

## **The Swan** by Jennifer Filipowicz

“Don’t touch that.”

Jayda pulled her hand away instantly, as though her mother’s voice had the power to move her like a marionette. Still the dead swan beckoned, as pristine as it had been in life, and Jayda felt a desperate urge to stroke its pure white feathers. She watched out of the corner of her eye until her mother’s attention was diverted to the windsurfers sailing across Burlington Bay, then Jayda reached out and stroked the twisted neck.

The swan was beautiful, like snow white in her coffin, and like the handsome prince, Jayda kissed the majestic dead bird on its black beak, just below its vacant staring eye.

“Jayda!”

“I was just pretending,” Jayda said, the coolness of the beak still on her lips.

Mom rummaged in her beach bag, pulled out a package of disinfectant wipes and frantically wiped Jayda’s face and hands. “We don’t know how the swan died,” Mom said. “It might have a disease.”

“It doesn’t look sick,” Jayda said. “Just dead.”

“We don’t know, so we don’t touch it just in case.”

Jayda nodded solemnly. “Can I keep a feather as a souvenir?” Jayda yanked out a tail feather from the corpse and held it up.

“Jayda,” Mom answered neutrally.

Jayda brushed the soft feather across her face. A man wearing swim trunks walked his golden retriever along the beach. The dog lunged toward the dead swan,

causing the man great physical exertion as he held his companion back. Finally the man in the swim trunks successfully turned back the way he came. Jayda watched the dog gallop along the beach, then turned her attention back to the swan.

Suddenly she got a wonderful idea.

“Mom!” she exclaimed. “If we went and got my wagon we could take the swan with us!”

“No, Jayda,” Mom said, her voice tired.

“But it will look so nice in my room,” Jayda said. “And I won’t even touch it, just look.”

“It will rot.”

Jayda imagined the swan as its body shriveled, maggots eating holes in its flesh, until only a skeleton remained. “Neat.”

“It will smell really bad.”

Jayda considered this. “Worse than Daddy’s feet?”

“Infinitely worse.”

“The birds at the ROM don’t smell or rot.”

“The museum birds are stuffed.”

“Can we—”

“No.”

“You don’t know what I was asking.”

“We can’t have this swan stuffed.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know a taxidermist.”

Jayda's mother stared out over the water again, one of the windsurfers lost his balance and fell into the waves. His head popped up again and he held onto his board.

"Mom, what's a taxidermist?"

"A person who stuffs dead animals."

"I want to be a taxidermist!"

"You can be anything you want to, Sweetie."

"I have an idea!" Jayda said. "We can take the swan home and I can practice stuffing it!"

"No."

"I'll wear my paint smock, so I won't get any blood on me."

"I'll let you keep the feather," Mom said.

"I can't stuff a feather, Mom."

"You can stuff things when you're older."

Jayda kicked at the sand so that beige and grey dust sprinkled over the swan corpse. Then she crouched down and brushed the sand away until the swan was pristine again. Her mother was ready with the wipes. "It's time to go home," Mom said.

They walked together along Burlington Beach to the playground near where their car was parked. Jayda glanced back at the swan, now a splotch of white in the distance.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, Jayda?"

"Can we come back every day to watch the swan rot?"

THE END