

EDITH SPEERS

BEAUSEJOUR AND LAC DU BONNET

The road sign pointing north to Beausejour will not tell you what it was like to live in the 20th century and the tourist booklet on Lac du Bonnet does not say that here men trapped rabbits and shot deer never for sport but because the meat fed their families nor does it explain that Old Pinawa was a place by the river that was already deserted when city-bred twenty year olds working at the Whiteshell nuclear research centre came to show off their lithe flawless bodies their puppy fat their well-fed chubby cheeks and slide on smooth stones splashing and laughing and leaving behind on the long lazy weekends their jobs in the labs but never their notion that they were the privileged educated sophisticated centre of the universe in the middle of a spruce and birch and pine-reeking bug-ridden wilderness where stocky men with beard stubble red or green checked woollen caps with tied-up ear flaps and scarred boots drove pickup trucks with rifles racked in the cab and innocent woodland creatures dead and bleeding in the backs to be viewed by a circle of peasants at the gas station the merits of antlers fur haunch bone to be heartlessly discussed before they got strung up by the heels in a garage or from a tree out in the open to be split down the belly guts scooped out in some vague gory green and red mess that had nothing to do with the clean meat and neatly separated organs of beef and sheep in the butcher shops which have the decency to show no signs of their origins though certain clinically accurate but perhaps tasteless proprietors post on the wall a schematic diagram of the sources in flat pastel colours showing which cut comes from where nor did these naked whole creatures coats removed innards removed but feet and hooves still obscenely attached as they hang in the back yards of Beausejour and Lac du Bonnet have anything to do with the innocent little woodland creatures held and bred in the cages at Whiteshell and neatly divided into control and test samples to be subjected to various kinds and quantities of carefully controlled and measured radiation so the young scientists and their Ph.D. ordained elders could watch how fast or

slow and of what illnesses they died unless of course the whole experiment was ruined on a long stinking hot humid bug-ridden sweat-soaked summer weekend when the overworked air conditioning got coated with ice from its own chilled condensation and seized up and the temperature soared and eighty per cent of the experiments died old young and pregnant all in heaps to add extra pungency to the usual atmosphere which was always so bad on Mondays that the lab workers doing clean-up had to go in first wearing gas masks against the reek of urine ammonia and methane excreta but sometimes the two worlds overlapped like when the university students in white lab coats encountered the volunteers and showed them the way to the animal trailers or the whole body counting room for the scientists paid the men in unfashionable baggy work pants and laced-up logger boots to bring them animals they'd trapped so the carcasses could be tested for radioactivity and the men who ate the meat of wild animals had to be measured too had to sit for hours in a closed up machine with music piped in and magazines to keep them busy but no cigarettes or food or beer just to make sure not too much contamination from the atomic reactor was leaking leaching seeping out into the wilderness beyond the steel mesh fence topped with barbed wire beyond the asphalt parking lot with neat curbs and gutters balanced on this curve of the earth like a separate bell-jar snow-dome world just to make sure not too many alphas and betas and gammas were finding their way up through the roots of grass and plants or into the lakes and creeks to be consumed by deer and rabbits and ducks and trout and then passed on to the families of beard-stubbled hunters and fishers who did not have the money to buy butchers' meat and maybe even laughed at it anyway in the beer parlours and cafés and gas stations and preferred to bite into the bodies of creatures they killed themselves which in theory was understandable but in practise involved ugly things like bullets and blood and spring-loaded trap jaws doing painful things to bone and muscle and if in the hallways or back rooms of Whiteshell laboratories eyes met or fingers touched as a cigarette was lit or if in the cafés of Beausejour and Lac du Bonnet glances slid past but did not dare settle then maybe between the residents of new Pinawa the occupiers of a privileged suburbia in the wilderness and the people whose parents and grandparents shot meat and hooked fish to keep themselves alive there passed some invisible radioactive contamination so that in a single generation we have all mutated.