

They had been waiting for Constable Loch to come and remove the furniture from Giggy Andrewes's gazebo, when sleep had overtaken them. The air felt brittle in the hush of the afternoon and the peculiar bloomless plantings in the garden chafed against each other like shards of glass or weapons of soldiers eager for war. The blades glistened in the sunlight. So rarely did the breeze sigh through the tangle of Giggy's garden that any rustle from the exotics seemed less an act of appreciation than a mockery. The occasional cry of one of the peacocks pierced the air as if the creature were struggling to affirm its existence in the summer town of Lake Wachannabee. Each cry tinged Giggy's property, she recently conjectured as she introduced her nephew and his reticent friend to the garden such a short time ago, with an aura haunted by the history of Wachannabee Gorge and the indigenes that the British explorers first found among its caves and contours.

It was not until the gauzy sunlight began to spill over the rims of Jem's eyes and into his brain that the boy began to awaken. The nephew met the haze of the Ontario summer with the glazed indifference of an opossum, but eventually the pinkish blur of fleshly limbs strewn about the gazebo shed its aura and took on the bodily order of Giggy, Cora and himself. The mosquito netting undulated, paused, undulated again in the heat as it cast gentle whippings of shadow against the young

man's cheeks. He hung lazy across the coffee table from his aunt, his slender candle-wax fingers furtively plucking the harp of soft threads worn through near the crotch of his cut-offs. The gesture belied his willingness to respond to his aunt's unconscious overtures for attention.

Cora's limbs remained sprawled across the cedar-slatted floor, shifting occasionally among the pages of the exploration narrative that Dr. Amicable was editing. The hairs on her left arm glowed like strings of honey. A drop of saliva fell from her bottom lip onto the top page of the manuscript.

Back, back and back again Giggy's eyes flickered to the last glazed scrap of strudel on the tray near her ankles. The gesture evoked the rhythmic sway of a ceiling fan and Jem found himself disturbed by its consistency. His aunt's mind was elsewhere, perhaps once again thinking over the Fafaist Manifesto or re-evaluating the decision she had made over a year ago to have the gazebo stuccoed. Caught trusting a Cubist, she now owned an extension that, in her view, was nothing more than an architectural goitre on the soft, solid facade of the Winter Garden. She would never again act against the advice of Miss Emily of Crew, who prided herself on clairvoyance ever since she had correctly forecasted Mavis von und Graf's death in a street fight in Niagara Falls. The architectural blight no longer made Giggy weep, no, but, combined with her recent infatuation with Russian melodrama, it did give her complexion a distinctly seedy pallor.

Her entropy was not aided by the fact that she had begun reading these Russian novels with no expectation of finishing them. Cora had more than once seen her hostess's tongue wrap about the sounds of a single line for four or five minutes or even more before finally lolling on to the next as hesitant as a rural virgin before the glory and might of the Sultan himself. It had been rumoured by Lady Bella Clasp, the veterinarian of the flaming hair who lived next door, that Giggy had spent weeks

with one solitary finger piously retracing the opening line of *Anna Karenina* as her mind concocted permutations as evocative as the position of the Asian-American woman who at present rested at her powdered feet, the pages of Robert Shakely's exploration narrative nestling her body in an unearthly, phosphorescent glow.

Cora was sleeping with her arms akimbo and her smooth legs bent and overlapping like a pair of inebriated seagulls, their tone confirming her familiarity with the stationary rower in Giggy's basement. Even now, gazing at her, Jem could feel in the back of his brain the sensual, rhythmic pounding of the machine, its mechanisms whirring like a flock of rubber-band airplanes sent spinning by a cluster of knee-knocking school-boys into the heat of a white Italian sky. Had he been aware of her preference for consistency before inviting her north, things might have turned out differently for all of them. For him, muscle development – even the thought of muscle development – had always made his belly, nurtured for years on cocaine and the blackened seafood of the Louisiana bayou, *grrrr*. But now, since the 'murder,' all of his senses were benumbed.

Suspense is so stilted, he thought, so dishonest, and all people prefer to be trusted. Unfortunately, this veneration of clarity had in itself provoked some members of Lake Wachannabee to lie. Soon speculations were spilling from the lips of the townfolk like seeds from poppy pods. In truth, nobody was sure yet that it would be deemed a murder but, for the sake of veracity in the long term, everybody was operating under that assumption. It was so much easier, really.

For Jem, the reaction was numbness. Just now, as he lay belly down, he was fully unaware of the trickle of sweat that was lurching its way along the moguls of his spine like a drunk meandering toward the lake's edge to wash away his sorrows.

'I do declare. Auntie?'

'Yes, dear?' Giggy loved her nephew's little bayou twang that, as rare as the burble of an albino catfish, caught the attention of

all who heard it. Despite the fact that Jem had not been living at the Winter Garden for many months, she found herself often thinking of him as her son and had to struggle each time to cast the notion aside because of the limitations it implied for their relationship.

‘No, it’s nothing.’ Since Jem’s arrival, the two had begun to develop a system of communication that depended less and less on words. If language ever failed them, she would come to muse, it would be not because of their inability to converse but due to the inadequacy of the words they held in common. Their years apart seemed in fact to have made them more attuned to each other. The detritus of daily life, the responsibilities and irritations of raising a child or of being raised, had not corseted their relationship or cluttered the characteristics that they now valued so highly in each other.

‘Everybody loves children,’ Giggy had once tried to convince the PTA when presenting her closing arguments against a school field trip that required a brief but intimate sojourn on her property, ‘more purely when from a distance, through that sort of impressionist haze that obscures their faces or at least their mediocrity or, shall we say, when the love is allowed enough irresponsibility to become more akin to the respect one gives friends or colleagues.’ Then, to prove her gravity, she had turned in her summation to a Metaphysical. ‘It was, I believe, John Donne,’ she had offered, glancing at the smudged ink on the note card in her sweating hand (it might have read ‘John Deere’), ‘who made such adoration and its value obvious when in his sermon “Deaths Duell” he expounded all over the baby Jesus,

‘About midnight he was *taken and bound with a kisse*, art thou not *too conformable* to him in that? . . . There now hangs that *sacred Body* upon the *Crosse*, *rebaptized* in his *owne teares* and *sweat*, and *embalmed* in his *owne blood alive*. There are those *bowells of compassion*, which are so conspicuous, so manifested, as that you may *see them*

*through his wounds.* There those *glorious eyes* grew faint in their light: so as the *Sun* *ashamed* to survive them, *departed with his light* too.

‘See here, how the baby Jesus, his forehead as smooth and round as a young girl’s knee, is most venerated when he is viewed at some distance – as we do with portraits and monuments – there, on the cross, so tenderly, only a few yards away.’ Giggy reached one arm out as if to touch a crucifix only she could see levitating above the sink in the Wachannabee Elementary teachers’ lounge. ‘And then, as Donne demonstrates, even further, as far away as the sun, with which he is one, verily.’ The perspiration of her convictions had destroyed the remainder of her notes; there was nothing for it but to ad lib. ‘This then is how best to view children, for it gives us patience and keeps us from punishing them too readily and from forgetting that they are not our possessions but our charges. That would explain why, legally, one must demand “custody” of a child, would it not? A type of ownership. One is encouraged to do so, as if it were a biological right to have this authority, verily, over somebody else.’ Because Giggy had never wanted custody over Jem, it seemed obvious to the woman that he would gravitate toward her, just as most children gravitate away from the parents thrust upon them from birth.

Jem himself felt that he had not so much drifted away from his parents as been drawn by the kindness of strangers. The notion of personal agency had never entered his evaluation of the meanderings of his life. Absent-mindedly stroking the threads of his shorts, he recognized the boredom that characterized these wanderings – an apathy arising from a cultural familiarity with everything that had been invented or discovered since his birth, arising from the world being driven toward universalist essentialism despite being so far from the metaphysical. Rather than trying to understand it all, he conjectured, we assume that what we know is everything there is. Perhaps this

new view had not only prepared him for his life of observation but also given him the patience and pacing that his recent sense of guilt and caution required.

So recently, he had felt no guilt at all, because of his unique love and lust for Robert. It had seemed as if he might always retain the lump of nervous passion in his gorge that he felt on first seeing the man there at the Winter Garden. None of the Winter Gardeners actually went in for the horticultural; that was why Giggy had had the landscape redesigned, planted entirely with vegetation requiring the least amount of maintenance. It was in this unnatural setting of plants free from human interference that Jem saw Rob standing among a contortion of raspberry brambles. Giggy was trying to steer her nephew and Chappy, the house whippet, in another direction, toward the fleshy leaves of rhubarb and Potter's hostas, and the boy's body obeyed. But his eyes, imagination and nerves clung with lust to Robert who, unaware of being watched, was picking overripe raspberries with only his lips, kissing them one by one off their branches, leaving behind a trail of naked nubs glowing white where the red berries had just been.

'I say,' Jem murmured as he relaxed across from his aunt, 'Passive observation.' He envisioned it as a career option. He knew some people who had careers.

He lifted his fingers off the hard-on that he had unintentionally coaxed to attention. Language did that to him. His mahogany-heavy eyes settled on the tool shed, as erect as a sentinel's station at the west flank of Auntie's mallows. Yet another of the gardener's garish constructions, it seemed to burn in the sunlight. 'Aloo-*minium*,' he chattered to himself, 'aloooo-*minium*.' There was something refreshing about the word. It sounded millennial, like spray paint or Swedish toiletries. Something cool slipping between his lips. But he was also using it as self-flagellation, to punish himself for the rodenticides that he may so recently have committed.

'Aloominium.' So soothing a sound for a word marked by such pain. It was only yesterday that Jem had found the bundle of baby squirrels pasty-eyed and huddled in a corner of the tool shed. Upon discovery, he had latched shut the door to ensure that they would develop safe from the threat of predators. He'd then re-settled himself in the gazebo and consumed the last of his ginger ale and grenadine and had begun to fondle the edge of one of his aunt's novels. And it was then that his attention was drawn back to the shed – the squeals, the squeals. Another squirrel, one much larger, was trying to get into what Jem only at that moment realized was becoming a sweat box of death. The gardener's edifice was baking the babies alive.

'Shirley!' he squeaked in horror. The squirrel was one of Giggy's familiars. ('No, we don't know the creature's sex,' Giggy agreed, 'but it is the mother regardless.') Guilty, guilty, guilty – the word spun about the boy's head with the persistence of deer flies over roadkill. Yet he just watched, dumb-glazed, as Shirley scratched at the walls. Should he dare to interfere with nature again? The creature, its taut sinews soon torn and bleeding, continued to scrape at the barrier that kept her from her babies. All the while, she flayed her head back and forth as if unable to understand why nobody else was turning up to assist in the rescue. Even after her claws had begun to drip scarlet, she persisted in ramming her arms through the sliver of space she'd managed to scrape away beneath the door. Jem could just hear the infants, who must have recognized their parent's chatter, letting off faint hullabaloo of despair. And then, in frustration, in a final act of defiance against futility, Shirley began running circles of rage (as Jem himself had done on occasion), stopping only to throw her body against the siding with the dynamics of a percussionist before renewing the frantic dervish.

At last the boy, picking his moment, rushed to the structure, flung open the door and flopped backward onto the trimmed lawn as wafts of August heat poured forth. The waves hit him

like Florida hits foreigners, but before he could even formulate a headline for the *Wachannabee Orderly* ('Heroic Youth Yanks ...'), the rodent lunged at him and clamped her dingy teeth onto the denim of his shorts. Jem stumbled backward crablike, trying to shake himself free. Shirley was flung headlong into the air. She must have made her decision before she had even landed to retreat to the security of the garden, for she did so in a bounce and an arc so smooth and art deco that it whiffed a touch too much of practice.

Jem escaped into the gazebo and, latching shut the door, watched the waves of heat flow up across the metal siding of the shed, wails of despair emanating even more strongly now from the heat of darkness. 'Hullabaloo! Hullabaloo!' the infants cried like impassioned extras in *South Pacific*. How many of their pelts had he parched with his thoughtlessness? How many might yet even die? It seemed hours before he caught sight of scarlet-eyed Shirley risking a return, scuttling through the sweet grass, darting from willow to willow to whortleberry as if she were a master of espionage.

He slipped behind a porch pillar and peered out furtively. Saliva flashed off yellow squirrel teeth. 'Yellower than the chaste moon,' Jem would soliloquize among the other Winter Gardeners later that evening, 'yellower than the roses that children place at the feet of the Queen of Araby.' The creature, upon reaching the heat-heady chamber, leapt into the darkness with nary a glance askance. Amid the chaos of chattering and rustling, the young man could only wonder who was scolding whom, and then the adult finally sprung Houdini-like into the daylight. In her teeth, she carried not one but two of the babies. Limbs abounding, the trio bumbled off toward the soothing darkness at the heart of the garden and the safety of its fronds. The evacuation continued until each of the infants was removed – eight in all, some so limp that Jem doubted that they had survived. 'Probably just snoozy,' Giggy would console him.



Today, a day later, the deathtrap stands once again as barren and silent as a women's public washroom, as barren as an ill-specified condominium east of the Pickering nuclear plant, as silent as the Winter Garden itself ever since Giggy had discovered Rob's long, naked body unconscious on the Prussian blue rubber mat in the hallway near the weight room. No hair on his chest, or his legs, or his crotch, or even his armpits – just all that taut, glistening musculature highlighted, some of it even exposed. Rob had yet to speak to Jem since the event.

'Because, because, because, because, be-caaaause,' Jem softly sang as tears welled up in his eyes for the umpteenth time. Chappy knew what the boy was lamenting but thought it wisest to stay silent rather than join in the grief. During his short career as a green racer, the dog had been muzzle-broken and had learnt well the rewards of silence. So, up against Cora's still sleeping torso he curled his body and under Giggy's feet he tucked his nose. Digging his claws into the floorboards of the gazebo, he cast a cautious eye at Jem's flat lashes as they trapped his salty tears and tangled together like a chorus line of spider legs. Giggy watched the shadow of her own body as, lengthening into the evening, it enwrapped her nephew.



Despite the cooling air of the evening, Jem and Giggy continued to wilt at each other from across the coffee table as they watched a V of Canada geese pass over the lake and toward the evergreens that stood in the distance as sturdy as the obelisks of the West Nile and as flat as the black cardboard backdrop of *Dante's Inferno – The Musical* that Constable Loch kept in the storage room of the Lake Wachannabee Community Centre.

Upon his arrival at the Winter Garden, Jem's acts of affection toward his aunt had been fostered by a dutiful sense of reciprocity, but he was now simply pleased to see her happy. Love, he had learnt, did not always take the short and lusty route. This was the passage taken with Robert. His feelings for both his aunt and Robert – even the difference between his early love for Robert and the way that he missed him now – proved to Jem that 'love' was not broad enough a term to encompass the range of feelings.

Rob wasn't sure his feelings for Jem were love. He found the other exotic and affectionate and this, so far, was enough. If anything challenged the wounded man's fondness, it was Jem's inertia – no, his complacency regarding his inertia. He was rather young, Robert thought, to be facing his future with indifference, as if all that existed were the moment. Pleasure became gem-like only in comparison to less fulfilling moments. He had, of late, become far more sensitive to the heights of

emotion and so much more appreciative. His lover, unfortunately, had not.

Jem's attention drifted off the V of geese and parachuted down to the dark surface of the lake, pierced here and there now and then by motley flips of fish snipping at the insects that always hovered over the water at sunset. Dr. Amicable's extremely long and slender canoe created another, more deceptive V cutting a silver slit in the water as it made its way from the public dock back to his cabin for the night. The man's editing of Shakely's exploration journals had made him something of a star in the community. The journals were the first extensive account of the Wachannabee region. Dr. Amicable's English, however, was too inelastic for work on the records of an eighteenth-century Hudson's Bay explorer, so he had accrued a cluster of eloquent assistants to help him, Rob among them. No doubt the only somewhat literate Robert Shakely never intended his words – 'No crapping today' and so on – for so many earnest eyes.

Jem twisted his torso and inhaled a serpentine of cocaine off the mirror tabletop, and then refilled his glass with the Canada Dry and crushed glacial ice that he kept in a small Styrofoam cooler near the divan. This mix had replaced cappuccino slushies as his *brevuage de la saison*. Living up here, he mused – lying on his back, eyes mesmerized by the golden effervescence in his glass – Auntie must often take pleasure in such exotic northern products. He took a sip, enjoying the cold dribble that ran down his chin and along one of the two grooves on the front of his neck. It inched its way into the slight indent of his chest and more slowly still down to the oxbow lake of his belly button where it pooled lazily and became still.

'I'm worried that you're drinking too much of that, dear. Anything habit-forming isn't worth experiencing twice. And you'll get to belching. You don't want that. I don't want that. Belching – who could say why – seems inevitably to lead to swagging. And then, well, the slippery slope of slovenliness.'

‘I don’t know that I wouldn’t mind a swagger. It has always added mystery to those who could pull it off. Val Kilmer, for example, or Huckleberry Hound.’

‘Pull what off, dear?’

But this didn’t interest him. ‘I wonder if it looks like a V from directly above.’ He coaxed a bluebottle off his soft left lid but let his lank black hair continue to hang heavy there.

‘A swagger would no doubt work on you, dear – everything does seem to. Still, habits,’ she cautioned maternally, scooping up some beer foam with a flake of her strudel.

‘What do you say?’

‘The flock?’ Her lips pulled forcefully on a Cameo.

‘The wake.’

She stared into the gloaming. ‘Well, it’s definitely a V from above, sweetest, but not from behind,’ and yet, even as she spoke, Giggy realized that one V couldn’t possibly set a standard for all Vs. What one saw from behind could simply be a different V.

‘Oh, but it is from underneath.’

‘Yes, possibly from underneath,’ and then, hoping to help her nephew reach the same realization that she had regarding normativization, she added with forced casualness, ‘it wouldn’t be inappropriate, would it, dear, to consider David Hume at this point. “Skeptic,” you know, needn’t carry wholly negative connotations. I’m sure geese could make a V from behind if they tried. But then, that’s assuming a fair amount of rationality for the fowl, yes? And yet who’s to say that animals don’t act rationally?’

Giggy took a swig of beer, burped sharply (‘I must, for my condition’) and imagined what the wake looked like from beneath, from underwater, her own billowful body naked in the cool night – a moment’s respite from a summer of chafing along the length of her cleavage, under her full breasts, between the rolls on her belly and thighs. On especially hot days, when even the deodorant she smothered under her succulents did not seem to help, she tucked a couple of Cora’s sanitary pads

between her flesh and the wire support of her bra to ease the pressure.

Just now, Giggy found sufficient relief in her imaginings. She envisioned her submerged body borne by the black water, her kimono fluttering wet about her in the breezy current as fawn muskellunge and yellow perch flew past with flapping fins and Dr. Amicable's long and extremely slender canoe slipped over her like one half of a husked pea pod, casting a shadow in the moonlight such that, for a brief moment, her body became an aquatic image of yin and yang. Emerald was the pod and darkest ermine the water as her body bobbed like driftwood, just keeping itself from plunging into the masses of air. 'So too inspiring,' she murmured, lowering her torso in its chair as if submerging into a bath. This was not the first time the doctor had rested so comfortably on her mind. But a fraction Giggy's legs spread, the tips of her bare feet poking out from beneath her Balzacian kimono with the timidity of mice. Jem realized that she was having a vision from beneath the wake of the canoe.

I love her so much more than exotic Canadian products, he thought, more than René Simard's jumpsuits, more than maple syrup in tiny tin houses that Wachannabee children place in homage at the leathered boots of mounted police, more than the husky-skin culottes in which Québécois mothers swaddle and coddle their tender infants, more than the smoked salmon of . . . oh so and so and so much more.

Recent discussions of murder had upset Jem's aunt immeasurably, and he hoped that these briefest suggestions of pleasure were spreading their reassuring warmth, like Tiger Balm on a twisted muscle, below the surface of her skin all the way down to her veins, her heart, the very marrow of her bones. Lost in imaginings, she stretched her feet even further out and stroked the curved leg of some furniture. The act itself was a gesture of reaffirmation, for Giggy was reclining on the very same chaise longue on which Constable Loch had so disdainfully refused to

sit only one month ago, choosing instead to splay the girth of his khakied buttocks on a common footstool as he licked the lead of his working-man's pencil and mapped in only the thinnest trail of her eloquent defence: 5:15, sun setting in the west, flesh aglow as if illuminated from within.

His squatting macho had forced Giggy to admire his chiselled ass despite the fact that his hackneyed shorthand irritated her. That day, she had decided to wax especially baroque for his sake, guessing that the others' reports – Jem's, Cora's, the professor's, Robert's (although one might forgive his unwillingness to speak, what with the facial wounds virtually ensuring that his lips were sealed) – had probably all been made mundane by each of their futile struggles for objectivity. Oh, she thought now, gently rubbing the last, succulent memories of her nocturnal swim out from between the sweet-smelling rolls of her belly, I'll have to give the constable Dr. Amicable's manuscript of Shakely's journal just so that, even if he never discovers the truth of the crime, he will at least have a hint of how such a thing might be inspired.

She meditated on Dr. Amicable's words, her admiration for his passion unlikely to become anything venerator, it having reached a level beyond the erotic. But there was something about Shakely's artlessness that she was finding more and more appealing, more visceral, the longer she allowed herself to live within the over-wrought aestheticism of her own mind. Giggy gulped some more beer and ran the long nail of her left pinky along the edge of the chaise longue, surprised to find it snag on a slit in the material. This lazy sew struck the matriarch as not simply unfortunate but embarrassing, even peculiar. The whippet's effort to steal her attention failed. The chaise longue, like much of her furniture, had come from her deceased mother's long-since-demolished-but-once-five-star hotel in Zurich, the Ambassador's Arms. *Home Away from Home, for Ambassadors and Kings*. A tear in the fabric of the furniture was a tear in the fabric of her memory.

Giggy's concerns about the material were rooted in the images that she recalled of herself as a pert thing curled up on the chaise while Mama played the piano in her eccentric way – charming, really, with a pained anxiety coming through in the brief silence that foreshadowed each sudden poke of Mama's only index finger. Watching her play, one could not help but think of a chicken learning to type – an impassioned chicken, unquestionably, but still . . . These fond, formative memories made it all the more troublesome to imagine that the piano and the chaise longue, which had all this time remained as united as wealthy Siamese twins, might soon be separated. They were all she had left of her childhood and now she was giving one of them up to the constable's charity bazaar. She could still hear Mama, in a continental English as reassuring as a receding thunderstorm, proudly inform the baronets who sojourned every season on their way to the Black Forest mineral baths, of the refinement of the hotel. 'Five stars, five of them, dahrlinggs,' she would zsazsa. 'It takes talent to whip up a hotel like this one. A bucket of talent. And I've got a bucket.' The memory brought back to Giggy her mother's last years of pain, of waning hope – not pride, as the daughter had once thought, but desperation. One recurring image, only one, as Giggy left in search of her destiny – that of Mama standing as glorious as a Rhode Island Red next to the piano, wagging the pointed nail of a finger in warning. The sun ricocheted off the mother's aurora of auburn hair. It was the brilliance of the locks, Giggy later lied, that caused her to tear. Oh yes, Giggy had her own bucket, a bucket full of painful memories. If only she could sell *them*, she thought, instead of the furniture.

'You're right,' volleyed Jem, tugging absent-mindedly on a lone chest hair. 'Those big old geese *could* make a V from behind, and they could also make an R. Or an O. Or a B.' A single tear as plump as the central diamond in the tiara of the Infanta of Paraguay squeezed itself from the duct tucked into the boy's

lower left lid. 'I do believe they could probably make just about any letter under the heavens and still make a V from below.' Now he stretched his coltish legs into a V as a visual aid, remembering his childhood swims in Catahoula Lake under the full Louisiana moon, the way in which the sweet, muddy waters pulled him forward as he stepped gingerly along the soft, grey depths shifting below, the way in which the mud-blind fish and weedy banners caressed his calves and thighs. Waist-deep, he would turn like Salomé to face the white virgin moon, the summer air warm yet chilling his skin, the orb's beams piercing his body like a promise, his then hairless chest breaking into goosebumps while his scrotum receded into his body like a bashful snail into its shell. Silver swamp daffodils, their petals stiff-shut, swayed over the jet waters, each stem holding a perfect whiplash curve.

The young man's eyes focused on the drapes of mosquito netting that clung around the front of the house like a giant hairnet. The bugs had begun to bother, all spindly and aggressive – blackflies, deer flies, gnats, an everglade's worth of mosquitoes, all incessantly spinning tangles of anxiety and illness in the dustless air.

'No, not any letter. I can't imagine an O,' said Giggy.

'Oh well, dear, if you can't imagine it . . . ,' half-attentive.

'Well I can't, love, or an X for example. It would take a lot of Canada geese to make an X in the sky, yes? I wonder how many geese it would take to spell FOX. And with their heads and legs, because you'd have to view them from behind for that, wouldn't they look more like asterisks? Animals are so self-serving; they'd only do it if it suited them. But humans . . . well, humans aren't much different.'

If a V, thought Jem, then why not an X? Wasn't it just two hip-joined Vs?

It had been all Giggy could do to convince Constable Loch that the Queen Anne chaise longue had no part in the crime –



even though, since Cora had been staying in the Winter Garden for some time now, Giggy was herself unsure, although unadmittedly so. It was that smear of scarlet, the size of a small palm print, but which she clearly recalled as pomegranate juice she had spilt herself years and years ago, that had made Queen Anne suspect. Province states had crumbled for less, she mused concernedly, Bethgoz-Lisotania, to name what for Giggy was but the most obvious example.

Not that she would ever join the community in its defamation of Cora. Indeed she couldn't imagine any one person, let alone the toned but tiny Cora, having the strength or agility to remove all those rectangular strips of flesh from a body in protest. And who would have cleaned up all the mess, the spills of blood that had to have been left behind? There were no traces of cleaning supplies to be found and there must have been so much blood on those craggy stones. And Cora was, well, brittle, wasn't she? Is 'brittle' not the kindest word in this case? She was young only in years, that one. Her maturity pressed down upon *joie* like a stack of encyclopedias on a maple leaf.

Giggy was not guilty of assuming that Cora's earnestness and caution (she avoided calling it conservatism) were the visitor's fault. It was something arising through Cora's interaction with the rest of society or, more precisely, arising from the pressures it forced on her. As such, these traits of respectability and precision did not belong to Cora, but existed in a space between her and society. Their contours could be read on the surface of her body but they were nevertheless the product of external influences, like body paint or a second skin.

Giggy was correct in deducing that Cora wore her wounds with pride, and that this was necessary if she were to protect her sense of identity. The girl had been travelling with Jem for who knew how long, in the United States and now here in Canada. She looked only a few years older than him, but she was definitely the chaperone. Giggy could see that many would feel

that her nephew was both feeble and egotistical. But Cora, she saw in him the kind of person that she was destined to support – such a one as she herself might have become had she not been queer *and* a woman. And so Giggy recognized her younger self in Cora's overreliance on melancholy as a form of joy, on contentment as fulfilment. The matriarch could only hope that Cora's growing love for Jem (for she truly believed that all must eventually love him) would allow her to shed some defences. He may not teach her to swim through the onslaught of vindictiveness and malice as he did, as if it were only the exhaust and whine of a Sea-Doo. But for now, Cora could at least manoeuvre in his wake and learn that indifference was at times the most effective form of self-defence.

Cora's high valuation of responsibility, Giggy felt, meant that she had the patience, but not the adventurousness, to have peeled the strips of skin off Robert. The older woman could not help but wonder, as well, how patient Robert had to have been to have let himself be so ensnared. It almost frustrated her, the sense that his point of view, the unique materiality of his experience, was just beyond the grasp of her clumsy fingers. Giggy had once watched Lady Clasp, who lived across the east field, use a pair of tweezers to strip the skin from boiled tomatoes. After the roiling water had inflamed the pieces of fruit, their tissue skin puckered, seeming to beg to be pulled back. The veterinarian, her flaming locks hairnetted, had approached each of the orbs with a tenderness verging on a perfectionism almost Catholic in its ceremony, Futurist in its faith. There was a symbiosis, a sort of conspiracy, it seemed, between the woman and the glowing orange-red globes. The recent crime, however, must have required more than a Kmart kitchen utensil and the skills of the village vet. Robert, it had been conjectured, must have been peeled with something like a scalpel or an Xacto knife. Despite signs of restraints, it was felt the delicacy of the procedure had required that he had been coerced somehow into

participating. The lab had found no substances in the young man's system that would have knocked him unconscious, nor signs of severe restraints. Oh, a body in protest, ruminated Giggy, that might be the title of my memoirs. And she began kneading her chafing flesh once more.

The lack of evidence either in favour of or against Cora had gnawed on Giggy's already stressed mind so persistently that she'd finally decided to donate it, the chaise longue on which Constable Loch had discovered the red stain, to the Lake Wachannabee Bazaar. Since they had yet to attain confirmation of a crime and nobody had pressed charges, there was no basis for taking evidence, but Giggy felt it best to let the furniture go regardless. She'd never expected that her humble gift would attract much attention, but the townsfolk began to gobble the fruits of speculation from each other's baskets as if starved for gossip. At first, she was most perturbed to find so many pronouncing her name with a soft 'G,' but soon this gaucherie was surpassed by the one declaration consistent in all their accusations: the wealthy lacked morals. 'It is at times even too easy to conceal,' bewailed the matriarch in language decadent in its convolutions, 'the actual poverty from which I, like the black grapes of Sicily, have grown.'

Giggy's eyes focused on the point at which the geese had disappeared, and she began to worry again about her decision to give the furniture away. An exploratory nail had revealed the slit to be almost five inches long. She could slide her hand into it as if it were a pocket. Giggy saw the slice symbolizing the monetary sacrifices that poorly clothed her life, the vulgarity that she had otherwise been able to hide from the social classes against which she still humiliatingly defined herself. It was like playing Patience without wearing underwear, a habit she had picked up in the 1980s from the maid of a Moroccan civil servant and which she hesitated to break because it was now one of the traits by which she was defined.

The tear in the fabric seemed especially uncouth to her because she had never noticed it before. Might have somebody else? Might have the constable? Why had she ever brought the thing up from the basement? Could Constable Loch have construed her desire to get rid of this furniture now as an admission of guilt? She didn't want to admit any guilt, but for some reason everything in her house had become guilty by association. The accusation of murder had spread like skunk scent off the Prussian blue mat and into the nooks, crannies and wainscoting of the many-chambered house. She had initially thought that buying new furniture would clean her home of the moral taint but then realized that this would only reinforce the suspicions of the town, ultimately positioning her as a flying buttress for the hate-mongering pillars of the community. She now couldn't understand why the constable had suggested she give the piece to the bazaar in the first place. Perhaps this was his way of provoking her to plead guilty. But if she had no intention, could she make the plea? Where does the legal system draw its own little pencil marks of ethics?

Presently, the community belched its fumes of suspicion almost solely upon Cora, although the information Jem received from the gossips on grocery day was clearly skewed by odium. Giggy herself had never known Cora to spend a night outside the villa, and the two women shared a bedroom. One morning the family had found the word 'OMDALISK' spray-painted across the limestone wall of the Cubist gazebo, and they assumed it to be a reference to Cora's Asian ancestry, her jet black hair and eyes. It was Jem who had been able to define the misspelt word, for he had himself once been compared to an Oriental concubine, albeit for purposes purely cordial. Giggy had suggested to the younger woman that if she wanted her reputation to change she should wear more makeup and start riding a girl's bicycle, but Cora, who grew up in Las Vegas, had never adequately considered the concept of gendered

machinery, and Giggy herself could not explain. She knew it had something to do with skirts and scrotums, and so she said. Maybe it was a difference in the metal V connecting the handlebars to the seat. Or the number of tassels on the handlebars or how long they dangled. She'd proposed that it had something to do with pedal-pushers, and so Jem began wearing a pair just to prove her wrong. That had only been for one day, after which he switched back to his cut-offs, the same pair he wore now as he lay asleep yet stroking the frayed threads of the denim.

'Darling, wake up. It's almost nighttime.'

'Mmmmm. You know, when you whisper, you sound like Eva Gabor.'

'You knew Eva?'

