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CASTS AND LIKENESSES

AN ARTIST MAKES EVERYONE AROUND HIM A SHILL by his very nature, and in my experience this applies to visual artists more than musicians or writers. In the case of music and writing there is usually a safe distance between the creator and the audience, but the people who buy visual art expect a piece of the artist just as surely as if they were taking a lock of hair from a lover. And artists—especially those who have not yet broken through—seem willing to court that longing and sometimes even to satisfy it.

It was Canada Day weekend, 1977, and I was with Billy at Bran and Lucie Camstock's Georgian Bay cottage. At that time, the Camstock cottage was on the boundary line between Canadian art and Canadian money, as it was a meeting place for collectors and the people whose work they collected. It was as if the Camstocks' greatest hope was to make their country retreat as busy as the Toronto intersections they were trying to get away from. In addition, they had become enamoured of their own creativity, as they had populated the building and grounds with their sculptures, especially the life casts of children. Sometimes it almost seemed as if they were avidly waiting for the artists they had financed into success to have the good sense to begin buying their work, although they never asked and no one ever offered.

The Camstocks had three other guests staying with them that weekend: another art-collecting couple named Barbara and "Banker" Bill (as everyone called him and as he liked to call himself) and Gillian—Billy's model for the pieces he had with him for sale that weekend. Billy was almost sure that one of the couples was ready to buy—driven perhaps by envy or competitiveness more than true appreciation—but he was not sure enough to work without a shill, which is why I was invited to tag along. I didn't mind helping out. All I had to do was tell them something incriminating or intensely personal about Billy—his toilet rituals, for example, or his taste in sex. But I hated being treated as nothing more than his partner. Shouldn't they have at least pretended to take my writerly ambitions seriously?

Lunch was over, and the seven of us were sitting in lawn chairs positioned to benefit from the mid-afternoon shadows cast by a fine, tall oak when Bran asked, “Where are the children?”

I wasn’t sure how many children Bran was asking about. I knew that several had been brought along, but I had made no attempt to count them. The Camstocks had several, their friends had brought more, and Gillian had three—two boys and a girl—whose paternity was questionable (I never knew for sure whether Billy was the father, but it suited Billy to assume that he was). When the children were being settled for lunch in an area of tables a bit apart from the main seating, everyone kept looking at them, as if they expected to witness delight in action. Since it was nothing to me, I didn’t look, but if I had, I believe I still wouldn’t have counted exactly how many had been captured and deposited together to be fed.

One thing seemed certain from Bran’s question: the children weren’t where they had been put to eat. And yet, Gillian looked there first, rotating her head slowly from left to right and then back to its original position. Had I thought that Gillian was actually looking for the children, I would have suggested she try looking for them where she didn’t expect to find them. I could have offered, as proof, several confirmed sightings following on investigations into a startling glint or flash on the periphery of sight. But I suspected that what she was doing was demonstrating to Bran that he needn’t have asked, as he could have easily found out for himself what he wanted to know. Another scrap of proof that she wasn’t really looking was that when she didn’t see them and said, “I seem to have lost them,” she sounded wondrously unconcerned. When she added the question “Where are they, Billy?” she spoke languorously, like Cleopatra before Antony left her—a seductive plea for attention.

Billy said nothing. He only repeated Gillian’s action of scanning wherever he could see from his chair. For him, this was the opportunity to make people wonder at how much more the artist sees than the rest of us. He did not, however, see any children.

Because I was not drawn into doing it, I noticed that the others were now turning their heads as well. They resembled an exercise class, with everyone obeying an exhortation to do a gentle neck stretch from side to side. Now that he had everyone but me looking, Bran also began exploring his possible motives for having asked about the children in the first place. “I am always worried about young visitors because of the pond beyond the formal

garden.” That was the pond where Lucie and her brothers used to swim as children during visits to their grandparents, who had built the house early in their married life. “The pond seemed dangerous—it had depths that drew children in. We always meant to drain it but never got around to it.”

Despite his words, there was nothing in the tone of his voice except serenity, or so it seemed to me. Though Billy offered him reassurance, so maybe not. “Don’t worry, Bran. Gillian’s kids know better.” Bran went on without acknowledging him, as if to say that even so self-involved a person as Billy could not truly be indifferent to the fate of children.

After a few minutes, Billy got up and walked off without identifying his destination. He might have gone to search for the children, or he might have simply had enough of Bran. Gillian remained behind with the rest of us, who were lingering in the shade like fish communing in chill water.

Bran’s question might lead you to think that there will be a drowned child here. And there is, as soon as you think that—maybe not one of Gillian’s, maybe not one from among the invited guests’, maybe not one from the surrounding area, but there is still a drowned child—maybe more than one. In the act of drawing them up from the pond, I notice that they look more peaceful than children normally do when they are running around red-faced and sweaty, when they are shuffling into a lunch line at a stranger’s cottage, or even when they are sleeping, because sometimes their limbs move while they dream. It is so much more restful to be around them when they are drowned.

What am I saying? It’s only the mental construct of a drowned child that is so still and peaceful. The corpse of a drowned child, especially one being drawn from a deep pond, always lolls and drips. The lifters comment on how much the water adds to the weight, and they even use the term “dead weight,” careless of the discourtesy it implies. And they curse at the slipperiness the water imparts, because the bodies seem almost alive in their willful efforts to evade the hands of their rescuers.

But wait. Nobody is going to drown here, because these children all know better. Gillian’s older boy is probably in one of the thickets, or maybe Gillian and her obnoxious second son are in one of the upstairs bedrooms having something out. Or maybe her little girl is asleep beneath one of the specimen oaks in the garden and will awaken to a circle of admirers, like Nicholas Nickleby’s sister Kate, who collapsed exhausted in the sorrow of

being lost and then rose up into the consciousness of being loved.

And yet I can't forget the image of the drowned children, even as I deny its forecasting power, because I had finally found my story. The role I assigned to myself also reveals the resentment I felt that day against Bran, Lucie, and Billy—and that was part of my experience too.

"Where are the children?" Bran greeted another passerby. No wonder our group was only ever diminishing. Gillian got up, carefully, as if to follow the passerby, because he must have been going somewhere worthwhile, and she had to go too. Then, a few minutes later, under scrutiny from Bran as to the location of the children she had brought with her, Barbara claimed to have seen one of them tugging at one of the statues that marked the entranceway to the formal garden, which could just be seen to the south of the lawn. With a shout to Banker Bill, whom no one could see anywhere around, she excused herself. And with that, heedless of what she had condemned me to, she was gone. I was left alone with Bran and Lucie, and with the liquor outside of casual reach. I knew that they were going to give me something to do and that it would have something to do with the children, although perhaps it would be nothing more than one of those impious wishes that the nuisances troubling their peace might be disposed of. When Bran spoke next, however, it was to his wife, not to me. He repeated, "I'm worried, Lucie. We should have drained the pond or fenced it off. We should have at least put up a sign."

"Let them have their adventure," she said, beginning a rambling reminiscence of a time years before when some young visitor had almost drowned. I tried to follow her story, as it seemed to promise a happy ending, but I got tangled up in the depth of detail. On the one hand, it seemed that she treasured the old days, when children ran wild and were free to explore and discover on their own. On the other hand, she couldn't deny that it had been a dangerous, even anarchic time. Back then, pleasure and tragedy frequently walked together in an intimacy that mocked those who wanted peace and who longed for it to be like it had been before, "in the garden, perhaps, you know, the garden of Genesis, the one where Adam and God used to walk together of an evening."

"But they're not protective at all," Bran protested. "Gillian couldn't be bothered to keep track of her three. The rest are no better." He was becoming angry. "Parents today don't understand their responsibilities. I see it

everywhere.”

“You can’t devote every second to keeping children safe, not even if you lock them up indoors. If I had to remove everything that might be dangerous, I’d never have anybody over. Knives in the kitchen drawers, fireplace tools, steps . . .”

For a moment, Bran was silent. Then, heaving himself up from his lawn chair, he walked away, murmuring, “Never mind. I’ll take care of it.”

I tried to break the ensuing silence by asking about their new sculpture, which stood at the entrance to the formal garden. As Lucie launched into another long story, I was free once again to sit back and listen. Still there was something distressingly, endlessly literal about the life casts scattered everywhere about the grounds, especially since some of them were based on actual children—either their own or their guests’. It was one way of being fruitful and multiplying, I supposed, without having to endure the endless fear that life entails. Having children had never been my trade, except of course in the sense that every product of my imagination—or most of them, at any rate—were like children to me.

Why do I say that now, when you will, as soon as I say it, populate my womb with drowned children as surely as, before, you filled the pond with them?

When Lucie excused herself, I stepped away into a garden walk lined on either side with tall ornamental grasses that made me think of world hunger. I was spoken to at once by a child hiding behind the plantings—not one of Gillian’s, but someone else’s.

“Are they looking for me? Are they wondering where I am?”

In an instant of disappointment, I had found a living child instead of a dead one drawn up heavy with water from the bottom of the pond. Then I imagined hearing a voice in the distance, herding the child I had found toward it, and finding Gillian at the side of Bran and Lucie’s pond shouting for help. Billy was a foot or so from the bank, the water up to his hips. Banker Bill and Barbara had gone in next to him, but the water was only up to their knees, so they were much less hampered in their movements. Lucie was also there, kneeling on the bank and reaching toward them. And Bran was standing behind her, ready for the next one, because it was more than one they had found. I watched as child after child was pulled out of the pond

and passed from person to person. Four of them were already arranged side by side on the lawn with their arms and legs straightened, quieter than the child from the garden, who was inconveniently wrapped around my legs, holding me still, unable to escape or help.

As the bodies accumulated, Bran began to walk up and down the line of dead children, occasionally reaching down to straighten a collar on a coat or smooth back hair from a forehead. “Who are they?” he kept asking. “Who brought them? I don’t remember them.” Neighbours came by to witness the spectacle, but no one stepped forward to claim the drowned.

Lucie told Bran that he should stop what he was doing and run back to the house at once and call someone. The others continued to draw up the bodies from the water until the rescue teams came with carry-alls of medical equipment, gurneys, and light stands to be set out along the line of children for examination. Thirty-one bodies were lying at the side of the pond before the rescue workers suggested that Billy, Barbara, Banker Bill, and Lucie should let them take over. I was delegated to make sandwiches and coffee, and the police and firefighters—who were mostly young, very big, and soft-spoken—always thanked me whenever I offered them something.

For some reason I felt that it was my own fault—that the entire tragedy had been caused by my cold, judgmental nature—and I kept expecting someone to begin questioning me. Why did I want to take responsibility for something that never really happened? On some level, I suppose that I wanted them to recognize who had made it happen to show that I was no one’s shill anymore. I wanted them to see the sculptures I had cast with words. In my mind, they were already cast—the sculptures of my progeny.