





*Dolly Dennis*



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*To my husband, Rick, and son, Tyler*

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*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.*  
— William Shakespeare

*All the world's a stage and most of us  
are desperately unrehearsed.*  
— Sean O'Casey





(FADE IN)

SCENE 1:

# Loddy



*Summer 1967*

When Loddy moved into the three-storey walk-up near McGill University, she painted her basement apartment the colour of a boiled egg, and then for the hell of it, stencilled a wide China Red semi-circle across the living room wall, top to bottom, and called it the Rising Sun. Red. Her mother, Alma, hated red. She said it was the colour of communists and blood — the colour of pain. So Loddy wore only red.

Resembling a beefsteak tomato from her mother's garden, Loddy sat Buddha-like on the front stoop of her building, a transistor radio dangling from her wrist like an oversized trinket on a charm bracelet. She dragged on a cigarette, Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, flicking hot ashes and letting them settle on her bare wrestler-size thighs. She felt no pain.

Her stomach undulated in waves of blubber whenever she shifted positions. For someone so big, she was not shy about exposing her gummy arms, which jiggled under her red sleeveless t-shirt as she wiped the perspiration from her armpits. She tossed the half-smoked cigarette onto the sidewalk and, then with much effort, stood

up, legs wide apart, to air-dry her innermost thighs, chafed from the friction and heat of a humid Montreal summer. Hands on hips, she stretched her entire body upwards and attempted a side bend, then strained her head towards Milton Street for signs of the van. Every little bit of exercise helped.

A couple of nights before, to find relief from the unbearable heat, Loddy moved her divan, which doubled as a bed, against the wall just below the open living room window. She slept without any covers, any clothes — too hot for anything more than naked flesh. She woke in the middle of the night, startled by a tapping on the window, a movement of shadow, a noise of shuffling feet, and then more footsteps.

What part of her naïveté compelled her to peek through the dusty vinyl venetians, only to meet an eyeball for an eyeball, then someone racing up the steps to the sidewalk above, and there she was, screaming ... or was she dreaming? She turned on the lights and her roommates, the cockroaches, scurried back to their hiding places as though they too had been awakened, terrified by her intruder.

The next day, she told Bettina about the cockroaches and peeping tom.

“You live in a dive, Loddy, and I’m going to tell Maw.”

“Like, she still not talking to me?”

“Loddy, ever since you left she wears black for Sunday Mass and lights candles for you in the name of the Blessed Virgin. What do you think?”

“Christ.”

“Yeah, he gets candles too.”

Loddy shrugged and lit another cigarette to relieve her mounting hunger.

“Damn, damn, damn. Now I’ll really be late.”

Startled, she jumped and almost stabbed her eye with the cigarette. It became airborne, bouncing off her red cotton shorts before landing on the bottom step.

“Shit, Dewey!” Without hesitation, she lit another one.

Dewey’s thick black hair usually fell loosely to his shoulder blades, but in this heat, he had pulled it back into a tight-fisted ponytail, accenting his pockmarked face and bulbous nose.

“Loddy, why don’t you just put ketchup on those things and eat them like fries?”

She inhaled the tobacco in one long pull of defiance and exhaled a rapid succession of smoke rings towards Dewey.

“Are we ready then?” Dewey coughed through the curl of smoke.

“Like, I have to wait for the exterminators to let them in. No one’s around today.” Puff, puff, puff.

“Don’t know why they even bother. Can’t get rid of those bugs. This entire city is full of cockroaches and rats — bilingual politicians that don’t go away.” He chuckled at his feeble joke.



Dewey had entered everyone’s life in early spring. A Sunday. The St. Patrick’s Day parade, which had wound its way through the downtown core, was just breaking up and spectators were fanning out onto the main drag, St. Catherine Street, and into the nearby restaurants and Irish pubs. Floats were now parked around Dominion Square instead of horse-drawn caleches awaiting tourists and the military bands had packed up their instruments and were now searching for their rented buses near Windsor Station. Someone in the distance blew a

“Like you know, you know ... has anyone ever said you look just like Frank Zappa of the Mothers of Invention?” Loddy chirped through the smog of her own cigarette.

“N’ York. Brooklyn. I’ve been told I look a lot like Dewey Duck, nephew to Donald. The beak, quack, quack.” And he pointed to his oversized nose. “And you are?”

“Loddy. Nickname for Lotte. L-o-t-t-e which is short for Charlotte but, like, it’s such an ugly name, everyone, even my mother, just calls me Loddy like in Roddy McDowell.”

“Well, Loddy-Dah, nice to meet you.”

“Just Loddy.”

His unkempt handlebar moustache blended seriously into his scruffy beard, distracting people from his snout, and so it was his eyes that were impossible to ignore—hypnotic bulbs, two lumps of iridescent coal, like a snowman’s. He called himself a photographer, an artist, and said he lived on hot air, charcoal pencils and love and, “Can I sketch anybody here? Twenty bucks or a couple of joints will do.”

“Ooouuuuu, I love Frank Zappa!” Ulu’s Icelandic blue eyes, half shut, considered his face. She whispered in her best Marilyn Monroe voice: “Nobody’s ever done my body before.”

“Really?” Dewey leaned in closer. “I can hardly believe that.”

“You one of these drafters that escape through the border Champlain?” Marcel was peeling away the label off his empty Molson. Everyone waited for Dewey’s reply.

“Depends on your point of view,” he said.

It was Ulu, who adopted him like a stray pet, cleaned him up and became intrigued by this Frank Zappa

look-a-like who identified himself as a cartoon character, scribbled portraits, and snapped photos of her nude body.

Dewey and Ulu lived in an apartment on the main floor above Loddy's. Some nights she could hear them have such vitriolic tantrums that Loddy could feel the ceiling vibrate from the force of their arguments. She could hear the door slam and Ulu's furious steps clacking down the stairs to Loddy's apartment.



"How many ciggies is that today, Loddy?"

"Never you mind. Just let me die, okay."

Dewey had just plunked down beside her on the front steps when she saw The Blonde running barefoot down the middle of the street, sloshing with purpose through the puddles from the previous night's rain. Loddy turned up the volume to Frankie Valli's *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*. She leaned over the railing for a better view at this beauty, this vision from a Clairol commercial, a sleek pony prancing in slow motion, breasts barely mobile, her golden mane whipping high cheekbones—a goddess, a winner.

"Wow! Like, look at that."

On the sudden rise Loddy felt lightheaded. Dizzy from hunger, wet with sweat from the humidity, she began to sway like the Tower of Pisa. She fainted dead away and slid down the railing, a short roller coaster ride, out of control, descending, just as the van with the psychedelic sign atop its roof, **STERLING PEST CONTROL**, animated graphics of vermin and lettering on the side doors—*Specializing in: cockroaches, bees, mice and ants*—screached to a halt in front of the building. Loddy, on the hot pavement, her body bruised and lacerated,

lay unconscious on her side like a beached whale waiting to be saved.

A neighbour dialled the emergency operator and, as the paramedics were making a concerted effort to heave her onto the stretcher, she regained consciousness, protesting: “I’m okay, I’m okay.” Her wounded pride would not allow the humiliation of being swept into an emergency room where real patients were sick or dying while she was merely occupying space, rolls of fat from her stomach slipping over the edge of her elastic waistband like a doughy cupcake. A physical exam would have mortified her.

Loddy, aware of the giggling gawkers, curious bystanders who surrounded the ambulance, ignored the commotion her tumble had caused. Just another ordinary day, she thought. Dewey grabbed her elbow and led her, like a guide dog, two feet per step, back to her apartment while the Pest Control men trailed behind.

“Did you see her?” she wheezed. “Did you see her?”

SCENE 2:

## *The Garage Theatre*



Rita, manager and part-owner of the theatre, had just finished counting the float and was bored, bored, bored. There was nothing else to do in a tiny box office while waiting for an audience. She had already inspected her teeth in a compact mirror to ensure the raspberry pink lipstick wasn't bleeding onto the veneers, and now with mouth wide and drawn like a grinning Cheshire cat, she massaged the gums with a middle finger. She shaped her mouth in an O and checked for any new wrinkles, re-applying lipstick like a child with a crayon, paint-on-paint, smacking lips, sucking cheeks, arching pencil-thin eyebrows, twisting her head this way and that until she was satisfied. Rita was primped and shaved and electrolyzed, her grey hair dyed a nightmare black and backcombed until the beehive formed a four-inch nest atop her head.

"You look gorgeous," Loddy deadpanned as the door swung behind her, bumping Dewey in the face. The Doors were singing *Light My Fire* on her transistor radio.

Rita, startled by the interruption, smeared the lipstick over her lip line.

“Now look. Look, what you made me do. And turn that ... that awful noise off,” she said, catching Dewey in the act of rubbing his nose. “Where have you two been? Samuel has been having a kanipshit.”

“Conniption, Rita, Conniption,” Dewey rolled his eyes.

“Isn’t that what I just said? Never mind.” She continued rummaging through her oversized handbag, searching for a Kleenex when she froze in mid thought, and sniffed the air, “What is that dreadful odour?”

“They’re fumigating our building for cockroaches. Guess we’re going to smell a bit.” Dewey winked at Loddy then disappeared upstairs.

Rita shut her eyes in exasperation, and began to hum the alphabet, then shook her head when she reached the Cs as though she had just remembered something and needed a moment. Rita had studied method acting; now she was Tallulah Bankhead. “Loddy, Darlink. Please, please, be a dear and do turn that thing off. The audience will hear.”

“Like, I don’t see anyone here.”

“They will come.” Rita resumed her hunt for a tissue, lips puckered up as though she were ready to plant a kiss on anyone who might walk by. Instead she came across a bottle of Chanel No. 5 and spray painted Loddy with a mini-squirt.

“Hey!”

Rita spoke in low octaves, trained by her vocal coach to delete any signs of her high-pitched Jewish voice, and to just breathe from the centre of her entire universe, her diaphragm. For Rita, life was one long audition with call backs.

“Take care of the box office, Loddy, darlink, while I run upstairs and fix my face.”



“Well, like I guess that’ll be forever,” Loddy said, her lips barely moving.

Rita didn’t hear. “Call me if anyone comes, darlink,” she said, voice fading into one of the dressing rooms upstairs.

Loddy slouched against the wall of the foyer, lolling, pulling up her body like a human rolling pin, sucking in her belly, a desperate attempt to look thin. Too fat to fit with any decent sense of comfort inside the box office, she began a series of squats using the wall for balance. Loddy never missed an opportunity to exercise.

She was wearing snug, red polyester slacks to conceal the abrasions from her fall so the pants hindered her grand pliés and leg lifts. For someone so big, Loddy possessed fluidity in her movements — jazz arms extended out to the sides with palms facing up, fingers poised in a balletic attitude, legs in second position. The dance classes with Marvel were paying off and yet, she still had loads of fat to dump.

People should be arriving soon ... or maybe not. Tuesday was not a big audience night. Tuesday was a warm-up for Wednesday, which was a warm-up for Thursday, which was a warm-up for Friday night. Saturday was usually a full house with friends and family occupying most of the seats.

The Garage Theatre, named after its past life as a garage, was owned by the Athletic Club next door, who sold the building when their liabilities outweighed their assets, and the English membership began to dwindle. The new identity as a converted two-hundred-seat avant-garde theatre, located just a breath away from the downtown police station, provided unsuspecting audiences with original, seductive productions that both provoked and entertained.



SCENE 9:

## *The Robust Form*



*Spring 1968*

Bettina was a rebellious outpatient at Verdun's Douglas Hospital (aka *The Dougie*). She balked at the notion of keeping appointments in a building associated with mental illness. When they were children, Loddy and Bettina would dart past the ominous-looking gated grounds, both singing at the top of their lungs: "*They're Coming to take Me Away, Ha Ha. They're Coming to Take Me Away.*" Bettina was gradually gaining weight, looking healthier and Alma lit candles to the Blessed Virgin Mary in gratitude.

Loddy's life, in the meantime, had shifted into neutral. At Samuel's insistence, she resumed dance classes with Marvel who taught a combination of Ballet Jazz, Modern and Afro-Cuban with a sprinkle of Oriental movements thrown into the mix—a recipe for an excruciating experience—on par with a tooth extraction without Novocain.

She drilled her students like a sergeant and finished the class with a hundred jumping jacks, everyone in a final tumble to the floor, clutching knees, huffing and puffing. The classes became routine, three times a week.

Loddy would crawl to the flank of the stage, collapse, and lie there, immobile, tears melding with the sweat, and every part of her being—every nerve, every bone, every blood vessel, every muscle, even her eyelashes—hurt.

Instead of walking home, she would sometimes spoil herself and take the bus, clenching her teeth, ignoring her burning thighs as she bunny-hopped onto the steps sideways, one foot at a time, while the driver and passengers, strangers all, empathized with her wretched agony. After six weeks of torture, however, she felt rejuvenated, re-energized even, and the fire in her thighs subsided to a dull ache, but Marvel pushed her even harder. It was all about discipline, a dancer's discipline Loddy hoped would transfer into other facets of her life.



On this sunny April afternoon, Loddy splayed her legs out on Ulu's living room floor among a dizzying array of shimmering fabrics. Every few minutes she'd extend her arms forward and try to touch her toes, torso parallel to the floor like a tabletop. She wore black tights under her ample red tunic top, a new style of comfort she had discovered in one of the less expensive boutiques in Place Ville Marie. On Marvel's advice, she had graduated into a red and black wardrobe.

In the throes of sewing costumes for Ulu's new act, Loddy was slipstitching gold lamé over a bra while Ulu, who could barely thread a needle, wrestled with a chiffon skirt. Without warning, Loddy would pummel her thighs against the wooden floor in a continuous motion of slaps, like a runaway train, faster faster, chug chug chug, harder harder, until Ulu would deadpan: "Must you." Or in between stitches, she'd knead the fat on her

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