

ELIZABETH BALL

THE OICKELS

IT WAS MARGE WHYNAUGHT who chose Foggy Oickel to be her square dance partner one Saturday night at the New Glasgow fire hall—not the other way around. He was the only man in the room whose height outmatched hers and who seemed shy enough to let her lead. He was nervous and feared his hands were too clammy to keep a good grip on hers, but he had nothing to worry about. “Nothing Marge caught ever slipped away,” she told him. She smelled like fresh bread and cigarettes, and her posture commanded attention like a proud fisherman. Her shoulders were as broad as her tits and tummy were round, and her bleached blond hair was done up in a bouffant that reminded Foggy of cotton candy. She was handsome, not pretty, and the awkward, lanky Foggy thought that she was the most majestic girl in the room. It was the summer of 1954 and, at almost thirty years old, they were both single. He was glad square dancing had been mandatory at school in Nova Scotia.

Every Saturday night thereafter, the couple came together on the dance floor like two halves of a quahog shell. Afterwards they’d slip behind the hall to suck face. Marge told Foggy that she’d let him go to second base if he gave her his pin. The few friends he had didn’t know what to make of her. She was not like any woman they’d ever met. She was loud, funny, and swore like a man. They were all a little scared of her, but something drew them to her like breast milk and whisky treats. What they liked most was that she made Foggy happy—or at least it was something that looked like happiness. Until he met Marge, Foggy had been practically invisible despite his stature. He hardly ever spoke, and if his friends hadn’t dragged him out to the dance hall once a week he would most likely have died a virgin. Even though she could be as prickly as a sea urchin one minute and as tender as a young oyster the next, something about the big girl brought a sparkle to his eye. He would have done anything for her. He was hooked.

Foggy worked as a foreman at the paper mill. His colleagues sometimes teased him for being so quiet, but overall they showed him great respect. He was fair, kind, and kept out of everyone's business. Marge worked at the fish factory as a sardine packer. She always said that she hated the job—that it was like forcing eight bickering children to sleep head-to-toe in the same bed over and over again—but she thrived on the social connection. The women on the line loved her tall tales but were also petrified of getting on her bad side. Her voice, which matched her size, boomed with fury and joy.

After six months of dating, with their savings and their parents' blessings, they were able to marry and buy a little blue house in a drive-thru town off the main road. When they weren't working, they went square dancing. Marge wore elaborate petticoats under her large circle skirts, and Foggy wore a big proud grin. At home, Foggy played solitaire while Marge chain-smoked and baked squares—mint, peanut butter, pineapple, vanilla with pink icing. She liked to keep their deep freeze stocked for special occasions. She also had a thing for disaster preparedness, as their pantry was chockablock with tinned corned beef, baked beans, and toilet paper. On Sundays they went to church. Marge was a devout Catholic.

The Oickles were a popular couple in the community. Their door was always open, and they sure knew how to throw a corn boil. Their friends were equally charmed and disquieted by their presence. It was evident that Marge adored Foggy, but she could also treat him like shit. She never missed an opportunity to both kiss and berate him in public, like the time she thought it would be funny to throw leftover pumpkin pie in his face or the time he spilled his drink on her lap and she made him get down on his knees to clean it up. He never spoke back—he knew this was just the way she rolled—and she always made up for it in the bedroom and the kitchen. Her blowjobs and squares were out of this world.

After four years of miscarriages, Marge finally fell pregnant. She announced it to Foggy one Sunday on their way to church. She was petrified of not bringing the pregnancy to term, and when she began sobbing Foggy pulled over the car, ran around to the passenger side, and kissed away her briny tears. He told her that no matter what happened she was already the best mother in the world.

Marge couldn't handle the smell of the factory or being away from her bed for too long, so she eventually gave up her job. Over the next few months, Foggy brought meals to her in bed and rubbed her feet every day. Inevita-

bly, they gave up square dancing—and sex—and Foggy spent his spare time building a wooden cradle and a hanging mobile of boats and stars that made shadows on the wall that looked like dancing angels.

Spurgell Oickel was born at a whopping thirteen pounds during the worst snowstorm of the year. Despite the weather, he came out round and rosy, like his mama, and calm, like his papa. When Foggy held him for the first time, he swore his whole body warmed up like God himself had joined in the hugging. Their family and friends said that they felt it, too, and passed him around the room like a little furnace of love. The hospital staff said they'd never seen anything like it.

At home, Spurgell slept with his bum on Foggy's head and his mouth on Marge's nipple. Marge was so besotted with the little guy that Foggy became more of a nuisance than a partner. The more she gave Spurgell, the less there was for Foggy. At first, Foggy didn't mind; he knew that deep down she still cared. He could take the punches as long as Spurgell got the love.

Marge spent her days napping with Spurgell and keeping a snug home. She gave up smoking for the babe and upped the ante on sweets. Most of her clothes didn't fit anymore, so she took to wearing loose nighties. More often than not, Foggy would arrive home from work and find the two of them curled up on the couch in front of the TV, fast asleep, their faces smudged with whatever colour icing she'd used that day for baking and one or both of her colossal breasts hanging out with little puddles of milk collecting on her folds of fat like tide pools on a roly-poly sand dune. Foggy would stand and watch them, worried that his heart might burst with beatitude. Despite her onerous disposition, she looked after him and had borne him a child. Surely, he thought, he couldn't ask for more.

As time went on, Marge grew fatter and fatter. She could stuff her face like no one he'd ever seen, and it reminded Foggy of a dog that ate so fast it barely chewed. It was a miracle she didn't choke. She once told him that food and Spurgell were the only things that made her happy, but then he found her crying over the kitchen sink with a square in one hand and a bottle of Coke in the other. He didn't understand what it meant and didn't press for an explanation.

She also grew meaner and meaner—towards Foggy, that is, as her devotion to Spurgell never faltered—and she didn't like to go out much anymore. On one of the rare occasions when the couple entertained, Foggy's fourth cousin told him that he should put his wife in her place. "Be a man," he said.

On another occasion Marge screamed at him in church, and folks eyed him with a mix of sympathy and disdain. There were times when he thought that she was right—that he wasn't pulling his weight—but there were also times when he fantasized about clocking her one.

Spurgell was a good boy and loved his parents, but overall he was a mama's boy. He had no choice. At three years old he still slept in her arms with unlimited access to the milk bar. Foggy slept on the couch like a house guest, his work clothes folded up neatly on a card table. If Marge ever had thoughts about a second child, her actions told him otherwise, and he missed her large bottom and tongue tricks. When the resentment got to be too much, he would tell himself to embrace his loneliness like a nasty flu bug and pray that it would pass sooner rather than later. He was counting on the fact that Spurgell couldn't stay a child forever.

One Friday afternoon, Foggy was invited to go square dancing with the guys at work. It wasn't the first time he'd been invited—they went every Friday—but it was the first time he agreed to join them. It didn't feel right to go without Marge, but something he'd tried desperately to keep only in his dreams persuaded him. That something was Shirlette, a young widow who worked in the mill's cafeteria. She was a petite brunette with the cutest little nose and pixie cut this side of the Atlantic, and she made his coffee with just the right amount of cream. When she put her hand on his arm, he had to think of rotten fish to hold off his boner. Foggy knew that she'd be there and that she didn't have a dance partner. What he didn't know was that the decision would capsize his world forever.

Totally out of character, Foggy lied to Marge, claiming that he had to help bail out a buddy's flooded basement. "You needn't bother making me a plate," he said, "I'll eat there." Marge didn't seem suspicious; she was too busy worrying about Spurgell, who'd been sick for the past week with fever and vomiting. They discussed whether or not to take him to the doctor that evening but decided to wait until morning, when Foggy could drive them.

In his arms, Shirlette moved, felt, and smelled nothing like Marge. If Marge was an oversized mutt, Shirlette was a poodle. If Marge was a beefy steak, Shirlette was a cucumber sandwich. If Marge was cheesecloth, Shirlette was lace. If Marge was blood red, Shirlette was baby blue. And, boy, did Foggy find it refreshing. They danced until the lights turned on, and for the first time in almost ten years Foggy began to imagine a life without Marge.

On his way home, Foggy drove slowly with the windows down. He need-

ed time to wipe the smile from his face and the smell of Shirlette from his shirt. He didn't think he could walk through the door without doing a happy two step, and he was sure that Marge would have something nasty to say about it. His mojo was such that he might even snap back, he thought, but Marge was the least of his killjoy. The ambulance outside his home brought him out of his do-si-do romance as painfully as a good foot-stomping to the groin. By the time the frantic father entered the house, it was too late— young Spurgell was already dead, his lips the colour of blueberry jelly and his skin like white slate rock.

“Probably meningitis,” the first responders said as they tried to remove the child's body from his mother's grip, but Marge wouldn't let go—then or ever. She spent the next three days with her dead child in very much the same way as when he was alive. She bathed him, rocked him, sang to him, brushed his hair, and dressed him. She even tried to nurse him, and when that didn't work she tried to feed him. She baked his favourite dishes and tied him in a sitting position to a chair. She brought the spoon to his mouth and then back to hers. She ate everything she made for him and then threw it all up in a bucket by her side.

The grieving Foggy stood guard, wearing a backpack full of heavy rocks and tight barbed wire around his thigh. He couldn't look at his wife and child or else he'd start slapping his face. His eyesight was permanently damaged from crying. Unlike Marge, he starved himself. He was convinced that his son's death was his fault—that it was divine retribution for wanting more than his lot.

After the undertakers came for the body, Marge closed the blinds and took to her La-Z-Boy for months. She didn't cry or change her nightie. She took up smoking again and kept the TV on at all hours. Around her chair were piles of junk food that Foggy brought her on demand. She only got up to cook or use the bathroom. When they went to church, she put a rain poncho over her nightie. Her stench was as bad as they felt.

Foggy felt ill when he saw Shirlette at work, but his dreams didn't let up. Each time he woke with wet pyjamas he went to the garage and punched the wall until he bled.

When Marge developed diabetes, her legs became too swollen to walk. The doctor recommended a wheelchair, which Foggy would push to the stove and the bathroom. He even built a ramp from the house to the driveway so that he could still take her to church, but after losing control of the

chair one day Marge crashed into the car and refused to leave the house ever again.

By the two-year anniversary of Spurgell's death, Marge weighed over five hundred pounds and had taken to her La-Z-Boy for good. Foggy brought her ingredients and mixing bowls so she could still make squares. He held the mirror and wash basin while she brushed her teeth. He attached a potty to her chair and wiped her shitty ass and bloody vulva. She only spoke to order him around or talk with her priest on the phone. The priest had her repeat mantras about heaven and hell, and Foggy often overheard them discussing the sin of taking one's own life.

Foggy watched her kiss their son's toothbrush and rub a balloon he'd once tried to blow up against her face. He saw her wear their son's shoes on her hands and sniff his hairbrush about a million times a day. She slept with a blanket around her neck that was soiled with their son's bodily fluids.

Everyone told Foggy that catering to Marge as he did was destroying three lives instead of just one. "You're making things worse," they said. "She's only thirty-eight. She can still have another child. The way she's going, she'll be dead in a year." But Foggy was incapable of refusing her. The one time he'd let her down, the skies opened up and pissed daggers on them. The least he could do was make her comfortable. It was, after all, his betrayal that killed their boy.

His dreams began to consume him. When he wasn't dreaming of Shirlette and her tight little ass, he was dreaming of Marge. Sometimes he dreamed of her in the good old days, and he imagined putting his face between her hulking breasts or promenading with her around the dance hall, drunk on fiddle music and plans for the future. And sometimes he dreamed of her calling out to him for help on that horrendous night—help that he never gave because he was too busy dancing with the devil. But mostly he dreamed of her with Spurgell, the two of them playing peacefully without him on a salt water taffy cloud. The dreams plagued him for a year before he finally understood what he needed to do—what Marge needed him to do. He was going to hell anyway.

One Sunday evening, he defrosted a meatloaf and whipped up some mashed potatoes and gravy. He brought the meal over to Marge, put the TV on mute, and the two of them ate by the light of the shopping channel and the tune of her favourite record—a local square dance caller gone famous. For dessert, he served her hot chocolate laced with sleeping pills. After he

washed the dishes and emptied her potty, he braided her hair and painted her fingernails hot pink. Then he rubbed her feet, like he had when she was pregnant, and told her that he loved her. When she passed out, he held a pillow over her face a little longer than he needed to.