



Chapter One

Runner's Fall (i)

MARCH 18TH, 2003, 7:08 P.M.

When Runner Coghill fell through the ceiling, she interrupted what we can only call a domestic quarrel.

Of the arguers in question, the young man's name was Dumuzi, though his name has been changed to protect the innocent (that is, Dumuzi). Moments before, he had been huffing and puffing from the cold, for which he was wilfully under-dressed, and standing with his sometimes girlfriend Anna inside the front entrance to the warehouse at 5819 Saint-Laurent, a building that, against all probability, she owned.

Anna had called him, out of the blue, on what he thought was the first warmish day of the year, although that had turned out to be an illusion propagated by the phone call and Anna's attention; in fact, it was cold, but Anna was bored and looking for company to walk around downtown. They had met in the early afternoon and walked down the hill into the late afternoon, Anna telling him about her classes – a bit of philosophy, a bit of English, the only thing she liked was anthropology, or at least she liked the idea of anthropology, though the reality of anthropology was boring and more boring. The sound of her voice so soothed his chronic spikes of sexual anxiety – brought on by her arbitrary pattern of granting and withholding affection – that he began to question whether he'd ever felt them in any serious way.

Now it was freezing raining and it was evening, and Anna, who was wet, wanted to go inside and find a clean corner where the two of them would be able to pile some remnants of her

grandfather's old shmatte emporium into something that might resemble a bed and a blanket, beside a pale beam of streetlight they could roll into when they were done. Her other conditions included a solid ceiling above their heads and no turds, human or otherwise, at least not nearby. She didn't mind a little dust and dirt though, since, as Du had noticed, she hadn't washed for some time, either her clothes or her person, and had embarked on a more animal form of grooming.

It was a slow negotiation, because Anna was offering Du what he'd been pining after through the entire winter; that is to say, she was offering sex, in a warehouse that suddenly didn't seem so filthy because of the way the light filtered out of the darkness and the dust and the endorphins that were suddenly released into Dumuzi's brain. But she wanted him to pay her for it. To see what it was like. And her proposal was slowing him down.

A little note about Dumuzi: his hormones were raging, but he tried to be polite about it. He was a big squarish guy, but when you looked at him you got the whole picture. He wasn't a bobbing Adam's apple or a collar or a grin. There was nothing about his maleness that was easily Atwoodian. It would be unfair to describe him like that, even though he was a boy and the reader might not like boys.¹ He tried to keep tidy. He wore clean lines. He was a whole guy, albeit a young guy who just needed, very desperately, to get laid. Where Anna was concerned, he definitely did not like who he became when he was with her, but still he wanted to be with her and wished only to change who he was and how and what he thought.

He asked Anna where she'd gotten the idea and she told him how earlier in the day an elderly gentleman had mistaken her for a prostitute and propositioned her while Du was buying gum. This shocked him almost as much as the proposal itself and he looked away, shuffling in a head-bowed, punch-drunk silence.

(Eventually.) 'You like this place?'

1 We weren't fond of boys ourselves, but our opinion here is not relevant.

She said, 'Yeah, why not.'

He tried to speed up his thoughts. 'Well, I don't know about all this love of decay and dark dripping warehouses. I mean, you might try to take out your contacts every once in a while if you don't want to go blind, and you might want to change your clothes every once in a while, and, yeah, this new obsession of yours is really going to help, although, although I think any dirty old man on Saint-Laurent would lose his erection if he was standing downwind of you and your —'

'I doubt it.'

'Sure.' He deflated. 'Sure. Me too. Anyway, this place is falling apart. There must be a million squatters living here.'

'I can't afford to fix it. I'm warehouse poor.'

'Oh.'

'Dumuzi ... I'm going to let you sleep with me.'

'But you want me to pay you, Anna.'

'So just forget about that part.'

'Anna, you want me to pay you a lot of money.'

'Let's say you don't have to pay me all that much. I'm only asking you to pay for what most men think they have the god-given right to get for free.'

'So why shouldn't I think that too?'

'Don't you think that's a little arrogant?'

'You think it's good for men to pay for sex? Wow.'

'I'm saying it might be good for me to get paid for sex. It might fulfill some sort of destiny.'

'Oh, I can't stand it!'

And this is when Dumuzi's fist hit the pillar, compromising, it would appear, the integrity of the building, and that's when Runner fell through the ceiling above and landed behind them in a bunch of cardboard boxes.²

2 It might be of interest as well to note how, on this day, on the other side of the world from there, everyone who could was getting out of Baghdad, filling the outlying cities of Rawa and Anna. Water was scarce and the American dollar was worth 2,700 Iraqi dinars. According to the Blogger of Baghdad. (Aline's note.)



A new quality Du was beginning to notice about himself was his capacity to be grateful for events that reasonable people might find abhorrent or tragic, as long as these events deflected the attention of his tormentors. The truth is that he would have preferred the whole city to come down on their heads in that moment, but he had to make do with Runner Coghill, falling like debris. He unshouldered his backpack and ran over to the crumpled girl set like a small broken mannequin among the boxes and the stones. She was screaming, though Du realized as he got closer that she was shouting not incoherent pain so much as the name of a boy: 'NEIL! NEIL! I'M HURT!'

The girl paused to reflect, loud enough for Du to hear, 'Oh I don't think a dose of Prozac is going to help this kind of pain.' She was talking over his head though, aiming her thoughts straight for Anna.

'Oh. Hi. I guess that came as a shock to you. I seem to have —'

Anna interrupted her, having forgotten her former business, and was trying to figure out uh what this intruder uh was uh doing here.

'Well, I don't really mean to be here. Upstairs is where I —'

Interrupted by Anna again, who meant to say, 'The uh building. How did you come to be in the uh building?'

'Cool it, sister. Don't hate me because I'm beautiful.'

Now, Runner Coghill was not exactly a looker, not by any stretch of the imagination and certainly not to Dumuzi. Runner was small. She looked like a Grey Nun out on a day pass — you could imagine her in a wimple. She was almost weightless, with translucent skin, a haughty nose — a pig nose she sometimes called it in her own garment-rending arias of despair, which were private and known to us only because they were occasionally gossiped about in fits of envy of which we are not proud. And she let her hair grow more thickly over her bumps, to try and cover

them up, though this practice only augmented them. They were called pilar cysts. She insisted that everyone know what they were called even though she was supposedly trying to hide them. That is the way she was. She boasted about her minor ailments while keeping the most prominent one – the actual life-threatening one – entirely to herself. We are still amazed to report that she kept it a secret, though the primary sign, the tell-tale one, would have been obvious to a medically minded person had there ever been one in the group – this primary sign being that her eyes popped right out of her head, more so with every passing month, so much so that you might think she was staring even when she was not, though she did sometimes stare. It was disconcerting to some, most immediately to Dumuzi, who felt a little Gordian knot of fear every time he caught her eye, even though he was literally twice her size.

So when this wreckage of a girl, crumpled up in a coat, having fallen through the ceiling seconds before, said, to the perfect Anna, 'Don't hate me because I'm beautiful,' Du, after a moment's uncomprehending shock, laughed, a sort of stunned laugh. And that's when the girl noticed him for the first time.

Being broken in the presence of the male gaze would have made Runner feel overwhelmed under normal circumstances, but, beyond a few fleeting thoughts,³ she was in too much of a hurry to be overwhelmed at the moment. Still, it was fortunate she'd got some warning, because a second later Du swooped in and crouched very close to her, examining her, opening her coat, uncovering her, touching her leg. She gasped for air with a little

3 His cheeks were stubbled, like the bark of a tree ... the hair on his head grew thick as laundry ... his beauty was consummate. He was tall! He was magnificent! He was terrible! He would scour [Runner's] body in search of life and coax it toward maturity! He would dig from [Runner's] most shadowy slopes the deepest well of pure water, out of which an ocean would spring, and he would cross that ocean to the sunrise beyond, arrive on some future morn when [Runner] was hale and adult and smiling fully in his arms, in the bedroom of a third-storey flat in Mile End! (From Runner's notebook.)

yelp that she hoped sounded like an expression of pain and not its opposite, and squeezed her eyes shut.

'Anna, I think she's broken her leg.'

Anna swore. Runner drew a breath and let it exhale without speaking. And then drew another.

And then began to explain patiently to them – well, to Anna, still ignoring Du despite the temperance he'd suddenly inspired in her – about her ailments. She said that she was sorry, that she had a mild form of osteoporosis which, she felt, made a bad combination with her epileptic tendencies (which tendencies she was fabricating for the first time in that very moment), but that she was also really quite grateful for it, her osteoporosis, because it made her a very modern thinker. It forced her to think about the body in art and the world. Like, for instance, how was she going to get her body, broken leg and all, up to the fifth floor of this building, if she had willed herself already up to the second and it had brought her, of its own volition, right back down to the first? How was she going to get this useless shell of a body, this inattentive and ungrateful husk, back up to the second, and beyond to the third, fourth and finally fifth, especially when faced with such a pair of uncomprehending and unsympathetic faces as now looked down upon her?

Anna kept her eye on the ball: 'What's up on the fifth floor?'

Runner took a deep breath and sighed, as if to say that these two were just not going to get it. When she spoke again, however, there was a green blade of hope in her voice: 'Have you ever heard of the Lacuna Cabal?'

'No.'

'Well ... it's ... a very exclusive ... book club, and I'm sure ...'

Du, who was a devoted student of every thought and mood that flickered across Anna's face, here observed her try to imagine the possibility of a book club on the fifth floor of the Jacob Lighter Building.

'... and I'm sure it doesn't interest you, but there are six

women up there right now who at this moment are finishing up the last book and are about to launch into proposals for the next, at which point I have to make an entrance.'

Anna's instinct of ownership kicked in. 'But this is my building!'

'I see you fail to see the bigger picture.'

'How long has this been going on?'

'I tell you, I need to get upstairs!'

'I don't care.'

Du recognized the expression that now came over Runner's face. It allied him to her, at least for the moment, fellow recipient of the chill wind from Anna. The girl saw first that Anna didn't care, and then she saw that, really, really, she didn't care. It was an obstacle. It was a challenge. Runner launched in, like Churchill convincing an island to make war.

'Kid,' she said, addressing Anna, for how else do you address someone young in years who has revealed herself to be as jaded as a dead thing, except to appeal to the part of her that is still young, the bright shiny package that contains her, her skin? 'Kid,' she called her, and went on to ask her if she'd ever felt anything for a cause that was bigger than herself, if she'd ever wanted to throw herself behind such a cause, for the sheer bumfuckery of it, if she'd ever been curious about ...

Anna's uppercut in the microsecond's lull: 'I don't care.'

'Please,' Runner said. 'Those girls up there don't expect to ever be caught by anything even remotely resembling the owner of a building. You're missing a great opportunity here, for, believe me, they are far, far more deserving of your goddess-like wrath than I —'

'I don't c—' Anna had not expected that. Goddess-like wrath? For one moment she didn't speak. And then another. Dumuzi could see that the broken-legged girl had hit pay dirt, found a weak spot he didn't even know was there. He made a mental note: 'goddess.' And then the girl on the floor went on.

'Association with this club, which I now offer to you in defiance —'

'Who says I want —?'

'— of our heartless executive, will expose you to the damaged masterpiece I am about to propose. That's right, sister, I can see that you're a bit of a damaged masterpiece yourself, aren't you? Though you're strong and beautiful and everything I'm not.'

Anna looked squarely at the girl. She was thinking that she did often feel like a damaged masterpiece. Quite often, in fact. Regularly. She gave sudden rein to the thought that this girl knew ... she knew ... what did she know? She knew something. Something about her. Perhaps ... everything. Perhaps she was wise in all matters. Shit, man, Anna couldn't even make her 8:30 classes. This girl, though, she obviously had it together. Anna had always wanted ... Her eyes drifted up to the hole in the ceiling. Du's, mystified, uncomprehending, followed. For a moment, considering the stranger's words, Anna suddenly felt that she was not confused at all. She felt that she had been confused, but was, for this precious instant, pretty smart, pretty witty, pretty pretty, not dead. Gloriously defeated by the girl with the broken leg, on the floor.

But did any of this show up on Anna's face? Nope. She was tough. She was tough as nails. The only indication of a change of heart was the gesture for Du to pick the chick up.

As for Runner, she had been relishing her victory until she saw Du's hands zeroing in, getting closer and larger. She had a fit of sneezing. When that was through, she proceeded to lay herself bare before this boy's deepest cell of shame: 'Oh no, pal, not you. Her. Not you. If you touch me I'd have to ask you to fuck me, and if you said no then that would be humiliating for me, wouldn't it? It's been so long, I feel like a virgin. Really. Let's be honest, I am a virgin, that's not normal. And still you're going to let this brute put his hands on me?'

Runner's virgin status was not something she necessarily wanted to get rid of. But she did feel that the sexual act might just

pull her flagging, barely post-adolescent body fully into the present and force it to grow up. As for shyness around the opposite sex, her wreckage of a body had just led her to an epiphany. She decided, right here and now, anticipating the strong arms of Dumuzi, to fully explore the archetype of the foul-mouthed shy person and take it to new heights.

At least that's what she decided deep down. On the surface she was screaming indignation that Anna was allowing a boy to lay hands on her.

Anna said, simply, sorry. She wasn't going to lift a finger for this girl. Maybe she felt a bond with her, but she sure wasn't about to show it.

Dumuzi, blushing pink, gathered Runner into his arms and picked her up. She was as small and light as a beanbag full of little bones, and she relaxed into his arms. As he swept her up she felt a sharp pain in her leg but ignored it. That is, her voice responded, practically bursting Du's eardrum, but her mind ignored it. She launched again into her protests and was in mid-air when she suddenly remembered.

'Don't forget those.'

Those?

There at Du's feet, surrounding him like a toy rampart, were several irregularly shaped slabs of stone. They looked fragile, though none seemed to have broken in the fall. And they were marked all over, front and back, with tender notches of writing, presented in columns with a symmetry and order that nearly took Du's breath away. They looked old. Really old. She must have been carrying them when she fell through the floor.

Anna clapped eyes on them too. Ten of them. Looked like she would have to lift a finger after all. No idea what this crazy chick needed them for, but she didn't feel the need to question. Anyway, they were manageable. Weird. But small. Ish. She gathered them up, and they carried on, toward the stairs, and up, and into a bygone era.



And then Neil appeared.

He'd seen Runner negotiate her way through this sort of accident before, and he knew she would survive it, this time at least, even if it wasn't clear that she wanted to. Earlier, he'd watched, on the second floor, as she gave herself freely over to the fall and disappeared into the floor with all ten tablets. It made him tired. He knew she would apologize when he saw her next, and that upset him and made him even more tired.

He'd been here on the first floor for quite some time, through the negotiations, having made his way quietly around the perimeter. When he finally appeared, though, you would not have imagined him capable of such stealth. He looked awkward in his clothes, which were old and badly fitting, and he wore a pair of large round-rimmed glasses without lenses, and his head was buried in a book even when he walked. It was a notebook, which he held open with his right hand, crooked in his elbow, while writing from time to time with his left. As he crept across the floor toward Du's backpack, he stopped to jot something down no fewer than five times, creating the impression of a time-lapse photograph or a Noh stage show. It seemed he had a running commentary going on the passing moments of his life.

If we were to have stood over him, in this moment, and peered down into his book, we would have seen the following entry as it emerged from his pen:

Once so strong she was ... now so ... crazy ... accident-prone, and Neil ... He carried the bag.

And then Neil bent over and with some effort picked up Du's bulky backpack, slung it over his shoulder and crept toward the stairs.

Chapter Two

The Lacuna Cabal

The Lacuna Cabal had not always met on the fifth floor of the Jacob Lighter Building at 5819 Saint-Laurent. In our efforts to keep moving, we tried cellars, garrets, walk-in closets and bell towers, with very little account given to our general welfare and comfort. Priority was given rather to the idea that the location should suit the book, the book the location. It went beyond re-enactment and into the realm of living out, as much as possible, the story of the book, in the hope that its experience would rub off on us. Thus we considered ourselves to be the premium reading club of the English-speaking world.

This method took some refinement. An early example: we once conducted a spontaneous public reading of a novel in verse called *Autobiography of Red* at the airport, for which we all painted ourselves top to toe for the occasion. It was later agreed, however, that we did not absorb a great deal from the presentation, beyond a bit of pigment, some skin rashes and a charge of public mischief (dismissed).

And another time, early on, we kidnapped the aging poet Irving Layton for four hours from the Maimonides Geriatric Centre in Côte-Saint-Luc and took him for an excursion up the mountain – a trip from which he was reported to have reappeared sporting a diadem of autumn leaves and looking immensely satisfied. That one made the papers. And the evening news. Still, it had been dangerous and seemed like a cheat to meet the poet himself rather than the words in his book.

In our second year, when our methods had acquired some clarity, we once headed down to Place des Arts on a Sunday and

tried to depict the scene of the nun swinging from the bridge-builder's broken arm in *In the Skin of a Lion*.⁴ One of our members nearly hanged herself. Accidentally, of course. But it was memorable and satisfying and we declared that book a success.

Our third year was characterized by a more traditional approach: we began to calm down as a group and seek out a more or less permanent meeting place.

There's an elongated little park just west of Saint-Denis on Laurier, north side, with a sandbox and small set of monkey bars.⁵ We tried to meet there for a while, since someone had noticed that there never seemed to be any children. But when we started going, so did the children. The park stayed empty throughout the week and even on weekends, as long as we weren't there. But when we showed up, they were never far behind. And when we abandoned the place, so, again, did they.⁶

Eventually we found a beautiful warehouse on the waterfront, rumoured to have required rent – rent rumoured to have been paid by the wealthy father of our founder and president. There we felt safe from prying eyes and blessed with a view of the river.

But then, in the fall, someone in the Cabal died, and so we decided to move. We felt that the waterfront warehouse had lost its lustre and its luck. And when the general mood failed to brighten by November, we even decided to enlist a new member as a gesture of self-preservation – someone to push against the pall that had fallen over the group.

The Jacob Lighter Building was discovered in mid-December, during a well-needed Christmas hiatus, by Romy

4 If the reader isn't familiar with this particular novel, she might as well stop reading this book right now and go read that one. Or else dispense with the whole idea of reading altogether. *In the Skin of a Lion* is, officially, the Lacuna Cabal's favourite book.

5 Later note: No there isn't.

6 It's not there anymore. Somebody must have dreamt it. Unless our abandonment of it, along with the children's, caused it to fade away.

Childerhose, on one of her long walks. She tried the door by the loading dock for five days in a row and it was always open. She finally ventured into the building and bravely worked her way up through the darkness of the stairwell, floor by floor, finding that all evidence of squatter habitation – blankets and newspapers and washrooms that would have to be sealed off – ended on the third. Thinking it over, she felt that there must have been an instinct among squatters to be ready for a quick escape, although, if it had been her, she would have climbed as high as she could, like a squirrel with a nest, and kept her stuff near a window that could be opened so that everything might be hurled out and away, to be retrieved later. But it was clear that no one had lived here for quite some time.

Up on the fifth floor, the flappable Romy found things to be clean, spacious and empty. Though very, very cold. There was evidence that someone had begun to renovate the building up there – presumably Anna's rovingly entrepreneurial father – but the project had been abandoned. Drywall had all been ripped out and there was little or no insulation. We have long speculated that it might have been the general state of abandonment, by squatters on one side and developers on the other, that had so drawn Romy (who hailed from a city in Ontario which she referred to exclusively as 'Bingotown'). The building was a book – a weighty tome no less – that nobody wanted, neither for pleasure nor pillage, a gargantuan testament to wasted lives, like hers, like ours, like this book itself, whose leviathan bulk is a reflection more of waste than achievement.

When we moved into the fifth floor of the Jacob Lighter Building, it was decided by vote that we had to acquire a portable heater with a scary-looking flame and two enormous and truly frightening propane tanks, rented with the benefit of Missy's father's credit card. We called it 'the blue flame-thrower.' Some of us wondered how Missy's father could have allowed such a rental to be made by his daughter. Where paternal love was concerned,

we could understand the silver Sunfire with its custom pull-down top, we clocked the purchase of the flat in Outremont and we appreciated the rent paid on our waterfront meeting place. But allowing a propane heater with an eternally flaming grill, like the burning bush except indoors and blue — this took parental indulgence to a new level and led some of us to wonder whether the man was paying any attention at all. What's more, there was a period wherein Missy erected a large tent up there — also acquired by the divine grace of her father's card — to try and contain the heat. So the blue flame was two times indoors, a fire hazard inside a fire hazard, at least until she pulled the tent down and returned it at the beginning of March.

We wonder, from the cool perspective of three or four years' distance, whether we didn't all share a funny latent death wish that one weird winter.

So we stayed on the fifth floor of the Jacob Lighter Building, 5819 Saint-Laurent, even though it did not provide us with the poetry of shelter from winter. Missy told us that we all had our respective homes for that. The readers of *Don Quixote*, she said, huddled shivering for centuries in cold places and still managed to get through the book. That book was present in point of fact, she added, all the way through the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution. You can only imagine, she said, what kind of horrors people must have endured between bouts of reading Cervantes's book.

That's the thing about born leaders. They convince you that you're capable of doing — that you want to be doing — the craziest things. When they go too far, we suppose, is when you find yourself with a cult on your hands. And when they don't go far enough, they come across as carping, opinionated, pain-in-the-ass purveyors of sloppy thinking. Missy fluctuated between these two extremes. How could she not? She was young and only beginning to experiment with holding the reins of power. Anyway, it's no secret that the two primary writers of this book remained loyal

to her and would have followed her anywhere except that point beyond which, according to the foundation principles of the Lacuna Cabal, we were expressly forbidden to go.



Which brings us finally to the call of the role. The sitting members of the Lacuna Cabal as of March 18th, 2003.

House left, stage right, in a semi-circle heading toward house right, stage left, books open in our laps, it goes as follows:

The first is one of us. One of the two of us. One of we two narrators or, if you prefer, glorified stage-direction readers. Missy liked to keep us separate so that her consolidation of power would not seem so obvious. So I, Jennifer, about whom the less said the better, sat at the farthest left, house left, all by myself, next to the newest member, whose name was (is)

Priya Underhay,

the aforementioned newest, the ray of hope and sunshine, meant to combat the gloom that had followed a death in the club — about whom we knew, at the time, very little. She was, not coincidentally when you consider Missy's motive for taking her on, a bit of a hippie. To us she seemed a little crazy and often could be overheard speaking in a low voice to — one could only assume — herself.

Priya, who carried a travel guitar with her wherever she went, missed the occasional meeting because she had the occasional commitment to play at the occasional small-time open-mike event. She called these 'alt-country nights,' whatever that meant. Such events were never attended by the Cabal, for two, no, three reasons:

1. They would have blown our cover.
2. We were declaratively interested in the written word, to the exclusion of every other art form, and would pay attention to a ballad only if it were written in a book.

3. An example of Priya's early song lyrics:

*we are the fortunate ones, you and I,
who travel with the pelicans and the platypi ...
'goodnight,' lisp the smiling, dozing sarcophagi
as we pass them by.
we are the delicate ones, though we do not cry
when we wound one another with the lash of an eye ...
'and you think you'll live,' screech the dead sarcophagi
but they are out of earshot, by and by.*

We'd like to meet some living sarcophagi.

(Allowing a folksinger into our ranks seemed, for the longest time, a very serious mistake.)

Priya kept her travel guitar in a slim tube designed to sling a yoga mat over her back. Rumour had it, or, rather, Romy had it, that she didn't need to carry the mat around because she used it for sleeping, that it was the only piece of furniture she owned. This wasn't quite true, since it emerged that she lived with her mother and a younger sister in a small flat in the eastern French section of the plateau — a very small ground-floor flat, although they were very close to the people who lived in the two above them, a French couple with a new baby who owned the whole building, and another single mother, who lived at the top with a one-year-old. They were all doctors and architects in a vertically oriented community, and Priya made most of her money from babysitting.

At the time when this story begins, Priya had written, by all accounts, upward of thirty songs, most of them incomprehensible, and suffered from the occasional nosebleed, one can only imagine because of her nocturnal flights with fellow folksinging witches.

Next to Priya sat

Romy Childerhose,

the aforementioned squirrel in her nest, who hailed from the so-named Bingotown and had felt drawn to the epic seediness of the Jacob Lighter building.

We have no desire to present a negative portrayal of Romy in this passage, as we feel it might cause pain and would not be commensurate with the esteem in which we currently hold her. This presents a problem for us because, during the time this story takes place, we felt nothing but contempt for her, and this account would be nothing if it did not present something resembling the truth. In confessing this dilemma to the subject in question, however, a solution presented itself: apparently, not surprisingly, our contempt was nothing compared to how Romy felt about herself.

Here, therefore, is Romy's introduction, in her own recently commissioned words. Characteristically, she has begun far earlier in her story than expected, and has included information that we were perhaps better off not knowing:

I was born in a barn. I was. Just outside of Bingotown, Ontario, where my mother-to-be had been dropped in a field with her two older sisters, one of whom had vomited on the other two while their parents — my grandparents — were on their way to church in their Sunday best. They dropped the vomit-covered sisters in the field to wait out the hour while the clean ones — the younger boys and the parents — went off to do their churchly duty. It was just enough time to quietly induce labour, since the sisters were privy to the knowledge of my mother's condition and the vomit had in fact been purposely induced. My mother (did I mention that my mother was very large?) had managed to conceal her pregnancy from her extremely Catholic parents. And then, for several months after I was born, she managed to hide me. You've heard the story of Kaspar Hauser? Living beneath the

floorboards of a little house somewhere in Germany? Well, if I hadn't been discovered, I might have been the small-town Southwestern Ontario version of that poor kid. And in many respects, perhaps I was.

What's more, Romy felt that this was one of the two seminal stories of her childhood, the other one being a Homeric narrative on the subject of fatness and responsibility:

People get fat through an act of will. Don't they? It's instead of a callus. The emotion is all nestled inside, like a pig in a blanket, and, as with calluses, the blows don't land quite so hard. Is that why they do it? My mother was fat. She was a cement balloon sinking into the ocean, who held me by the ankles and pulled me down, like galoshes on a mobster who'd slept with the wrong moll. I was fat too, but my fat was an air pocket to try and keep me afloat, to try and stop my mother from consuming everything. When I was a kid I once purchased a mouse. A little white mouse. I bought it at a pet store downtown and took it home in a small cardboard box, with a big bagful of mouse food. It was in the middle of a particularly harsh winter. I don't know what I was thinking. When I got home, my mother flipped out. Another mouth to feed that was not her own. But I have food for it, I said. A whole bag. I'm sure it's not the kind of food that you would like, I said. Who's to say? she said, and took the food. Besides, there was no place for the little mouth to live. My mother occupied everything. I found a little fishbowl that had belonged to a long-ago goldfish. And I put the little mouth in there. And then I watched in horror as he scabbled around the small bottom and tried to jump free. He would leap into the air and catch a small paw at the lip of the bowl, spin his legs frantically and then fall to the bottom again. It was horrifying. Only a matter of time before he mastered the leap. I considered putting a pile of books there,

at the top, to block the exit, but then he would have suffocated. I suppose I could have drilled some holes in the books, but I didn't have a drill and you don't treat books like that, do you? And besides, the goldfish bowl was way too small. It was way, way too small. There was a woodpile at the back of the yard. I gazed at the woodpile through a window, imagining that it might make a beautiful, spacious, multi-hallwayed new home for my little burden. No, said my mother, the poor thing will die out there in the cold. We have to return it to the store. But there's a no-return policy, I yelled. It says so on a big sign right on the door! But we drove downtown with the mouse in the box. And when they refused to take the mouse back, my mother revealed her secret weapon, dragging a desperate, sobbing, sorry little me in through the jingling door. And they took back the mouse.

Romy on how she came to leave Bingotown:

Bingotown was not a colourful city in those days, though I haven't been there lately. I remember reading somewhere that nineteenth-century municipal laws restricted the use of colour in the urban environment. This was true all over the world at the time, but Bingotown still had no colour over a century later. And so I left finally and came to Montreal, which, I heard, had coloured gables and coloured spiral staircases. I asked somebody, 'What is the most colourful city in Canada?' and they told me to go to Montreal.

Romy was, in the days of the Lacuna Cabal, a proverbial deer in the headlights, which suggested she always had something else on her mind. Still, she had one outstanding feature that made her, in our eyes, a paragon of womanhood: the most beautiful flowing locks of auburn hair you can imagine, which did much to mitigate the effects of the earnest demeanour they framed. She towered over the rest of us, trying always (and unsuccessfully) to keep her larger-than-life feelings to herself.

Let's see, what else? Romy had a soft spot for children's literature – due, we hypothesized, to the arrested development that may have occurred as a result of not being allowed to look after that goddamned mouse – and tried to keep up to speed on its developments. She considered *Harry Potter* to be inferior to some book about a girl and a bear and atheism, the title of which we can't recall, and the first book she recommended to the group (summarily rejected), was *Shardik* by Richard Adams, not really children's literature at all but also somewhat intensely about a bear (though he had written more famously about rabbits). The trajectory from mouse to bear in Romy's imagination remains a mystery to us.

Oh yes, and she found the building. The saddest, greyest, ugliest building in the city of Montreal. That was her single contribution to the Lacuna Cabal Montreal Young Women's Book Club at the beginning of our story, a fact that is, we suppose, nothing to sneeze at.

Romy sat next to

Emmy Jones,

offering her constant comfort, due to a heartbreak that had occurred in Emmy's life at exactly the same time, almost to the day, as the death that had occurred in the Cabal the previous fall. Nobody was certain why Emmy continued to feel heartbroken six months after the fact, but the generous interpretation was that she had occasionally resumed torturous relations with the man in question. The primary casualty of this heartbreak, however, even considering her self-centredness during the season leading up to the new book, seems to have been her love of literature, which made a sudden and, it seems, permanent, exit.⁷

⁷ As a playwright, her highest ambition, according to a recent interview published in the *Mirror*, is to create a *théâtre vérité* domestic drama in which not one word is spoken on the stage and all expression is made using only looks, small gestures and violence.

What's more, speaking now of the present, she resents, apparently, very deeply, being depicted in the 'exaggerated mythopoetic realm of this account,' and will not read it, will have nothing to do with it, will barely even acknowledge its existence. She stuck it out with the Lacuna Cabal's final book, she reports, out of loyalty to and concern for Runner's health and feelings, but was otherwise finished with fiction. She has, in fact, challenged us, through the intercession of a third party, to entirely remove her from this account. But after deep consideration afforded by many sleepless nights, we have determined that we cannot do that, at least not altogether. Many of the decisions Emmy made during the weeks in which this story takes place – decisions which, granted, may have arisen out of heartbroken self-destructiveness – rendered her de facto the catalyst for many other events, events that go to the very heart of our story. Emmy's private story is intertwined with the larger story of the Lacuna Cabal Montreal Young Women's Book Club, which fact renders it not exclusively her own. We're sorry. We're very, very sorry.

We considered changing her name, but that doesn't seem to go far enough in the case of Emmy Jones. We feel, given her concern and our deep regard for same, that we have to transform, somehow, her whole self. It's a difficult dilemma because we can't just replace her with a scarecrow with no past and no future, who merely commits the actions that are necessary for Emmy to commit in order to move ahead with our story. We also have to be careful to avoid becoming like the storied Islamic painter of the thirteenth century, who, having been told that he cannot depict Muhammad, begins to dream the Prophet in three glorious dimensions on canvas and so prefigures the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, depicting Muhammad and always Muhammad and only Muhammad. The last thing that we need to happen in this story is for us to become obsessed with depicting Emmy, holding up a mirror to reflect another mirror, casting Emmy forever and alone into infinity. We do not wish to be embraced by

our repression, lest it bring forth monsters. We have therefore adopted a somewhat radical narrative strategy and decided to make Emmy a fictional character. And to make the fact of Emmy as a fictional character clear to the reader in every moment. In order to fulfill this mandate, we have determined to (ahem) make her striped. And to always comment on her actions and feelings with respect to the fact that she is striped.

Emmy was striped. Like a zebra. Except saying she was striped like a zebra is like saying Einstein was smart like a fox. It does not convey the truth of the matter. Also, we should stress that her stripes were not of the zebra (or tiger, etc.) variety at all. We know that, because they did not fan out from her spine, as they do in most of the natural world, but were rather more uniform, running horizontally all the way around her body. And her stripes changed width, colour and shade, depending on her mood. Still, no matter how they changed, one shade was always lighter and the other darker.⁸ So, if you attended a very close eye, you would always perceive the stripes. Her mind in those days was a perpetual state of black and grey, but her skin was always projecting at least two colours, exquisitely matched. We wonder, under what circumstances would she mismatch? And was it an act of will that she didn't? Or was it rather an act of nature? Colours always match in nature.

Her stripes manifested themselves with exquisite subtlety – if you met her on the street you would not notice that she had them. She managed, with some effort, to mask them from most observers by colouring her hair in a pair of tones and wearing brightly striped shirts. On regular days she had maybe four of them running along her face, six if you include her neck. On more intensely neurotic or desperately emotional days, there would be more. On the day that we introduce the Lacuna Cabal,

⁸ Formally, we should clarify that we're speaking of the stripes themselves and also the spaces between the stripes. We leave it to the reader to determine which was which.

March 18th, 2003, there were plenty, but they were noticeable only to Romy.

So there. We have told of a body changed into a shape of a different kind. And we get to keep Emmy in our story. This does present a bit of an aesthetic challenge for us, since, as we stated in our portrait of Priya, we are interested in the written word to the ascetic exclusion of all other art forms, including all those that are rendered in colour. But we'll do the best we can.

We might as well cut to the chase, let the cat out of the bag and say the thing that was obvious to everybody except Romy herself and perhaps Emmy as well: Romy loved Emmy. She would have loved her even without her stripes, but, as she was from Bingotown, Romy's eye was involuntarily drawn to colour as something it had rarely seen. So Romy saw Emmy, and what she saw she loved, no matter how sullen was the object of her love. What's more, despite the fact that her love was unrequited, Romy remembers it with wistful fondness and has offered her diary to be used for its edifying instances of self-loathing. We have, however, for the moment anyway, declined.

Emmy sat next to

Aline Irwin.

Aline was the most controversial member of the Lacuna Cabal Montreal Young Women's Book Club, for the simple reason that she was not a young woman at all. Not that she was old, or that we would not have been able to make some kind of exemption for elderly applicants, but we're not entirely sure that we should have made an exemption for Aline Irwin, no matter what Missy might have wished.

Still, Aline was there at Missy's invitation and Missy's insistence, and there were certain matters in which no one would ever dare to cross Missy.

Priya, who was new to the group, recalled once having seen Aline, sometime in the previous year, surrounded by friends

(presumably including Missy, who did everything she could to protect Aline from the world) in a breakfast café on Parc Avenue. It was something Priya recalled easily for the simple reason that she had never before seen a person who looked so miserable as Aline did that morning, especially in contrast with her crowding compatriots. It was clear that her friends appreciated Aline, indulged her, allowed her to stay the way she was: sitting with her head down and peering through her makeup at the black dress, the stockings, the shoes. They accepted her without complaint and were heroically unaffected by his moods. The way you might sit with a sick friend when it's many of you who have come to visit and not just one.

But even in this recollection we've managed already to make the error of referring to Aline in the masculine. We can't even prop up the desired illusion of femininity in our own account.

Because it was clear to all of us, including Aline herself, if that permanently alienated expression was any indication, that Aline was a boy. A boy in a dress, as distinguished from a spectacular androgyne, like Prince, or like Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Probably not even a fully grown boy, since he was working so hard to mentally suppress his hormones.

Yes, she was a he, dressed as a she, and no matter how much makeup and sympathy were ladled onto her, this remained a permanent, irreversible fact. She was never going to make the cover of *Xtra*. Where the makeup was concerned, you could always more than make out a five-o'clock shadow — a misnomer in this case, since he shaved sometimes three times a day, so it might as well have been a 10 a.m. shadow. His skin reacted badly to the foundation and sprouted abscesses with deep reservoirs. No matter how loosely fitting her drop-waist dresses, you could always perceive the blockiness of her body, the flatness of her chest, the leggings emphasizing the power of her thighs, the knobiness of her knees.

It was appalling.

Missy (we suspect) invited Aline into the Cabal so that she might have the opportunity to meet and get to know ‘other women’ and have them rub some of their womanness off on her. Among other things, she wanted her to experience ‘the reinvention of the self through literature’ and ‘a bit of a haven from boys.’

Since there were no boys allowed in the Lacuna Cabal Montreal Young Women’s Book Club. Not then. Not ever. No exceptions ...

Neil Coghill was an exception. Because he was ten and alone in the world except for Runner. And he was not really a member, but, rather, merely present to the membership. Otherwise, no exceptions.

The one who was fierce in her loyalty to Aline, who sat next to her, protected her, displayed in the manner of all guardians that most profound test of loyalty – the commitment to a lie – was none other than

Missy Bean,

founder and president of the Lacuna Cabal, of whom we have already spoken. How could we not have already spoken of her? She touched and enriched each of our lives in myriad ways. She gave us books and she gave us one another, and she was lonely and she was from Westmount. She was our captain and our king. If we were the seven sages who laid the foundation, Missy alone was the engineer of human souls!

Which is not to say she could not be barbaric (or, if you prefer, particularly considering the aforementioned allusion to a quote from Stalin: which is to say she could be barbaric). She had the instinct for power and the will to find it. She left no question in anyone’s mind that politics is something pursued for the love of power and the craving of attention. Government is essentially barbaric – ‘barbaric in its origins and forever susceptible to barbaric actions and aims.’⁹ It can’t civilize itself. But it

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can certainly civilize the rest of us, depending on what book it elects to have us read and plunder.

And we would have followed Missy to the ends of the earth. As it turns out, Missy did indeed go there, to the ends of the earth, before this story came to its conclusion, and we – the two of us – did not follow her there. So this book is our attempt to fulfill the tenets of our oath some years after the fact.

Missy was a little older than the rest of us – a fact that she managed to conceal fairly easily, mostly by refraining from any discussion of her past. Truth be told, she'd had some experiences of her own, had travelled a bit and was, we've come to learn, listening very closely to the ticking of her biological clock. She kept this fact well concealed, however, allowing us to think of her as a latter-day Sappho, indifferent to the world of men, when in truth she was more like Cleopatra. And she had a rich father who kept her in furs and memberships, and provided the credit card that purchased the heater, in the glow of whose blue flame she now sat next to

Me.

The other I of the two of us: Danielle, at the other extreme end, the other one of the two of us about whom the less said the better, though I suppose we should say something:

We were brought into the club by Missy, essentially as loyalists – sort of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to her Claudius, with the twins, Runner and Ruby, cast as Hamlet. We were there from the beginning. Missy knew that it would take an effort to control the will of the twins, though she felt that the Cabal was better off with them than without them, since perhaps without them meant against them, and that would have been no good at all.

Though we pretended fealty and friendship to everyone, essentially we represented two extra votes in Missy's favour. That was the private condition from the beginning, to be overturned

only if we felt that, for some reason, Missy was committing a destructive act, against herself or against the integrity of the club. The only reason this caveat was ever discussed at all was that we, including Missy, shared a very high sense of drama, occasionally indulging in fantasies about going mad and that sort of thing.

But why should Missy not have three guaranteed votes? She'd built the cabal with her own bare hands. Whatever it was that a maverick such as Runner Coghill brought to the table, she was no leader, and she could not have begun to build such an institution on her own. Mercury burns its path, cuts a swath: it's a destroyer, not a builder. Missy built the Cabal alone.

So, yes, we were her lackeys, meant to counterbalance the influence of the twins, Runner and Ruby, and their essentially wacky ideas. Which means, we suppose, that the two of us were the anti-twins.

And that completes the call of the role for the Lacuna Cabal, March 18th, 2003, 7:06 p.m. Here we are, in all our individualized glory, with our conflicts and our quirks.

Though in many other ways – many essential ways – we were, together, a single thing. Like a unit of the army in battle, like the chorus in an old Greek tragedy, like the Scooby-Doo gang. We were then, and always will be, the Lacuna Cabal Montreal Young Women's Book Club.