



stunt

Claudia Dey

*'And the red sun of desire and decision
(the two things that create a live world)
rose higher and higher.'*

Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita

one

It's night. The dead centre of it, bull's-eye black. We're sitting in the wet sand on the shores of Lake Ontario, after riding your bicycle here: you, the pedaller, and me, the pedalled, curled on your handlebars, knees to my chin, eyes fixed on yours. We arrowed south, a perfect downhill, and with a sharp left, stomachs pulled into hard wedges, we sped east onto the straight and narrow of Lake Shore, under the bridges that jackknife it, to this spot. Crabs on pointe. Red ants. Boaters' lost rings. We are father and daughter, fishing on the shores of a radioactive lake. I'm nine. Not sure how old you are. Don't know the day you were born. Only that it was winter. And that it was during a snow-storm, a murderous one.

This night, the weather is terrible. Cold and raining. Unlikely fishing weather. The city asleep behind its great wing. 'We should have brought slickers,' you say and sidle into me. Nightgown soaked and stuck to my skin, I shrug. I am Sancho Panza. 'I like it.' I do a cartwheel for you, legs quick shudders over the moon. You grin smoke.

We've spent every night here for a year, tucked in amongst the boulders. We've never caught anything, not even a shoe, but this doesn't seem to be the point.

Fishing hook held hard in one hand, worm and cigarette in the other, you pass the worm along knuckles until it hangs from your fifth finger. The lake inches up to your high-grade-leather cowboy boots. Size thirteen. Licked with paint. The worm fans its body in the air. Everything instantly lashes and undulations for you, everything instantly mistress. Pink and brown rings contracting, it arches back. It eyes its killer: a man tall as a weather vane. Pinstripe suit, frayed at the cuffs, split and resewed, beard

in patches, and a moustache waxed to flatline. Remnants of a handsome man.

Cigarette to your mouth, the stub of your smoke is pulled in, a deep draw, and then pinched between a graveyard of blackening teeth. Never an exhalation. You keep it all. Your lungs: stingrays. Winging out. Eternal.

You puncture the worm.

I hear the worm's death cry. And then rapture, worm rapture, rapture in the death hands of Sheb Wooly Ledoux, worm killer, unflinching man, my father.

You dip your line – twelve feet of household string tied to a straight sapling, small rock for a sinker, safety pin bent for a hook – into the lake. ‘It is about the bold statements, my darlin’.’ You wrap your arm almost double around me. ‘The bold statements.’ You peer out at the water. Cross-hatching around your eyes, your face made tributaries by the rain – you are cut from rock. From that original band of granite. The collision, the fire to the air, the melting, the near settling, this is what made you.

The hungry whine of a seagull. The green smell of the lake. No bites.

Suddenly called to attention, you stand, a gazelle full of broken bones. You cover my ears. An explosion across the lake stacks itself up the sky in blacks and reds, bruises and sores. The earth shakes below us. The lake swells and boils in an angry moan. Fish fly out of the water and onto the sand, flipping on their bellies, their backs, trick fish balancing on their tails. Five of them hop neatly into your suit pockets, enough for breakfast. You uncover my ears. You look at me. Your cigarette somehow still lit.

Love me. I dangle these words in front of you like beads on a fine string. *Love me.*

You stroke my hair, cold and slicked. You stroke my face. Thumbs smudging rain. Your hand comes to rest on the back of my neck. I lean in against it.

‘We’re the same.’ I read your lips. Won’t get my hearing back until morning.

I close my eyes and smell you in: unwashed man skin, old smoke, cat, wet wool, apple. I reach out in the dark, knowing the path by heart, touch my finger to your mouth, your lips so soft behind the bristle, batter and silk. They open for a second. For the first time, my fingertip allowed to disappear.

The next morning, sand in my sheets:
kippers fanned out – a peacock on the breakfast table,
the taste of metal in my mouth,
you are gone.

You leave behind a note. This one, this last one: a drawing of
a flying monk with an enormous penis and below, in your
exaggerated scrawl, always lower case,

gone to save the world
sorry mink,
immaculata,
sorry
yours
sheb wooly ledoux
asshole

No Eugenia. No Eugenia. None.

I am sitting on our front stoop now. It is the first day. The first day of Sheb Departed. June 7, 1981. Time suspended. For me. Not for the rest of the world. The rest of the world is busy, birds flying through the spokes of a spinning wheel.

Trucks speed along our narrow street swiping side mirrors, Eritrean music pounding and keening, kittens scampering for their brief lives. People holler to each other from open windows. Instructions and promises and *don't forgets*. Milk! Marriage! Go! After the rain last night, the sidewalk is washed clean, cars licked and glinting like the backs of otters. And me. Teeth brushed. Hair brushed. I am ready. Knowing that you did not put me in the note because you mean to take me. Of all the things we agreed upon in silence, this is the biggest.

I wear my black corduroy dress. It will stand up to any weather, wherever you might want to squire me to, whatever clime. I have sewn provisions into the hem: nuts, a handkerchief, rope, a pen and paper and a knife. I will move with you as seamlessly as you move through the world. I will be your shadow.

The twins from next door race by. They are playing Horse and Master in matching brown leotards and tap shoes. They have numbers pinned to their backs, hair in buns, like second heads. They have just come home from a dance competition. I can never tell them apart. They are my age. Their names rhyme. They take turns being mean.

The twins' mother comes from the Perfect Mother Kit. Our mother, Mink, dared us to find her pulse. Mrs. Next Door could host church. She is the saint of little sandwiches, mending cuffs and gentle scolding. She matches her lawn ornaments. She walks like she is figure-skating. She carries a first-aid kit. She is always calling out the time. Bath time. Suppertime. Homework

time. She is the cuckoo bird of mothers, something between a wind-up doll and a wax museum. Once, my sister, Immaculata, and I heard Mrs. Next Door tell the twins to stay away from us because we were macabre. The twins didn't understand *macabre*.

Mr. Next Door was a professional football player. Now he is just another formerly muscular man with a briefcase and a hatchback. Sometimes he looks at us lingeringly in the driveway. He smells of photocopier and he never tells jokes the way most men do. He just heads for their front door, withering into the shape of a question mark as he draws near.

One of the twins neighs while the other uses her skipping rope as a whip – just grazing her sister, who, below on all fours, does not dare look up for fear of blindness or disfigurement. 'Faster,' the one with the whip commands, 'faster, you filthy mare.' Too exuberant, she trips herself. She holds her scraped palms open as though she had been carrying something – a trophy, an infant, a glass slipper – and now it is gone. The horse sister neighs plaintively and strokes her injured sister with her double head. They look at me and together they sputter, 'You're bad luck, Eugenia.' I see them tangled in the underbrush of a lake, tangled in each other, drowning frantic and then perfectly, smoothly together.

'Snack time. Now,' Mrs. Next Door commands.

I do not want to leave my post, so I pretend to be looking at the teenage flowers poking their new oval heads out of the earth, and I pee. I pee in our garden, scant and brittle and doomed, in naked daylight.

All said, I am easily found. Find me. This is what my body yowls, even if I am all orderliness and composure. I am a spectacular quiet. A morgue after hours, empty corridors and, somewhere, a knocking from within.

The postman walks by. No mail. Still, he stops. 'Good day, little lady.' I know by his extra glee that he has no wife, no girlfriend, and that some nights he eats out of a can. 'Waiting for the tooth fairy?' 'No,' I say, flicking my front tooth back and forth, the dangler on a nerve string. 'The tooth fairy does not exist.' 'I disagree,' says the postman, enthusiastic, a man in a theme park. As he is about to launch into a fake fable, I cut him off, 'See you anon,' and I look beside him to make sure I am not missing my cue, a car door swanned open, a hard wink. I need to get him past me, past my line of vision. I want it unobstructed. I want everything unobstructed. 'Move along.'

The postman is gone. It smells like bachelor apartment.

I am synesthetic. When I smell, I see. I was diagnosed with synesthesia when Mink's perfume made me bite my tongue until it bled and scarred. A gully. She moved to smooth my bird's-nest hair, her skeleton wrist passing my face, her nails filed into darts, and with it, I saw bayonets slashing through the bodies of serpents.

I try to explain this, with my swollen tongue, to the doctor. His scalp is a freshly seeded lawn. His eyes, the colour of turpentine. He pats me down like dough. I stutter. I am all vowels. 'ell er efum an ... aw ... erents ... an ayo.' I cannot find words or answers. This always happens when I am beside Mink. Like I have just arrived in this body and I am still trying to figure out how it works. Not the way I am with you; with you, I am a *daredevil*, an *aerialist*, a *miracle*. Your words, not mine.

The doctor explains that synesthesia is thought of as a cross-wiring in the brain, a leftover from the early mammals. 'It often comes in the form of letters and numbers having specific colours.' As he speaks, his forehead winks white. He is an egg about to hatch. He is full of spiders. 'For instance, the letter F will come across as a sharp yellow; in turn, so will the words *finger*, *fog*, *faith*.' 'F', says Mink. Mink is flushed and gleaming. Mink is turning into dessert. Mink and the doctor laugh the way adults laugh when they can't have sex. This haha is my hand between your legs and this other haha is my hand moving over your breast, a matador on a motorcycle, vroom, vroom. The doctor leads Mink behind the examination curtain for what Mink calls grown-up talk. There is an exchange I can't quite make out that involves the words *cheeks*, *lamb* and *parking lot* and then there is what sounds like a scuffle. They re-emerge from behind the curtain. Mink is unaltered the way she is always unaltered: flood,

famine, mushroom cloud, everything would still be tickety-boo for Mink. Adjusting himself, up, down, the doctor goes on, panel-professional now: 'Synesthesia has a strong genetic component,' he says, all business, all comportment.

You see with sound.

'And is more common in the premature,' he concludes, subdued zing.

Me, by three months. A worm.

I trip on the way out of his office and split my lip.

'Eugenia,' Mink says as if I'm a stubborn stain, and apologizes to the receptionist, thick and square under two sweaters, both buttoned to the neck, nose chapped to a cardinal red. 'She's an incurable drunk,' and Mink laughs her throaty laugh. The receptionist hands me a tissue from her sleeve, 'There, dear, you're bleeding.'

Later, you tell me that if I were to surprise you on a busy city street, you would, upon seeing me, hear an entire symphony.

We live in Parkdale, a village in the west end of the city of Toronto, made up of Victorian mansions that used to border the lake. Women with parasols and bathing suits down to their calves, women with consumption, walked the beach, Sunnyside Beach. Now the highway sits on top of us, a beleaguered crown, turning Parkdale into a tired beauty queen. Feathers in her hair. Crinolines in a knot. She is grand. She is slumped. She is a rooming house with clapboard siding, transoms, cornices and turrets. Her voice is parched and playful. She is all invitation. She will take you in when nobody else will. The sun: her chandelier, her tarnished medal for bravery.

A shirtless man steers a shopping cart filled with scrap metal and stereo equipment. He wears a sleeping bag for a scarf. Inside our house, Mink will be plugging her ears, fingers forming an arrow, *What a racket*. The man's right eye is purple and swollen shut, the wet hump of an urchin. In Parkdale, he is not an unusual sight. It is the smooth faces that people stare at, the smooth faces that stand out. Everyone else appears shipwrecked. Everyone else appears collapsed with scurvy. Teeth falling out. Bones splintering into matchsticks. Eyes streaming with blood.

Morning turns into afternoon, the sun slinking slowly west, all sprawl and repose, and taking with it the freshness of the day. Immaculata places a sandwich beside me. Her long wrist, the lace cuff of her dress too short, a mess of blue veins. She has a stricken look, a sixteenth-century face the colour of porcelain. 'Sustenance,' she says in her nurse purr. She pads away. I look at the sandwich. It is isolation on a plate. The crusts have been cut. I open it. Liverwurst. No garnish. No condiment. This is Immaculata.

My older sister, the proletarian restaurant. She is all task completion. There is no waste. No frivolity. There is no humming under the breath.

Suddenly she is beside me again, the human postscript, panting liver into my ear, 'When I couldn't find him this morning to give him his coffee I thought he might have spontaneously combusted because that would be just like Sheb and then I saw the kippers and then I thought *strange* and then I realized that he had left and my guess is that he is not coming back and that this is it for a father no more father Euge no more father no more Sheb.' She is so efficient there is no punctuation.

'Wrong,' I say too late. 'Wrong,' and I practice standing on an acorn without splitting it. I do it. A perfect shot to the air. *Pow pow*. Maybe you are watching. Please, be watching.

You tell me that an acute sense of smell can lead to impeccable balance. You tell me that this is true of the Asian elephant, and true of me. I set out to prove you right. And while I do, I imagine you, braided wire around your wrists, your waist, your ankles, being slowly pulled up to standing by me, your small army.

Riding on your bicycle to Our Spot, *secret*, every night for this past year, to dangle our lines in the lake and catch nothing, rain, sleet, the last of the snow and ice melting into a dirty cross-section of bone, a blown-out honeycomb around us, I say *Stop* whenever I see the possibility for daring. You do. At first, in alleyways and playgrounds, I balance forgotten balls on my forehead and then catch them with the back of my neck. You clap. And then I perform this same small motion with the slopes of a stranger's roof falling north and south below me. You clap more – now

five people instead of one. *Stop*. You break into an abandoned factory (fist through window, *fuck*, scar), and with a ta-da of your arm, you say, 'Madame,' and there I use light switches as footholds. I walk the heating ducts above the sewing machines, crawling with spiders and rust. I do handstands on the seamstresses' chairs. And then I do handstands on the seamstresses' chairs tipped onto two legs. In that sprawling emptied room, clapping, you are a crowd. Clapping, the factory is full and busy.

When I return to you, you bow, believing the daring was your own and you are invincible again; and I take your wrists, and I hold them where the braided wire would have been, the braided wire that pulled you up.

One week before you leave, you take me to the library. You breathe as though you have just been bullfighting. You have something to show me. You pull down a heavy book, the whole row with it, thud, thud, thud, not even noticing the bluster, and there in the stacks you say his name. *Finbar*, you say it in a whisper, *Finbar*. *Finbar* is a spell. *Finbar* is something you do not wish to disturb. You leaf through the book reverently, a family album. With it in your hands, you are no longer an orphan. You are the son of something. Something brave. Again and again, that week, we go back to the library. We go back to the same book.

*I. I. Finbar Me the Three,
Handsome Funambulist and Colossal Menagerie:
An Unofficial Autobiography*

Again and again, the librarian tells us stiffly that we cannot take the book home. Even when you empty your pockets and

offer her tobacco, spare change, a comb. Even when you plead with her, on our last day together, that Finbar is your father – the father who left you, twenty minutes old, in the maternity ward of a Kapuskasing hospital the night of the fiercest snowstorm the town had ever seen.

‘Your father?’

‘Yes, Eugenia. My father.’ You stun even yourself with the announcement. And when it is made, it is like someone new has slipped into our room. With the exception of my birth, this is your quietest moment. Not used to it, I break it.

‘But you have never mentioned him before.’

‘It just came to my attention.’

‘How?’

‘You.’

And, in the hush of the library, you mime doing a handstand.

Finbar is a tightrope walker. The high wire. He ruled it flamboyant and firm. You show me photographs of him again and again, commenting on your likeness – though Finbar has what Mink would call *a face only a mother could love*. To me, he looks battered. Swollen in burls and hard waves like his bones are punching him out from the inside. They shoot through him, thoroughbreds in a gallop – his face, hooves in motion. I imagine running my hand over it. I imagine it shifting under my touch.

With your palette knife, you carefully cut the photographs from the book. When we are banned for life from the library, you tell the librarian, ‘You have a neck like a stem, which, if I was intent on destroying flowers, I would snap.’ And then you hold the cut pages up to your face, a mask, and you say, ‘Boo.’

and then you laugh, and then you say, 'Boo hoo hoo.' The librarian, shaking, frostbitten, says, 'Beat it, buster,' and you repeat, 'Buster,' and then we do beat it, with the push of a broad man in a blue uniform, cut pages falling from the book like bulky snowflakes, photographs of Finbar stuffed in your pockets.

When we get home, we close the door to your studio and we iron the crumpled pages flat with our hands, the tightrope a straight line again. Here is Finbar in nothing but dark tights. Swarthy, a handsome musculature, he pushes a baby tiger in a wheelbarrow on a wire the width of your thumb across Niagara Falls. The baby tiger and Finbar appear to be roaring at each other. And grinning. They appear to be in love. They are 160 feet above the gorge. Water churns below them: a death soup. Here is Finbar between two skyscrapers, cooking breakfast on a small stove, the classic: eggs over, bacon crispy, a potato onion hash, strong coffee. I imagine him lifting the coffee to his mouth, staining it. The wind gathers between the buildings. He salutes an airplane overhead. Here he is again, with a woman sitting straight-spined on a chair on his shoulders, flanking Florence, spires crooked behind them. She is tall, remarkably tall. Like you, she is instantly someone you want to know, someone you want to be shuttered in with. She waves to the crowd gathered below. Contrapuntal. They are dead quiet. A frieze. She flutters. Her dress is bandages and they are coming undone.

You tell me, 'The woman on the chair fell to her death seconds after that photograph was taken. Some drunk shook the wire.' And then you punch the wall of your studio, your fist immediately gloved in blood like you just birthed a calf. The blood is thick and it sticks to everything you touch. Making my cheek, my neck, my hair, me, red as you tell me, 'Some drunk shook

the wire. Some drunk shook the wire.' Two scars form on your knuckles. Of the seventy-two scars on your body, there are only four that I was there for. This moment accounts for half. I wrap a towel around your hand and I kiss your knuckles through the reddened towel, and with my new, worried mouth I pretend I am a queen in wartime. You do too. And then you lean in, your moustache now balsam-waxed in the style of his, straight across your face, a right angle in a world without right angles, Finbar's words, not your own, 'The trick is to have a stunt that no one else can perform.' I see the words in the space between us. The lettering is gold and ornate.

'Did Finbar fall too?'

'He tried.'

Sometimes a slow dance, tonight a toppling – the sun sets decisively and night sweeps in, all dark majesty and menace. A Cheshire grin. The air: teeth. I eat the liverwurst sandwich. It is wood chips. It is ashes. I can hear the vacuum cleaner inside. It is the sound of accusation. Mink is cleaning. We have not spoken yet. There is no need. I will be gone soon and with my absence there will be one less thing for her to worry about. She will have to wait a few weeks, but then she can turn my bedroom into an exercise studio.

Across the street and five doors down, Meatball Marta draws her curtains closed. Of all the neighbourhood women, she is my favourite, the one whose affections I court. Her face is that of a film starlet reclining on a divan. Skin like butcher paper, lithe as an electric eel, she has a Polish accent even though she has lived here since she was a girl. When she speaks on the telephone to her relatives in Warsaw, it sounds like *cream eternity cream eternity cream*. She could have state secrets and a fan made of peacock feathers. She could have a young lover in riding pants. On her bed is a buffalo hide, a lantern shaped like a phoenix above it. Her apartment is full of candelabras. They are bronze and ornate, borrowed from Renaissance paintings. Mink calls her *the spinster in loungewear*. Marta is always dyeing her hair and apologizing to me for being moody. She collects old books. The Everyman's Library. Her apartment is sinking from the weight of them. They are stacked in her attic. She says, 'I am unemployed. I am existentialist. I have no reason to leave the house.' I go there to look at the engravings in the books and to admire the adventurers, tall at the helms of ships, heading into the great unknown. Surely that's still on someone's map, somewhere: THE GREAT UNKNOWN.

Now her lights flicker yellow, like gnomes live there and they are bustling beside a great hearth, like her hovel is the one you find when you are lost in the forest and need a heel of bread. For a moment, I want to go there and have her pat my head and speak to me in her hard syllables, bricks of gold. I want her to calm me. But I don't dare. I could miss you.

I see what you are thinking. Why you didn't come earlier. It is all clear. As the outlaw says, cocksure, swayback, wet toothpick in the teeth, I must be under the cover of darkness to be wrapped in a horse blanket and stolen away. *Pow pow*. Now is the time. I know all about night, its roominess. I watched the movies with you, our fingers tangling in the popcorn. You would roar alongside the lion and then the movie would start and you would sink to a squat and fall still as a disciple. That black-and-white stutter broadcast on a sheet in your studio: cowboys liver-spotted with dirt loping through teepees; mistresses in nightgowns, purse-sized rifle clutched in hand, boss-lover's blood seeping into the carpet below; a spy on his elbows inchworming under a French window. You would cry for a thing downed, for a thing won. You could not distinguish their world from ours. I could. But I would pretend the delusion. 'Huzzah,' you would say, 'huzzah.' Cigarette stem ghosting the air. 'Huzzah,' I would answer, like a good catch, 'huzzah.'

The last time I visit Marta, one week ago, she pats my head as she always does. She wears an oval locket around her neck. It is new. She will not let me see who is in it. Her hair is Chicago

Night Life Black and matted and she has not dressed even though it is evening. Her cheeks are flushed like she has been tilling a field of stone or weaving wool to make garments for hundreds of children. She is full of children. They are quiet hills growing inside of her. She smells like she is fermenting. When I ask her if she has a fever, she says, 'No, I am sanguine.' When I ask her if she is pregnant, she says nothing and pulls a book down for me, the shelf teetering as if it is a beginner stilt walker.

The book is about a girl three oceans away who invents a language for a rope. The girl transmits a series of desires and commands to her rope and, to her astonishment, it rises an inch off the ground, and then a foot, until it coils up and lassoes itself through the air, coming back to her feet, and it dances for her and then it dances with her and then she thinks she hears it chuckle.

The girl feels a closeness with the rope that far surpasses anything she has ever felt with human beings, even her grandmother, whose kindness is never cumbersome. This closeness, like an undertow, makes her go toward the rope and away from everything else. She repeats these conversations with the rope a thousand times a day. Always away from her home and her school so that she will not be mocked or called mad. Always in the same untravelled clearing in the woods, between the jackfruit and the betel nut, bamboo creepers, the jamun and the mango. Until she does not have to have any other conversations. One day, she looks around as everyone eats their meals and laughs and wears certain shoes and ties their hair the same way and she wonders, missing her rope: *When did I become so different from everybody else?*

'I know,' I tell the girl in the book. 'I know,' I tell Marta.

The girl leaves for the forest.

On the day that they are about to lock her up, the mad girl in the woods, her village is wiped out by a flood. But she is not, because she talks to her rope and it rises while she stands on it, lifting her to safety. She hovers above her village and watches its superstitions be washed and wrung clean. Before they are drowned, the villagers have a final glimpse of her. They think she is an apparition floating above them. But they are wrong. Things like this, a girl on a rope in the air, are not sudden or fake or heavenly. They are a slow coming. They are an accumulation of events. Much like the flood. It seems quick. Barrelling across the earth. But it is not. It has been plodding. It has been brooding. Yes, the water was loosened – but it had been groaning all the while.