kate look like "normal" young people as they rake leaves in their yard. This tranquility, however, is interrupted by the sound of adults shouting inside the home behind them. Their neighbor Connie (Alice Nunn) walks over to show them a picture of her new granddaughter. This photograph comes to represent the normalcy of a perfect, functioning family, in stark contrast to Francesca and Kate's world. The yelling ceases as their father rushes out of the house to a waiting taxi. The shots of Francesca and Kate saying goodbye to their father frame

the upstairs window in the background, with their mother Lillian looking down at the happenings outside. His departure prompts Francesca to look at her mother's window, beginning a shot reverse shot sequence that first frames Lillian through the window, drinking. The reverse shot cuts to Francesca's reaction. She has a concerned look on her face, the effect of which is elongated with a freeze frame and melodramatic music that begins as the credits appear over her pensive expression.

All of this contextual information sets up the central story within the first two minutes of the *Special*. The indication that their lives are different comes from Connie's statement to them that "your folks are starting to sound more like my soap opera every day," marking them as a family that cannot hide its dysfunctional melodrama from the outside world. Over the next hour the audience witnesses Lillian's drinking problem, rooted in her pain over the accidental death of her son Robbie, who died five years ago after being hit by a truck. The title character, Francesca, has stepped prematurely into adulthood in order to take care of her family, and is forced to serve as sister, mother, and father to her younger sister Kate in her parents' physical and emotional absence. In this capacity Francesca must perform a number of "adult" tasks while still being a teenager. These begin when Francesca's father gives her money to purchase a gift for her sister Kate, whose birthday he forgot. She then must take Kate to purchase birthday supplies for her upcoming party. While at the store she meets up with her classmate Bix (Dennis Bowen) who asks Francesca and Kate to join him for a soda. Francesca declines his invitation, telling Bix that her mother needs her at home. At school the next day she turns him down again, blaming her mother's "nervous condition" as the reason she cannot go on a date with him. Later, Francesca must arrange for Connie to keep Lillian occupied during Kate's birthday party so her mother will not come downstairs and upset the young guests. When this does happen, Kate's friends quickly abandon her. When Kate falls ill around the family's Thanksgiving, Francesca is the person who must care for her and nurse her back to health. Francesca's final act of premature adulthood comes from her fears about her mother smoking in bed. After putting out a small fire one night, she purchases a rope to ensure that, in case of another fire, she and Kate will have a secondary escape plan to get out of their second story windows. While all of these tasks are framed within this episode

as normal to Francesca, they are all duties that the viewer is supposed to associate as "adult," above and beyond the normal life of a teenager. Her premature adulthood and her longing for a normal teenage life are crafted visually throughout this *Special*, such as when we watch her leave the grocery store with two bags of food. She briefly stops to watch some classmates on the street drive away in a convertible, as they discuss whether to go to Laguna Beach or Santa Barbara. In this sense, Francesca's premature adulthood has her looking out at the world, knowing that she is living an abnormal existence. Francesca quietly observes the carefree lives of other teenagers like her classmates. These contrasting images cement her status as an outsider among her peers, commenting on how her premature adulthood is keeping her from a "normal" teen life.

The juxtaposed images of Francesca's existence against the seemingly normal teenagers construct the outward manifestation of her internal struggle with her mother's alcoholism. She copes in one way by keeping her peers at a distance. Kate, however, desperately wants to find some camaraderie with her classmates, and tells Francesca that she has "had a fight with every girl in school because of mother" and no longer has anyone to eat with at school. With much apprehension, Francesca finally relents to Kate's insistence that she attend an Alateen meeting, where she finds several of her high school classmates laughing and having a good time despite the troubles in their lives. At Alateen she discovers that alcoholism is a family disease, that her mother is "sick," and that she cannot make her mother better. "Francesca, Baby" frames Alateen as the force that can help Francesca move away from her premature adulthood into a life as a normal teenager. As a group related to Alcoholics Anonymous, Alateen serves as a support system for teenagers who have parents, family members, or friends suffering from problem drinking, encouraging them to regain control of their lives (Alateen 3-9). At her first Alateen meeting Francesca learns step one of the "twelve steps," which states that they are "powerless over alcohol" and that their "lives have become unmanageable." Only after her second meeting does Francesca start to understand that she has to extricate herself from her mother's alcoholism—that she cannot stop her mother from drinking, and that she must not enable her mother by taking care of her in the middle of the night. Francesca's acceptance of the tenets of Alateen begins the process that eventually facilitates her shift away from premature

adulthood. By learning these lessons at Alateen, Francesca begins the process of shifting back into a life as a normal teenager.

"Francesca, Baby" does not use the introduction of Alateen to neatly wrap up the problems in her life. It does, however, give Francesca the courage to tell her mother (and herself) that the problem is "your drinking. And it is your problem, not mine. Not unless I make it mine." After this exchange she tells her mother "no" for the first time when she refuses to stop attending the Alateen meetings. These statements show her effectively begin to move away from her premature adulthood to what this *Special* has constructed as a normal teenage life, and perhaps help her mother as well. The *Special* ends with a sober conversation between Francesca and her mother, who tells her that she called Alcoholics Anonymous after realizing what she had "been putting my babies through." Her mom says, "maybe I can do it through AA. It couldn't hurt to talk." Francesca says, happily, "couldn't hurt to talk. It's a start."

"Francesca, Baby" mostly fulfills the mandate set by ABC, one that Tahse said he took seriously, that his *Afterschool Specials* not have "a fairy tale ending" and that the young people solve their own problems. Here, it is the young people at Alateen and not the adults who help each other solve their collective family problems. However, the ending of "Francesca, Baby" borders on a fairy tale fantasy for a young person with an alcoholic parent. Up to this point this *Special* had been built around the idea that Francesca should not waste her energy trying to change her mother—that she can only change how she reacts to her mother's drinking. The episode concludes with the sense that, after all, Francesca did have the power to stop her mom from drinking. Yet on the other hand, despite the positive things that may come from Lillian's AA attendance, the end of this *Special* does not completely tidy up the present conflicts. Her mother has agreed to go to Alcoholics Anonymous, but that does not mean that she will quit drinking. Francesca and her mom begin talking again, but her father remains an absent member of the family, and her brother is still dead. The end of this *Afterschool Special* leaves room to imagine that this family might continue to heal and recover in the future, and that perhaps Francesca has successfully extricated herself from her premature adulthood, with a new boyfriend, friends, and a fresh outlook on her life.

Though it possesses similar subject matter, an alcoholic mother, and a like-minded educational message, the ending of "First Step" sets a different tone than "Francesca, Baby." In the next section I will examine "First Step" as Tahse's second attempt to use the *Afterschool Specials* to teach teenagers about the dangers and difficulties of premature adulthood.

"Can't you see I have to take care of my mother?"

"First Step" (23 September 1981) stars Bonnie Bartlett as Miriam Scott, a former professional dancer and single mom with two kids, Cindy (Amanda Wyss) and Brett (Elliot Jaffe). Like "Francesca, Baby," "First Step" quickly jumps into its story, efficiently introducing the main characters by opening with an artful crosscutting sequence between younger brother Brett outside walking the dog, Cindy practicing a monologue in front of her bedroom mirror, and Miriam getting orange juice out of the refrigerator. This opening sequence is imbued with several layers of meaning, as it works to introduce the family living in the house, connected by proximity but leading separate lives. It also features Cindy practicing for a play audition, which will occur later in her day. Crafting the character of Cindy as a budding actress serves as a powerful metaphor—her real life is consumed by her premature adulthood in which she is forced to take care of her mother and her little brother because of her mother's drinking problem. Even before she wins the lead in the school play, Cindy is already a first-rate actress, playing the role of mother at home while also performing the normative teenager to her friends at school. Cindy's ultimate role as an actress in this *Special* is as a young person who expresses to the world that she can handle all of the pressure of premature adulthood. In fact, this façade later crumbles, at which point she realizes that she can no longer keep playing these multiple roles.

Cindy's premature adulthood is rooted in her attempts to serve as a surrogate for her mother, which becomes evident within the first three minutes of this *Special*. This situation subtly manifests itself in the scene where the three characters meet up for breakfast in the family's kitchen. The mother, Miriam, chastises her son Brett for spilling a box of cereal on the floor. Miriam does not get up to help,

but Cindy comes out of her room for this reason. Miriam tells Cindy to “stop nagging” her to eat breakfast, as if mother and teenaged daughter have switched roles. Cindy’s “mothering” of her brother continues when she tells him he cannot have a friend over after school, because their mother “has not been feeling well.” While Brett initially whines to his mother, she tells him, “you heard your sister.” In this way it appears that Miriam is comfortable with the situation and even encourages her daughter to take care of her brother and the household. Cindy has stepped in as the adult, even going so far as to write checks for the utility bills. She is covering for her mother who, as was the case in “Francesca, Baby,” is physically present but is not a functioning or contributing member of the household.

Miriam’s drinking problem becomes apparent at a school event. Though Cindy asks her mother not to attend her open house, she shows up anyway. There, Miriam reveals the origins of her drinking problem—she was once a professional dancer, but upon becoming pregnant with Cindy, she gave it up. Miriam tells Mr. Sharrigan (Jack Manning) that “with a kid in diapers, and bills to be paid, and my husband was not too reliable, and housework to do” she “never managed to get back into” her dancing career. Much like “Francesca, Baby,” the revelation of Miriam’s drinking problem precedes several scenes that show its detrimental effects on Cindy and Brett, particularly in Cindy’s inability to have a normal teenage life. Cindy’s friend Sherrie (Anna Garduno) is not allowed to sleep over at her house anymore. Cindy must leave a social event early to go home to take care of her brother and put her mother to bed after finding her passed out. Cindy cannot invite her friend Mitch Stevens (Michael LeClair) to her house because of her mother’s drinking. When Cindy takes a chance on inviting Mitch over to the house she finds her mother passed out. Though deeply embarrassed by her mother’s state, this serves as the precipitating event that leads to Mitch inviting her to an Alateen meeting. At first she resists, telling him that, “I don’t need a group...We can handle it on our own.” Only after Miriam hits Brett later, in a drunken episode, does Cindy agree to attend an Alateen meeting with Mitch. Like Francesca, at Alateen Cindy begins to fully accept her family’s situation—that her mother is sick and that she can only help her mom by resuming her life as a normal teenager. As Elman notes, the *Specials* focused on alcoholism “showed a transition

from a teen's enabling and covering for an alcoholic parent to his or her seizing control of life by attending Alateen" (265).

The "first step" noted in the title of this *Special* is a direct reference to Alcoholics Anonymous and Alateen, whose first step is an admission by the drinker or the family member of a drinker that they are "powerless over alcohol" and that it has made their lives "unmanageable." When John O'Connor reviewed "First Step" for *The New York Times* in 1981, he wrote that this *Special* was "really an explanation and endorsement of Alateen, the Alcoholic Anonymous affiliate that helps the children of alcoholics" (C31). As in "Francesca, Baby," "First Step" presents Alateen as the starting point for Cindy to step away from her premature adulthood, and proves to be the lifeline that both young women rely on to heal. It is through Alateen that both Francesca and Cindy learn to make new friends and to cope with their mothers' drinking problems. In a way the group functions as a subculture for these teenagers, in that it provides a respite from their troubled and complicated lives. The notion of Alateen as a subculture deviates somewhat from the usual ways we think about subcultures, as Dick Hebdige writes, as communicated through visible objects like clothes or hairstyles that express meaning in code (18). Rather, it functions as Ross Haenfler defines subcultures, as "a relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived 'conventional' story" (16). Alateen works as a shared social network, one that brings together teens in similar circumstances. In both "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step," the young people attending the meeting are inconspicuously introduced over the course of the *Special*, as a nod to the idea that children of alcoholics are everywhere, not physically marked per se, but existing all around nonetheless. In "Francesca, Baby" the Alateen meeting is attended by several people that Mitch has briefly introduced Francesca to at school. In "First Step," one of the prominent speakers at the meeting is a young woman who overheard Cindy's mom Miriam drunkenly shout at the open house. Further, as Haenfler notes in his definition of a subculture, the shared identity and distinctive meanings of Alateen members comes from the specifically codified language taken up by its subjects, the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, deployed to provide members with better coping mechanisms with which to deal with the alcoholic(s) in their lives. Much like how the

alcoholic parent causes the marginalization of the teenager, forcing them into premature adulthood in order to cope with issues at home, Alateen offers the solace of group acceptance, of a shared set of circumstances that brings these young people together to help one another and provides them with a group identity constructed around family trauma.

As Tahse had previously emphasized in "Francesca, Baby," the teenagers, rather than the adults, help each other in "First Step." Though the young people in this program are surrounded by adult supervisors, from the teachers at school to the adult sponsor at the Alateen meetings, the teenagers remain the center of this story. Cindy's math teacher Mrs. Sharrigan (Peg Stewart) serves as the Alateen sponsor, but she never directly tells Cindy how to deal with her home life. Instead, the young woman who had originally overheard Miriam at the open house gives Cindy some sage advice after the Alateen meeting. Only after hearing from the other Alateen member does Mrs. Sharrigan add a comment. This functions to allow Cindy to work towards making independent decisions outside of the scope of adults, which eventually helps to release her from her premature adulthood. Cindy is at odds with her alcoholic mother, but it is only through her own introspection and the help of her young peers that she comes to understand that her mother's actions are beyond her control. This realization allows her to transition back into the normal teenage life that the young people around her are already experiencing.

A secondary, implicit educational message exists within "First Step." Though this particular episode does not speak directly to Miriam's life beyond her alcoholism, it hints at the "mistakes" that led her to her current condition. For one, Miriam complains that she had to leave dancing when she became pregnant with Cindy. While Cindy never mentions her father, his absence helps define what is "wrong" with this family. Though the viewer is never explicitly told that Miriam's pregnancy caused her to abandon her dreams, the viewer assumes that this may have led to her drinking, which then perhaps led to her existence as a single mother. This undercurrent maintains focus on an implicit message: do not abandon your dreams, for doing so will be the beginning of your future troubles. This message is central to many of the *Afterschool Specials*—stay hopeful and work

toward your goals, don't do drugs, avoid unplanned pregnancies, and the like—all in service of maintaining the focus on your future path in life. As the notion of "dreams" and "the future" is fundamental to our contemporary understanding of normative adolescence, this idea reinforces again that Cindy should be thinking about college and having fun with her friends, rather than staying at home to take care of her mother.

One important tonal difference between "First Step" and "Francesca, Baby" is present in the different ways that the two stories conclude. "Francesca, Baby" ends with mom and daughter having a short, heartfelt conversation about Alcoholics Anonymous, learning to talk about their problems, and the positive sense that Francesca has stepped away from her premature adulthood back into the life of a teenager. "First Step," however, does not end with Miriam magically seeking help, ceasing her drinking, and the family living happily ever after. Instead, the penultimate scene features Cindy and her brother Brett finding their mother passed out on the floor of her bedroom. Brett says, "Let's try and get her in bed." Cindy replies, "No, leave her," and explains that they cannot and should not attempt to control, enable, or save their mother from her alcoholism. Instead of their usual routine of covering up for their mother, Cindy and Brett leave the house to go skating together as a functional family of two. Though the resolution of "First Step" lacks the reconnection of mother and daughter, Cindy literally steps around her mother's body, taking her "first step" away from the premature adulthood that forced her to take care of everyone and everything, and back to being a teenager who will focus on her own life and having fun, despite her mother's continued drinking.

It is only at the conclusion of "First Step" that the words from Cindy's opening monologue for her audition take on additional meaning. At the opening of this episode, Cindy speaks to her mirror, saying, "Haven't you said a million times that I would grow up to be just like you, strong headed and willing to take the risk? Well look at me! I am my father's daughter." These are the first words the audience hears her speak, hinting at the parental influence to which any teenager would be subjected, either from a mother or a father. Her father's influence expresses itself through her role in the play. Perhaps this refers to Tahse's real-life difficulties with an alcoholic

father, cleverly inserting this idea of parental influence into the *Special*. Although Cindy's friend Mitch briefly describes the destructive actions of his father's drinking and driving, there are no alcoholic fathers visible in these episodes. Cindy's father is never seen and rarely mentioned in "First Step." She admires this absent parent because the one who stuck around is portrayed as deeply flawed. At the end of the episode Cindy and Brett decide to follow Alateen's teachings and leave their mother and her drinking behind, much like the audience is led to presume their father did in the past.³

CONCLUSION

I have shown how "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step" frame their teenaged protagonists as young women forced into premature adulthood by virtue of their complicated family dynamics. As I suggested earlier, the ABC *Afterschool Specials* "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step" break from the "proper age chronology" concept of teenagers moving away from adolescence towards maturity and adulthood. Instead, they show the process by which these protagonists use the teachings of Alateen to move from their premature adulthood back into a normative teenage existence. These two episodes of the *Specials* show how Francesca and Cindy are able to accept their powerlessness over their mothers' drinking, and work towards regaining their lives through the support of new friends and Alateen. Overall, these short, teen-focused made-for-TV movies utilize storytelling from the teenagers' point of view, effectively showing how young people can learn from one another with minimal adult intervention.

Nonetheless, as both Elman and Pike describe in their earlier work on the *Specials*, these two episodes do contain some inherently contradictory messages. At least from the perspective of a contemporary viewer, there are troubling aspects. For one, while both of the *Specials* in this article vilify the disease of alcoholism, they do also lay the blame for these broken families on the mothers' drinking. It is only from this problem drinking that all other issues presented in these narrative universes come to pass. While each woman is given a powerful motivation for her drinking problem—one has lost a son, the other has lost a promising dancing career—these women are presented as the foremost cause of their family's dysfunction. As a direct result of the mothers' drinking problems, the fathers are absent and the

children are under-parented. As Kirsten Pike points out, "negligent mothers" were "a series staple" in the *Specials* (110).

Additionally, in her assessment of the *Afterschool Specials*, Elman notes that in the episodes on alcoholism, "all of the teens with alcoholic parents...were girls, and in all of the examples the female protagonist began taking charge of her life after meeting a boy who also had an alcoholic parent and who dutifully showed the girl how to deal with it" (265). On the surface this statement matches the narrative trajectory of the two *Specials* discussed here. After Francesca meets Bix, and after Cindy grows closer to Mitch, both young ladies begin to find the confidence and emotional tools with which to cope with their mother's problems and find ways to escape from their premature adulthood. However, I believe these stories are more nuanced than Elman suggests. Francesca's new neighbor Jo Lynn (Elizabeth Herbert) and her schoolteacher Miss Handley (Lee Kessler) also serve as catalysts in her move towards acceptance and healing. Likewise, Cindy's friend Sherrie provides emotional support to her throughout the episode. While one can view the heterosexual coupling that occurs in each of the episodes as a small way to reinforce social norms, both couples can also be read as part of ABC's mandate that the young people in these episodes learn to solve their own problems with the help of their peers. Additionally, these heterosexual, romantic relationships illustrates one way that Francesca and Cindy have evolved from unhealthy mother-daughter codependency to the functional relationships out of the reach of their parents. Francesca and Cindy find people they can trust with their family problems, marking an important step in their personal growth. They are changing and blossoming into independent teenagers who will grow into adults only when it is appropriate, rather than improperly hiding behind a bottle, as the adults in their lives have done. Their female friends are as much a part of their support system as the young men who come into their lives.

Overall, the *Afterschool Specials* were not choose-your-own-adventure stories. They were cautionary tales that attempted to show different characters negotiating difficult real-world situations in contrasting ways. The episodes discussed here structured their advice to present both good (Alateen) and bad (premature adulthood and denial) decisions and the consequences of each to show how

characters could use these experiences for personal growth and learning. While the *Specials* did lean heavily towards suggesting what might be construed as the "right" choice, that does not mean they made the "right" answers seem easy or achievable by everyone—quite the opposite. They acknowledged that the lives of young people were full of turmoil and difficult decisions—and that the *Afterschool Specials'* role was that of a trusted friend. While these two episodes steered young people into making those "right" choices that would lead them out of premature adulthood and into normative teenage lives, they differed on a tonal level and offered messages that spoke differently to Francesca than they did to Cindy.

Perhaps because the *Specials* were aimed at young audiences, the teenaged characters were given much more hopeful messages about their futures than the older characters. For example, in "First Step," Cindy learns from her mistakes; her mother, it seems, does not. Although Cindy has to put up with her mother's alcoholism, she is young, talented, and pretty, and will grow up and move on with her life. Her mother, however, has chosen to drink instead of seeking more productive ways to cope with her problems. Miriam will continue to pay for her "bad" decisions. Francesca also appears to have a bright future. She has people who care about her and has a positive outlook on her life. Lillian, however, is presented as the one with the most to lose. She must transform into a better mother or risk losing her girls forever. This fact seems marked on her body in the last shots of the episode, which show her dressed and showered for the first time. Seemingly presentable to the outside world, she looks pale and deeply fragile, smoking, trembling, and teary-eyed, heavy with the knowledge that she, not Francesca, has a great battle ahead of her in staying sober. Alateen has made Francesca's transformation possible. It is unclear if Alcoholics Anonymous will help Lillian achieve hers as well.

Each of Tahse's *Afterschool Specials*, and the many episodes written, produced, and directed by others, presented multifaceted, complicated issues that faced teenagers, too many to address in this short analysis. It seems most productive to approach these episodes in the way that Elman, Pike, and I have done—by grouping them by similar subject matter in order to read them closely and uncover how each type addresses its viewers and attempts to transform its protagonists. There is no one mode of analysis or approach that gets

at the core of what the *Afterschool Specials* were, what they represented, or the stories they told. However, this examination of "Francesca, Baby" and "First Step" seeks to add another piece of scholarship that both celebrates and examines the way that the *Specials* told stories, educated viewers, and entertained audiences. It is particularly important to remember this in light of when and where the *Specials* were produced. These were early attempts to narrowcast to a specific audience, teenagers, in the midst of the network era of television, which offered few spaces for programming that did not have a mass, broad appeal. While modern audiences may find these *Specials* overly didactic, cheesy, heavily moralizing, and presenting only one version of "normative" teenage lives, they reflect the context in which they were produced, as short, teen-focused versions of made-for-TV movies. The *Specials* ended around the time that cable channels increasingly offered more choices to young viewers in the mid-1990s. Yet, as Elman suggests in her work on the *Specials*, their legacy "lives on in traces today, for instance, in the 'very special episode' format of contemporary teen dramas" (283).

There remains much work to be accomplished in exploring how popular television programming attempted to target specific audiences with educational messages. Further work in these areas will help us to understand the multifaceted nature of niche programming that had a stated dual focus to educate and entertain.

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Endnotes

¹ I list the mid-1990s as the end point for the series. Martin Tahse and *After School Specials* scholars point to different dates for the end of series, between 1972-1995 (Elman 2010, 260), 1972-1997 (imdb; Pike 2011, 95). Tahse stated in an interview that he thought they "went off the air in 1990 or 1991" (Janisse 2004). He also produced similar programs for the CBS's *Schoolbreak Specials*.

² I would have included the third Tahse special on alcoholism, "Just Tippy, Honey" (16 March 1989) but I have been unable to locate or obtain it. The synopsis of the *Special* on the Internet Movie Database describes it as a similar story to his other two *Specials* on the same subject: "Teenage girl is in denial about her mother's drinking problem" (imdb.com).

³ An interesting note between the Tahse's *Afterschool Special* adaptation of Anne Snyder's novel *First Step*. In the book the students rehearse and perform "Peter Pan," yet in the television *Special* the play remains unnamed. The *Specials*' here depict premature adulthood in characters that attempt to live their lives far ahead of their social age or maturity. The character of Peter Pan, on the other hand, never wants to grow up at all, and goes far out of his way to achieve that goal.

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