

James Dunn / S/HE

I

After working for a short time at a real estate office, Conrad started a fox ranch in Summerside and in 1948 married Lois Gallant. The couple raised two children, Herbert and Elizabeth.

During the war, he fought at Dunkirk and Verdun, and on August 8, 1943, he was wounded while fighting in France. She was a nurse in a nearby army hospital and she endeavoured to help him recover his strength and dignity. She felt sorry for the man whose right testicle had been blown off.

The son of an undertaker, he was born in Toronto and attended Guelph Agricultural College in 1941. He left college, joined the army, and was sent overseas. The daughter of a doctor, she was raised to be a nurse and quickly volunteered to go overseas.

The funeral was held yesterday, with hundreds of mourners in attendance. Conrad and Lois were buried side by side.

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While Lois gave birth to her son, Conrad carefully calculated the monthly financial statement in the unpleasant confines of the hospital waiting room. He didn't believe in wasting any time. It was the same when Elizabeth was born.

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Herbert wanted to be an accountant right from the start. He liked the way numbers always yielded satisfactory solutions to difficult problems. Elizabeth liked to play golf. Unfortunately, her scores were much too high.

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Conrad would have stayed in real estate except for a bitter disagreement with his partner. He felt that his partner was becoming much too familiar with Lois. Lois didn't even bother to disagree. She was already beginning to feel that all men were loathsome and dishonest.

Later, Conrad was furious when she refused to wear the fur coat he had secured for her. He threatened to sell her imitation Cezanne if she did not advertise his product. Lois eventually succumbed to his fervent demands.

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While Conrad busied himself with the mating of rare foxes, Lois quietly became interested in art. She was moved by the dark, smouldering broodiness of Rembrandt's subjects. And she enjoyed the bright colours of Van Gogh.

In her dreams, Lois tearfully refused ardent young artists who threatened to cut off an ear if she did not elope with them. When questioned, she told Conrad that she did not have dreams anymore.

It was the same for Conrad. He could not tell Lois about his journeys inside women whose only source of happiness was his violent penetration.

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Words were seldom spoken. When Conrad required something, he would use one of his many gestures in order to articulate that need to Lois. For her part, Lois did not see any further use in attempting to talk to him. She was tired of discussing the futility of language.

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Elizabeth could not understand her mother. She could not see what was so interesting about a giant picture of a bowl of fruit. Herbert rather liked the painting. He liked the way it captured the essence of the apples and oranges without making them indistinct or indistinguishable.

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Conrad had purchased the painting on the occasion of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He had often seen her casting coveting glances at it in an art gallery owned by friends of theirs. Besides, he had been told it was a solid investment.

Elizabeth thought she would vomit when he made her take part in the unveiling. She was afraid to do anything that might incur his anger. She had been touched in a place where she knew fathers shouldn't touch their daughters.

The party was an enormous success. Everyone was so impressed by the grandeur of the work. While Lois was overjoyed to receive the painting, she also felt bitterness towards the man who offered it. Frankly, she mistrusted the spirit in which it was given.

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Soon afterwards, Lois became disenchanted with art. She no longer loved her Cezanne. She no longer appreciated Rembrandt. She didn't even care for Van Gogh anymore.

Somehow, she felt helpless in the face of the masters. She felt like an empty glass waiting to be filled. She wanted so badly to give something of herself. But it was not required.

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When he graduated from college, Herbert opened his own practice in Charlottetown. Still, he dreamed of Hitler's Messerschmidts each night. In her little bed, Elizabeth dreamed of social discomfort and loneliness. By day, she worked as a dental hygienist.

Lois spent her days at the library, searching madly for a painting that would please her. She found nothing. Conrad spent more time than usual daydreaming. He often thought of escaping to Mexico and becoming a shepherd.

One day, while looking through a book on revolutionary art, Lois discovered what she was looking for. She felt compelled to account for herself.

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III

She had purchased the framed print for a mere thirty dollars and had thought he would be pleased with her frugality. She did not realize the extent of her error until he smashed the glass with his bare fist, causing it to bleed. It was probably just such a reaction that Kazimir Malevich had intended when he painted the work in 1918. For her part, she was unable to explain or justify why anyone would paint a "White Square on a White Background." Conrad was consumed with rage.

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Starting his engine, he asked himself why women were so stupid. He asked himself why he even bothered with them. He silently cursed their need to manipulate. He silently cursed his need for sexual amelioration. He backed his car out of the driveway and turned left at the traffic circle.

Starting her engine, she asked herself why men resented women. She asked herself how they maintained so much hatred and anger. She loudly cursed their need to dominate. She loudly cursed her need for security. She backed her car out of the driveway and turned right at the traffic circle.

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At the far side of the traffic circle, a cat prepared to cross the road. He could see a mouse on the other side and he was very hungry.

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Gunning his engine, Conrad swore that she would kill him someday with one of her unbridled impulses. Slamming on her brakes, Lois swerved to avoid the cat who was crossing the road.

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There was no problem with "the big white thing," as Herbert liked to call it. The garbage collectors were called to take it away and they did so for a relatively small fee.