

CLAIM TO FAME

Mrs. Grant seemed to everyone who came in contact with her a well-adjusted, rather self-contained woman: small, tidy, the sort of woman about whom people said, "Bet she was a looker when she was young." Her former, rather English beauty could be reconstructed from the traces of it which still clung to her features and she had taken care of herself. Watched her figure. Minded her skin. Her light brown hair had gone prettily white with some assistance from her hairdresser, her blue eyes sparkled behind new contact lenses obtained at the urging of her grandchildren, and, although her legs continued remarkably fine, she showed them off in decorous ways, with shaded silk stockings and high-heel pumps, but never with short skirts. Mrs. Grant, widow of eminent geneticist Julian Grant, appeared to know her place, her age and station in life.

"Poor Mother," lamented Gwen Grant to husband number two. She was Mrs. Grant's eldest daughter, aged thirty-seven, a biostatistician at the University and a dedicated feminist. She spoke with the tenderest contempt. "Daddy just squashed her. Her life has been so dull."

That was before the shit hit the fan.

For thirty years Mrs. Grant's best friend had been Nancy Forrester, the wife of Lionel Forrester (he was the man who injected the study of Canadian literature with an almost lethal dose of Jungianism from which it began its slow recovery only in the mid-eighties). The two women met at a reception for a new faculty wife whose name no one can now recall -- probably she has since moved on or died -- and became in very short order intimate friends. They lived within a few blocks of one another in South London -- Mrs. Grant in the Wortley Village area, Nancy, more romantically, on a bluff overlooking the Coves. They met on an average of every three days at the Wortley Road House, a family-style restaurant halfway between their two houses, and exchanged confidences.

As might have been expected of such a blustery and choleric character, Dr. Forrester died of a massive coronary in his early sixties, making a great mess which was quickly cleaned up. A few years later, Julian Grant died on the operating table -- a double bypass. Then, when Mrs. Grant was sixty-one, Nancy died of breast cancer. Of these deaths, Nancy's hit Mrs. Grant hardest. People understood that this was because it was the latest in a series and because, being due to cancer, it had been so prolonged. Mrs. Grant stayed at her friend's bedside until the end. She was more faithful than Nancy's own children. Everyone commented on how devoted Mrs. Grant had been. It was unusual, they said, and touching.

On the negative side was Peter Grant's observation that, since Nancy's death, his mother had become decidedly and -- increasingly with the passage of time -- cantankerous. She had never been cantankerous before. He was a psychiatric social worker and wondered if her personality wasn't disintegrating.

After a decade of being unfashionable, Dr. Forrester's literary machinations made a comeback. Scholars now labeled them as landmarks of criticism. An important book was written about him and his influence, and he became quite as famous as he had ever been. Accordingly, LACAC decided that the house in which he had lived and worked for forty years -- being a gracious, big rambling house in the Arts and Crafts style -- should bear a plaque to that effect. Mrs. Grant, as one of the Forresters' oldest and dearest friends, was invited to the unveiling ceremony.

Nancy had sold the house to a family named Bentley after Dr. Forrester's death. John Bentley was in the English Department and Andrea Bentley was keen on historical houses. "I like living in echo chambers," the Free Press quoted her as saying. Andrea worked closely with members of LACAC to make the unveiling a success, helping with the tea and setting out her own silver, even though she had been warned people might walk off with it. The media was there and the mayor and such of the Forrester children as could be rounded up and, of course, all sorts of other people, former colleagues and neighbours and friends.

After the ceremony, tea was served, buffet style, in the dining room. Carol Woods, a reporter from CFPL, having failed to nab the mayor before he nipped off to another similar function, circulated in a predatory way among the guests, pursued closely

by a man with a camrecorder. She was trying to generate enough footage to fill 30 seconds on the nightly news.

"Talk to that lady over there," someone tipped her off. "She was Nancy Forrester's best friend. She might have a story or two about old Lionel." He pointed out Mrs. Grant, who stood drinking pale tea by the window, looking out and down towards the German-Canadian Club in that abstracted, yet concentrated way of hers that faintly annoyed her children -- it had annoyed Julian too -- and set them clambering for her attention. It was as though she were watching something quite interesting take place on the moon's surface and that surface was right outside the window. The adoption of this manner dated from the inception of her friendship with Nancy. "What are you thinking about, Mum?" they would ask. "Oh, nothing," she would say, or, "I'm thinking about dinner," when they knew she wasn't. Except for Susan, Mrs. Grant's youngest child, conceived years after Peter when Mrs. Grant was in her late thirties, they could remember the way she was before -- there for them in a way she never would be again.

Hopeful that Mrs. Grant might provide her with an anecdote about the deceased academic, who had enjoyed a considerable reputation for eccentricity, Carol wriggled through the crowd and squeezed her wide hips between the table and the window to reach Mrs. Grant. The man with the camcorder followed close behind.

"Hello," Carol accosted Mrs. Grant, "I'm Carol Woods, with CFPL, and I understand you were a friend of Nancy Forrester?"

Mrs. Grant looked away from the window with apparent reluctance. "I'm sorry," she murmured distractedly, as though she was having some trouble relocating herself in the social context of a tea. Then, focusing, "Oh, yes," she said. "Nancy. I was her best friend. Everyone knows that. For years and years." Her eyes took in the little microphone pinned to Carol's blouse. "Did you say that you were with the television?"

"CFPL," Carol repeated. "The evening news."

"Oh, the news," echoed Mrs. Grant with some interest. "Will this -- what you and I are saying -- be on the news?"

"We're covering the unveiling." Carol knew not to promise anything. "Dr. Forrester was such a pivotal figure. London's very proud of him."

Mrs. Grant dismissed this with contempt. "He was a terrible windbag," she said.

"I studied him in university," Carol defended Forrester. She had majored in English. "He made a great contribution to the field of Can Lit."

Mrs. Grant made a little sucking sound of exasperation. "It was Nancy who made a great contribution to Canadian literature, not to mention Canadian art and Canadian music," she informed Carol. "Compared to Nancy, Lionel did squat."

"I'm sorry," Carol apologized. "Was Mrs. Forrester an artist of some sort?"

Mrs. Grant shook her head. "No," she said testily. "She was an . . . how can I put this? An inspiration. A muse."

Carol thought she got Mrs. Grant's drift. "'Behind every great man. . .,'" she began gamely.

"Great man! You don't think I'm talking about Lionel Forrester, do you?" Mrs. Grant snorted, plainly annoyed. "He wasn't a great man!"

Carol repressed a sigh. This was not the sort of footage she needed and she foresaw difficulty disengaging herself from this woman, particularly as she had now gone and jammed both herself and her cameraman in between the table and the window. But Mrs. Grant had warmed to her subject. "You know," she said, "I didn't mind at first. I mean, how many years did we keep quiet about it? About all of it, and, when you think about it, it was so much. Thirty years! It was part of the plan, part of the point, part of the fun, and it didn't bother me as long as Nancy was alive, but lately I can't tell you how it's been getting my goat! All this fuss about Lionel Forrester! And you know, he never suspected a thing!"

What is she going on about? wondered Carol. She was going to have to extricate herself from this conversation. "I'm sorry, Mrs. . . ?"

Mrs. Grant was not above pulling rank. "Mrs. Grant!" she replied tartly. "Mrs. Julian Grant. You know Julian Grant, the geneticist? He's the other one who put UWO on the map."

"Oh, of course! Julian Grant!" Carol was impressed. Everyone in Canada knew Julian Grant. It was what he discovered about DNA that no one could quite remember. There had been a big fuss about it at the time. He'd been on the cover of Macleans. On *The National*. His obit too.

"Perhaps I should talk to you," Mrs. Grant said. "I've been wondering who I should talk to."

"About what?" Carol asked.

"I want to set the record straight. I want truth to out. I want credit given where credit is due. I want to throw a spanner into the history of Canadian culture as it has been perceived for the last thirty years. I want to rewrite history."

Mrs. Grant looked so ferocious that Carol had to smile. "How can you do that?" she asked.

Mrs. Grant looked at her so sharply that Carol's smile faded on her lips. "You've heard of Andrew Grenville, I suppose."

Of course Carol had heard of Andrew Grenville. He was Canada's most celebrated post-Beat lyric poet. He was an institution, publicly funded. Grateful that he had not expatriated, Canada conferred award after award on him. Carol had studied him in high school, at university. She had even interviewed him back when she was a student and he was a Poet in Residence. In the presence of the great man, shortish but lionine in aspect, her knees had shaken and she had gone, to her private embarrassment, rather damp between the legs.

"You are familiar with *The Interludes*?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"Among the most moving love lyrics written since World War II. . .
." Carol spoke as though reciting a lesson -- which she was.

"Moving?" Mrs. Grant laughed shortly. "I'd call them . . .
incendiary!"

"I suppose," conceded Carol, nonplussed.

"The man who wrote those poems loved the woman he wrote
them for with a terrible passion!" Mrs. Grant exclaimed with
what seemed to Carol an equally terrible passion.

"They're pretty . . . provocative," admitted Carol, feeling
uncomfortable. This woman was old enough to be her
grandmother. It didn't seem right that Mrs. Grant should be
pointing out to her the spoor of passion in the woods of Canadian
literature.

"And mysterious!" Mrs. Grant continued. The younger woman
must have looked unconvinced because Mrs. Grant immediately
asked, "You don't think so? Ah, well, then, tell me this if you can:
who were they written to? Have you ever stopped to wonder
that?" She raised her eyebrows quizzically. "Have scholars ever
stopped to ask that question?" She shook her head. "Of course
they haven't. Academics never ask the right questions. 'Is this a
lyric free fall or a lyric free for all?' I can hear Lionel now. So
sententious. When the only thing that matters is who were they
written to? Who was the poet thinking of when he wrote the
poem? Was writing his only consolation? His only hope? Did he
seek to win her with these words? To keep her? Or was she only
kindling to his fire -- useful, disposable? Those are the questions
we want answers to! Poetry should be like a runaway chariot. It
should drag us behind it, through the dust, over the rocks!" Mrs.
Grant was vehement. "But what do academics know of love, of
passion, of marriage for that matter and the desert of desire it
becomes? I'm talking about male academics here," she clarified.
"No feminist would touch Grenville with a ten-foot pole. That
would be like invading a boy scout jamboree just before they
dance around the wolf's head on a stick. Poles and penises! No,
my dear, male academics assume that *The Interludes* were written
for the poet's wife, for Sarah Grenville." Here Mrs. Grant laughed
sardonically. The sight of such a pretty old lady laughing
sardonically unsettled Carol. "Sarah!" she exclaimed. She
lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Well, my dear, he and Sarah

had been married twelve years when he wrote *The Interludes*. She bored him . . . well, not stiff enough. Remember the line about the woman's legs? Sarah had legs like giant redwoods. I know. I saw her in a bathing suit up in Port Franks in 1965. Not a pretty sight."

Carol realized that she had been gaping. Her mouth snapped shut with a click of teeth. "If it wasn't Sarah Grenville he wrote *The Interludes* for," she asked, "who was it?" Is this a scoop, she wondered, or is Mrs. Grant a senile lunatic?

Mrs. Grant settled back onto her high heels. Placing her empty tea cup on the table with a studied grace, she smiled. She looked at Carol, lifting her eyebrows as she did. 'Won't you be surprised!' her look said. "Why, Nancy Forrester, of course!" she replied softly. "And that's not all!"

Susan Grant drove her mother home from the unveiling ceremony. Susan was twenty-six, more practical than intellectual, a chiropractor with strong, masculine hands and shoulders like a football player. Susan gave an impression of size (no one knew where that had come from -- her mother was so petite and her father was of modest stature) and almost overwhelming cheer. In fact, she was an idealist, the most trembling sort of optimist. "That TV reporter spent a long time with you, Mum," she said, turning off Wharncliffe onto Askin. She had observed with gratitude the animation with which Mrs. Grant had been speaking to Carol. Her mother had become rather difficult since Nancy's death. Taciturn. "What were you two talking about?" she asked.

"I was telling her some stories about Nancy." Mrs. Grant was pleasant if a bit vague. She was squinting out the window at the houses as they passed. She noted a realtor's sign. "The Burns are selling their house," she informed Susan. "Must be too big for them now Joan's gone to Toronto."

"Did you tell her about the time Nancy put the peep toads in Dr. Forrester's hiking boots when he was going up North?" asked Susan, remembering, chuckling.

"No, dear," replied Mrs. Grant blandly. "I forgot that one."

The News Editor was skeptical. "I need hard evidence," he told Carol.

Carol called Mrs. Grant. "My editor needs hard evidence," she told her.

"Are you free for tea?" Mrs. Grant asked.

It was a very ordinary old trunk, a bit battered, papered on the inside with some yellowing floral print. The lid rattled on its hinges, and a strong yank would have pulled it right off. The lock was purely formal. Nancy had picked it up at a rummage sale many years before for next to nothing. When she had been hospitalized for what they knew would be the last time, she sent Mrs. Grant over to her condo with a note to the Super to remove the trunk from storage. She didn't want the children to come across it when they were going through her things. Mrs. Grant stored it in her basement.

When Carol arrived at four o'clock that afternoon, the trunk was lying open in front of the sofa and to one side of the coffee table, which had been shoved over a couple of feet to accommodate it -- she had had the yardman bring it up. It contained packets of letters, tied with different colored ribbon, manuscripts, motel receipts in Ziploc bags, locks of hair in Ziploc bags, restaurant menus, a yellowing silken teddy pressed between sheets of scented tissue paper like a flower between squares of waxed paper, a photograph album, a couple of empty Mums champagne bottles, a thin gold bracelet, a large brown portfolio tied with black grosgrain ribbon, a man's sock.

The two women sat on the chintz-covered sofa before the trunk. Reaching in, Mrs. Grant extracted the sock and held it up. It was brown and worn at the heel. "Marshall Sims," she explained, wrinkling her nose a bit. Perhaps the sock smelled. "He lost it one night under the bed."

Carol swallowed hard. Marshall Sims had died only recently and the media had been saturated with tributes to his art. According

to many critics, he had been Canada's foremost magic realist. "Do you mind if I tape this, Mrs. Grant?" she asked faintly.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Grant. "In fact, I'm delighted to have a record of this. In case one of the Forrester children assassinates me in the next few weeks. I wouldn't put it past Patty. Would you like some tea?"

"Oh, yes," said Carol, taking a small, battery-operated tape recorder from her purse and setting it on the sofa between them. She pressed the Play and Record button simultaneously. A little red light flashed on and the tape began to turn.

Mrs. Grant poured expertly. She was one of that generation of faculty wives who volunteered, preserved local history, arranged flowers, poured tea. She was using the Osbourne today. It set the right tone, she thought. This was, after all, an historic occasion.

Carol was peering into the trunk. "I see there are letters," she said.

"Each packet is from a different man," Mrs. Grant explained. "Colour-coded. Nancy was so organized. It was how she managed. Now, those tied with the black ribbon. . . . Those are letters she wrote but, upon consideration, did not send. Perhaps she had exposed too much or demanded too much, or perhaps the man changed his tack and what she had said in the letter was no longer appropriate. She tied them with a black ribbon because they were fatal letters, letters that would have done her in. There's a letter to Bill MacAdam in that packet, ending the affair. She never sent it. Do you take sugar?"

Nancy in the Wortley Roadhouse, handing in her report over coffee and cigarettes and a Formica tabletop. Now that she was in her late thirties she met lovers only at restaurants or bars whose lighting suited her. If she wasn't sure of a place, she'd call in advance. "How subdued is your lighting?" she would ask. The Wortley Roadhouse was designed for more prosaic encounters. In its brutal phosphorescence, Nancy's pale hair shone almost

white and her face beneath the thin veil of makeup appeared haggard.

"It was a very short letter," Nancy explained as she bludgeoned the glass ashtray with her cigarette -- she was always trying to extinguish some flame. Meanwhile her next cigarette nestled glowing between her middle and ring finger. "'You give me nothing,' I wrote. That was it in essence. I put it on the mantelpiece behind that awful vase. I was going to slip it to him as he left the party, but he was so sweet, Ellen. What he said to me was so unbearably sweet -- that he missed me, that now he hoped he would have more time for me, that I, not she, understood how it was for him, etc. -- that I left the letter where it was." Nancy shrugged. "I didn't give it to him. Couldn't. This morning I put it away with the other black letters."

"The man's a washout," Mrs. Grant observed.

"Oh, well. I know. Of course he is," said Nancy, smiling ruefully, pushing the ashtray away from her in a gesture of rejection, then drawing it back close.

"William MacAdam?" Carol asked with amazement. "The twelve-tone composer? Oh, yes, please," she said to sugar. "Two teaspoons. How many lovers did Mrs. Forrester have? Were they all so famous?"

"Nine altogether," replied Mrs. Grant, ministering to the tea, "and no, they weren't all famous. Grenville, Sims, MacAdam. They were the ones who made it big. Burkhardt is famous in his way -- he's that psychiatrist in Toronto who founded that new kind of therapy. . . . You vent aggression physically. Some very pseud name for it. He was always a violent man. No, Nancy was . . . a freelancer working on spec. You could think of it that way. Some hits. Some misses." She laughed softly, shaking her head. "Some downright disasters." She handed Carol her tea. "I'm thinking of Ned Logan. Oh! What a shambles! And there was poor John Foster. Everyone thought he had such promise, but all he succeeded in doing was drinking himself to death. Have you ever heard of Ned Logan? John Foster?"

Carol hadn't.

"There." Mrs. Grant had made her point. She seemed pleased. "You hear, Nancy?" she asked the air. "I told you they would never do." She smiled at Carol. "I am vindicated," she said, by way of explanation.

"It's cockeyed what people believe about men and women," Nancy ruminated. She often started off this way, moving from the general to the specific. "About men being aggressive, I mean, and women passive. I don't think any man has ever come onto me that I haven't laid some kind of trap for. Every lover I've had I've propositioned, and they've been ruddy grateful. They couldn't have screwed up the courage." She sighed, lit another cigarette. "It irritates me -- how inert they are. Slouching about, hoping someone will take them in hand. Nothing would ever happen if it weren't for women. The whole species would grind to a halt."

Mrs. Grant wanted details. "What did you say to him?"

Nancy smiled. "I looked him straight in the eye and said, 'So, John Foster, are we going to have an affair?' Like sugar in the rain, Ellen, that's how he melted. Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"What do you think of him? Surely that's more to the point."

"I'm in love. I'm irrational. I can't pass judgment. Yes, I can. He's divine."

Mrs. Grant sipped her coffee judiciously. "He's a good sculptor, I suppose, but my opinion is he drinks too much."

"You may be right," Nancy conceded. "Wonder if I can save him."

"Still, four out of nine. . . . That's not bad as records go," Carol spoke with admiration and some envy. She perceived this envy

as pain, a twinge in the vicinity of her liver. She herself had had two sorts of semi-relationships. They had fizzled like Alka Seltzer in water -- a momentary effervescence followed by a permanent flatness. Carol wanted . . . was looking for someone sensitive with a comparable income. The men who came onto her in bars were too short.

But Mrs. Grant didn't seem to think finding suitable men so difficult. "Canada's a small country," she pointed out, "and Nancy had good instincts. She was great at rummage sales too. Always came away with some prize." She glanced down at the trunk. "Not that he was such a great prize, mind you. At least I didn't think so. Those letters tied up in blue are from Burkhardt. He was younger than Nancy by, oh, quite a bit, seven years or so. Wet behind the ears. Green. He was crazy about her, wrote her almost daily. When she broke it off, he had a fit, cried like a cat under the window. Explaining that one away to Lionel was not so easy, let me tell you. Luckily the entire debacle coincided with the University awarding the great man a chair, so he was distracted, as usual, by earthly glory."

Nancy heard a rapping at the back door. Turning from the sink, she saw that it was Greg Burkhardt. Quickly she dried her hands on the dishtowel, laid it crumpled on the counter and moved to the door. She opened it a crack and spoke through the screen into the darkness of the summer night. "Greg," she hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"Let me in, Nancy," he said. "I know Lionel's in Toronto."

He looked pale and very grim. She unlatched the door. He slipped in, caught her by the forearms, pulled her so close that his hipbones grazed hers. Then abruptly, absurdly, he buried his face in her shoulder. She was embarrassed for him.

"Greg!" she protested.

"

I don't understand why you're doing this," he said through clenched teeth from the comfort of her shoulder.

"The usual reasons. I've told you all this before," she said tensely. "Something is bound to happen."

He pulled back and looked her square in the face. "I don't buy it, Nancy," he told her. "You didn't worry before."

"I have four children."

"I'll take them."

"They love their father. It would tear them apart if we were to divorce. It would ruin their lives."

"But what about me? What about my life?" he cried. His voice was ragged with grief.

"Oh, Greg," she said wearily. "Poor Greg! There's nothing I can do to help you." She took him in her arms, smoothed his hair like a mother, kissed him on the eyelids. "There, there," she said. Over his shoulder she watched, in case a child woke in the night and came downstairs to find her.

"Within months of breaking off with Nancy, Burkhardt married," said Mrs. Grant. "An older woman who looked very much like her. It didn't last. Frankly, I think he beat her." She smiled. "You know what gives me great satisfaction?"

Carol shook her head.

"Knowing that, at this very minute, as we sit here, my dear, having tea and chatting so nicely about Nancy, well-heeled Torontonians are paying absolutely ridiculous sums of money to have Greg Burkhardt coach them in venting aggression. You know where he got the idea in the first place?"

Carol didn't.

"From me," said Mrs. Grant, the pride sounding in her voice.

"Now, mind you, none of Nancy's lovers knew that she had a confidante. They would have had the fantods if they had. Men hate women to talk about them in that way. It's as if their pants are down, as if women are evaluating their genitals, possibly laughing at them. That does happen, of course, but not so often as they think. But Greg was desperate and I was her best friend.

He confessed his love for her to me and begged me to intercede on his behalf. He had very little pride at that time. Now, of course, he's insufferable. More tea?"

Carol nodded. Mrs. Grant poured. Added milk. Sugar.

"I must admit it was interesting hearing his interpretation of our script," she went on. "Such a fairy tale, but, of course, he believed it, had no way of knowing how we had written him in and then out of the story. He wept. He railed. In the end he was a bore, impossible to get rid of. I felt sorry for him, but I wanted him gone. I had housework to do. I took him down to the basement, got a family pack of chicken breasts from the freezer and told him to beat the floor with it. And he did. He wrestled with the chicken parts, tearing them apart. His fingers got very red. They must have ached with the cold. Then he beat them on the ground, sobbing and ranting. He kept this up for about twenty minutes, then came upstairs to the kitchen where I was cooking dinner, said he felt better and left. That was it. He never came back. I washed the chicken parts off, bent them more or less back into shape and put them out on the counter to unthaw the rest of the way. That night we had a fricasee. A few years later, I heard that he had pioneered a new sort of therapy in which people rid themselves of pent-up anger and frustration by screeching while kicking upholstered walls and beating the floor with bolsters."

"If a man loved me that much, I'd never break it off," swore Carol.

"Well, she was starting up with Sims," Mrs. Grant explained.

"Nancy liked to dovetail affairs. Always lighting one cigarette before she had quite finished the last. It was a habit of hers. She never liked to be without."

Nancy waited until the waitress who had served them their coffee and apple pie had moved on to the next booth. Then she leaned across the table and asked tensely, "Well, tell me. What does she look like?" The evening before Mrs. Grant had been to a *vernissage* with Evelyn Sims.

"Quite small, fair, not much of a figure," remembered Mrs. Grant. "I'd say not great legs. Pretty face."

"Pretty?"

"Doll-like."

"Pretty."

"Yes."

"Oh, Hell," said Nancy.

"I don't see why you should worry. It's her who should worry," Mrs. Grant pointed out.

"I'm not worried," Nancy said miserably. "I'm jealous."

"Well, then, don't be jealous."

"Why shouldn't I? How can I not be? She's had him all these years. She's borne his children. She has him still."

"Well, you've had Lionel all these years. You've borne his children. You have him still," said Mrs. Grant. "Nancy, you don't want any more children."

"It's the principle of the thing, Ellen. You know what I mean."

"If you want, I could introduce. . . ," Mrs. Grant offered.

"Oh, God, no." Nancy held up her hand. "Remember that god awful occasion I took Judy Foster out to the White Sale at Eaton's and tea after and had to drive around all those concession roads between Lobo and Arva for an hour after I let her off, howling? No. I'm staying as far away from Evelyn Sims as I possible can."

"You might like her."

"It would make me physically sick to be in the same room with her, Ellen. I know it would. There I'd be, adding up her flaws, hoping that the sum of them would equal her eventual overthrow. Her good points would be like thorns in my flesh. I would want to take a hat pin to her face."

"Does Marshall know you feel this way?"

"Are you kidding?" Nancy laughed. "She's the jealous one. I'm the one who 'gives him space'. Now, whenever he mentions her, I just bland out. It's strange. Like fighting a duel to the death, only neither my opponent nor the man we are fighting over has any notion what's going on."

"Honestly, Nancy, I sometimes wonder what you get from this," said Mrs. Grant.

Nancy looked up at her. She smiled, shrugged. "Something to do?" she asked.

"What is this?" asked Carol, flicking the tissue paper back from the bit of champagne-coloured silk nestled in the corner of the trunk.

"A teddy," said Mrs. Grant, lifting it out of its wrappings by the spaghetti straps and laying it on her lap. "Sims bought her this. Or rather, the Canada Council. It's amazing the uses to which taxpayers' money is put, isn't it? Marshall liked lingerie. She had quite a nice figure, Nancy did. Very slight. Remarkable considering that she had had four children. Just the least pooch in the stomach and some worrisome skin around the navel. She talked of getting a tummy tuck. Never did."

"What's this?" Carol extracted a portfolio, the usual brown a portfolio is, tied with a black ribbon.

"Undo the ribbon," Mrs. Grant suggested.

Carol untied it and opened the portfolio. It contained perhaps two dozen drawings, some pen and ink sketches, some watercolours, of a nude woman. They were restrained but nevertheless very erotic, and the style was unmistakable. "Marshall Sims," Carol breathed.

"Umm," Mrs. Grant acquiesced. "Nancy, of course."

"These must be worth a fortune!" exclaimed Carol.

"I had a dream last night," Nancy told Mrs. Grant. "There was a hole in that new sofa, the one in the den, and all the stuffing was coming out. In handfuls. I was sick when I discovered it. Then I woke up and I thought, 'All the stuffing is coming out of my life.' I felt terrible. I come back from seeing him. . . . It's like coming back to a nest full of birdlings, everyone's mouth open, everyone wanting something from me. The kids want food; Joe wants me to drive him downtown; Lionel insists there's someone stealing his socks. Sometimes I go into the linen closet and bury my face in a towel and scream. Even then it has to be a very small scream or someone will hear. I get out of bed once I know Lionel has gone to sleep and I creep downstairs and sit in the rocking chair in the kitchen and weep in my bathrobe. My life is like a shattered mirror. I look into it to see who I am, and I'm all in pieces. And I'm the one who lobbed the baseball into it. If I think about it -- all of it -- I get so frightened. So I don't think about it, Ellen. I almost never think about it."

"How did she manage it, Mrs. Grant?" Carl asked. "The children? How could Dr. Forrester not know? One, I can understand, or two . . . but nine?"

Mrs. Grant thought for a moment before speaking. "Nancy had a genius for affairs, I think," she said. "And she had me. Not that it wasn't difficult. Not that she didn't suffer. But I covered for her. Lionel traveled a good deal really. It's unconventional, but people do make love in the morning when the children are at school or in the afternoon. And . . . and this is the hardest thing to accept, but it is no less true for all that . . . the people who should know us best often know us least."

"Was Dr. Forrester so awful?" Carol didn't want to believe it. "She must have loved him once."

"It didn't have much to do with Lionel, I don't think," said Mrs. Grant. "And, no, he wasn't so awful. He could be quite funny sometimes. A bit pompous, but men are, aren't they? Particularly academic men who've gained some notoriety. No, it wasn't Lionel, and she did love him, although less and less as the years went on, I suspect. It's hard to love a man you've betrayed. You can't help but think him a fool in the end, and then there's so

much silence between you." She paused before resuming. "It's a field of eggshells," she went on, "and you can't break so much as one. Everything becomes surface. In the case of Nancy and Lionel, a very smooth surface, like the Coves during a deep freeze -- cold, hard ice. You could skate on such a surface as stretched between Nancy and Lionel." She took the portfolio from Carol, thumbed through the drawings until she came to a pen and ink of Nancy seated naked on the edge of a rumpled bed, her legs open, her narrow feet on the floor, her torso twisted as she turned to look at something behind her. She studied it. "No," she said, "it was Nancy. She needed it. She loved it, actually. The excitement. The clarity. The danger. Oh, Nancy was like a cat. She had nine lives, one for each man. I saw her reborn with each, midwife to herself, new at the beginning, a stranger, but Nancy by the end."

"I can't understand it myself," Carol said, shaking her head. "The stress must have been tremendous."

Mrs. Grant shrugged. "People continue to live in Beirut," she said. "Have you ever asked yourself why?" Shutting the portfolio, she replaced it in the trunk. When she spoke next it was with a kind of urgency. "We didn't want to hang it up, Miss Woods," she told the younger woman. "We didn't want to be dead in the water. Others did, but we didn't. Do you understand?"

"Women have more freedom today. We know what we want. We don't have that problem," said Carol, feeling frightened.

Mrs. Grant smiled. Her eyes widened a little, taking in Carol's fright. "Do you?" she asked lightly. "I'm glad to hear it. How nice for you!"

Carol asked Mrs. Grant one more question before she left. It was an afterthought, asked on the way out, when the tape recorder had been packed away in her purse and Mrs. Grant was fetching the reporter her London Fog. It was, Mrs. Grant thought, the most sensible question she had asked. She wondered why it hadn't been the first. "What about love?" she asked. "Did Nancy love them? I mean . . . really?"

"Love," said Mrs. Grant and smiled. "Judging from my daughters' experience, the word 'love' now inspires a kind of terror. You

don't tell someone you love them; you confess it, as if it were a crime. If the person doesn't reciprocate, you feel like an idiot. 'Oh, why did I say it? If only I had held off! Maybe in the meantime he might have fallen in love with me, but now, . . . ' Or, if the person does reciprocate, then the word becomes a kind of dreadful watershed. Once you agree you love one another, you feel obliged to do something desperate -- like get married. Love is a word denoting a range of feeling, Miss Woods. It is a very useful word, and we were never afraid to use it. Yes, Nancy loved them. She loved them all. She wasn't their friend. She didn't like them. She was their lover, and she loved them."

"But who did she love the best? Did she love any the best?" Carol wanted to know.

Mrs. Grant looked thoughtful. "At the time, she loved each of them the best. When Nancy was in love, it was pure, if you know what I mean. She was determined to love, perhaps bio-determined. I don't know. Nothing could stop her. 'Why do you love him?' I would ask. 'Because he loves me,' she would say. 'But what if he didn't love you?' I would counter. 'Then I would love him because he didn't love me,' she would reply. But to answer your question. . . ." Mrs. Grant's expression, usually so controlled, so politely ironic, softened about the edges and she sagged a little against the lintel. "I asked her that question not long before she died," she said.

"Who did you love the best?" Mrs. Grant asked. She was seated by Nancy's hospital bed in the little cubicle where Nancy lived out the last two weeks of her life. Beyond the bed a window framed a picture of the grounds of Parkwood Hospital in late winter. Ants in white lab coats scuttling between the buildings, stories below.

"Andy, of course," said Nancy weakly. She was so worn out with pain that speaking was an effort and the morphine made her hazy. "Poets pay such lovely compliments. I remember once towards the beginning he said to me. . . . I never told you this, Ellen. Can't think why not. Perhaps it was too private. Perhaps I relished it too much. Doesn't matter now. He was kissing my breasts, and he said, 'I've thought about your breasts all week. I've memorized them with my mouth.'" She laughed -- a puff of air through closed, cracked lips. She shook her head. "And I

thought to myself, well, Nancy, that's it. You've just received the compliment you've been waiting for all your life. You can die now." She sighed, coughed, shifted on her pillows. "I didn't die, of course. Not then. I'm dying now. My breasts that he so loved that he memorized them with his mouth. His beautiful mouth." She smiled wanly. "Surprise!" she cried faintly. "Nature is not kind."

Mrs. Grant went back into the living room and pulled a typescript from the still-opened trunk. Returning to the foyer, she handed it to Carol. It contained a rough draft, with words crossed out and other penciled above, handwritten on yellow foolscap, of *The Interludes*. "For Nancy," was scrawled across the top of one in pen.

"Andrew Grenville?" Carol asked.

Mrs. Grant nodded. "Last March, when I was up in Toronto for some funeral, I went to a reading he gave at Massey College. Can't think why. He's an old man now, though he doesn't look much different. Still wiry, quick. Same piggy little eyes. I never cared for Andy much. He read from *The Interludes*, and I could tell that he was directing them to this woman in the audience. A redhead, thirty or forty years old. Oh, he was subtle enough. I'm sure no one knew but me, but of course I had watched him do the same to Nancy, so I knew what to look for. And I was angry. Furious. I thought to myself: isn't that just like the Andy I knew? Killing God knows how many birds with one stone. The reusable poem, written for one woman but infinitely applicable." She shrugged. "Later I thought better of it. Andy's love was all his own. It bore his stamp, and he expressed it through his poetry. He loved the women he loved the same way, his way, the only way he could, so, in fact, the sentiments he expressed in *The Interludes* may have been elicited by Nancy but they did not belong to her. They belonged to him, and he could do with them what he wished. I felt more kindly towards him then. Well, marginally. He had loved her. I remember how he loved her. That beautiful compliment."

In the end Carol didn't take her story to her news editor at CFPL. She called the Arts Director of *The National*, which later that month devoted a segment to Mrs. Grant's revelations.

The next day the Forrester children arrived *en masse* at Mrs. Grant's house. Words were exchanged. Threats were made.

Peter Grant was on hand to defend his mother. "I can't understand what all the fuss is about," he pointed out in an attempt to apply sociological principles to an existing situation. "When you sleep with someone, you take on their social status. Your spouse takes on the same status -- second hand, as it were, like second-hand smoke. By sleeping with such cultural lights as Grenville, Sims, MacAdam and Burkhardt, your mother has upped your father's already considerable social status immensely -- retroactively, of course. Yours' too."

The Forrester children chose not to see it this way. Lines were drawn never to be crossed. The trunk was surrendered into Forrester hands, and any further communication between the remnants of the two families was forever foresworn.

Litigation followed. The children of Marshall Sims claimed that the drawings he had done of Nancy Forrester belonged to them. The Forrester children, embarrassed enough by Mrs. Grant's disclosures not to want any more publicity, had been prepared to relinquish title to the drawings until Patty, the eldest daughter, discovered how much they were worth. She hired a lawyer, won her case and sold the drawings to a private collector for \$250,000. When the other Forrester children demanded that she split the money with them, minus the expenses she had incurred in court, she objected, and they took her to court.

There was talk of taking Mrs. Grant to court too, but it was decided she was really too old.

Andrew Grenville's lawyer petitioned the courts for the return of the manuscript of *The Interludes* to the poet. His petition was granted. Sarah Grenville, when questioned about Nancy Forrester, replied only that she had been a thin little thing and that she knew for a fact her husband liked substantial women.

Bill MacAdam publicly acknowledged his affair with Nancy Forrester and went on to dedicate a song cycle to her memory.

"She was the softest, most pliant women I've ever met. Incredibly supportive. Without Nancy's help at that point in my life, I don't know if I would have continued composing," The Globe and Mail quoted him as saying.

Greg Burkhardt was less generous. "Nancy was the most insidious kind of *femme fatale* -- the housewife next door," he said. "All milk and Oreo cookies. Really she was like quicksand. Looked safe enough, but before you knew it, you were in up to your neck and fighting for your life."

Mrs. Grant was planting impatience in her borders when Gwen arrived. It was just after Victoria Day, and the air was still a bit chilly. Because Mrs. Grant had allergies, she wore a broad-brimmed straw hat draped with a large, square, lime-green chiffon scarf tied around her neck. She looked like a gaudy bee keeper.

"I'm stunned, Mother. Really I am," said Gwen, following her mother's slow, stooped progress down the border. "Think of those poor wives, driving station wagons full of kids, splitting hotdog buns, making ends meet, wearing Bermuda shorts and looking like hell. . . . Nancy didn't hurt the men she slept with. She hurt their wives."

"I worry about you, Nancy," Mrs. Grant told her, reaching across the Formica tabletop of their booth at the Wortley Roadhouse to touch her hand. "You're stretched to the limit."

But Nancy only smiled, squeezed her hand, replaced it on the table. She sipped her coffee, then, replacing the cup in the saucer, buried her forehead in her hands. "So what should I do?" she asked from inside her hands. "Become a den mother? Run for the School Board? Throw pots? These are dangerous times, Ellen. Who knows when the refrigerator might swing open its door and devour me? Who knows when I might drown in the bathtub?"

"Nancy drove station wagons full of kids. She split hotdog buns. She wouldn't have been caught dead in Bermuda shorts. That is true. Neither, for that matter, would I." Mrs. Grant replied. She was alternating red, white and fuchsia flowers in a zigzag pattern.

"And you aided and abetted her!" Gwen ignored her. "How could the two of you have such little feeling for your own sex?"

"It's a dog-eat-dog world," said Mrs. Grant, patting down the soil around each tender plant and standing a little stiffly. "Or so I'm told. Now for some water." She picked up a big tin watering can.

"Where would we be today if every woman thought that way?" Gwen wondered.

"I don't know, dear," replied Mrs. Grant a little tartly. "Where are we today?"

Susan thought her mother should get more exercise. She drove her to Port Franks for a walk on the beach. It was not a warm day. A storm was blowing up. The two women wore their raincoats and walked with their backs to the gathering wind.

"It must have been so traumatic for the Forrester children," Susan reflected. "Thinking your parents were one way, then finding out all of a sudden that they were entirely different."

"Maybe it's exciting," speculated Mrs. Grant. "Turning things upside down isn't always bad."

"Oh, but when it's your parents," Susan disagreed. "No, your perception of your parents is the bedrock on which you ground your worldview."

"Ever heard of tectonic plates?" asked Mrs. Grant.

"We're talking about people's lives, Mother. We're not just . . . extending metaphors!" Susan chided her. She was serious.

So was Mrs. Grant. She bent down to study the beach rocks while Susan strode athletically ahead. Mrs. Grant selected a stone -- a big, black, flat stone -- and stood. "So," she called out after Susan. It was a hook to draw her back. "Do you think you know me, Susan?"

Susan stopped walking, turned, looked back at her. She stuffed her big hands into the pockets of her trench coat and bunched her shoulders up around her ears. She was cold. Her mother looked small, waif-like in the wind -- like a child with soft hair. "I thought I did," she called back. Then, as if by way of compensation, to console herself: "I knew Daddy!"

At this Mrs. Grant turned and, with a quick and practiced movement of her wrist, sent the rock flying over the surf. It hit the surface of the water and skipped twice before it sank. Sank, she thought, like a stone.

"What makes you so sure," she asked, "that Julian Grant was your father."

