



Polyamorous Love Song

a novel

Jacob Wren

FIRST EDITION

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50 YEARS OF ONTARIO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS
50 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS

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excerpt from
**Polyamorous
Love Song**

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I had never seen so many people crammed into the house. In fact, there was barely room for all of us. Video monitors and cameras had been set up in every corner. You could participate in the meeting from any room. I recognized the Mascots and Productive Compromisers, I think basically all of us were there, but there were so many others I had never seen before. Every kind of person: businessmen, street punks, religious sects, people from other parts of the world in traditional dress. (I felt ignorant, not knowing precisely what parts of the world they were from.) So many characters, kinds of characters, I was unable to place or identify. It seemed the Mascots really got around. They had managed to draw together an entire spectrum of the unexpected.

Melanie and I pushed through the crowd, gradually showing our way from room to room with no particular purpose. No one seemed to know when the meeting would start or what it was about. There was much curiosity and speculation. Steve was in a corner watching the action with a strange expression, far removed from his usual anxious bemusement.

“Who the fuck are all these people?”

I shrugged and smiled.

“They’re the international, worldwide Mascot super-fan club,” Melanie said, scanning the room for potential conquests. I took a moment to admire how even at the heart of a political meeting she could continue to cruise.

“Maybe our gang should get out there a bit more, go forth in the world, get organized.” Steve continued scanning the room, trying to make sense of it all. “It’s like we’re the local burger joint and they’re fucking McDonald’s.”

It’s true I also felt this strange kind of jealousy. They say sex sells, but it now seemed that the unlikely combination of guns plus furry

outfits was selling much better. In every room there was such a palpable sense of excitement. I felt that, like us, most of the people here had assumed they were the only ones who knew about the Mascots, who were in on the secret, everyone just as surprised as us to learn there were so many supporters. We spotted Samantha on the far side of the room. She didn't see us and was gone before we made it over.

The epicentre of the meeting appeared to be the basement, surrounding the famous artist still chained to the radiator. On all monitors one could see a large group of Mascots, most in outfit but a handful not, sitting in a semicircle whose open side faced the radiator. Microphones were being set up. Nothing seemed forced, but everything contributed to a perpetual build in anticipation. From what we knew and could see, the Mascots never had a leader, power seemed to continuously shift among them, within smaller or larger groups that operated autonomously. There may well have been some functional structure behind it, but if so it remained invisible. Then, very suddenly, a loud bell rang ten times. A microphone was handed to the famous artist. His voice sounded clearly through every room.

"I have been asked to chair this meeting. I suppose I was asked because I'm thought to be a bit neutral, not exactly a Mascot, something of an outsider. However, as many of you already know, I do not consider myself neutral in any way. From my perspective, I am a complete and total partisan of the Mascot Front and their ongoing battle. But perhaps that is beside the point.

"The Mascot Front have called this meeting because, for the first time, they now wish for others to fight alongside them. The only way against failure, and towards success, is solidarity. In the past, the Mascot Front has attempted to do no damage to anyone other than those who were directly attacking them, like the Hippocratic oath: first rule, do no harm. But now the situation has become

considerably more dire, and if anyone here chooses to fight alongside us in the future, it is possible, even likely, that you might be injured or killed. This is the shift, the possible change in our policy, that we have come together to question and discuss.”

It was then I noticed her. In the bottom corner of the screen our mentor was perched, a 16 mm camera on her shoulder, filming everything that occurred. Shock is not quite the right word for what ran through me at that moment. It was like I had taken the world’s strongest drug. Everything I knew, or thought I knew, was turned inside out. If I had seen her holding a live octopus it would have made more sense, at that moment, than to see her filming. Later, when we were all speaking about it at *The Knife*, many mentioned a sense of betrayal, that they felt betrayed by her return to the old filmmaking, but I’m not sure what I felt was betrayal, it was more like a sense of unreality, that I couldn’t quite grasp the logic or trajectory of what was unfolding before me. I wondered if this was in part because I was watching it on a monitor, in somewhat imperfect focus, like a video in a gallery, yet at the same time knew it was happening just underneath my feet. I pointed it out to Melanie – pointing to the exact corner of the screen – and for a moment I thought she would scream. But then she fell silent, said nothing.

“In one sense it is true, what we are looking for here tonight are volunteers, volunteers to fight by our side, volunteers to help us survive. But in another sense we are searching for something more. We feel ready to open up, to question the basic assumptions of our strategy, which we now must admit is failing us. We are here to ask all of you to think about the question together: how can we still win.”

There was a pause as a microphone was handed to Bear.

“A meeting like this is a strange beast.” Bear continued, “All of you know something about the Mascot Front but few of you know

very much. This has perhaps, up til now, been our fatal flaw. The fact that almost no one knows just how bad things have gotten, that we now believe we are practically on the verge of extinction, also prevents anyone from offering assistance. Of the four hundred Mascots we are aware of, we now believe over two hundred have been killed or are currently imprisoned. Another ninety Mascots are missing in action. Many of the missing have most likely done little more than hang up their outfits – a grave error, in our judgment, but nonetheless the best-case scenario. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that of these ninety missing some have been killed as well. To the best of our knowledge, between eighty and one hundred Mascots are here with us tonight and the most likely scenario is that, within one year from now, half of us will be captured or dead and in three years time, there will be no one. Those who know me will also know I have fought fearlessly for my entire adult life. But right now, I must admit, I'm afraid.”

Another silence. I was listening, thinking about everything I had heard, all viewed through the lens of our mentor's sudden reversal. And as I listened one thing became increasingly clear. A gradual reversal of my own. A moment of clarity. What I realized was that all of this, our encounter and complicity with the Mascots, had been a misunderstanding. They weren't new filmmakers at all, they were actual revolutionaries, fighting for their rights, subject to real and constant persecution. We had viewed the entirety of their activities through our own strange screen, assuming they were like us, not seeing or admitting the key, radical difference.

Melanie saw Samantha, again on the far side of the room, grabbed my hand and pulled us towards her. The crowd was denser now, all standing, staring at the various monitors, wondering, as I was, how much they cared. Would we, any of us, risk our lives to

fight alongside these relative strangers? How many of us were even considering it? Was I? (Of course I was considering it but was I really giving the matter serious thought?)

When we reached Samantha, Melanie wasted no time: “Our mentor has a new friend.”

“You have no idea.”

Samantha told us about her session, how she was filmed, then they had sex, and how this was the first sex she’d had in years that she was unable to think of as filmmaking.

“It was so strange: we were fucking, and I realized there wasn’t this other layer intertwined with it. Suddenly we were just fucking. There were no scenarios, no shots, no set-ups. When she put down the camera all of that was put aside as well.”

“She regained control.”

“How do you mean?”

“Before it was your film. You called her. You were writing the scenario. Now, with the camera on her shoulder, it’s hers again. She topped you.”

Samantha look distressed, more distressed than I ever recalled seeing her. She obviously hadn’t thought of it this way. A moment ago she was feeling liberated, emboldened by this new experience of fucking without a scenario, and now she felt she’d been played, that she’d lost the upper hand. It’s amazing how fast these switches can flip.

On the monitor Kangaroo, in full outfit, was continuing: “And I think what’s most important in this dialogue is to remember that we are never only victims. Yes we were persecuted. But we were persecuted and we fought back, knowing, as we did so, that we were beginning a cycle of vengeance we might not be able to stop. For now, the danger is clear: If we don’t change something, if we don’t

alter our strategy, this vengeance will consume us completely. It has only been in the past few months that we have begun to consider the idea of a truce. It is now, in our minds at least, on the table. But it is difficult to negotiate a truce from a position of such desperate weakness. That is why we are asking for your help. In the immediacy of the present we must strengthen our hand.”

I was fixated on the monitor, while still listening to Melanie and Samantha with one ear. That is how I learned that our mentor, who I could catch only a glimpse of in the bottom corner of the screen, was making a documentary on the new filmmaking, focusing, at least to start, on us and the Mascots, and I realized that she had made the exact same mistake as us, had not yet realized what was really at stake.

The meeting was being opened up to the floor and a man in the next room was speaking into a microphone: “Unlike many people here, I’ve had more than a few experiences with armed resistance.”

He was thin, focused, spoke as if he meant it.

“And I admire the pure insanity of the Mascot Front, as I would admire any noble yet lost cause.”

On the monitor the Mascots were listening intently, tilting their heads towards the speakers on the floor.

“The difficulty, as I see it, is so obvious as to be almost not worth mentioning. When you are in uniform you are too conspicuous. You are like big, furry, moving targets. And when you are out of uniform you have disavowed the very thing you are fighting for. However, I believe you are already well on your way to a solution: A secondary, non-Mascot rebel force could do the jobs Mascots are simply too conspicuous for. And, in additional support of this idea, I would simply like to state one more thing. In my experience, to fight for a cause, to risk one’s life in support of a cause one truly believes in, is

the only way to give one's life actual content and meaning. Everything else is just for show.”

It was difficult to gauge how the others around us were responding to such bold statements of intent. The air in the room was tense and ambiguous. The Mascots too were taking a moment to quietly confer before responding. And it was within this relative silence, this murmur of perplexed consideration, that I first heard the clatter in the front room. It was strange, those early moments when I still thought nothing of it. I wondered about the new filmmaking, what the implications were if the Mascots in fact had absolutely nothing to do with it, what it meant for us, for our practice, for our debauched scenarios, the commotion in the front room getting louder and I thought, for a split second, I heard a muffled gunshot without quite registering it, nothing was clear, it could have been anything. The Mascots on the small screen began to scatter, to energize, reaching for things off-screen, most likely weapons.

In one sense everyone around us was attempting to push, to run, but the rooms were so crowded, we were so tightly packed together, that no one could get very far or move very fast. We were being pushed from all sides, but I still hadn't seen anything. I asked Melanie which way she thought we should go and she said we should stay put, cling to the wall, keep our eyes open and, if things got worse, drop to the floor. I pressed against the wall, pressed up beside her. Through the doorway I caught a glimpse of full riot gear and on the television screen twelve empty chairs formed a semicircle beside the famous artist still chained to the radiator. He looked straight ahead, a bit frightened, and then, almost to still his own fears, stretched his entire body across the floor and managed to reach one of the microphone cords, dragging the microphone towards him. There was more gunfire, a series of louder bursts much closer to us as the famous artist began to speak.

“I don’t know exactly what’s happening. There seems to be some degree of panic. I assume this is something like a raid . . .”

People were running in front of him, running between him and the video camera. It wasn’t clear how to get out but everyone tried.

“However, in such situations, whatever the situation might be, it’s always best to remain calm. There are four exits on the ground floor plus two fire escapes upstairs. Please find your way to the one you think nearest . . .”

Kangaroo ran into the frame with a machine gun in one hand and a crowbar in the other, slid the crowbar between the radiator and the handcuffs, effortlessly snapping them open. The famous artist stood up, dropped the microphone, which hit the floor loudly, and was out of frame in a split second as a few feet away from us a man fell face forward, blood trickling out from under him. I suddenly wondered why I wasn’t more afraid.