

# REAL GIRLS DON'T CRY



NOVEL

*Claude Daigneault*

*La Caboché*



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**Translation from French to English :**

Mathieu Daigneault

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Claude Daigneault

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Diane Létourneau

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Raymond Gallant

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Blog : <http://lanoraye.42blog.com>

mailto : [cdaigneault@ilavaltric.com](mailto:cdaigneault@ilavaltric.com)

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# I

The humid, glacial air of the disused warehouse reeked of diesel fuel and rotten cardboard.

From the shadowy recess of a brick wall, a man emerged, clad only in embroidered teddy bear pyjamas.

Wearing ankle-length boots, he took a few faltering steps towards an old wooden door that had been laid down flat across large trestles. Near this improvised table glowed the reddish coil of an electric radiator.

On the table rested a blow up doll, outfitted with rudimentary black lingerie. Its legs had been positioned spread-eagled so as to welcome a male sex organ inside its clumsy imitation of a vagina.

As if in a trance, the man stared intently at the doll. Highlighted by the fluttering flames of a dozen prayer candles perched atop two empty barrels behind the head of the doll, his eyes burned with intense longing.

All around him, the interior of the darkened warehouse was outlined by the glow of the gray sky peering in through crazed window panes that years of neglect had covered with an abundant layer of dust.

A feminine voice rose up behind him.

“What are you waiting for? You’re the one who says she’s always belittling you...”

The man jerked in surprise, then took a few hesitant steps towards the table. He had the demeanor of a visitor uncomfortable with his surroundings, as if standing in the presence of a loved one's remains at a funeral parlor. He froze. In his limp right hand, he held an imitation cat o' nine tails made up of nine black ribbons studded with tiny beads of blue glass at the tips.

"Look at her face, always smiling. She's mocking you, you know. She's a bitch. A filthy whore who doesn't deserve to live."

The man took two small steps, then froze again; the blow up doll was within reach. A slender hand suddenly materialized from the darkness to place a picture down on the vulgar doll's face. Cut out from a magazine, the color photograph represented a once famous French actress flaunting a rather contemptuous smile.

Agile hands slid the paper tapes across the limp face. The man's fascination was absolute.

Slowly, the cat o' nine tails moved about, making the ribbons flutter. A small battery-powered cassette player started up and Lucienne Boyer's static-filled tart voice rose up around him in the abandoned warehouse:

"Talk to me of love,  
And speak of tender things...  
Your pretty talk, my heart  
Never tires of hearing..."

A shiver spread across the man's face. Timidly, he took a shot at the doll with the cat o' nine tails, producing a quirky tambourine sound.

Then, three or four sharper hits, soon followed by a volley of increasingly more violent strikes against the

rudimentary breasts and vulva.

In the throes of a frenzy that made him huff and pant, the man soon focused his frustrations on the paper picture, shredding it within seconds.

The feminine hand pressed down against his left shoulder.

“Conserve your strength...”

His gasps for air started sounding like moans of pleasure.

Lucienne Boyer’s voice became supplicating.

“As long as forever,

You repeat these words supreme:

I Lo-oo-ooove youuu...”

The two feminine hands took down his pyjama bottoms.

The man’s eyes were now bulging under the strain.

Clumsily, he climbed on top of the doll. The woman had to help him slide his erect penis inside the crudely simulated vulva, feeling for all intents and purposes as if she were helping a horse ejaculate inside an artificial insemination receptacle. The man had barely begun that he had already achieved orgasm.

His entire body shaking, he got back to his feet, moaning a moment, before letting out a ferocious cry. After a few more repeated whacks of his martinet, the doll finally burst, whistling away like a deflating balloon. Trying to cover the long ironic fart, the woman’s voice calmly intervened.

“Enough... She’s earned her lesson. Go get dressed.”

Out of breath, the man compliantly followed the escort back to a dilapidated sofa where his clothes had been thrown pell-mell.

Vicky watched him get dressed. He caught her staring and turned his back to her. Keeping her tone neutral, she said:

“You know, for the same price, you can also have me if you’d like...”

The man nodded without commenting, tightened his belt around his waist and fumbled inside one of his pant pockets before taking out a small wrinkled envelope and handing it over to her.

Vicky peered inside, counted the bills, whistled softly, then smiled at him.

“Thanks for the little bonus there. That should help cover the price of a new doll. Same time, same channel next week?”

By way of reply, the man placed his hand against his ear, index and little fingers extended, indicating he would call her.

“All right.”

The visitor left without saying goodbye.

Once alone, she nodded slowly, a tired smile dawning on her heavily lacquered lips.

“Brave heart, Vicky... In a few months, all of this will be a thing of the past.”

With little regard for Lucienne Boyer’s husky reprisal of “I Lo-oo-oove youuu...,” she stopped the cassette player, took off her work clothes and promptly stuffed them inside a beige canvas bag before slipping into a more mundane outfit of matching pants and shirt. After stowing away her paraphernalia inside a dusty stock room, she locked up and left the abandoned warehouse. Glancing at her watch, she winced and started running towards her tiny rust-infested car.



Sitting in a classroom at the university, Vicky listened attentively as her favorite teacher expounded André Gide's conception of human fervor in his work entitled 'The Fruits of the Earth.'

The aging intellectual seemed oblivious to the empty chairs and the occasional yawning of some of his students. He seemed content just to be able to wax on about Gide's evocative style, his homosexuality, his candidness, his honesty, as well as his passion for being true to oneself. These notions reached out to Vicky on a personal level.

"There's something I'd like you to listen to," announced the professor, revealing a portable record player that must have dated back at least forty years.

From his briefcase, he pulled out a faded brown sleeve from which he produced a record. A few of the students smiled out of shared commiseration. But when, amidst the pop and hiss of a scratched record that had seen too many hours of play, the voice of the immortal Gérard Philippe started rising, silence fell.

Vicky became so entranced, she only realized the class was ending when she noticed other students getting up from their seats.

"This week," said the teacher as his pupils were about to leave, "I recommend you make good use of Gide's writings and try to formulate your own opinion concerning his philosophy, be it favorable or not. In other words, try and prove he was wrong. That should introduce you to proper reasoning."

Vicky took a moment to reread that brief sentence from 'Fruits of the Earth,' a quote she had already underlined upon first encountering it:

“The present would be pregnant with all futures if the past had not already projected its history into it.”

Her head awash with emotions, she gathered her notes, stuffed them in her backpack and proceeded to follow the few lingering students as they were slowly filing out of the classroom.

Feeling observed, she spun her head around.

A student in his early twenties, whom she'd noticed sitting in the back of the class a few times, was smiling at her with that conceited look typical to men who are convinced of the sway they hold over women.

She didn't smile back. Undeterred, he whispered to her:

“Can I carry your bag?”

“I've heard better pick-up lines,” snapped Vicky. “I got that one in grade school. When I need a kindergartner, I'll let you know.”

Undaunted, the guy pressed on:

“How 'bout coffee, then?”

“I only drink coffee with people I don't know. And I have no intention of knowing you. Goodbye.”

She left quickly to avoid any further interaction with the cumbersome individual, but still managed to hear him profess a last minute jeer:

“Damn feminist...”

A smile on her face, Vicky pushed open the glass door that led onto Maisonneuve boulevard, and was greeted by gusts of wind and swirling snowflakes.

As she walked down the street, André Gide's quote kept resonating in her head.

## 2

Harvey Simard was slowly navigating his car around the labyrinth of gloomy alleys that was the underground parking lot of the Centre des Congrès in Québec City. After many false hopes, he finally managed to find an open spot on one of the lower levels, next to a shiny new sports car deliberately parked ascant. Its owner had obviously sought to discourage other patrons from parking next to his car to protect it from accidental dents and scrapes.

Ten minutes spent in vain attempts of trying to find an available parking spot in the remote corners of each and every level of the underground complex had made Harvey late to an important meeting, one that was about to alter his career forever, of that he was certain. Exasperated, he persisted, trying to maneuver his small car back and forth, forwards and backwards, multiplying hits on the brakes, before finally managing to slide it snugly inside the available spot, almost scratching his paint job against a cement pillar in the process. A final tug on the wheel, and the ordeal was over. With barely enough room to open his car door, he slid out from behind the wheel, rather easily considering that the coat he wore hugged him a little too tightly around the armholes.

Furious at the other driver's incivility, Harvey banged his car door against the pretty car, hard. He leaned in for

inspection; a scrape of paint had peeled away, revealing a dent in the bodywork. Smirking in cynical satisfaction, he took out a paper handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the incriminating blemish from his car door. With the satisfaction of an inconspicuous terrorist, he headed towards the elevator doors, leaving wafts of cheap cologne in his wake. As soon as he reached street level, he threw the soiled paper rag on the ground and briskly walked away, innocent as the driven snow.

Harvey had always had a hard time controlling his irascible temper. Now fifty-seven, he'd been representing a rural riding as an elected member of the Québec National Assembly for the last eighteen years, having spent only one term in the opposition. Each election and its subsequent cabinet reshuffle had made him dream of perhaps, one day, acceding to higher office. He would have been content heading even the most insignificant of departments. "Hell, even Cultural Affairs, I don't care," he sniggered to himself. "That'll show my wife for calling me a Philistine all these years."

He reckoned that his many years of service, his law practice, his undeniable popularity, his unswerving endorsement of not one but three different Prime Ministers, all represented very strong reasons why he should finally be recognized for what he truly was: a loyal and indispensable party man.

Harvey had always outright rejected any criticism made about his volatile temper, as well as his reticence to nuance his opinions. He was convinced that his natural rigor as a politician was his badge of excellence as Minister of Public Safety.

As a right-wing conservative in a centrist party, he acted as mentor to a rearguard of five jaded softies who preferred to manifest their discontent loudly during caucus meetings.

But all of that was about to change, he thought, tightening the buckle of his coat; the early days of December were bitterly cold this year, and the ground was already blanketed with the first snows of winter.

The tiny restaurant on Saint-Jean street where the executive assistant of the Prime Minister had given him rendez-vous was in sight.

Just a few weeks away from the purported general election rumored to be held come springtime, he probably just wanted to meet with him in person to unveil the name of the department he would soon be heading in the upcoming cabinet. No doubt, people in high places had finally recognized that a politician of his caliber should no longer be simply relegated to the kiddies' table. Harvey was a man in his prime, he kept himself healthy by playing tennis and skiing, played golf regularly with bigwigs from his riding, in brief, he still had some of the young buck in him. Now admittedly, he had not been going easy on the bottle these last few years, but such was the ransom of politics. And he was determined to amend this weakness should the P.M. insist on it as a proviso.

Additionally, his reputation as a model husband entirely devoted to his paraplegic, wheelchair-bound wife would undoubtedly prove a powerful asset throughout his campaign.

The mere thought soured his mood. Last month, Solange had warned him that, from now on, she would no longer submit herself to the masquerade of having to appear in small county periodicals in order to help nurse his public image. Should he decide to run again, she had warned him that she intended to stay as far away from his political activities as possible.

Harvey fumed; their relationship had become unbearable. He swore he would give the matter some thought and try

to find new ways of saving their marriage from the brink of disaster.

The first few notes of “O Canada” chimed up from his shirt pocket, and Harvey retrieved his cell phone.

“Hello, yes?”

“Hey dad, it’s Thomas.”

“Not a good time, Thomas. I’m arriving at the restaurant as we speak. I have a meeting with the P.M.’s executive assistant.”

“This won’t take long. Dad, I... I need a little... advance, to pay this debt I owe...”

“The answer is no, Thomas. It was no last week, and it’ll still be no next week.”

“Last time, dad, I swear. I’m sort of in a jam...”

“And the answer is still no. I’ve already loaned you a lot of money, Thomas. I’m in a bit of a predicament because of you. Listen, I have to go, I’m late. Bye.”

“Dad, I...”

Livid, Harvey hung up. When would his son learn to be a responsible adult? He took a moment to compose himself, put on a brave face, turned his cell phone off to avoid any further distractions, then charged towards his rendez-vous with destiny.

The owner of the little restaurant he patronized every week during parliamentary sessions greeted him warmly before quickly escorting him to a table at the back of the dining room, where the young executive assistant of the P.M. was consulting the menu as he waited.

“Sorry I’m late, I got waylaid by a big businessman from my riding, and I just couldn’t shake him,” said Harvey, trying to save face. “The disadvantages of being a public servant, I guess; they always expect us to be prepared. Just like in the boyscouts.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mr. Simard. No harm done. I arrived here early anyway...”

The man was well aware of his guest’s reputation as a prevaricator, a teller of tall tales who never shied away from toadying to his adversaries in order to mollify them.

Harvey ordered himself a double scotch while the cabinet chief settled for a glass of mineral water. Immediately noticing his faux pas, he called the waiter back to their table.

“Come to think of it, I think I’ll have mineral water as well...”



The meal went on without any further blunders, and even turned lively, taking on airs of quasi camaraderie. Harvey was flattered that such a high-ranking member of the Prime Minister’s entourage would seek his advice concerning bills currently in First Reading before the National Assembly, going so far as to enquire about his personal health and the state of current affairs in his riding. He had even asked him his opinion on certain issues regarding the upcoming general election.

Brimming with confidence, Harvey had laid out his strategy on how to squash the opposition, a rather conventional strategy as it turned out since none of the other candidates from his rural riding possessed enough stature to chip away even in the slightest his majority of 11,237 votes polled during the last ballot.

The executive assistant glanced at the dining room as it was progressively emptying out and set his coffee cup back down; Harvey deduced that the man was finally about to broach the real topic at hand.

“Mr. Simard...”

“Harvey, please!” let out the MNA, made affable by his own hubris.

“If you insist... Harvey, you have always been a loyal party man, and the party has always been able to count on you, even through the dark times of recent memory. During our stint in purgatory when we formed the opposition, you were like a rock. Young MPs knew they could always rely on you should they need sound advice when preparing for the sometimes vicious exchanges of the National Assembly.

“Our party leader had named me Whip. I was only doing my duty. And I was proud to do so, and help him become Prime Minister again.”

“And he’s very grateful to you for all of your efforts. He even told me so this morning. It is because of a man like you, Harvey, a man with a firm grasp on the tiller, if discipline was maintained within our ranks during these difficult times, and if our leader was able to devote himself entirely to preparing our return to power.”

Harvey felt a surge of warmth wash over his stomach.

At last! A real high-ranking position in the cabinet was being dangled in front of him, just within his grasp. He hadn’t kept the backbenches warm with his imposing backside all this time for nothing.

“But... Times change. Like Dylan sang: ‘The times, they are a-changin’.’”

He waited for Harvey to react to his joke, but quickly realized that the man sitting in front of him had absolutely no idea who the famous American folk-rocker was. He pressed on.

“Erm... You’ll certainly have noticed, as we all have, that our opponents keep getting younger every passing year. The P.M.O. expects a difficult campaign in the

upcoming election. We're going to need high-caliber candidates, men and women who are authorities in more... erm... contemporary fields."

"Oh no doubt, no doubt. My riding is a party stronghold: I'm guaranteed a safe seat."

"That's sort of why I invited you here... uhm, Harvey. You see, the P.M. needs your riding, probably the surest bet of them all, in order to establish a star candidate, one that could offer great contributions to an already important department..."

As the young technocrat drilled his disheartening message home, Harvey felt like his words had scored a perfect strike in the bowling alley of his mind. Sweat began trickling down his forehead and neck; his heart struggled to keep pace. He'd had no time to brace himself properly against the disloyal blow that this executioner had just delivered without warning.

"Harvey, look, the P.M. is asking you to make a great sacrifice: he wants you to yield your riding to a candidate likely to become the next Minister of Finance."

"Wait, what? Let me get this straight: you're firing me?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly phrase it like that... Don't worry, you won't be left out in the cold. The P.M. has assured me that he'd try and find you some sort of position within the party's structure."

"Like what?"

"Well... We're going to be needing a new chief of operations for our fund-raisers. Money is the sinews of war, you know that... You'd become the party's new Treasurer. Our money man, if you will..."

"I have no interest in kissing businessmen's asses just to get their contributions."

“Harvey, please... There are still clients present...”

“Not my problem. I call ‘em as I see ‘em. You want me to step down? Fine. Then I want a deputy minister’s job, in the Department of Justice, or maybe Public Safety, I don’t care. Is that clear?”

“Are you listening to yourself? We can’t just ask our deputy ministers to step down! We’re the ones who put them there in the first place!”

“Put ‘em on the shelf, like you’re trying to do to me! And anyway, what happens to me if I refuse your offer?”

The young chief of staff stared him coldly in the eye.

“The Prime Minister will refuse to sign, no doubt with great regret, your registration form as official party candidate.”

Harvey Simard would never have thought his own party capable of being so ungrateful. After all he’d done for them! His world was falling apart, and he was struggling to find weapons to defend himself with.

“Well that’s convenient. What’s your beef with me anyway?”

The young man’s haughty demeanor soured. In a dry voice, he replied:

“You are involved in an illicit love affair that could draw unwanted attention, even bring scandal to the party. Your alcohol consumption is such a hot topic these days that a Montreal newspaper has even published a caricature of you, one that drew quite a few guffaws from opposition members during session, I might add. You’re always broke. You have misappropriated funds earmarked for administrative purposes of your riding office and used them for personal needs. You recently fired personnel for...”

“So that’s what’s this all about! I fired a secretary for slacking off on the job? She was useless! I don’t care if she

was the Minister of Education's daughter, she couldn't even spell her name right! We kept having to go over her work and do it all over again. I only accepted to hire her in the first place as a favor to the minister because he represented the county next door. I get it now: she was there to spy on me, wasn't she? I can't believe this! You'd think we're living in some sort of dictatorship! Spying on your own troops..."

"Mister Simard, we're not spying on anybody. Your behavior's like an open book, there for all to see. Your splenetic temper has cost the party a few awkward moments recently. Just last week, you were thrown out of a Grande-Allée restaurant after getting massively drunk. I was there. I saw the whole thing."

"Oh, I get it! You're the guy who put that stupid idea in the P.M.'s head in the first place, aren't you? Well I'll just go and talk to him in person, you'll see."

"He won't see you. For him, this case is closed. He expects your resignation on his desk tomorrow morning at nine. An announcement will be made at eleven o'clock in order to make the noon newscasts. So what do you say? Do I have your word? Can the party count on you?"

Harvey was brutally realizing the scope of his defeat. His hands shook in impotent rage. Him, an unparalleled bigmouth who could reduce his opponents to tears with but a few choice words, was now speechless in the face of utter humiliation. Well, he wasn't about to beat a retreat without at least landing one final blow.

"I could feel the plotting going on behind my back these last few weeks. The awkward glances as I walked the halls of Parliament to reach my office, my fellow back-benching MPs slowly evaporating around me, invitations to go out for a drink that were refused because no one

wanted to be seen in my company... Well, let me tell you something, young man. You're still wet behind the ears. Oh, you're gonna get my resignation, all right, but not before I leave you all with a little parting gift. You know what they say about Greeks bearing gifts, don't you? Look it up in a dictionary, if you even own one. You and your heartless party, you'll be hearing from me. Mark my words. I know way too many details about the dark underbelly of your incompetent administration. You'll rue the day you threw me out on my ass, showing no respect at all for what I've done for you over the years."

"I'd advise you to think twice before..."

"Oh, don't you worry about me, kiddo. See ya! I'll just leave the check with you right here, okay? Consider that a much-deserved farewell present from the party to me! Okay?"

His face flushed with anger and shame, Harvey grabbed his coat from the stand near the entrance and stormed out of the restaurant.

The executive assistant let out a long, heavy sigh, took out his cell phone and began to dial.

"Good afternoon, sir. Yes, sir, it's done. No, it didn't go so well. You can expect his resignation on your desk tomorrow morning. But I fear he might become a problem, sir... It might be time to ask the collaboration of your special... informant, sir. Yes... We'll talk more once I get back to the office. See you soon."

Chewing on his lower lip, the young man fiddled with his half-empty coffee cup for a moment. Lost in thought, he pushed his chair back, got up and went to pay the check before heading out the front door as restaurant employees, having witnessed the entire scene, watched on in silence.



A few hours later, Harvey was on the bed of a quiet motel in the Minister of Education's riding, weeping openly in Linda Falardeau's arms.

They were both lying on the bed, fully dressed, having little heart for their usual philandering. His executive clerk for the last ten years, his mistress for the last six, at thirty-four years of age, Linda had the image of an energetic single woman, proud of her simple beauty. Through a rigorous biweekly training regimen at a local fitness center, she had not only sculpted her impeccable physique, but also the inner strength to endure an often unsatisfying relationship with her boss.

But Linda was a determined woman. Solange Simard wouldn't stick around forever; her lover's paraplegic spouse was bound to die eventually.

"How could they do this to me...?! Damn ingrates!"

"Shhh, baby, shh. You've been venting for an hour now, it's time to get a grip on yourself. Calm down, we need to think this through. Cooler heads will prevail."

"They want my resignation letter on the P.M.'s desk by nine tomorrow morning..."

"That leaves us plenty of time. Let's go get a cocktail or two before supper and... talk about it."

"Maybe you're right... I should probably warn Solange and Annie."

"Why don't you call your daughter and tell her that you've decided to stay in Québec City tonight? It'd give us some breathing room. You can always go back home tomorrow morning and break the bad news to them before it makes in on the air. I mean after all, the room's already been payed for the night..."

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Linda...”

“Harvey, listen... We’ve spent way too much energy trying to steer this constituency in the right direction you and I, for them to simply swoop in and take it all away like that. You’re an excellent MP, always trying to keep in touch with your fellow constituents. You’re a job creator, a man who can dig up investments on a dime. And all of these people who got jobs thanks to you over the years will remember it for a long a time. The party president for our riding has been your friend for twenty years, and you’ve got the executive committee firmly in your pocket. Well, except for that Pouliot lady who thinks she’s better than everyone else just because she’s a high school teacher. I’d bet anything that she’s the one who ratted us out, that snooty tart. But aside from her, that leaves us with a pretty good committee to set our own campaign in motion.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t be a government official anymore. People pay a lot less attention to you when that happens.”

“They’ll pay attention if the government needs your vote. Regardless of who’s in charge, it’ll be a minority party anyways; the voters are way too dissatisfied with people in power these days. It’s the ideal situation for an independent. Think about it. Meanwhile, why don’t I make you your usual. Double scotch with a splash of soda?”

Lost in thought, Harvey shook his head. She was right, he stood a good chance of getting re-elected, but his former party and the opposition weren’t about to just stand by and let him get away with it; they wouldn’t hesitate to spend loads of cash simply to beat him in his own riding. Money... Always the same problem in his life. An electoral venture such as this required a lot of liquidity; they were going to have to establish an emergency slush fund, and fast.

As she touched up her hair in the bathroom, Linda tried to soothe and comfort him, but Harvey hardly paid any attention to her words. Fueled by alcohol, he slowly started regaining his self-confidence.



After an intimate dinner at a quiet little inn, he made love to Linda with conviction, if with little imagination. The young woman had the kindness of heart to feign a realistic orgasm and, like a comforted child, Harvey promptly fell asleep in her arms.

But, late into the night, Linda's eyes were still wide open. Her heart heavy, she kept picturing the face of Harvey's son, Thomas, in her mind. Not having found the courage to inform her he had wanted to break up, Thomas had begun seeing less and less of her, then stopped calling her entirely. She repressed the memory of a particularly torrid evening spent together, trying not to linger on his young, muscled arms, and focused her attention instead on what the future held.

How far would she go to secretly help finance her lover's electoral campaign? Would their backers prove as generous as before now that he had been ousted from his party?

And to think that, following a lawsuit she had won handily, Solange Simard now possessed more money than she knew what to do with. Granted, that car accident had left her handicapped for the rest of her days... But, better to live rich and handicapped than... than... poor and handicapped, I suppose, thought Linda, unable to find a more appropriate proverb.

If only the old hag had the decency to just... curl up and die, already. She had a fleeting vision of a hand pushing Solange's wheelchair down a steep staircase... She sighed.

Was Harvey right in wanting to hold on to his parliamentary seat? Had she herself made the right decision in encouraging him to present himself as an independent? Should he lose the election, what happens to her then? Would she have to start all over again and back a different MP? Political advisers really did not have it easy, she mused, sliding back under the covers...



At a quarter to nine the next morning, sitting in front of coffee and brioches they had purchased at Mama's Breakfast Nook on the outskirts of the little township, Harvey and Linda watched on as the riding office fax machine swallowed his resignation. In the background, a radio was playing, tuned in to a local call-in show hosted by a chatty woman affecting a girlish voice.

"Eighteen years of service... My entire career, summed up in one single sentence," grumbled Harvey as his resignation disappeared.

The pallor of his face was not due only to his congested liver; up to the last minute, although he hadn't told Linda, he had hoped that the P.M. would phone him up in extremis and plead with him to postpone his resignation.

The sadness, that pain one feels when a long-standing relationship is about to end, devastated him. Most of all, he regretted that the Prime Minister hadn't had the courage to inform him of his decision personally. The disillusionment was hard to bear. His natural aggressiveness had

melted away. The injustice of his situation bereaved him. He felt old and weak.

Linda knew he couldn't stay like this; if he didn't do something soon, he'd start sinking into that morose melancholy she knew him so well for, and this time, he just might stay there permanently. The part-time secretary that had been hired to replace the Minister of Education's daughter was probably on her way to work right now; they were going to have to act quickly. They had but two hours before the news was made public. Two measly hours to set up a conference call between executive party members, all in the hopes that...

The phone rang. Linda glanced at her watch. 8:54 am. Convinced that the secretary was calling in sick yet again, she picked up the receiver.

"Deputy Simard's office."

"It's Joseph Rondeau. Thank God you're there. I got a call from the P.M. at eleven o'clock last night, informing me of Harvey's resignation. Is it true?"

"At eleven? Last night?"

"Yes. I tried to reach him, both at his home and at his motel room in Québec, but couldn't get hold of him. Where is he?"

"He... He just got in. He left Québec very early this morning. He... He's here, hold on..."

Anxious and dumbfounded, Harvey was staring at her expectantly. Linda covered the receiver with her hand.

"It's mister Rondeau. He knows. He's asking for confirmation. You have to take this."

"What? They bypassed me and went straight to the executive chairman?"

Harvey's face became even paler. He was starting to get a measure of just how much of a pariah he had become,

like a rotten tooth that has to be extracted for the sake of the remaining teeth. With a trembling hand, he grabbed the receiver.

“Hello, Joseph... Yes, it’s true... I just sent in my resignation, barely ten minutes ago... I can’t understand why they’d possibly want to let you know before I even had a chance to tell you myself... I tried calling you from Québec yesterday, but the line was busy... Look, I just came in. I was about to get in touch with you to try and organize a conference call with members of the executive...”

He broke off abruptly. Her face taut with anger, Linda had turned the volume up on the radio. A Montreal-based network was making its headlines with his resignation.

“The resignation of colorful MP Harvey Simard will most likely come as a shock to voters from his riding this morning, as, for the last eighteen years, he had been re-elected handily. During the groundbreaking ceremony of a new supermarket in Saint-Calixte last Thursday, the politician had even declared that he would most assuredly be running again in the upcoming elections. It’s now an open secret that elections are only a few weeks away. The MP’s resignation, a copy of which we have just received, confirms the content of a press release sent earlier this morning under strict embargo conditions. In it, mister Simard cites personal reasons for his sudden resignation... In municipal news...”

Harvey shook with rage.

“Sonnvabitch!” he screeched. “Joseph? You still there? No use in holding a conference call now, everybody’s heard the news. Convene an extraordinary general meeting for tonight, at our office... Say, 7:30 pm. Okay? We’ve got difficult decisions ahead of us. No... No... I won’t be talking to the press until we do. The executive committee

will decide where we go from here. That okay with you? I'm counting on you. All right, see you then, old friend.”

He had just hung up the phone that it started ringing again. In a flash, all three lines lit up and started blinking.

Harvey winced, rubbed his temples, then hung his head, perplexed. Behind him, Linda was trying to maintain her composure, busying herself by moving objects about on his desk. She had never seen him so dejected. She decided to take matters into her own hands.

From her left ear, she unhooked one of the large artificial pearl pendant earrings studded with false emeralds she wore and promptly picked up the receiver. It was going to be one of those days...



### 3

Carrying a tray holding fresh towels, essential oils, soap and a basin full of hot, steaming water, Annie turned the key in the lock and pushed the door to her mother's large bedroom open. She was immediately greeted by the stench of urine and excrement.

Hastily, Solange Simard hid away two objects Annie couldn't identify inside her nightstand drawer and, securing the piece of furniture under lock and key, said, somewhat curtly:

"Where have you been? I've been waiting for ages. What, still had your nose stuck in front of that computer of yours?"

The radio was tuned in to the station that had just broadcast the news of her husband's resignation. Without waiting for a reply to her question, she promptly added:

"Have you heard the news?"

"Yes. I have to say, it took me by surprise. I thought daddy had decided to run again in the upcoming elections. He's not sick, is he?"

"Not as far as I know. But as your father and I don't see each other very often these days... Is he in his bedroom?"

"No. He called late last night on his cell phone to inform me that he wasn't returning from Québec until this

morning. I wanted to come warn you, but I overheard you through the door, talking on the phone. I went back to the living room to finish watching the rest of a movie on TV. I guess I must have gotten really into the story, because when I came back an hour later, you were already asleep. Had you taken your sleeping pills?”

“You think I can sleep without them? I’m in constant pain... Call his riding office, will you, and find out if he’s back.”

“Right after your sponge bath, Your Highness. Here, let me help you out of your nightgown.”

“Do you have to be so perky this early in the morning? You sound like a laxative peddler in a TV commercial. Do you really think that’s the proper attitude to adopt with an invalid?”

“With an invalid who’s also my mother, a woman with the charm and wit of a cartoon witch who obstinately refuses the help of a physiotherapist to try and improve her condition? Yes, yes, I do, Your Highness.”

“Smartass. You’re insolent and you understand nothing of what afflicts me. I’ll never be able to walk again. Unless you’ve received a doctorate in nanosurgery that I don’t know about, and that you’re able to reconnect every crushed nerve in my spinal cord...?”

Despite the scathing tone, Annie kept her cool and started removing the nightgown, trying not to show too much revulsion at the strong odors emanating from her mother’s diaper.

Solange instinctively tried to cover her chest with her arms, then gave up, heaving a resigned sigh.

A few months after her mother’s accident, Annie had accepted to play nurse, somewhat reluctantly; the successive dismissal of a dozen health care professionals had left the

young woman with no other choice. But Solange Simard knew how to blow both hot and cold: she had proposed to pay her daughter a salary as long as she would take care of her.

Having fallen prey to depression after discovering that her life partner had been cheating on her, Annie had left her old job as a schoolteacher to try and find refuge in the role of domestic help, safely secluded from the complications of life.

Her mother's cantankerous comments had long since lost the power to upset her. As a former schoolteacher, Annie had gotten used to handling the often unpredictable reactions of mollycoddled children.

Supporting her back, she slowly leaned Solange's torso backwards and helped her lie down on the bed. Dispassionately, she started removing her diaper; as a paraplegic, her mother had lost all control over her bladder and her bowels.

Solange's body stiffened.

"God damn this is humiliating!" she hissed through clenched teeth. "I'll never get used to this... I think I would have preferred ending up six feet under."

"You said that already. I got used to this on day one. Too bad you keep refusing the help of an orthopedic doctor. Your legs are losing their tonus. That's even more of a shame, considering that, for their part, your face and breasts have kept up rather well."

"Enough, Annie! Just do your job!"

"Sir, yes, sir! You know, it might help if you'd let me call in a massage therapist once in a while..."

"I hold little faith in those witch doctors."

"Yes, I know. You prefer lamenting your sad situation and letting others carry the weight of your woe instead. I'll

admit, I kind of pity poor Juliette; even though she's a retired nurse, she devotes a lot of her time off to come do voluntary work at your side when I'm not here."

"If she hadn't wanted to help rescue invalids from despair, she shouldn't have put her name down on the sign-up sheet at the local community service center."

"That's all she means to you? She was only supposed to fill in for me on Tuesdays to help monitor your condition. Now, she takes you out shopping in her car, takes you to the hairstylist, to the doctor's, even takes you out to the park for strolls... She does much more than is required of her. You don't deserve her."

"I show her gratitude, in my own way. As for what we do when we're together, that's none of your business."

"All right. I'll stop there, before you accuse me of giving you another sermon. Well, the bottom floor's all done. Your diaper's not too tight? Your bum's as shiny as a car straight out of the carwash. How about we clean the rest of you up?"

She dutifully cleaned her mother's face, chest and legs, taking care not to go too roughly, but not too gently either. She then helped her slip on a bra, a nicely tailored corsage, and trousers that helped conceal her diaper and her atrophied legs. She sat her back up, helped her put on a fleece jacket and brought the wheelchair closer to the bed.

Her mother cursed and complained throughout the entire ordeal, but Annie didn't pay her any heed; after hearing her whining every morning, six times a week, she was starting to get used to it.

Helping her mother into her wheelchair, Annie was determined not to provide any encouragement. She knew only too well her manipulative bent, her need to scold the people closest to her, to complain incessantly, to try, by any

means necessary, to instill a sense of guilt in their hearts. The young woman respected the agreement binding her to this situation, but more and more, she skirted away from showing too much compassion.

Solange had not always been such a shrew, even though her relationship with Harvey, Thomas and Annie had always been tinged with a certain coolness. Before the accident, she had been head of an advertising agency in downtown Montreal. She was the one who had introduced Harvey to a high-ranking party official, a man who had quickly realized that Harvey was better suited to the low-level responsibilities of backbenching representatives.

Annie still cherished a few fond memories of her childhood spent with Thomas, simpler times filled with gales of laughter. That is until, prompted by the party leader, their father had decided to abandon his law practice and run for office. Unfortunately for his family, he had actually been elected.

As a consequence of this new career path, they'd been forced to relocate to the country, in the riding he now represented. After having sold her agency, reaping huge profits in the process, Solange had immediately gone house hunting.

And thus, hidden away in a forgotten range of the Lanaudière region, she had come upon their new home, a large house that had needed as much love as it had needed renovations. They had even managed to obtain it for a decent price: its former owners, anglophones who had wanted to escape the 'separatist peril' at all costs, had been keen on fleeing to Florida as soon as possible.

As she helped her mother over to her mirrored vanity and began to comb and brush her hair, Annie started waxing nostalgic.

Yes, for a moment, they had almost been happy. Why then had the sky suddenly darkened over their heads?

In Michael Mathieux, a fellow classmate, Thomas had found a sincere friend. Annie, on the other hand, entirely devoted to her studies, had followed a more solitary path.

Michael had grown up alongside both siblings. He'd often come over to visit, but had seemed to fancy Solange's company, with whom he would discuss classical music and literature incessantly. Annie, for her part, had preferred video games, heavy metal and detective stories.

As a teenager, she had always been somewhat of a tomboy, a fact that had greatly amused Thomas and Michael at the time, as they had relished mocking their big sister, but a reality that grew less to their liking when puberty hit and they started getting zits.

Harvey was always absent, and their mother had become more and more embittered. But her passion for this secluded house, built far from the narrow rural road that ran alongside a fabulous lake nestled between tall hills, had never really withered away. She became somewhat of a recluse, seeking refuge in her books and her home. Developing an obsession for literature, she had started making frequent trips to Montreal, where she'd come back, her arms filled with new and exciting stories. In these moments, she would briefly become happy again, her face showing a sort of contentment, a serenity that her daughter rarely glimpsed in her these days.

When Annie turned twenty, Micheal, his face red as a peony, had found the courage to mumble a few quaint goodbyes. At eighteen, he announced that he had already made his 'life choice,' and had decided to 'serve Christ.' He'd enrolled in a theology class in college and, when age permitted it, wanted to attend the seminary.

Over the years, Michael would come back and drop in on them on occasion, but things were never really the same after that. The young man had become reserved, anxious, somewhat uncomfortable with family members. His visits became more and more sporadic, right up to the moment he was admitted to the seminary.

On the rare occasions he did find himself in the Simard family's presence, he would take on airs of a prim, proper young gentleman, something that had irritated Annie to no end. At the time, she couldn't have known that Michael was actually in love with her, and that he had never found a way to tell her. Not that that would have influenced her attraction to women in any way.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Her mother's shrill voice snapped her back to reality.

"I'm sorry. I was just... stuck in the past."

"Is that your way of telling me I'm boring you?"

"Mother, you know I don't fall for your little guilt trips anymore. You won't succeed in making me angry. What is it you were saying?"

"I said, I think I heard your father's car. Probably came home to confess his sins, poor thing. He needs constant consoling, you know. Although I'm sure someone else is seeing to that these days."

"Try and tone down the sarcasm, will you? He just got back... Oh, I forgot to tell you. I got a call from Thomas, yesterday..."

"Oh? My son doesn't even want to speak to his dear mother in person anymore?"

"Mom, you were sleeping. Stop pretending like you're this poor, hapless martyr. He just wanted to ask me if he could invite Michael over this weekend..."

"Oh... We haven't seen him in a while, have we? Well,

at least your father will be glad. He's always saying how there are too many women in this house."

"I'll ask Mrs. Marcotte to whip us up a nice meal. Her catering business is the only really classy thing about this village. We'll take care of the rest."

Solange frowned.

"Mrs. Marcotte? Do you really think that's..."

"Look, mom, I'm a little tired these days. I can't serve as both home cook and maid to the entire family..."

Solange shook her head disapprovingly.

"But I... Oh, all right, if you must. You deserve a little rest. Listen, Annie... Erm... Thank you... For everything that you do for me... I know I can be a bit of a... shrew, sometimes... But I... I have... affection for you."

Annie couldn't believe her ears. Her mother was actually thanking her? Without a gun being pointed at her head? She had an unpredictable reaction: she wrapped her arms around her from behind and planted a big, wet kiss on her mother's cheek. Solange quickly pushed her away.

"Careful! You'll smear my makeup."

"Oh, dear, dear Highness. As allergic to displays of affection as always."

The creaking of one of the floorboards outside the bedroom caught their attention.

Harvey was standing there in the doorway, suitcase in hand.

"Sorry... Wouldn't want to intrude..."

Solange stared at him coolly, but without contempt. Annie broke the silence.

"Hi, dad. We heard the news on the radio. I'm really sorry. You deserved better than that."

"Thank you, Annie..."

Unable to show his daughter any kind of affection even

though she'd always been his favorite, her father simply stood there, stiffly.

Annie thought he had the air of a boy who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"I think I'll leave you lovebirds alone," she said with a wry smile, the one her father had always been so fond of in her childhood. "You two probably have a lot to discuss. Mom, I'll just nip off to the kitchen and prepare a large batch of vegetable soup, okay? If you want some later on..."

"I hate vegetable soup! It gives me gas..."

"Well that's too bad. It's quite good for you. Ciao!"

Annie closed the door behind her as she left. Alone inside the bedroom, the two spouses stared each other down, the air between them thick with tension. Harvey dropped his suitcase on the carpet next to an easy chair before draping his coat over it. He knew he was going to be in for the toughest battle of his career, one he had to win, at all costs...



Her mother's nightgown surfaced amidst a few towels inside the washer's soapy water and Annie closed the lid. Wearing a warm wool jacket, a snug tuque tucked down to her ears and knitted mittens on her hands, Annie slipped out the back door to drop the dirtied diaper inside a garbage bag.

She took a deep breath of icy cold air. The flowerbeds filled with yellowed grass were almost entirely covered in snow. Wrapped in their protective sleeves, the garden shrubs looked like frigid sentinels. The sun was hiding behind heavy gray clouds and only rarely peeked out from behind its fleecy refuge.

Following the long inclined walkway that, when the weather was clement, allowed her mother to reach her flowerbeds, she slowly made her way down to the lake embankment and sat in a heavy lawn chair made of painted wood. She looked on as a flock of geese streaked noisily across the sky.

Again, she filled her lungs with bracing air rolling in from the lake. Moments like these gave her a fleeting sense of serenity that helped her forget the vicissitudes of her situation, that of a resigned caregiver.

The old pontoon on which Michael, Thomas and herself had spent some of the best days of their adolescence had been hauled up onto the lawn and chained to an elm. On the surface of the lake, lazy eddies were breaking up barely formed patches of ice as wavelets lapped at the shore.

She thought back on their childhood feuds, innocent squabbles that would inevitably culminate in gales of laughter. Those long hours spent lying down on the pontoon, taking in the Sun's warmth, sharing their dreams, their ambitions, or simply reading adventure stories in silence.

Her heart heavy, Annie remembered the first time Michael had tried to kiss her; he had been fourteen, and had waited until Thomas had gone inside the house to get some sodas. She could still picture the boy's shy face, his great big inquisitive eyes that had managed to express both surprise and distress simultaneously.

From the kitchen window, Solange had caught them in the act and had immediately stormed down to the lake to make a scene, lecturing both sheepish teens on the spot, although her vitriol had mostly been directed towards Annie, whom she had called 'a slutty little tramp.'

Her mouth half-open, Annie let out a long sigh. It seemed like a lifetime ago, that period of naïve flings, of furtive awkward petting and innocent daydreams. In her fit

of anger, her mother had also taken the time to point out some of her character flaws, making sharp and cynical criticisms concerning her behavior as well as her appearance in general. “She doesn’t even have any breasts yet and she already thinks she’s this great seductress. You’ve got a long way to go yet, you little nitwit. And you, Michael, I think it’s high time you went and packed your things. Harvey will give you a lift home.”

After she’d left, Annie had burst into tears. Michael had taken her hand in his, awkwardly repeating: “Don’t cry, Annie... Please don’t cry... Girls... Real girls, I mean... Real girls don’t cry...”

In spite of herself, she had started to laugh at his childish humor and had finally managed to calm down.

A determined look on his face, Michael had stood up on the diving platform, straight as a pole, before dramatically announcing: “I will go and talk with your mother. I will apologize, and ask her if she would please allow me to stay.”

With the arrogance of youth, he had dived into the lake before quickly swimming back to shore. Emerging from the water, he had dried himself off using a beach towel that had been draped over an old sturdy lawnchair, the same one she was sitting in now, all these years later.

He had waved at her, a gesture meant to be reassuring, before heading back to the house, an air of determination on his face.

At first, Annie had heard only echoes of her mother’s shrill voice. Obviously, Michael had been having a hard go of it.

Then, little by little, her tone had seemed to calm down, and silence had fallen.

Waiting for the inevitable outcome, the young Annie had gone back to reading her detective novel. Some time

later, Michael had strutted back down to the lakeshore, having donned one of his long t-shirts adorned with a bust of Mozart along with a pair of jeans. His face red and his voice hoarse, he had shouted that everything was fine, that the matter had been resolved, that he didn't have to leave anymore, but that, for his 'penance', he had to go all the way over to town on his bike and run an errand for her mother.

My hero... He had earned a soft spot in her heart that day, one of gratefulness. Even at that young age, Michael had shown signs of a promising negotiator, exhibiting charm that would one day help him land a job as a television journalist, before eventually becoming host of his own weekly show...

But since that time, Annie felt as if she'd been stuck in some sort of celestial waiting room, biding her time until fickle destiny found the right moment to reorient her life.

Distant shouting brought her sharply back to reality.

Even from the lakeside, she could hear her father's angry tone followed by her mother's sharp replies. She took a moment before reacting. Her father had a propensity for speaking in a loud voice, a force of habit he had developed in order to be heard during sessions at the National Assembly. But his shouting seemed more thundering than usual.

What was going on?

She walked back up the pathway at as brisk pace. Thank God this hadn't occurred on her day off. Juliette, the volunteer nurse, would surely have blabbed every dirty little detail of their private squabble to any client down at the supermarket willing to listen to her. About a dozen meters away from the house, she began hearing snippets of their exchange, like drill bits boring into her ears.

“... One million two hundred thousand... accidental...  
Not including your own account...”

“... my money...! And for what? ... Foolish venture...  
political has-been...?”

“... just asking... help me...”

“... helped you enough. Have fun sorting... mess out  
with your... already shares your bed anyways!”

“... Linda out of this!”

“... say whatever I please! I have had just about enough  
of... Get out!”

Then, her father’s booming voice, threatening:

“YOU’LL PAY FOR THIS! MARK MY WORDS!!”

Transfixed in front of the entrance, Annie shivered. Quarrels between her parents had become more or less business as usual these last few years, but this time, both of them seemed to have crossed the line.

She heard a sharp noise that made her think of a gunshot. Then, the sound of a door being slammed shut. Suddenly alarmed, she ran across the kitchen and burst into the corridor leading to her mother’s bedroom, on the ground floor. She almost ran into her father who was barreling down the corridor at that exact moment, suitcase and coat in hand. A haggard look in his eyes, his face red and drenched in sweat, he stared at her and, in a daze, shouted:

“There’s a limit to just how much one man can take! She wants to ruin my career! If she thinks she can bring me down to my knees, she’s sorely mistaken. She won’t get away with this! Good Lord, if she could just croak already!”

Annie grabbed his arm with both hands.

“Daddy, stop! You don’t know what you’re saying! I know you’re angry, but you can’t possibly mean that.”

“Leave me alone, Annie! Don’t you get involved in this! Anyway, she’s crazy! She’s made my life a living hell,

and now she wants to humiliate me by refusing to help me out. Well she hasn't heard the last of Harvey Simard, let me tell you. The days of her bossing us around are over. Witches like her don't even deserve to live!"

Her mother's strident voice pierced through the bedroom door:

"Annie! Help, Annie! Come quickly!"

The young woman had a moment of hesitation, which her father used to his advantage to free himself from her hold and storm off into the study. In her panic, Annie had difficulty opening the bedroom door.

The wheelchair had flipped over, and Solange, bracing herself on both arms, was desperately trying to extricate herself from a bad situation. As her daughter rushed over to help her support her weight, she heard the sound of a car engine outside, then the screeching of tires. Please don't let him get arrested for speeding by the Sûreté du Québec again, sighed Annie. Focusing on her mother, she helped her back up into her wheelchair.

"What happened? What is that, all over the floor?"

"The remains of my favorite procelain figurine. More than three hundred years of careful care by generations of people, just to end up shattered into a million pieces. Your father threw it against the wall... I so loved that piece. He wanted to punish me, so he broke it. He completely lost it."

"But why, mom? What did he want?"

"He came to ask me for money, of course. To help him pay off some so-called 'debts' and help him finance his electoral campaign. I immediately refused. He wants to run as an independent, can you believe that?"

"If you didn't want to give him any, you could have loaned him some..."

“Your father’s bankrupt, dear. Everyone in the party talks of his propensity to squander his paychecks on card games. I’m not about to throw my money away, especially not on a fool’s errand.”

“Not even a little bit?”

“No!”

“Care to explain why?”

“No! It’s none of your business. You don’t need to know the motive behind every decision that I make. Now be a dear and fetch me a glass of mineral water, will you? There’s a good girl...”

Annie scowled and went to fill her a glass from a carafe resting on the night table near the bed.

“It is customary for couples to help each other out, you know...”

“Keep your nose out of my business, missy. I have my reasons for not supporting your father. Amongst others, I have no desire to help him spoil that floozy of a secretary he keeps humping on a daily basis.”

“You’re exaggerating, mommy. Linda is...”

“Linda is a slutty little upstart who sleeps around with Harvey in order to realize her career plan more quickly, which is to get as close to actual power as possible!”

“Why would you say such a thing?”

“Enough, Annie! Let’s just say I keep myself well-informed. Now, help me lie down on the bed, I feel a migraine coming on.”

“Well this bodes rather well for the weekend... And here I thought we were going to be able to spend some quality time with Michael and Thomas...”

“Oh, stop fretting. We’ll pretend everything’s fine, like we always do. Now, be a dear and close the curtains, will you? I need to get my strength back. This argument has left me weak as a kitten. And I need time to think.”

The bedroom plunged into darkness once more, Annie was about to leave, when she heard her mother behind her, her worried voice barely a whisper:

“I heard him make those threats, Annie. Through the door, when you were talking. I’m really scared of him this time...”

“Oh, come on, mom... Dad likes to shout a lot, but he’d never hurt a fly.”

“A fly? No. But a woman he despises...”

Once in the hallway, Annie quietly closed the door behind her.

Her hand on the handle, she stood there for a moment, trying to convince herself that her father’s erratic behavior was probably just exasperation caused by her mother’s refusal to help him.

But slowly, apprehension crept into her heart. Should she call Thomas and Michael and cancel their plans for the weekend?

She scowled. Come on, it’s a family meal! What’s the worse that could happen, a breadstick fight? And the presence of the boys would surely mollify the two belligerents.

Her mother was right: they had always pretended. That is how it had always been. Why break with tradition now?

She would simply let matters run their course, as she always had.

## 4

Standing in the middle of the living room in his condo on Nuns' Island in Montreal, Michael Mathieux was suffering through another one of his coughing fits. Trying to catch his breath, he spat in a paper handkerchief.

The apartment had somewhat of a monastic feel to it; sparsely furnished, every corner was filled with bookcases replete with numerous works. His was the collection of a fanatical bibliophile drawn to all kinds of subjects, where anthologies covering the greatest enigmas and crime mysteries of history stood alongside often obscure religious works.

Music played softly in the background, emanating from a high-quality sound system coupled to a large home entertainment theater. Enclosed on both sides by bookcases filled with DVD's and old VHS tapes, the entire set-up monopolized the largest wall of the living room.

When the doorbell chimed for the second time, Michael went to answer, and was soon greeted by his old friend, Thomas Simard, who just stood there in the entrance, a smile on his face and a pizza box and a bottle of Bardolino in his arms.

“I wasn't expecting you so soon...!”

Just speaking those few words brought on a new coughing fit.

“Hey there, padre! Geez, your pneumonia isn’t getting any better, is it?”

“Yes and no. Antibiotics help; it’s unpleasant, but I’m almost done. I’ve been told that coughing can persist for a few days, even after the infection’s gone.”

“When I rang you up, I thought you were just trying to avoid another crushing defeat at the hands of this old tennis pro! Are you sure you’re well enough for company?”

“Oh, yes. Don’t worry though, it’s not contagious. I appreciate you coming over, Thomas. Days are long. I can’t wait to get back to work.”

Michael was the host of his own television show, a program devoted to elucidating unsolved crime investigations and odd disappearances. His ability to interrogate police officers and witnesses, as well as his skill at staging reenactments, had garnered him impressive ratings of late.

In his childhood, Michael had been taken in and raised by his paternal aunt and uncle after his mother had passed away due to cancer. Unable to raise a child by himself, his father had entrusted him to this brave but somewhat rustic fiftysomething couple. Each month thereafter, a check had been deposited in his uncle’s account at the local Caisse Populaire.

As a teenager bored to tears by the doldrums of his adoptive family, Michael had often sought refuge at the great big lakeside house of the Simard family, who had always considered him as one of theirs.

“I don’t know how you do it, man” commented Thomas, closing the door behind him with his foot. “I’d die of boredom if I were stuck inside my own apartment like you. Here, I brought something to cheer you up.”

“Excellent. You’re the first visitor I’ve had in ten days. It’s like everyone thinks I’m a leper or something.”

Thomas was already in the kitchen, ripping the extra-large pizza box open. His childish hyperactivity had hardly been mollified by the oncoming thirties; he always seemed distracted, bent on wasting as little time as possible. With brusqueness that would have irritated anyone else but Michael, he took out two plates from a cupboard, almost dropping them in the process, rummaged around noisily in a couple of drawers, before finally finding utensils.

Michael watched as his friend hurriedly spread everything out on the dining room table adjacent to the living room, before quickly heading back to the kitchen in search of wine glasses.

“Make yourself useful!” cried Thomas as he resumed opening and slamming cupboard doors. “Uncork the bottle, will ya?”

As Thomas went back and forth restlessly between rooms, Michael looked on passively, slowly twisting the corkscrew inside the bottle neck.

“Where’d you find this thing?”

Thomas was buzzing around a sideboard on which rested a large Jansenist crucifix, the bottom of which had been inserted into a pedestal. His large, friendly head that made him resemble his father so still had airs of a little overexcited boy. But today, Michael had a hard time recognizing his friend’s usual jovial self.

“What, the crucifix? I got it from an antique dealer I met during a shoot, in a little village of the upper Matawinie region. He’d had it for eight years, and seemed pretty desperate to sell it. Apparently, he got it from some priest’s estate after he passed away in his quiet little parish. The priest’s heirs had wanted nothing to do with it. Like the dealer said to me: “They found it ugly as butt. And, y’know, religion ain’t as pop’lar as it used to be...” It dates

back to the middle of the seventeenth century, during the period of Blaise Pascal and Jansenism. It was probably brought over to the colonies of New France by a nobleman or a French officer.”

“Jansenism?”

“It was a sort of mystical movement that became very persecuted at the time. So, you know... Don’t you find that Christ seems incredibly discouraged, the way he’s depicted?”

“Man, you always talk like a teacher. Remind me again what this thing is supposed to symbolize?”

“In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Jansenism expounded that Christ had died for a small group of predestined believers, instead of the multitude of followers as per the dogma of the Catholic Church at the time. Traditionally, Christ is portrayed as having his arms outstretched horizontally along the cross, to signify he brings salvation to the entire Universe. The Jansenist Christ, however, is depicted as having his arms stretched-out over his head, to indicate that his salvation was only intended for a small group of individuals. It’s the complexities of grace and predestination in a nutshell.”

“His feet look weird, like, all pointy and stuff. Oh well, all of these religious squabbles seem so outdated now. Come on, let’s dig in before the pizza gets cold!”

Michael put the bottle down on the table next to the pizza as Thomas quickly came back to take a seat before tearing off a large slice.

“Did you see the news this morning?” he asked, swallowing his first mouthful.

“You mean the item about your father?”

“Yeah. Were you surprised?”

“I have to admit, yes.”

“Yeah, me too. The last time I spent a weekend over at the house was... Let me think... It must have been five or six weeks ago... Whatever, who cares. Anyways, so, last time I was there, my father made it clear to us that he was intent on running again, and that this time, oh this time, would be the right one. He was sure he’d finally be named minister.”

Staring at his plate, Thomas paused for a moment, chewing thoughtfully.

“I haven’t spoken to him since then.”

“You think his resignation comes at a weird time?”

“I do. Although Annie did send me an e-mail warning me that dad seemed rather preoccupied these days. Apparently, he’s been grumpy for no good reason, even by his own standards, drinks more than usual, and frets about everything. Thankfully, he’s kept himself busy. You know, as guest of honor for special events and communal meals, that sort of thing. He used to love getting his picture taken. He’d go to local outreach centers, shake hands, kiss a few babies and get his face printed in the weekly papers. Your typical little rural representative.”

“You haven’t mellowed your stance on him, have you? It never really worked out between the two of you. I’ve always wondered why.”

“No particular reason. We just never really... hit it off, I suppose. It’s not like we had a lot in common.”

Thomas downed his wine glass in one swig. Michael raised an eyebrow.

“Hey! That’s not mineral water you’ve got there! Maybe you should take it easy. Are you driving?”

“Yeah. I left my car in a parking lot somewhere. I’ve got three or four clients to meet in this neighborhood anyways. Trying to sell them these new Austrian skis. Real

fancy. I'm gonna be doing a lot of walking today, so, you know... no problem."

Thomas grabbed another huge slice of pizza before biting into it voraciously.

"I'll be honest with you, Michael. The real reason I came here is that I need to ask you a favor."

"If it's in my power..."

"Oh, don't worry, it is. I want you to come and spend the weekend over at my parents' house. Please say yes; I've already told Annie you were coming."

"What? Why?"

"Why not? You were like a second son to my parents for so many years. When the weather's nice, the countryside is magnificent. And there are so many activities to do around those parts. You know, hiking, interior tennis, horseback riding, that sort of thing..."

"Sure! And why don't we climb the mountain in Sept-Chutes park at a trot while we're at it? Look, Thomas, I took some time off because I had pneumonia, remember? Take a chill pill, as the kiddies say."

"Yeah, you're right," conceded Thomas. "I... forgot. It would just make me so happy if we could spend a long weekend together, like we used to, all of us..."

"You're up to something..."

"Well... All right, look, the mood will probably be a little tense, because of what happened to Harvey and all. He's found himself unemployed overnight, and I'm pretty sure his financial situation is going to weigh heavily on his mind. He's always led a rather lavish lifestyle, you know that, so he might be a little depressed. In any case... I'd appreciate it if you could come, to lighten the mood. You know, for Annie's sake. She seemed so happy when I told her you'd be coming. Your presence there would prevent my parents from bickering all the time."

Perplexed, Michael hesitated.

“I don’t think I should get involved in your family squabbles. Your parents are old enough to know what they’re doing.”

“Do it for Annie and me? For all the years we spent together as kids? You’re part of the family, in a way; it wouldn’t be the same without you. Come on, tell me you’ll come? Please.”

Michael mulled this over in silence for a moment. Thomas’ friendship had always been precious to him, but this sudden invitation seemed to hide a motive other than simply getting some fresh air and exercise. His insistence on the matter troubled him.

“It does coincide with the end of my sick leave,” he muttered, trying to convince himself. “Maybe the country air will do me some good after all. But I must warn you, Thomas, this is making me a little uncomfortable. You think your parents will be okay with this? It’s not like I’ve maintained close relationships with either of them over the years. A situation I now regret, I must admit.”

With a smile of satisfaction, Thomas bounded out of his chair, drained the rest of his glass and quickly poured himself another before sprinting to the kitchen, dinner plate in hand.

“Annie’s already given mom the heads up you were coming,” he announced loudly, to be sure Michael had heard him. “You know Solange often enquires about you, right? She says you’re always welcome, and laments the fact that you don’t come over to the house anymore. Annie will inform dad as soon as she can get in touch with him. She’ll be so glad to see you again! You two always were the best of friends, like peas in a pod!”

Michael scowled, and his pallid cheeks flushed red.

“Don’t be silly. We were just children. So, this will just be... sort of like a family gathering or something? A friendly reunion?”

“Sure, if you like...”

“Speaking of which, are you still seeing Linda...?”

Thomas carelessly dropped the dishes in the sink, interrupting him.

“It’s over between us. Well, sort of. She still needs to get over the breakup. I just... I needed something else, you know? It’s hard to explain. Linda’s an interesting girl, I guess, it’s just that she’s got a rather... possessive side. Maybe it’s because of the age difference, I don’t know... She was always chomping at the bit to lecture me, always suggesting I should ‘change my lifestyle’ or something...”

He glanced at his watch.

“Well, gotta go! I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Look, Thomas, please, stop taking me for a fool. Tell me the truth. Why the last minute invite? We’ve played tennis together twice a month for the last five years, and all this time, you never once invited me to come over and spend a weekend at your parents’ house.”

Thomas froze for a moment, then stared his old friend straight in the eye.

“There are a few things I need to settle with good ol’ daddy-o, and I think this would be the ideal opportunity to do it. Your presence there would help me scrounge up some courage.”

Standing in front of the window, his gazed fixed upon the city streets nine stories below, Thomas seemed visibly nervous. In no time at all, he had regained his composure, back to his old self. Then, without saying a word, he walked over to one of the bookcases and started taking out books one by one, glancing briefly at each of the covers before

putting them back in place. The perpetual movement of his hyperactivity started to make Michael dizzy. Hastily leafing through a photo album, Thomas finally added:

“I want him to understand that I might not be a professional like him, but that I like my job as a sales rep. I’m always on the move, I love that. I know you’re gonna say that there’s nothing glorious about representing a company that sells sporting goods...”

Michael was about to object, but Thomas continued.

“I just didn’t have your smarts, Michael. I’m just an ordinary guy. I didn’t hate school, really, I didn’t, but I wasn’t that interested either.”

“Thomas, listen to me. There’s nothing dishonorable about your line of work, and I fail to see why your father would have a problem with it. After all, there are no silly jobs--”

“Just silly people. Yeah, I know. Trust me, I’ve heard that one before. All I ever wanted to do was play guitar with my band. We weren’t that bad either. We’d even started performing in high schools and colleges. But mister high and mighty MP was ashamed of me. He wanted me to find a real job, to get formal training in something. Hell, anything would have been better than becoming a singer in his eyes, even a butcher!”

Thomas quickly came back to the table and poured himself another glass of wine before immediately gulping it down.

“Nothing’s changed. Any pretext is good for him to call me up. He even comes over to my flat without warning, enquiring about my income, my ambitions, like he’s cross-examining me... I’ve had it. It’s like he thinks I’m one of the board members at his riding office or something... Or, more to the point, it’s like he’s trying to orient my life...

As if he owned me. I just want him to accept me for who I am, as I am. I'm a victim of his... his..."

The word 'concern' stuck in his throat. Thomas went to leave.

"I just wish I could... I don't know... Make peace with him. And it would help me greatly if you were there. It'd give me the strength to do it."

Michael got up as well. To him, Thomas' motives seemed rather muddy. Was he lying to him right now? Just thinking about the Simards' home made him feel uncomfortable, dredging up long forgotten memories, like smoldering embers he'd never quite managed to extinguish, memories he'd rather have kept hidden away. A huge empty house with huge empty rooms, sheltered away on a remote parcel of land; why on Earth would he ever want to go back there? But, trying to overcome his misgivings, he replied:

"If I listened to myself right now, I would refuse your invitation. You're putting me in a difficult spot here, Thomas. But I have not forgotten how, when I left the seminary, when I needed your help, you were very generous of your time. I see no reason why I should play the ingrate and refuse to help you now."

Touched, Thomas glanced at him.

"Thanks, buddy. Listen... I hate to do this to you but... Could I borrow four hundred bucks from you, just till our next tennis bout? I'm afraid I'm a little short this month; the super keeps reminding me about the rent every time I see him. I've already got half, I just need the rest... Lost a stupid bet, that sort of thing..."

Nodding his head, Michael went and retrieved his checkbook from one of the drawers in his work desk.

As soon as he had the check in hand, Thomas bounded over to the armchair where he'd dropped his leather vest

upon arriving.

“I knew I could count on you! Now I know why I always appreciated having a friend like you. Wow, look at the time! Is it half past one already? Gotta go! And take care of yourself, will you? I’ll call you later! I’ll come and pick you up! Ciao, padre!”

“Try and be careful! Even if you are only walking!”

Thomas was already gone.

Michael walked over to the patio door of his balcony and stared out at the silhouette of Montreal’s skyline.

Preoccupied, he was already regretting having accepted the invitation. How could he possibly spend an entire weekend with the Simard family, listening to them squabble, in a house where certain painful memories were sure to resurface?

And most of all, he had the sinking feeling that his friend hadn’t been entirely truthful with him, or at the very least, that he had presented his own version of the truth with omissions and modifications.

He turned his head and stared at the Christ figure, with its arms in that curiously outstretched stance that evoked so much dejection and despondency. He shivered. What did he have to do to free himself from this troubling past that haunted him so?

Suddenly uneasy, he straightened his back and, determined to resolve this sudden distress, decided to go and pay his favorite record shop a visit.



## 5

Standing in front of a mirror hung up on a wall yellowed by years of cigarette smoke, Vicky was busy trying to give her ruffled hairdo some much needed volume, and so did not see her client quietly slip away without saying a word.

She didn't particularly care for busy fiftysomething businessmen who, convinced their secretaries had actually been fooled by the old 'I've got a meeting with a client' routine, would pay themselves a little afternoon romp of salubrity.

She took off her black silk nightgown embroidered with chinese motifs and proceeded to meticulously wash her vulva and her inner thighs. Condoms were practical, but didn't help matters any when it came to messes made by males on the decline. She also took care to wash her breasts, that still smelled of the last client's bad breath.

"Damn pigs who like extra onions in their fat hamburgers, she brooded. I should keep a bottle of mouthwash and force them to decontaminate their filthy mouths beforehand..."

After slowly getting dressed, she went to smooth out the gray wool blanket draped directly over the bare mattress.

She slid the window open to let some cool air in. Noise from the adjoining street immediately filled the seedy little room.

Taking the banknotes that had been left on her brown melamine nightstand, she slipped them inside an ATM envelope. She disliked carrying so much cash around on her person, and preferred to keep only the minimum amount she needed in her handbag. She'd have to make a quick deposit on her way to university, later in the afternoon. Shivering, she closed the window, leaving it only slightly ajar to help dissipate the male musk still lingering in the room.

Snow had accumulated on the Italian restaurant's lean-to next door. From a large ventilator embedded in the kitchen wall of the establishment, a pungent odor of tomatoes, grilled onions and green peppers wafted in.

She casually left her small two-and-a-half-room apartment. In the bustling street outside, she reprised what she referred to as her skank persona, walking slowly and enticingly, trying to showcase her long legs beneath her frumpled miniskirt, her flowery pantyhose and her mid-length boots. She liked to pretend she was a modern-day flapper, maybe a young secretary wearing too much make-up out on her lunch break, or even a promiscuous college student. She was glad she'd opted for her shearling-lined leather jacket and her red beret; it would allow her to wander wherever her whim took her without being bothered by the humid cold.

The memory of the fiftysomething fellow with the bad breath had already evaporated.

The ATM machine was only a few meters away, in the lobby of a banking institution. The bounty wasn't as big as she had hoped (she'd only turned two tricks since ten this morning), but she didn't mind. Vicky was hardly the kind

of woman to be devoured by a blind ambition of becoming the best paid hooker in town, nor was she the kind to lose sleep over the metaphysical quandaries of the profession she had taken up.

It allowed her to pay the rent and her studies. She didn't do drugs, and owed nothing to any pimp. She planned on quitting this 'job like any other' within the next six months, and was certain that her life would then take her in a new direction. To this confident young lady, that's all that mattered. She was master of her own destiny, captain of her own ship.

She noticed an elegant young woman walking by. She seemed painfully aware of how passersby on the street were staring at her. Vicky had a sudden urge to spend the night with this beautiful stranger, to caress her and hold her in her arms. She surreptitiously turned her head to follow her swaying hips as she walked away, eyeing her expertly.

That's when she saw him following in her wake. In his nervousness, the man barely glanced at the passing cars, who were honking at irregular intervals according to their drivers' restlessness. No doubt about it. It was the client who had requested the blow-up doll. Vicky quickly turned away. What was he doing here, so close to where she lived? Was he on the lookout for her? How could he have possibly known where her territory was? Every time she had received him, it had been in an old abandoned warehouse, not at her place. He'd obtained her number from an add she would occasionally place in a weekly periodical under the heading: 'Escort.'

She toyed with the idea of throwing him a little conspiratorial wink, but quickly decided against it. Maybe he was on his way to a rendez-vous with his girlfriend. No point in making him uncomfortable.

Trying to act casual, she turned her head around to examine the shop window of a lingerie boutique and, to ensure their paths wouldn't cross, changed her trajectory to move closer to the display case, feigning interest.

When she finally had the nerve to glance in his direction again, she saw him running across the street under a hail of car honks. He had undoubtedly recognized her; he was trying to put some distance between them.

Shrugging, she went inside the bank located next to the lingerie shop and took her place at the back of the line of waiting patrons.



When she exited the banking institution ten minutes later, somewhat exasperated by the unexpected wait due to a momentary lack of liquidity at the teller's counter, Vicky immediately headed towards an intersection where she knew she'd catch the eye of American tourists out for some fun, men who had escaped their spoiled and coddled wives after having left them downtown in some of the biggest retail stores for a bout of excessive shopping.

Flaunting a mischievous air, she straightened out her collar, zipped her leather jacket up to her neck and spun around to gaze slowly across the street, trying her best to look coy and innocent.

There he was again, standing on the sidewalk, his eyes darting about nervously as he turned his head left and right. He was clearly waiting for someone.

Just then, a young man came over and nonchalantly accosted him.

Her street smarts told her that a drug trade was about

to go down. Vicky froze in surprise. The pusher was the university student who had tried to invite her out for coffee.

He signaled his client to follow him, and both headed discreetly to the back of a parking lot before ducking between parked vehicles.

On the spur of the moment, Vicky decided to cross the main arterial road to try and get closer to them, just as the traffic light was turning from yellow to red. A taxi honked. She stepped back onto the sidewalk to let it pass.

By the time the cab had gone, the two men in the parking lot had disappeared from her sight. Why was she doing this anyways? This didn't concern her, he's just a client. A well-paying client, sure, but it's not like they were friends. She should simply leave it alone, and go back to languidly walking the streets of Montreal in search of males in heat. Just then, the little drug peddler popped up between two parked cars. Making his way back out of the parking lot, he slowly walked away down the street, heading back in the direction whence he'd come.

The traffic light finally turned green. She stepped foot between the white lines to cross the street. Her client came out of the parking lot next, heading in the direction opposite to that of the seller.

As she reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street, Vicky saw him climb into a gray sports car before speeding away, almost crashing into a taxi that had just stopped to take on a woman passenger.

She made her way across the parking lot, darting between endless rows of tightly packed cars, until she found the approximate spot where she'd last seen the two men, huddling up behind an old van. She circled around it. In the muddy snow at her feet, two empty polythene baggies rimmed with faint traces of a white powdery residue were flapping away in the northeasterly wind.

Backtracking her steps out of the parking lot, Vicky braced herself against the cold. In the future, she mused, it might prove wiser if she were to choose her clients more prudently...

## 6

Not even the pressure of planning a pivotal press conference could stifle Linda's resourcefulness when it came to improving her marketing strategies. From now on, her phone calls to entice journalists into attending would hold a new sense of import and purpose. While being careful not to let the cat out of the bag, she planned on briefly mentioning Harvey's track record, teasing about the 'real reason' behind his sudden resignation, then elaborating about his 'political legacy' as well as his professional accomplishments. In short, she would try her hardest to fuel rampant speculation so that Harvey's motives would be hotly debated both on air and in the papers, just in time for the big press conference. A perfect illustration of the proverb: "Speak ill of me, speak well of me, as long as you're talking about me."

Starting tomorrow, their public relations officer would begin leaking information to the press concerning the outgoing MP: how he had some startling revelations to make, how he was taking time off to reflect on his political future, and how so many voters had been calling in to offer their support and beg for him to reconsider his decision. In reality, their office had received but three phone calls, but why split hairs, she mused.

The press conference was to be held in a dining room at Chez Mimi's restaurant, situated right in front of their riding office. Linda had drafted an invite fixing the event at 10:00 am that Saturday morning, promising attendees coffee, croissants and donuts, along with a few other niceties (including some Cognac, which she planned on discretely pouring into a few select cups.)

The chronic dearth of news that usually plagued weekend broadcasts would help propel Harvey's story on every channel, starting with the noon telecasts. His declarations would then be picked up by the twenty-four hour news channels, before ultimately making the headlines in the papers the following Sunday morning.

Linda had borrowed the idea from a trade union group that had taken to holding press conferences every Saturday in order to capitalize on the media's eagerness to fill out the pages of their daily newspapers or to supplement their electronic media outlets with any tidbit of information it could find. The correspondent from the most watched twenty-four hour news network would likely respond favorably to the invite; a few months earlier, Harvey had used his influence to get the reporter's mistress a job as an attendant in a home for the elderly located in his riding. He owed him one...

One last hurdle remained for the day: in less than an hour and a half, the meeting with the executive committee was about to get underway. Linda glanced up at the wall clock imprinted with the logo of a well-known brewer: 6:00 pm. As long as Harvey hadn't gone off to drown his sorrows at a bar in the nearby township, she sighed. He hadn't bothered checking in with her since he'd revealed that he had paid his wife a visit, earlier in the morning.

She could have called him at home to see if he was

there, but, not wanting to have to deal with Solange Simard, thought better of it.

The urgent ringing of the telephone brought her sharply back to reality.

“Deputy Simard’s office.”

“Miss Falardeau, good morning. Counselor Comeau speaking. I’m calling about the rumor that has been airing on the news since this morning. Can you confirm this information, please?”

“Ah! Mr. Comeau. I was just about to get in touch with you. I see that you’ve been made aware of the situation...”

“Oh, not just me. The people whose interests I represent have also been made painfully aware of the situation, and I can assure you that they are not at all pleased. They’re afraid they might have bet on the wrong horse by placing their trust in you. Rather large investments have been made to your bank account, and my clients would like to see these garner dividends, else they might, how can I put this, buy back their stock...”

Linda felt a knot tighten in her stomach. The coolness of the man’s voice contrasted starkly with his usual jovial self. For the last six months, he had wired important sums of money to her bank account in Ontario, account she had opened under an assumed name, and up until now, their exchanges had always been good-natured. She had earmarked that money for a downpayment on a condo in Montreal, where she had planned on trying to steer Thomas along the slope to reconciliation.

In exchange for these allocations, of which Harvey knew nothing about, Linda had committed herself to subtly leaning on her lover MP in order to have him favor the erection of six mega hog farms in his riding, a project

supposedly put forward by an important, yet discrete, asian enterprise that Mr. Comeau refused to identify.

Harvey had not yet agreed to sign off on the project. The arguments that Linda's generous benefactors had provided her with, particularly the used cliché of 'creating job opportunities in a district where unemployment ran rampant,' had failed to immediately convince him. Harvey knew perfectly well that he risked losing the confidence of a considerable part of his electorate should he decide to favor a project that would surely beset his riding with a nauseating yearlong stench. The threat of pollution had never prevented Harvey from getting a good night's sleep, but the loss of his clientele of supporters most assuredly did.

To Linda's growing irritation, he had started reading up on the matter, pouring over books and even analyzing reports. It was the first time she hadn't been able to influence him into bending his convictions in her favor. Harvey was afraid to come off as an ignoramus in regards to the potential ecological damage of the presence of mega hog farms in his riding, their notorious overconsumption of water, the possible contamination of the ground water, along with the massive grain requirements to feed all of these animals... Faced with her lover's sudden, calculated green bent, she had fumed in silence. Would the proximity of an upcoming election, the outcome of which was hardly a foregone conclusion, force him to reconsider?

For the last few weeks, she had feared that these unknown investors would lose patience with her lack of results caused by Harvey's obstinacy, and choose to pull the plug. Linda resolved then and there to defend herself, along with her investments, tooth and nail.

"Counselor, listen to me. Now is not the time for panic. The riding's executive committee is holding an emer-

gency meeting this very evening, and Mr. Simard will be announcing that he intends to present himself as an independent in the upcoming elections.”

“Miss Falardeau, his own party has disavowed him. Surely the executive committee no longer answers to him, does it?”

“Actually, barring one person, the executive committee is all but ready to support him in his decision, and throughout this process. I took it upon myself to make a few enquiries today and see where everyone stood on the matter. Trust me, he will be re-elected handily, don’t you worry.”

“I’m very pleased for him, I’m sure, but that changes nothing to our present situation. Even if elected, Mr. Simard will be all alone at the National Assembly, without any real power to influence cabinet decisions. Might as well say he’s no longer of any use to anyone. At least, that’s what my... sponsors seem to think.”

A chill crawled down Linda’s spine. She had to counter, and fast. Never leave them time to ask the hard questions.

“Counselor Comeau, every opinion poll has shown that the next government will be a minority government. In that perspective, the presence of independents within Chambers will prove crucial. Additionally, over the course of the last eighteen years, Mr. Simard has managed to forge himself a solid network of contacts and reliable friends amongst civil servants, as well as within certain strategic departments.”

“Perhaps, but those individuals will prove less than useful should your MP fail to become Minister. You had promised us he would be. But rather than a promotion, Mr. Simard seems to have been given the boot. I won’t sugarcoat this for you, Miss Falardeau: my ‘friends’ are very

displeased with this situation. They risk a lot in this whole affair, and feel as if they've been swindled. Although they do not wish for the... let's call them 'gifts,' that you received to be revealed in the full light of day, they would still appreciate it if you could find a way to thank them back for their generous favors. I'd like to remind you that these people are hardly the forgiving type. They demand results, not empty promises."

The young woman felt perspiration beading at the base of her skull. Things were taking an unexpected turn, and a more dangerous one than she had anticipated. Counselor Comeau's secret sponsors had the habit of always paying promptly, but they would not hesitate to become extremely exigent. She jumped at the chance to launch a counterattack.

"Counselor Comeau, your misgivings are insulting. I have never swindled anybody in my life, and I am not about to start now. Over the course of the last six months, you have witnessed the level of persuasion I can exert over Mr. Simard, and..."

"Let me stop you right there. A few minor favors aside, Mr. Simard has hardly proven himself to be of any great use to us. On numerous occasions, he has delayed signing off on the construction of new mega hog farms in his riding. At this rate, these new fandangled elections will only serve to push this project back to the next millennium! What assurances do I have that, once in power, he will prove more favorable to my acquaintance's ventures than he has been in the past? What use can the two of you be to us, Miss Falardeau, if Mr. Simard is no longer even a member of the party in power?"

"Politics is not your forte, Counselor Comeau. Mr. Simard is one of the most beloved and well-esteemed MP's they have at the National Assembly, and..."

Linda noticed Harvey's silhouette growing in the door window.

"... And I'll be in touch with you shortly with the latest updates. Now if you'll please excuse me, someone's coming, and I'll have to call you back. Good-bye..."

Eyeing Harvey's movements, Linda hung up abruptly. To her astonishment, he seemed sober. He came over to her, glancing around the office to make certain they had privacy. Only then did he take her in his arms and kiss her.

"Where were you, Harvey? I was starting to think I might have to call your wife..."

"I just needed a few hours to calm my nerves down after that talk with Solange. I've been driving around the riding the whole afternoon..."

Linda hung on his every word. Her heart was beating so hard it felt as if it were trying to leap out of her chest. Was he about to spring a decision on her that she probably didn't want to hear?

"It did me some good, driving from one end of the riding to the other. It made me realize just how much I love this place, and its people. I came to understand that they really need me, you know, and that they'll never get a better advocate than me. If only the party hadn't decided to abandon me... It's going to be a tough fight to get elected as an independent... Maybe too tough..."

Linda felt a surge of relief. She had bet big, but might yet be able to come out of all of this on top. She knew how to anticipate the worst of situations and react accordingly before things deteriorated any further. Revitalizing Harvey's courage was now priority number one.

"Bravo. That's the Harvey I know. I take it your meeting with your wife didn't go so well?"

"It was a disaster. She refuses to help."

“That woman makes me crazy! She’s getting in the way, Harvey. Whatever. We’ll just have to find other ways to raise funds. Hopefully, one of these days she’ll just take a bad spill down the stairs or something and break her neck so she can stop bothering us for once.”

“Knock it off, Linda,” snapped Harvey. “We’re done talking about this.”

“I was just teasing, darling. The only thing that matters right now is our meeting with the executive committee this evening. We have to be prepared...”

“If we must...”

His lack of enthusiasm grated on her. This time, she was frankly starting to wonder if she still had any future being in Harvey’s arms.

Her conversation with Counselor Comeau weighed heavily on her mind. Would his secret sponsors have the patience to wait just a little longer? Oh, if only Solange would just...



Michael was waiting patiently in the parlor of the old seminary where, as a young man convinced he had received the calling, he had once spent two years studying theology. Nothing had changed since that dreary afternoon when he had left the premises, feeling helpless and confused, banged-up briefcase in hand.

The familiar smell of old dust and floor wax wafted in the air, made stifling hot by radiators that had been set too high. The same old religious engravings depicting the Virgin Mary as She held baby Jesus in her arms, along with Christ, His arms ascant on the cross, adorned the wall in

front of him. He tried, in vain, to look away; inevitably, his gaze kept coming back to them. He sighed.

The memory of Thomas' visit haunted him. He hadn't stayed over at the Simard's big family home in years, and had to admit that he dreaded the prospect of going back there. Something at the back of his mind kept insisting that this invitation to renew with old acquaintances sounded a little too convenient.

"Padre..." he mused. Coming from his best friend's mouth, the monicker had always sounded more than ironic. Thomas was the only one who could still remind him of his time spent at the seminary, a formative period of his life that had abruptly ended five years earlier.

In his mind, he could still picture the prelate who had summoned him to his diocese office, the one with the wood-paneled walls.

"Mister Mathieux, I regret to inform you that I have decided against granting you access to the priesthood. Being ordained is just not in the cards for you..."

Even using deference and respect, Michael had been unable to obtain any further explanations. The bishop's attitude hadn't been one of coldness, but rather a kind of jaded sadness. He could still remember the man's round face, with its pointy beak jutting out over a weak chin, a visage permeated with emotionalism.

Coming back to the present, Michael let out a small sigh. Would that old wound ever heal?

At the time, Thomas' solidarity had proven indispensable. Throughout his entire life, he had always been there for him, and in his time of need, his childhood friend hadn't failed him. During those dark days after his rejection, he had been there, nurturing him, weathering his emotional crises as he listened to him rattle on endless confidences over the course of many nights.

Together, they had started taking long hikes in the mountains surrounding the lake of the old Simard home, while the Simard couple had gone off on a cruise, in a final ditch effort to try and heal their matrimonial woes.

Slowly, Michael's crushing disappointment had mellowed into a kind of fragile forgetfulness. Thomas' sense of humor, his constant liveliness and his passion for the great outdoors, had all contributed greatly to helping him get back on his feet. From that point on, their friendship had remained unailing.

He coughed. Was it still that persistent pneumonia? He felt weak, fragile. He scanned the framed pictures hung up on the walls. So many portraits of young men, men his age who had managed to become priests some thirty, forty, fifty years before... How many of them had remained faithful to their vows? How many were still believers?

“Michael? Is that really you?”

His old teacher of canon law, father Cloutier, headed towards him, hand outstretched. Seventy-nine years of age, he moved more slowly than in his younger days, and seemed to have lost a bit of weight; he looked positively lost in the folds of his vestments. He no longer wore a clerical collar, but had instead inserted a cross pin in the buttonhole of his jacket lapel. His face still hinted at his propensity for intellectual matters, a passion that had been his mark as a good teacher.

“Yes, father, it's me. I've been placed on sick leave for a couple of weeks, and I thought it might prove pleasant to try and renew with old acquaintances whose company I once very much appreciated. I hope I'm not disturbing you?”

“Of course not! I have all the time in the world, now. They made me retire, you see. Well, why don't we go and

take a walk in the gardens; it's much better suited for conversations. It's one of the only remaining sanctuaries where one can find some peace of mind in this noisy town. Perhaps that's because condo project developers haven't yet heard of this place, eh? Would you mind waiting here a moment? I just need to go and fetch my coat and beret. At my age, one has to take more precautions than necessary if one wishes to see the next sunrise..."



The snow crunched beneath their feet as Michael and his old teacher followed the winding path that ran between tall, skeletal maple trees and wilted flowerbeds of hydrangea.

Hands crossed behind his back, the clergyman took slow steps, his gaze constantly in motion, as if discovering this universe for the first time.

"Do you remember my old friend, Thomas Simard, the one who would sometimes come visit me during my years of study here?"

"You mean the politician's son?"

"That's the one."

"I remember a rather talkative young fellow, somewhat excitable, who kept referring to you as 'padre.'"

"I see your memory has lost nothing of its keen edge. He came over to my place the other day, to pay me a visit. He wanted to ask if I'd like to spend a weekend over at his parents' old house. His mother has been rendered paraplegic ever since she was involved in a car accident one night, eight or nine years ago. Some driver cut her off abruptly and sent her vehicle flying off into a skid before she got rammed by a truck."

“I remember there was a lot of talk about this incident at the time, was there not?”

“The culprit was never found. Many suspected that the driver had been drunk at the time, and had consequently chosen to remain silent on the matter. Ever since then, things haven’t been the same between Thomas’ parents. And recently, it seems to have deteriorated even further.”

“I see. And what does your friend expect from you, do you think?”

“I used to be very close to the Simard family in my childhood. I would sometimes spend weeks over at their house. His parents always treated me as one of their own. I hold vivid memories of that period of my life. However...”

“Yes?”

“I’m not convinced that I’m comfortable in this role of intermediary he seeks to have me play. Thomas has a score to settle with his father. He believes that my presence there might serve to mollify tensions should Mr. Simard choose this opportunity to announce whether or not he will be pursuing his political career.”

“And what do you think?”

“Well... I find it unwise to try and stir the ashes of the past.”

“And here I thought your friend was asking you to help him extinguish the embers of the present.”

Michael winced.

“Yes, yes... You’re probably right. In this case, however, I fear that both past and present might be intimately linked. Perhaps not all truths are meant to be known.”

His old teacher took a moment before answering. Inhaling the crisp air of dawning winter, he contemplated the sky as wisps of clouds regularly sailed past the Sun, creating perpetual plays of light and shadow atop the thin layer of snow.

Emulating his former mentor's gait, Michael followed slowly next to him. He started fretting that perhaps he had made the wrong decision in coming here, trying to solicit an opinion that was long in coming.

A concerned look on his face, father Cloutier finally spoke up and, as was his wont, began soliloquizing.

"There comes a time in every individual's life when they must choose between the past and the present, Michael. Perhaps you are to be the instrument of this decision for both Thomas and his parents. The passing of our lives is not a tape we can simply unwind and erase according to whim, you know. Actions we take remain forever engraved in our minds. Your friend is attempting to alter the course of events, to free himself from this stagnant swamp of sad, unhealed reminders that has become his memory."

Michael froze. He had come here to this place, to this man, to try and vent some of the unease that kept resurfacing in his mind at the mere thought of having to visit that old house again. Had he exaggerated in assuming that Thomas' invitation had hidden a secret motive?

Suddenly, he noticed that the priest was staring him straight in the eye, without saying a word. His face expressed great puzzlement, tinged with fear.

"Michael, I'm not sure you undersand my meaning. Charity does not always mean having to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others. It also means trying to help them progress and adapt to often difficult circumstances!"

"Even to one's own expense?"

Unflinching, the old professor stared at him quizzically.

"Do you think this invitation poses some sort of danger to you?"

"I'm not sure I wish to revisit this particular memory. This whole family, to be honest. I have this sense of foreboding..."

“Michael, what are you afraid of?”

“Ever since Thomas’ visit, I’ve been experiencing nightmares wherein I see myself dying...”

“Certain types of medication can have that effect... Are you taking antidepressants?”

“Y... Yes... My work behind the cameras is starting to take its toll on me. Fatigue keeps me forever drowning in anguish. I am afraid of death, father...”

“You are afraid of dying?”

“No, father, I am afraid of death itself. Of what it signifies. I see myself dying, and I feel great anguish at not knowing why, at not understanding the purpose of it.”

“What a question! My dear Michael, faith is not a dam you build to protect yourself against the onslaught of anguish. When I consider the eight hundred and fifty million years of evolution that have preceded the improvement and realization of mankind, I remind myself that there is indeed purpose to all of this. So many geniuses have helped humanity progress to where it is today. The same applies to each and every one of us. Every life holds a purpose...”

“Even to those who murder? Does a purpose exist for those who seek to destroy, mistreat or even cause harm to others?”

“Good Lord, Michael, what has gotten into you? What demon has taken hold of your heart?”

“Are you afraid of dying, father?”

“Yes. Does that surprise you, a priest afraid of dying? Well it shouldn’t. Dying is our lot in life, all of us. But that doesn’t mean I don’t believe that everything, all of this, has a purpose, Michael. Even when it comes to humanity’s propensity for incommensurable stupidity.”

“Sometimes I wonder if we might not be better off getting rid of certain aspects of humanity, destroying unde-

sirable elements that prevent others from progressing towards the light, towards peace, both inside of us and amongst us... I tell myself that, at the very least, we should try and terminate certain relationships, ties that no longer hold any true meaning for us..."

"Are you referring to this friend of yours?"

"Perhaps... No... I don't know anymore... I suppose I was including myself in the lot... Along with certain other individuals..."

"Individuals like those you'll be meeting up with this weekend?"

"Maybe..."

"You worry me, Michael. But perhaps you're on the verge of discovering the answers to what has been troubling you of late."

"Thomas is the one seeking answers... I have chosen to jettison from my mind any and all questions to which I could not find an answer."

"Really?"

"Oh, I've never been able to hide anything from you, father. You're right, certain memories are harder to ignore. But I am not ready to discuss them with you yet. Please excuse me, I must take your leave, now..."

For a long moment, the priest stared the parlor door through which Michael had exited, chagrined at not having been able to find the proper words to help appease his troubled spirit.

Heading back to the chapel that smelled of bland incense and camphor ointment that served to assuage the arthritic bones of old priests, he knelt. Bowing his torso, he tried to mouth a silent prayer, but found he lacked the conviction to finish it. He had the gnawing impression that, regardless of what Michael might claim, he, in fact, had not

forgotten a single detail of the events that had stirred such great anguish within him.

Suddenly feeling great fear for his former pupil, he took up his prayer once more, in silence.

## 7

Vicky had hesitated before deciding whether she wanted to throw herself into a new production number with him or not. Especially only a few days after their last therapy session together.

But not out of fear. After all, she'd had to contend with ornery clients before, a gamut of perverts ranging from clingy depressives seeking human contact in all the wrong places to neurotic women willing to pay through the nose to try 'that' with a woman without risking condemnation for it.

What she'd discovered on the ground of the parking lot the day before was still fresh in her mind; another session of sado-masochism with this guy hardly felt like the ideal way to pay for her studies. What if he lost it and went ballistic on her? Would she be able to handle him, especially in an abandoned warehouse? Real life had little in common with what was shown on American television dramas.

But this client wasn't like the others. He followed a very precise scenario rooted in the deepest recesses of his mind. Vicky knew full well that her role in his story was but a supporting one.

Earlier, he had called to request that she dress the warehouse in their usual set, the one they'd used a dozen times before.

Certain elements from their previous encounters were on the program: the table, the candles, the cassette player that would yet again be playing *Talk to me of love...* But this time, he had asked her to bring an extra blanket and a pillow.

All in all, a rather minor request, considering that her equipment cupboard hidden away in a dark corner of the warehouse held, wrapped in sheets of plastic, all of the paraphernalia required to satisfy any of her clients' 'special needs.'

This time, her lack of enthusiasm must surely have been perceptible in her voice. The man had quickly added a \$100 bonus to the already agreed upon rate. Then, another \$100 when he had again detected hesitation in her voice. Reluctantly, Vicky had finally agreed to meet with him. She'd make more money out of a single hour with this guy that she would out of a typical day's work.

After having been abandoned for decades, the only other tenants besides her in the disused warehouse were a few pigeons who would occasionally flutter from joist to joist before soaring back outside through a broken windowpane.

At a quarter past two, standing in front of the stock room, Vicky was perplexed. There was a tiny scratch on the lock. Had she accidentally scraped it the last time she was here? She couldn't remember. Shrugging it off, she unlocked the door and retrieved her apparel, slipping on a short pleather skirt over fluorescent green stockings.

Checking her make-up in a small compact, she tucked a wayward strand of brown hair back under her blond wig. She had opted for tasteful make-up, nothing garish. It was more that of, say, a sales girl you'd find at the cosmetics counter of your local drug store. It gave her airs of a proper

young lady, one who'd come from a good family but who had decided to dress up a little more provocatively that day in order to get noticed at a rock concert. She was in the process of applying a thin veneer of purple lipstick when she heard knocking at the front door. She recognized the prearranged code.

Heading towards the entrance, she skirted around the table, and had the intuition something was amiss. She froze. The table had been moved slightly. Streaks were perceptible in the layer of dust covering the cement floor. Had her sanctuary been used by someone else?

There was another knock on the door. Setting aside her worries, she went and slid back the latch that kept the warehouse secured.

He had the same subdued look on his face he'd worn during their preceding sessions. Mumbling a meek 'Hello,' he placed a wad of cash in her hand. Vicky stepped aside to let him in and closed the door behind him before double-locking it with her key.

Walking over to the center of the room, he scanned the set-up she had laid out for him. The prayer candles fluttered as he passed by. A gas heater had warmed the area surrounding the improvised table. Everything seemed in order. He placed a hand on the folded covers to measure its thickness.

Trying to sound neutral, Vicky said:

"You sure you wouldn't prefer a mattress?"

"NO!!" he cried. Then, more calmly, he added: "No-oo... It has to look like a little cot."

That was the most he'd spoken to her since their first rendez-vous.

"Okay... So what'll it be this time?"

"Start the cassette player, please..."

Nodding, she went and pressed the play button. The old recording started resonating throughout the huge hangar, endowing Lucienne Boyer's voice with both a quivering and seductive quality.

Turning his back to her, he started undressing, saying:

"Please, take yours off as well... I'd like... I would like to... You know..."

Taken aback, Vicky whispered:

"You would like to make love to me this time?"

"Yes... If that's all right with you..."

"You're the client, and I'm not one to fail in my obligations. Just don't try any... funny business. Understood?"

"No. Nothing dangerous or anything like that, I swear. I just want to... hold you against me."

"All right then."

Vicky slipped off her skirt, unzipped her black leather boots, removed her pantyhose and took off the finely laced panties that barely served to conceal the dark patch of her pubic hair. Lying down on the uncomfortable pallet, she said:

"I'm keeping my sweater on... I'm a little cold..."

Fully naked, the man walked over to her and lay down awkwardly on the covered table. Hiding his face in the nook of the young woman's left shoulder, he began inhaling her scent, a mix of wildflowers tinged with a faint odor of perspiration.

Vicky surmised that he was too timid to initiate matters. Using her right hand, she slipped a condom on his erect penis and guided it towards her vagina. He instantly hardened in her hand. She felt him penetrate her with some trepidation. A slight shiver ran across the client's back.

Oh, Good Lord, she sighed. Not another one!

He had barely squirmed a few seconds before he let out a respectful moan. He quickly got up and started rummaging around beneath the table where he'd dropped his clothes. As he stood back up, she saw him holding an open newspaper in his hands. He glared at it for a moment before throwing it in a corner of the room, scattering the pages on the floor.

Leaning against her right elbow, Vicky started rooting around on the bed for her underwear. She finally found her panties and was about to slip them on.

“NO!”

Although it hadn't been overly aggressive, the loud voice startled her. It had sounded more like a cry for help, filled with despair. By way of apologizing, he immediately added:

“I wasn't done yet...”

Figuring he was going to try and give it another go from a different angle, Vicky lay back down on the pallet.

But instead, the young man knelt on the cold cement floor, grasping the edges of the table with both hands. He started sobbing relentlessly, before finally burying his face in the covers.

The song playing on the cassette recorder was reaching its climax. Lucienne Boyer's voice bleated softly:

”I Lo-oo-oove youuu...”

The distinctive sound of a spring-loaded button popping back up rang out in the heavy silence of the gloomy cathedral, indicating that the tape had reached its end.

That was the signal. As if suddenly becoming aware of the absurdity of his predicament, he stood back up, gathered his clothes in a hurry and started putting them back on, hopping around on one foot.

Vicky dressed in silence before walking over to him. As she was about to touch him on the shoulder, he ran to the entrance, trying in vain to open the heavy door and flee outside.

Rummaging for her keys in her handbag, she noticed the man swirling around to face her.

“Quickly, please,” he pleaded in a voice that seemed to convey all the anguish in the world. “I’m sorry, I so wanted to... I wanted to measure up, to meet your expectations... I wanted to be... adequate... It was important to me... I had planned everything out in my head. I didn’t mean any harm by it, I just thought that... you could me help forget someone... It was so important...”

Vicky went to him and turned the key inside the lock before pushing against the metal door. She was immediately engulfed in cold air.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s no big deal...”

The client glared at her with a wild look in his tear-filled eyes. Stumbling out into the cold, he suddenly collapsed onto the weed-strewn ground.

Getting back to his feet in the thin layer of snow and grit, he turned to face her, shouting:

“It was a big deal to me!”

Then, he fled, running along the rusty rails and rotten planks of the old railway track.

No longer able to bear witness to such a sad display, Vicky slammed the door shut.

The end of her classes couldn’t come quickly enough. She didn’t feel like doing any more charity work for these guys.

Heading back to the table to gather her apparel, she noticed the pages of the newspaper lying about on the dusty cement floor. What in those pages could have possibly set him off like that?

Trying to reassemble the dozen or so pages of the newspaper, she laid them down on the ground and started putting the sections back in order, piling them up on the bed as she went along. She began turning the pages, one by one, searching for a story or a photograph that might have had something to do with her client.

A short item in a political column caught her eye. The brief paragraph mentioned how rumor had it that, during his big press conference this coming Saturday, MP Harvey Simard intended to announce that he was presenting himself as an independent candidate for his riding. It also teased how he might be using the opportunity to make certain revelations concerning his dismissal from the party in power. A picture accompanied the piece, a family portrait undoubtedly taken two or three years earlier showing the MP, his wheelchair-bound wife, along with their son and daughter.

Vicky was dumbstruck. A chill in the air made her shiver. The son was the client who had just fled the warehouse.

An idea began germinating in her mind: could she, in any way, use this family as inspiration for her upcoming paper on Gide? ‘Families, I hate you! Shut-in homes, closed doors, jealous possessions of happiness...’

The verse scampered around the maze of her memories like a mouse.

But first things first. She had to stow all of her gear away, then leave this place and try to find a calm place where she could mull things over.



Over in the municipality of Saint-Alphonse-Rodriguez, Gisèle Marcotte was handing change back to her client, the last one for the day. Escorting him out of her establishment, she flipped the little sign hanging on a suction cup in the door window. The word ‘Closed’ was now visible from the outside.

She glanced at her watch.

“Four o’clock already? Gosh, time sure flies in the final days of autumn.”

She slid the door latch in place. Then, taking a key ring out of the pocket of her long white apron, she selected one and turned it inside the lock to close up for the day.

Scanning the street outside, she noticed how the sky over the rooftops of the nearby shops had become overrun with clouds. The cold front was making the wind rise. A few wrapping papers swirled by the door to her establishment, dancing in snow made dirty by the trampling boots of passersby. She sighed: the outside waste bin mounted on the metal frame of her storefront window was still too often neglected by clients. She would have to clean the entrance to her shop if she wanted to avoid new remonstrance from the municipal council. If she didn’t, the municipal councillor, that aggravating Pouliot woman, would have a field day spreading the rumor that her establishment had become ‘an environmental disaster.’

Once the tourist season was over, business usually tended to slow down considerably. Gisèle sighed. Back to work, she thought.

Earlier in the week, Annie Simard had placed an order; she was receiving guests this coming Saturday, and had asked her to prepare a meal for six to eight people, to be served promptly at 7:30 pm. Gisèle had ample time to prepare her homestyle specialties, but as she preferred to

take her time, she thought it better to elaborate her menu the day before the event in order to work more calmly. She was just about to fire up her oven, but decided to take a little breather first by brewing herself a fresh cup of reinvigorating green tea.

She'd barely had time to put the kettle on when the telephone started jingling.

"La Perdriole, how may I help you?"

A clear and cheerful voice rang out from the receiver:

"Mom, hi! It's me!"

"Marie-Andrée? What a pleasant surprise! How are you? So nice of you to call."

"And you? How's business?"

Biting down on her tongue, Gisèle replied:

"Pretty good. As a matter of fact, I was just about to start preparing a large order this very minute... And don't get me started on the hors d'oeuvres... It's for the Simard family..."

"You mean MP Simard? That Simard family?"

"That's the one..."

"Didn't he just resign?"

"Yes, but rumor has it that he intends to present himself as an independent. It's all anybody talks about in this town these days. I got the impression they wanted to celebrate his decision with a nice family meal."

"And here I was, about to ask you if you'd like it if I came over and spent the weekend with you, at the house?"

"You mean it? You know how much I miss you, sweetie!"

"Well, while I'm there, I could be tempted into lending you a hand. It's not like I haven't done this before, you know. That way, it'd go a lot faster, which would leave us more time to spend together!"

“You’re so thoughtful, sweetie. You haven’t come around in these parts since Thanksgiving...”

“I know, mom. I work too much. You’re always saying so. But I’m starting to follow your advice. See, I’ve decided to award myself a long weekend, just so I could spend more time with you. All right, I’ve gotta go. I’m late for an appointment. I should arrive by Friday evening. That all right with you?”

“Of course, honey! Supper will be on the table when you get here.”

“Don’t you think you’ve got enough on your plate, literally, without having to prepare a meal for your daughter on top of everything else? You’ll never change, mom. Hugs and kisses!”

“Be careful on the road. They say the weather’s about to get rough.”

“Don’t you worry. I never take chances when I drive. Bye now!”

“Hugs and kisses, sweetie.”

Mrs. Marcotte hung up. Since her husband had passed away, three years earlier, her only daughter had become the single most important person in her life. She adored her, and wished she would hear from her more often. It was a shame that, when she had decided to come settle in this little township to open her own catering business, Marie-Andrée had opted to stay in Montreal for work reasons.

When it came to creating absolute marvels in the kitchen, delicacies that could please even the most refined palate of their more demanding clients, her daughter definitely had talent. Gisèle still hadn’t given up on trying to press her back into service and have her come work for her small family business. Cooking together, they’d have such a lovely time. Although admittedly, life in the country might not hold much appeal for a young woman such as

Marie-Andrée, who so loved the bustle of the big city...

She forced herself back to reality. Her little darling didn't seem like she was going to get married anytime soon. Maybe Marie-Andrée could find a job in the region, while still helping her mother out with her catering business...

The kettle whistled; the water had boiled, and was now at the proper temperature. She scalded the inside of teapot to warm it up, poured the excess water into the sink, placed the infuser inside the teapot, then filled it halfway up with hot water before leaving it on the kitchen table, next to her favourite cup. She rotated the dial of the little egg timer and set it for four minutes.

She tuned in to a regional radio station, flipping through an organic seed catalog as she waited.

How she longed to expand her vegetable garden; come next spring, she had decided to try and start growing only organic produce for use in her dishes. If only she could see an increase in revenues. She let herself daydream a moment longer...

Look at me, Gisèle chastised herself, fantasizing about what I can't get! I'm like the milkmaid with her pail!

She was already having trouble making ends meet, what with all those taxes, and her mortgage... Not to mention that horrid Pouliot woman; as alderman of their neighbourhood, she had the nasty habit of talking about Gisèle behind her back, spreading false rumors about her and her products in an attempt to try and turn her clientele away. Thank goodness all those skiers and vacationers who came by their village every year didn't care an ounce about that Pouliot woman's gossipmongering.

With a heavy heart, Gisèle let out a long sigh. Sipping her hot tea, she forced herself to focus, skimming through an article describing all of the advantages of using kale in your preparations.



## 8

The small clock on the nightstand displayed 22:07 pm. Leaning against the backrest of her wheelchair, Solange was perusing a document by the light of a bedside lamp. As she studied the pages laid down across her knees on a book rest, she was simultaneously using two small metal dumbbells sheathed in gray plastic to strengthen her arms by putting them through a repetitive training regimen.

She felt a chill. Stretching her arm over to the bed, she grabbed the woolen shawl Annie had left within hand's reach. With ease, she wrapped it around her shoulders and shivered in delight. From now on, her life would consist mostly of rather innocent pleasures such as these, but she had learned to appreciate their value.

In the privacy of her own home, away from prying eyes, Solange was actually a much stronger and more energetic woman than she had led her entourage to believe. Inherently egotistical, she had adopted this public persona of a feeble and sickly person only to ensure that people around her, mainly her family, would always grant her immediate attention whenever she required it; she had found it a much more civilized way of controlling them. On numerous occasions, Annie had suggested that she procure herself a motorized wheelchair, which would have

granted her much more mobility. Solange had always refused, sharply, with no explanation given; having someone at her beck and call to drive her around wherever she needed to go fit perfectly well with her manipulative bent.

Secretly though, there were times, such as these, when she regretted having taken on the role of the bitter shrew, a role she only shed once in the privacy of her bedroom. She chided herself; no point resorting to self-flagellation!

Opening the nightstand drawer, she put the dumbbells away and took out her hand exercisers. Every time she did some reading, she liked to use the time to tone her forearms and her hands, all of this unbeknownst to Annie. Juliette had procured the dumbbells and the hand exercisers for her, along with a training program specially designed for paraplegics. It was Solange's way of prolonging the illusion that she was somehow combating her body's deterioration and preventing it from further wasting away.

Picking up where she had left off, she examined the document her lawyer had sent over via messenger service. Slowly, a cynical smile started spreading across her lips.

She reread the yellow sticky note that the attorney had thought wise to include with the text: "Allow me to congratulate you concerning the provisions you have asked me to add to your divorce petition. It is important for a person in your condition to ensure that the other party will not be able to dispute certain facts. I would have preferred discussing all of this with you in person, but matters of a political nature beckon. Should the content of these documents prove satisfactory, I would please request that you sign them and have them returned to me at your earliest convenience. Kind regards, Counselor Guy Comeau."

Dear Counselor Comeau, sighed Solange. Ever the prudent man. Perhaps he's right, maybe I should go to his

office and consult with him in person rather than have him communicate with me through messenger service. It's been a while since I've been to Montreal. I could use the opportunity to do a spot of shopping with Annie. The poor girl could sure use some new clothes. Always looking like something the cat dragged in. It's not like she goes out of her way to attract men's attention.

The vibration of her cell phone in the pocket of her dressing gown reminded her of a monstrous insect buzzing about. She took care to conceal the legal document under her shawl before answering.

"Yes, Mr. Prime Minister."

"You knew it was me calling?"

"Only one man would dare ring me up at this hour."

"It is rather late. Perhaps I should call back in the morning?"

"My dear sir," lied Solange, "for a handicapped woman who only goes to bed in the wee hours of the morning, late evenings are the ideal time to have a phone conversation."

"I won't take up much of your time. My executive assistant has just informed me that the meeting with the executive committee over at Harvey's riding office has just concluded. Members voted six against three in favour of endorsing his campaign as an independent. I'm afraid your decision to no longer support him financially was not enough to discourage him. It's rather disheartening."

Solange winced. She wasn't used to insinuations of failure.

"Don't throw in the towel too quickly, Mr. Prime Minister. I still hold an unbeatable trump card up my sleeve. I'll sum it up for you in one word: extortion. Should his dalliances with Miss Falardeau ever be leaked to the press..."

“Hmm... That’s actually not a bad plan. So his personal assistant still has no idea of your association with Counselor Comeau? Nicely done. You are a very resourceful woman, Mrs. Simard. Ever thought of trying your hand at politics?”

“I’m very flattered, but no thank you! I’m afraid I no longer have the constitution to spend my time worrying about the misery of others.”

“You prefer to operate from the shadows.”

“I prefer the role of advisor that my handicap enables me to play.”

“My dear Solange, I know how your condition prevents you from incarnating the role I’m asking you to play to its fullest. But if I may insist: you should try harder to convince Harvey to desist; he’ll be covered in ridicule. You know how much we have faith in you...”

Clearly, the politician was trying to pressure her into action. The thought of confessing she believed the effort doomed to failure crossed her mind. Caution being the better part of valor, she decided to tread carefully.

“I owe you much, sir. I know this.”

“Nonsense! We are the ones who are in your debt, madam. Believe me, your suggestions concerning our marketing campaigns have been indispensable. There isn’t an add agency in Montreal or Québec City that would hesitate hiring you on the spot.”

“Your faith in me is appreciated, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“I’ll let you get back to your evening. But please, give it another go. We would so prefer it if your husband managed to come to his senses. I’ll keep you apprised of the situation as it evolves over the coming days.”

“While I’ll use the time to weigh my options before playing my final trump card. It might be the only one I

have left, but it's the one that will help me win the game. Harvey thinks he's got a good hand with that queen of his; wait until he sees I've got an ace."

"You are a master strategist, Mrs. Simard, always have been. And for that, we are extremely grateful. Good night, my dear advisor."

"Good night, my dear Prime Minister."

Clutching the device in her hand, Solange pressed the off button.

This conversation troubled her. The P.M.'s veiled remonstrance had sounded almost like a threat. As if he was about to discard her like yesterday's paper and deprive her of her supplementary income. What on Earth was going on?

Had she gone too far, getting in league with the leadership of the party against her very own husband? For the first time since the accident that had paralyzed her, she wondered, not without some apprehension, if Harvey didn't actually pose a threat to her, should he ever find out that she had plotted against him. His brutal reaction the other day, upon his return from Québec City, had left her stunned. She had never imagined him ever raising a hand against her. Just remembering that hand as it had gripped her throat made her shiver...

What if the hurdles starting to pile up on her husband's path made him lose it? Impossible to predict how far Harvey was liable to go.

Suddenly fearful, she hastily rolled her wheelchair over to check on the door, and sighed in relief: it was locked. She took the key out of the lock and brought it over to her nightstand. Annie had a duplicate, she would be able to enter her bedroom in the morning.

She turned the bedside lamp off and rolled herself over to the window, staring down the night as it permeated the

forest surrounding her home, imbuing the trees with an odd lighting effect that reminded her of the bars of a prison cell. For the first time in her life, she wondered if the control she had exerted over her entourage for years had not started to wane...



Harvey and Linda had parked their cars along the narrow gravel path that stood a hundred meters away from the entrance to the Simard house, in front of the neighbouring property.

Linda had joined her lover in his car to try and assess the hectic meeting they'd just had with the executive committee.

"That Pouliot woman must have informed the P.M.'s office by now," sighed Harvey wearily.

"Don't tell me you're actually surprised she managed to get the support of those two other nitwits?"

"Yes and no. Yes, because I've known Gacy Lambert and Hubert Pomerleau for at least twelve years now, and they've always been loyal to me. No, because both have been members of an extreme right-wing religious sect for the last four years and probably decided to make a moral judgment. There's been a lot of gossip about us, you know that."

"Still, we won the first round."

"Maybe. Odds are in our favour, we do have the best hand. But thank God you remembered to make them sign a collective letter of resignation before they left..."

"They're not getting off that easily. I've summoned them to Saturday's press conference. They have to be seen

in your presence so that the public can realize you've decided to clean house and keep only the right elements."

"Still, it won't be easy securing contributions... Voters rarely favour independents..."

Linda grumbled.

"If only your stingy wife would croak; you'd stand to inherit her fortune..."

Harvey raised his voice.

"Linda, enough! You're putting too much pressure on me. And in any case, I wouldn't inherit a damn thing! Not a dime!"

"How do you know that?"

"She started consulting with Counselor Comeau, an old classmate of mine I saved from disbarment a while back. An embezzlement case. The worst case of my career, if you ask me. A guilty man got off scot-free because of me. He's this lawyer who's very close to the Prime Minister. And if Solange's gotten in league with him, it means she's probably plotting something. I can only assume that it concerns me directly. As you know, our relationship isn't exactly friendly these days."

Linda trembled in shock. Did he just say Counselor Comeau? She froze in worry. It couldn't be a coincidence.

"Comeau?" she asked, trying to sound innocent. "Counselor Guy Comeau?"

"Yeah. You know him?"

"I seem to vaguely remember the name, that's all... I must have read it in the paper or something... Oh, wait, no, it was in a press release from the party you got a few weeks ago..."

"That's probably it. He's very close to the P.M. He heads one of the most prestigious law firms in Montreal."

"Who told you your wife was consulting with him?"

“Annie. She overheard part of a conversation when she entered her mother’s bedroom. Ever since then, Solange’s taken to locking her door every night.”

“That old crone is such a bitch!”

“Linda, please!”

“What? She’s plotting behind her husband’s back! You think I should go easy on her? You know, sometimes you can be so spineless, Harvey.”

“Kitten, please, don’t get upset. It would serve no purpose.”

“I had hoped you’d be able to make her change her mind, convince her to give you some financial support. With all that money she has... Now, we’re going to have to look for funding somewhere else. Unless...”

“Unless what...”

“Unless I use Thomas...”

“I thought you and Thomas...”

“We never actually ‘broke up’. We just don’t see each other as much as we used to anymore, that’s all. Completely different thing.”

“I never liked this plan of yours, Linda. Seducing my son so he’ll convince his mother to help me dig myself out of this hole... Sometimes you scare me. You’re so devious.”

“Politics is not a bowling tournament for the elderly, Harvey. Let me think here... I’ve already rented an office on Main Street and had a phone line plugged in... And the moment we’ve secured backing from the MP’s who still support you in the caucus, we’ll be able to register the name of our newly-formed political movement. Hey, that’d make a pretty good name for it, actually. ‘The Movement.’ Now all we need to do is find out who it represents and what it stands for...”

As she was talking, her gaze fixed on the silhouette of the towering house next door, with its painted wood

paneling and its façade lit up by projectors hidden in the flowerbeds, Harvey contemplated his mistress' left profile, that of a conqueror, with features so fine they seemed chiseled out of porcelain. What could possibly have attracted this young woman intent on ruling by his side to a rural riding such as theirs?

At that moment, he wanted her, and tried hinting so by caressing her cheek.

Taken aback, Linda stared at him, as if coming out a deep trance.

“Harvey, honey, my darling, you need to get some rest. We'll be very busy in the coming days. Especially considering how stressful your press conference will be.”

“Ever wonder if we might not be rushing things a little...?”

“We couldn't have picked a better time if we'd tried. Our enemies won't be able to react to your announcement before Monday. Now, go to bed, there'll be plenty of time for fun and games later.”

“Annie invited Thomas and his childhood friend, Michael, over for the weekend. Want to come?”

“You're kidding, right?! You really think I want to be there so your hag of a wife can rain insults down on me? Well you can forget that!!”

Linda kissed him passionately and got out of the car, throwing him a complicit wink.

For the first time since his ill-fated meeting with the Prime Minister's executive assistant, Harvey felt a certain aversion for all of this feverish activity. The cumulative strain of the last few days made his shoulders feel like they were being gripped in a relentless bear hug. How many more years would he be able to endure this kind of pressure? Or his wife, for that matter?

He let out a little disappointed sigh and started his car. Making his way down the narrow path at the end of which stood the lone silhouette of their home, he noted the absence of any light at Solange's bedroom window. Probably doped out of her mind on sleeping pills again, he thought.

But in the room, Solange was hardly asleep. Sitting in her wheelchair next to the window, hiding behind a lace curtain, she made out the headlights of Linda's car as it doubled back to the main road after a quick U-turn. A moment later, her husband's car slowly rolled to the front of the house before stopping.

Never with such acuity had Solange felt the sensation of impotency that assailed her.

Her handicap had been at the root of her decision to play for the 'dark side' on the party's chessboard. She could even glorify herself in having provided significant contributions to the elaboration of more memorable slogans for the party, of more impactful posters, and of television spots that were as hard-hitting as they were effective. But now, after her conversation with the P.M., she had the sinking feeling that she might not be as indispensable as she had once thought.

The side door opened and closed. Walking over to his den, Harvey's footsteps sounded heavy.

She swivelled her wheelchair around and rolled it over to the bed. Turning on her bedside lamp, she slowly started reading the divorce petition again, the one Counselor Comeau had sent over for her to examine. After a moment, with a stroke of a pen, she signed the documents that would forever liberate her from Harvey.

Then, rather nimbly, she leaned against her robust forearms, extricated herself from her wheelchair and sat on

the bed. Using both hands, she laid her legs down on the mattress, one at a time, before pulling the covers over them. She placed her hand exercisers back in the nightstand drawer and locked it securely.

Leaning back against her pillow, she turned off the bedside lamp. In spite of the pills, sleep eluded her. Had she made the right decision?

She heard the phone ring in Harvey's den, followed by the mumbling of his muffled voice. Then, the sound of a door being closed, rendering the rest of the conversation inaudible. Who could possibly be calling him at this hour?



## 9

Annie turned the key inside the lock and, mindful of the squeaky top hinge, carefully edged the bedroom door open.

Lying straight as a recumbent statue, her mother was slumbering in her bed, her regular breathing barely perceptible. Wedged beneath her left arm was a bound photo album filled with glued newspaper clippings. For the life of her, Annie couldn't remember ever having seen this large scrapbook before.

Used to her mother's harsh features, she was surprised to find her face more lively and beautiful than usual. What happy dream could she possibly be having this gloomy morning that would imbue her with such vulnerability?

Trying to attenuate the squeal of the squeaky hinge, she carefully closed the door and quietly walked away.

Annie had wanted to consult with her mother concerning the decorations she'd dreamt up for Saturday evening's get-together, but resolved that she was quite capable of making decisions on her own. She would pin old photographs of Thomas, Michael and herself as teenagers on the walls of the dining room, along with pictures of her parents.

In particular, she had a silly picture in mind that might serve as a nice touch, a photograph of her father sporting

a dismayed look on his face as, knife in hand, he contemplated an enormous Christmas turkey, trying to figure out how to carve it while the rest of the family looked on in the background, merrily mocking him.

Recalling fond memories from her childhood, a smile spread across her lips as she headed upstairs. A little humor might help lighten the mood, she thought; moroseness seemed to grow every passing week in this house. Her father would surely appreciate a little reprieve from all his troubles, especially these days.

At the end of the corridor on the first floor, she walked over to a door, smaller than the others; it gave onto a straight, narrow staircase devoid of handrails that led up to the attic.

Wooden planks groaned beneath her feet as she made her way up the dozen dusty steps. She finally stepped into the attic, a vast area occupying most of the top of the large house, with a steeply inclined roof looming far overhead. In the gloom created by two gable vents, Annie slowly inched her way forward, arms outstretched, sweeping the air in front of her in search of the piece of string that would serve to light the lone light bulb in the attic.

Convinced a bat had suddenly brushed past her left wrist, she let out a little frightened scream. It was only the bit of string hanging from the rafters; she promptly pulled on it. The dusty bulb lit up, creating a zone of sinister light around her, just enough for her to discern a veritable hoard of cardboard boxes, old steamer trunks, slipcovers filled with clothes hanging from plumbing pipes on steel wires, children's furniture, along with an endless array of open garbage bags haphazardly stored and filled with toys conferring them odd shapes.

Annie hadn't come up here in years; she hadn't

remembered it being so cluttered. She noticed that the floorboards were covered in bat guano and dark mildew. She let out an irritated sigh, remembering that the shingles of the roof would need replacing come springtime, a fact that was sure to instigate yet another rowe between her father and her mother, who so hated having to spend on maintenance fees.

The raw humidity that reigned in the attic made her shiver. The tart odor of bat urine and excrements assailed her senses. Her gaze darting around every nook and cranny, across the studs, braces, collar beams, joists and struts of the truss, she searched for any trace of the little winged mammals; thankfully, none were to be found. A hole at the edge of the roof let some light filter in from the outside. That must be where the undesirable guests come through, she thought. Yet another problem to solve come springtime.

“Enough, Annie!” she cursed under her breath. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Trying to shake off the gloom, she thought back on how much pleasure she had had using this attic as her playground; as a child, she used to come up here all the time to play hide and seek. Ever fearful, especially come nightfall, Thomas would only accompany her to the bottom of the steps, pleading with her to come back down. Reveling in the attention, Annie would let him go on begging, trying to scare the daylights out of him by remaining silent. Sometimes, her younger brother would even have to go get their mother’s help, who would come to the base of the stairs and, rather authoritively, order that Annie come down at once.

One summer day, when a heatwave had made the air in the attic shimmer, she had taken refuge up here to try on her mother’s old dresses in all impunity. Suddenly

hearing the steps of the narrow staircase creak under someone's weight, she had quickly hid behind a stack of old steamer trunks, holding her breath.

Fully expecting to reap Solange's fury, she had been relieved to discover that it was only her brother, Michael. As her face had flushed in embarrassment, he had timidly walked over to her, complaining that she wasn't playing by the rules. His fingers in a knot, he had dawdled about, feigning to add more, before quickly retreating.

Little by little, all three of them had grown up and, over time, as most childhood games do, the merriment of playing hide and seek had lost its charm. Annie had found another incentive to hole up in the attic; she would spend hours up here, reading, lying on a mattress covered with a bedsheet that, although no doubt long forgotten, had still exhaled her mother's perfume.

Afraid that she would be forbidden from gaining access to her lair, she had been very mindful not to ask any questions concerning the presence of that old mattress in the attic, nor of the distinctive scent of her mother's perfume on it.

How many times had she begged her parents to transform this attic into her own private bedroom? But her mother had always categorically refused, claiming that the costs of such a conversion would be exorbitant.

Brushing off the now trivial memory, Annie shrugged.

Walking around the attic, her gaze fell upon pieces of old furniture and some dusty trunks, and she decided to investigate. The floorboards protested beneath her feet as if she had just irked them out of a deep slumber.

The temptation was too strong to resist; she lifted the lid of one of the trunks, older than the others, one that, in her mind, evoked a stirring moment from her childhood.

The trunk contained women's hats for all seasons. She rummaged around in it until she found, at the bottom, an old pillbox hat with a veil, intended to be worn atop a mass of coiffed-up hair, as attested to by the long pin's tarnished cabochon.

How many times had she slipped that pin in her hair, trying to flee into a fantasy world where she could have had a confidante her own age? Staring into a standing mirror decorated with pockmarked silvering that had been stowed away in a corner of the slanted roof, she found that she still remembered the poses she used to favour. Seeing herself now gave her somewhat of a shock. The old-fashioned hairdo made her realize just how much she resembled her mother. Shivering, she promptly threw the hat into the trunk before slamming it shut.

A few cardboard boxes that had been stacked near the brick chimney caught her eye; they had been piled onto the old mattress, now devoid of its scented bedcover. Markings on the side made in black felt-tip pen indicated the contents of each.

Bending over to examine the writing more closely, she noticed that the box she was looking for, the one containing old photo albums, seemed wedged at the bottom of the pile. One by one, she started lifting the boxes, piling them behind her as she went along. Kneeling on the mattress made cold by the ambient temperature, she ripped the masking tape holding the flaps together. The withered tape gave way unexpectedly, and she had to lean against the wall to maintain her balance.

From this position she noticed, stuck in the confined space between the chimney and the slanted roof, the edge of a metallic biscuit tin. Covered with a layer of dust and soot, it had probably been abandoned there for years. The

lettering and the thin layer of ornamental paint had considerably faded away over time. The metal seemed pitted with rust.

Leaning against the rough brick of the chimney, Annie stretched her arm, trying to reach the tin with the tip of her fingers. She only succeeded in pushing it back a few millimeters.

She swore under her breath. This well-hidden biscuit tin intrigued her. She would never have known of its existence had she not decided to come up here in search of their old childhood pictures. She resolved to sate her curiosity.

Still kneeling, she shoved a few more cardboard boxes out of her way in order to get within hand's reach of the object. Using the tip of her fingers to get a better grip on the edge of the lid, she finally managed to drag the tin out towards her. The rim of the box had been wrapped in several layers of now dried-up masking tape.

Once she had the tin firmly in hand, she straightened back up and went to stand under the hanging light bulb to inspect her discovery.

Blowing on the layer of dust, she noticed that the biscuit brand was an old one, but not as old as she might have thought. Although the lettering definitely seemed dated, that didn't mean a thing: the tin could have been used for years.

As she peeled away the layers holding it closed, the withered masking tape crumbled into granules of dry hardened glue in her hands. Using her thumb and her bent forefinger, she tried prying the lid off of the oblong box, but rust stubbornly prevented it from giving away.

Looking around her in the half-light of the naked bulb, Annie tried to find an object she could use to help her pry the lid open. Recalling the boxes she had moved out of the

way in order to reach the tin, she started looking through some of them. In one, she discovered a bundle of old handbags, which she resolved to open one by one. In the sixth one, she finally found what she was looking for: a faded manicure kit comprised of various small instruments. Grasping the nail file firmly in hand, she lodged the point of it between the lid and the side of the tin and started poking at several strategic spots around the edges.

Again using her thumb and bent forefinger, she tried prying the lid off by slowly sliding it upwards. Repeating the process of poking at the seam of the rusty joint, she finally felt it give.

Removing it, she immediately let out an ‘Aaaaaahhh!’ of revulsion, almost dropping the tin in the process.

What she saw inside nauseated her; her entire body started shaking uncontrollably. The box jerked in her hand. Clumsily placing the lid back on top of the tin, she let out a long wail interspersed with heavy sobs.

After a few deep breaths, Annie finally managed to calm herself down. Wiping her tears away on her shirt-sleeve, she stared, dumbfounded, both moved and troubled at the same time.

The thought of informing her parents about this discovery seemed ill-advised. What if they’d had something to do with this long-forgotten tin? With the already uneasy atmosphere prevailing in the house, why seek to provoke further altercations that would only serve to turn her life into a living hell?

Maybe this box had been hidden away in the attic decades earlier, perhaps by a member of the family who’d sold them this house?

Annie was trying to reassure herself by imagining a possible alternative for the presence of this horrid thing in

her home, any reason to avoid having to reveal a secret that would undoubtedly stir up even more trouble between her parents, the flames of which were already fanned by constant drama and bitterness. And what gave her the right to even suspect that someone in her very own family had been responsible for this dissimulation?

Her mind was made up. She would get rid of the box. Clutching it against her chest, she turned the light off and slowly made her way back down the narrow staircase.

On the threshold of the landing, she carefully opened the door and cocked an ear. Not a sound. Quietly closing the door behind her, she gingerly stepped down the corridor towards the staircase leading to the ground floor. Slowly making her way down the stairs, she instinctively tried to avoid the steps likely to creak under her weight...

“Annie? Where are you? I need you in here!”

The sound of her father’s voice coming from his den startled her, and she froze in the staircase. He must have come in when she was upstairs. She couldn’t let him see that she had found the tin, much less what it contained. In a shaky voice, she cried back:

“Coming, dad! I just need to... erm... I need to go to the bathroom first!”

Annie sprinted down the stairs and rushed to her bedroom. Desperate, she slid the tin under the cd-rom stand sitting next to her laptop, trying to conceal it behind a jar of de Meaux mustard brimming with pens and pencils.

“Annie!! What on Earth are you doing?”

“What I can, dad!”

To her eyes, the tin was still too noticeable. Rummaging around in her desk drawer, she finally found a picture frame of her father and wedged it between the mustard jar and the old biscuit tin.

Quickly closing the door to her room, she went over to the bathroom, flushed the toilet and hurriedly headed over to her father's den; he was standing in front of the VCR, videocassette in hand.

"There you are! This damn VCR is broken. I was trying to program it to record the news programs; they're sure to mention my press conference, and I'll be damned if I know how to fix this thing!"

"Hand me the remote, dad. You see those 88:88 numbers that keep flashing at the bottom? That's because the timer hasn't been set properly."

"Oh, right... I never got the hang of these things..."

"Maybe if you read the user manual once in a while, you might learn a thing or two..."

"Annie, please. I've got a lot on my mind right now. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Yes sir, Mister future MP, sir..."

Harvey glared at her. Trying to hide his embarrassment, he started flipping through the channels on the small television set.

Within a few moments, Annie had programmed the device to record various news programs on four different channels over a period of one hour.

"There you go. Do you really think they're going to be talking about you?"

"I'm counting on it!"

"What they say, on the radio, is it true? Are you really planning on running again?"

She was obviously expecting a straight answer. Looking somewhat lost, Harvey went to close the door to his den without answering.

Trying to find the right words, he stood facing his daughter.

“Annie, be honest with me. Do you think it’s a good idea for me to run as an independent? It might be risky...”

“Dad! What are you asking me for? What’s up with you? I thought your mind was made up already. What with that press conference and all...”

“I’ll be honest with you, sweetie. Getting kicked out of the party, losing my job... Well, it scared the hell out of me. I don’t think I could bear another humiliation like that. I would have hoped for more support. The majority of the executive committee is behind me, but two of my allies at the National Assembly are still on the fence. All it would take is for the party to offer them nice, cushy jobs and I’m sure they’d drop me like a bad habit. I couldn’t take a second slap in the face like that, especially so soon after the last one. And all of this because your mother stubbornly refuses to lend me some funding...”

“But I thought the Election Act prevented her from giving out large sums of money?”

“Every law has its flaw, honey. There’s always a loophole or something, a way to bend the rules a little...”

“You? A wheeler and dealer? Dad, I’m disappointed in you!”

“Hold on, you don’t understand. That’s precisely the reason why I’m not so sure what I should be announcing at Saturday’s press conference. You’re the first person I’ve talked to about this.”

“I hardly recognize you anymore. You’re usually so dynamic, so competitive.”

Harvey hung his head. His voice became uncertain.

“I’m so tired, Annie. Getting fired from the party broke my back. I can’t suffer humiliation like this anymore. And on top of that, I don’t think I can endure your mother’s mocking anymore either. Her refusal to help me out when I needed it the most hurt my feelings.”

Looking back up, his voice hardened.

“But I’m going to fix things with her once and for all!”

“Dad, don’t talk like that! You’re scaring me...”

“It’s time to clear the air. And once that’s done, everything will run much more smoothly in this house. At least, I hope. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got work to do. Calls to make. Thanks for helping me out with the remote thingy without making too much fun of your old man...”

Annie flashed him a smile. She was about to leave the room, but reconsidered.

“Dad, tell me something. I was talking about the former owners of the house with mom the other day. She was insistent that it was a family named Bureau, but I’m almost positive it was Bruneau. Do you remember which it was?”

“You’re both wrong. It was the Bilodeau family. You know, the one who owned that department store franchise? Back in the day, you couldn’t visit a township in Quebec or New-Brunswick without bumping into one.”

“I was so young at the time. I don’t really recall much about them. Whatever happened to them?”

“The Bilodeau franchise was in dire straits; it was acquired on the cheap by their competitors, an Ontario-based company that used to make life difficult for them by routinely slashing their prices. I imagine the poor fellow finally gave in and decided to sell. The sorrow of giving away the family business for mere peanuts killed him in the end. Family members got dispersed, and I never heard from any of them ever again.”

“They had children, didn’t they? A tall girl and her brother I think, right? Older than Thomas and I?”

“Geez, you are starting to lose your memory... I suppose that’s your mother’s influence, right there.”

“Daddy... Please...”

“There were two boys, twenty and twenty-two. Why are you so interested in these people all of a sudden anyways?”

Stumbling on her words, Annie quickly replied:

“Oh, no reason, no reason... Just for fun, you know... I was... um, cleaning up in the attic and, just, thought about them, that’s all... They were the ones who had this house built, right?”

“The grandfather did, I think. In the 1920’s. It was supposed to be a summer home, originally.”

The ringing of the telephone interrupted them. Her father stared at her for a moment without answering. Annie gave him a little wave before exiting the den and closing the door behind her.

Puzzled, she walked over to her mother’s bedroom; time to see if Her Higness was awake.



That Thursday evening’s supper had been a sad affair, as many had been since the relationship between her parents had started deteriorating.

The bitter exchanges between her parents at the table still resonated in Annie’s mind as she mechanically started filling the dishwasher with silverware.

Since her fateful accident, her mother had developed a caustic attitude towards all of them that had become hard to bear, even for her daughter, who normally showed surprising depths of patience.

After a series of endless telephone conversations, Harvey had finally emerged from his den, his face pale and sporting a distant look in his eyes. Her husband’s haggard expression had seemed to galvanize Solange. As if scorning

his distress, she had despicably pointed out the irony of his decline into unemployment.

Harvey's face had flushed. With a trembling hand, he had poured too much wine in his glass. After chugging down two-thirds of it, he had turned to face Annie, turning his back on Solange as if she didn't exist. Trying to steer the conversation onto more mundane matters, he had started rambling on about the weather and how bad it was likely to get over the weekend.

But, hardly the kind of woman to endure being ignored, Solange had started piling on, going even so far as to say that she, at least, had the Prime Minister's ear.

Staring sadly at his wife for a moment, Harvey had slowly put his knife and fork down in his plate.

Annie had immediately dreaded an even more dramatic altercation between the two, but, against all odds, her father had shown great restraint. Using only words, brimming with deep rancor, he had struck true, like knives tearing deep into exposed flesh. Slowly.

"I never thought I'd have to say this to you, Solange, but I never would have imagined you becoming such a bitter woman. You've changed so much since we got married... In spite of your air of refinement, you're so naïve that it's sad; I pity you, really. If only you knew just how much 'your' Prime Minister didn't care one iota about you. The only reason he got you a pension from the party and pretended to solicit your so-called 'advice' is so he could pull the wool over your eyes. Haven't you ever wondered who the driver was that ran into you that night? Well, I'll fill you in on a little secret. It was the Minister of Education, our dear MP from the riding next door whose charm and good manners you keep flaunting so much."

Solange's face had paled in stupefaction while Harvey had continued:

“These two great friends of yours were so scared that you’d insist the botched police investigation be reopened that they concocted this golden parachute of a retirement plan for you, thanks to an accommodating insurance company, and then handed you a job for life as their personal advisor. It’s sad to say, but I fell for it too. At the time, I accepted to hide all of this from you in return for the vague promise of an appointment to a Cabinet post. I can’t express how much shame I feel at having trusted them all this time.”

His livid stare drilling holes into Solange’s eyes, Harvey had gotten up, adding:

“I pity you, Solange. You didn’t deserve that. In spite of everything you’ve made me endure over the last few years... I think it’s high time we started striving for a better life you and I, one spent far away from each other. But I warn you, beware the people currently advising you. I’ve known for a long time that they’re not as trustworthy as you believe them to be. And concerning that divorce petition you thought you were going to use against me to try and and coerce me into doing your bidding? Cat’s out of the bag. I got wind of it from our ‘mutual friend,’ Counselor Comeau. I’ve only got one thing left to say to you: I will be a much happier man when you are no longer in my life. In any way, shape or form.”

Solange had cried out:

“You... You’re threatening me?!”

Harvey had simply shrugged, then had left the dining room with a gait made unsteady by excess wine and the preoccupations weighing heavily on his mind.

Bursting into tears, Solange had fled the table in her wheelchair, banging against the furniture and the doorjamb in the process, before taking refuge in her bedroom, from which intermittent whimpering could be heard.

Annie had hesitated a few minutes. The cruelty of the scene she had just witnessed had submerged her with great tension and the vague memories of even harsher exchanges over the years. Trying to ignore them, she had run to her mother's bedroom and had knocked on the door.

"Leave me alone!" had wailed the hysterical voice beyond the door.

Annie had not insisted. For years now, she had managed to convince herself that inner peace resided in the ability to flee conflict rather than trying to face it head on. She had sought shelter in her room. With her only friend: her computer.



Later that evening, trying to numb her feelings into oblivion and expunge the memory of her parents' vicious quarrel, Annie was listening to syncopated rock music in her headphones.

She decided to send Thomas an e-mail to warn him of what had just transpired, and to ask that he and Michael postpone their visit to some other time.

Heralded by a ping, the reply came a few minutes later. Thomas refused to cancel. For reasons that 'concerned but himself,' it was important he be there this weekend, and was counting on Michael to help alleviate tensions between her parents, he wrote.

The tone of the message disheartened her, but she finally relented in a brief reply. As if to temper the tone of his previous message, Thomas wrote back:

'Don't worry, Annie. I'll always be there for you. I have but one sister, and she means the world to me. Try and get

some sleep: your two faithful knights in shining armor are coming to rescue you!’

But protection was hardly what Annie required right now. What she really needed was a little bit of tenderness.

## 10

The leadership of the party had resorted to taking drastic measures. At five past nine Friday morning, a team of removal men accompanied by a bailiff arrived at Harvey's riding office and started loading all of the furniture into a semi-truck.

Having anticipated such a possibility, Linda had emptied their filing cabinets the evening before, spending part of her night transferring all of their computer files onto thumb drives.

With the help of the former president of the executive committee, Georges, along with his two sons, both young farmers blessed with a strong constitution, she had safely stowed every piece of documentation away in her apartment, along with a computer she had procured using her own money.

Under the dumbfounded stare of the bailiff, who had expected shrieks of protest, Linda simply left the office without saying a word. With her usual quick gait, she headed over to Chez Mimi's restaurant across the street to try and seek some warmth in front of a frugal breakfast.

Sitting at an angle near the front window, she spied the removal men's every move. With her calm demeanor, no one could have guessed that Linda was still reeling from

the revelation that Counselor Comeau had actually been Solange Simard's lawyer all along. She sighed; this bribing business between them was sure to come up during the campaign.

For a woman whose life ambition was to profit from the gullibility of others, she had to admit that, this time, they had gotten her good. Had the Counselor been sincere in asserting that he represented important Asian backers? She found the prospect dubious at best.

Monitoring the removal men's constant back and forth between the riding office and the semi afforded her an opportunity to try and mend her wounded ego, as well as time to reassess the plan that had been brewing in her mind over the last twenty-four hours.

Fueled by black coffee provided by a waitress who regularly came over to fill her cup, cell phone to her ear, Linda embarked upon a round of important calls.

It barely took an hour before the movers had completely removed all of the contents from the office. As the semi-truck drove away down Main Street, Linda smiled, performed a series of discrete breathing exercises, then dialed another number on her mobile phone. Within seconds, her interlocutor was on the other end.

"They cleaned out the office, just as I expected. Everything is under control. I need to see you, Harvey. I have a proposition for you."

Her lover's reply came in a frail voice.

"Oh, what's the point... Is all of this really worth it anymore?"

Linda's tone sharpened.

"Get a hold of yourself. All is not lost. You're just upset because you were forced to resign. You'll get over it. You haven't started drinking yet today, have you?"

“Oh, come on! It’s not even noon yet! Look, I’ve got something important I need to tell you first...”

“Not right now. Just... come over to my place around three o’clock this afternoon. Okay?”

“But, it’s important... Oh, all right. I’ll be there.”

“I’m counting on you. In the meantime, why don’t you go and take a little jog? Or maybe a long walk in the woods or something? It might help fire up the old neurons.”

She hung up without waiting for his reply, went to pay at the cash register and promptly left the restaurant.

The biting cold caught her by surprise. Grey and blackish clouds loomed heavily in the west, over the hills. She shivered.

“Damn global warming. You never know what to expect next.”

Climbing aboard her skittish little car, Linda took off like a shot, making the tires skid on the frozen snow. She had a lot of work ahead of her. It fell upon her to take the helm until Harvey managed to shake off his lethargy.



As she was walking down the hallway on the ground floor, Annie passed by the closed door to her father’s den and overheard the last few muddled words of a conversation he was having on the phone, but paid them no mind.

Entering Solange’s bedroom, she suddenly noticed her mother’s tormented face, the one usually reserved for bad days. In her eyes, she caught signs of uncommon distress.

“Good morning, mother. Rough night, I see?”

“Annie... I don’t have the energy to deal with your sarcasm this morning. I feel like I’ve aged twenty years in a

single night. Just turn the radio on will you, and ditch the running commentary. Do that for me please.”

“All right, mom. I’ll start cleaning you up.”

As the young woman undertook the task of removing her mother’s nightgown and soiled diaper, on the radio, a spirited discussion between an overexcited newswoman and her guests, three parliamentary correspondents, quickly filled the air.

Unable to bear the humiliation of their daily ritual, Solange closed her eyes, as she always did.

Suddenly, as her daughter was about to start washing her, she placed a hand on Annie’s arm to stay her hand. For a minute, both listened to the debate in silence. One of the journalists was saying:

“Well, his back is against the wall. Harvey Simard has got to announce his resignation during his press conference tomorrow. In spite of all of his... (a smattering of knowing, complicit laughter)... good and loyal services, the party unceremoniously showed him out the door without Mr. Simard ever having succeeded in scoring a position as Minister.”

“I disagree. I think we should expect the exact opposite, and even said so in my column this morning. Rumor has it that Mr. Simard is planning to stir the pot, as it were, and announce his plans of running as an independent, and that he most assuredly wouldn’t be the only one.”

“You mean a sort of coalition of independents,” asked the newswoman, “comprised of all of the disenfranchised members of the party’s rearguard?”

“Only a few weeks away from the elections, that would indeed be dire news for the Prime Minister. He’d risk ending up with a minority government, possibly even being relegated to the opposition.”

“Well Simard does have his riding’s support, so his odds are good there at least. Environmentalists have made a lot of noise lately, trying to raise awareness concerning the problem of pollution that the presence of the promised mega hog farms might cause in the region...”

“Yes, but he has never publicly taken a stance on the matter... Although it must be said that the construction of these infamous mega hog farms has never gone beyond the stage of rumor either. It’s as if someone had launched a trial balloon in the air and had just let it float there, simply to embarrass the MP.”

“Except this time, if Simard wants to champion the forces of the lily-livered masses, the silent majority as it were, he will have to commit himself one way or another,” mocked the one who seemed to be backing Harvey’s candidacy. “On the eve of the elections, he’s been handed this hot-button issue on a silver platter, a veritable gift horse complete with bit, bridle, saddle, stirrups and all of the trappings to go along with it!”

Linda’s strategy of leaking contradictory information had hit its mark: trying to defend their diverging points of view, the participants quickly started talking over each, which only resulted in an irritating cacophony.

Eyes closed, Solange asked Annie:

“Is you father still in his den?”

“Last time I checked, he was on the phone.”

“Quickly, help me get dressed and go fetch him for me, will you? I must speak with him. It’s important.”

Annie jumped at the chance to inject some humor into the situation.

“If you like, I could ask him to come over right now. I’m sure he would be seduced on the spot.”

“Annie, please. I don’t have the strength to slap you

upside the head like I did when you were a little girl. Now hurry.”

Quickly, Annie started washing her mother with a sponge and some hot water. It was obvious Solange seemed spent from last night’s rough exchange.

The debate had concluded. The manic host was now interviewing a regular on her show, a popular novelist always glad to dole out her opinions concerning any and everything who kept spouting inconsistencies like a grinder spewed sausage.

Solange muttered loudly.

“Change the station, or turn it off. I can’t stand that horrid woman. She’s a lousy writer, and as meaningful as a potted plant.”

Annie was only too happy to comply. She despised ‘talking heads’ radio.

“By the way,” added her mother after a moment of silence, “what were you doing up in the attic yesterday?”

Annie froze.

“How did you know I was up in the attic?”

“I heard you walking about and moving boxes.”

“I thought you were sleeping?”

“You woke me up. Well?”

Eyes still closed, Solange didn’t notice her daughter’s growing unease.

“I... was looking for old family photos... to decorate the dining room Saturday night. Pictures of all of us when we were younger, even you and dad.”

“What a notion! And did you find any?”

“Well... Not really. It’s like a couple of boxes are missing or something.”

Opening her eyes, Solange grumbled sharply:

“That’s odd. I thought I had kept all of them. Are you sure you looked everywhere?”

“Oh yes, yes... At least, I think so. All right then,” Annie added quickly, trying to grab a hold of herself, “let’s get you dressed. What would you like for dinner?”

“Aren’t you in a hurry to change the subject...”

“Me? Why would I do that?”

“You tell me...”

“Mom, you’re imagining things. If it can help put your mind at ease, I’ll go and have another look this afternoon. I remember this really silly picture of dad, trying to carve the Christmas turkey... Remember that?”

Solange closed her eyes again.

“I don’t think that that picture’s appropriate for the occasion. That was a long time ago... We were so young...”

“Remember when Michael and Thomas used to spend entire afternoons tossing a football in the yard?”

“And Michael would always drop it because he couldn’t take his eyes off of you!”

“Mom, please...”

“Did you love him?”

This time, Annie’s voice was firm as she replied:

“He was a good friend. And, as you say, that was a long time ago. It’s all part of the past, now. Everything changes, everything unravels...”

Softly, she brushed her mother’s hair before combing the tips to try and give it some volume. Solange could sense her daughter’s melancholy. After a few minutes, Annie was the first to speak.

“It’s too late to ask Mrs. Guindon to come over and do your hair. How about I wash it tomorrow morning instead? I have this great, mindblowing hairdo in mind, just for you.”

“That... That would be nice of you... sweetie.”

“You haven’t called me that in ages.”

“There are many things I haven’t done in ages...”

“You’re beautiful, mom. I remember, when I was little, I would have done anything to please you and make you happy.”

“I was rather hard on you.”

“Let’s just say you were an authoritative mother.”

“Maybe I... overprotected you a little...”

“Now, now. There she goes with the grand confessions all of a sudden. Forget about it, mom, that’s all in the past now.”

“I don’t hold fond memories of the way I treated you, Annie, of how I acted towards you. I wasn’t very receptive of your... your... sexual orientation.”

“Well all is forgiven. And I want you to know, if I were strong enough, I’d carry you up the stairs right now and take you into the attic so you could help me dig up the nicer memories of our childhood.”

Solange raised her voice. She stared at her daughter anxiously.

“Out of the question! I’ve no interest in going up there! I haven’t been in there since my accident...”

“Funny you should mention that. I realized the same thing just yesterday...”

“Ah... And what does the attic look like these days?”

“Nothing’s changed much. Still the same old steamer trunks, the same old cardboard boxes, the same old clothes I use to play dress up with as a kid. Even the old mattress that always smelled of your perfume is still up there...”

“What mattress?”

“Don’t you remember? You know, the one that had that bedcover on it? It always smelled like perfume... ‘Opium,’ I think it was?”

Through half-closed eyelids, Solange turned her worried

face to stare at the wall in front of her, quickly cutting the conversation short.

“I really don’t recall anything about that mattress. Maybe it’ll come back to me. But how time flies, my dear; have you forgotten that I wished to speak with your father?”

At that very moment, Harvey’s car roared to life. Both women stared at each other. Annie rushed to the window. The car was already leaving, rolling up the long driveway.

She slowly came back to the bed. Solange simply said: “Too late?”

Annie nodded in silence. Solange raised her voice:

“What an idiot! I absolutely had to speak with him immediately!”

“You want me to try and call him on his cell phone?”

“No... Never mind... I’ll... I’ll talk with him when he gets back.”

“All right then. I’ll go and fetch you breakfast.”

“If you like...”

Puzzled by the sudden distress in her mother’s face, Annie left the room. She hadn’t seen Solange so eager to speak to her husband in... well, ages.

Walking by the door to her father’s den again, Annie’s gaze fell upon a sheet of paper laying on his work desk. She went in to scoop it up. It was covered in furious scribbles, and a sum of money had been circled repeatedly and with such force that the tip of the pen had ripped through the paper: \$75,000. What was this all about? She placed the sheet back on the desk, leaving it in plain sight, before exiting the room to go and put her mother’s soiled linens inside the dirty laundry hamper.



As he was in his room packing a small suitcase with some spare clothing, Michael overheard Thomas talking to a client on the phone.

Although he had always imagined him much too shy to venture into the retail business, he had to admit that his childhood friend seemed to have grown into a rather skilled negotiator. How often we can misread people's true nature, he mused.

Thomas poked his head through the doorway.

"Sorry about the ruckus, padre. Some of these clients I just have to spell everything out to, otherwise they'll jump at the chance to swindle me later on by claiming that I didn't deliver on my promises."

"No worries, I understand."

Michael buckled his suitcase.

"Did you remember to pack some warm clothes in case we decide to go hiking?" asked Thomas.

"In the slipcover, on the coatstand, near the entrance."

"Look, I'm not trying to come across as a father hen or something, but padre, I would hate for you to suffer a relapse of some kind..."

"I'm aware of my limitations, Thomas. Don't worry."

"You look pale. You sure you consulted the right specialist?"

"Sort of. An old teacher of mine. Let's change the subject, shall we?"

"All right, all right..."

"Ok, all done. Where are you parked?"

"In a restricted zone, in front of the building. I think maybe we should hurry..."

“You’ll never change, Thomas. Beneath your pleasant demeanor, you hide the spirit of a true delinquent. Come on, let’s go.”

It seemed there had been a god for delinquents that day; no parking violation had been slipped under the wipers.

Skillfully, the little sedan sneaked its way into the heavy midafternoon traffic before heading off for the Metropolitan Expressway towards the North Shore.



## 11

Across the horizon, the sky had become the color of lead. The temperature had already climbed two or three degrees over the last few hours and was now hovering near zero.

Accustomed to the long rides mandated by his job as a sales representative, Thomas was cruising along Félix-Leclerc Highway at high speed. The more he accelerated, the more Michael became fidgety.

Michael had never learned how to drive; the television host usually relied on taxis when traveling around the city, and public transport when he was required to make long distance trips. His refusal to own a car tended to give his persona more credence, that of a passionate environmentalist who preferred to invest his time producing his weekly television show rather than polluting the planet with unproductive jaunts across town.

Keeping watch on Michael from the corner of his eye, Thomas overtook a small car speckled with flecks of rust at the bottom of its doors. Recklessly accelerating to perform the manoeuvre, he glanced at the driver in the other vehicle; as he crossed her, the woman turned her head to stare at him. The face seemed familiar. He took his eyes off the road for a moment in order to contemplate her a while longer.

Hands clasped over his stomach, tight-lipped and pale-faced, his traveling companion kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead of them. Suddenly, he cried out:

“Look out!”

The little car next to them retook the lead. Thomas felt his left tires biting down on the shoulder and, with difficulty, managed to straighten his vehicle back to the right. Accelerating once more to overtake it, he flew past the other car and quickly sped away in front of it before eventually slowing down.

Nonchalantly, he said:

“Close call, eh?”

Michael seemed to come out of his paralysis.

“Close enough to notice that your eyes were fixed on that woman rather than on the road. You know her?”

“I thought I recognized her, yeah.”

“Well it must be a pretty important person, because you almost got us killed.”

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little?”

“I despise cars. They’re just cages of plastic and metal with speed as their only warden... And the last thing I need in my life... is another cage.”

“I take it you don’t go for long drives in the country very often, do you?”

“I’m a rather busy man. When one produces one’s own weekly television show, one must often relinquish more leisurely pastimes.”

Thomas kept silent. He couldn’t stop thinking about that woman’s face.

He tried taking up the conversation again.

“You’ve changed recently, Michael.”

“You think so?”

“I’ve known you since we were kids. I learned how to read your moods.”

“I’ll admit, the pneumonia has taken its toll on me. I haven’t regained my strength yet.”

Suddenly, Thomas realized who the woman driver was. There was no doubt, it had been Vicky! He started accelerating again, trying to put some distance between the two of them. Why would Vicky be on the same road as them? And why the black wig? For a moment, he felt like he was in one of those American movies where the hero is being chased about by an embarrassing former lover.

Noticing Michael’s restlessness next to him, Thomas put the car on cruise control. As if the drop in speed had shaken him out of his morosity, Michael sat back up, his features more relaxed.

“I apologize, Thomas. Speed makes me nervous. And the last few weeks have been somewhat trying. Because of budgetary constraints imposed by the broadcaster, producing the show has become increasingly more difficult. And critics show no mercy in mocking our efforts, even comparing us to American shows that possess way bigger budgets than ours. But why don’t we talk about you for a while? Have you heard any news from your parents since last we spoke?”

“Annie sent me an e-mail yesterday.”

Thomas bit down on his lower lip; he didn’t want to alarm Michael by telling him about his parents’ quarrel.

“Everything’s dandy. Dad is still supposed to hold his big press conference tomorrow, and Annie seems to be hanging in there. But she sounded... I don’t know, tense.”

Michael let out a long sigh.

“I’m starting to regret letting you corral me into all of this, Thomas...”

“I just wanted to spend a peaceful weekend with my family. And in a way, you’ve always been a part of ours. Like I told you, I’ve got some matters to clear up at home. And

my parents wouldn't dare confront me directly if you're there. My mother will be so glad to be able to speak with you again, just like in the good old days, when the two of you used to spend hours talking to each other."

Michael stiffened.

"I'm not a marriage guidance counsellor, Thomas."

"You almost became a priest..."

"And I would thank you to stop reminding me."

Michael's tone of voice sounded both mournful and irritated. Touched, in a quiet voice Thomas added:

"That's how friendships tend to crumble, buddy. When friends don't see each other very often, they start to forget the bond that's held them together all this time."

"Everyone changes, Tom. That doesn't mean friendships have to erode away because of that. How often we see each other is not what's important, it's the quality of the time that we spend together."

"You see? You get it too! And that's precisely why I wanted you to come over and be with us this weekend. So that all three of us, Annie, you and me, can recapture that feeling that we had when we were fifteen, that we can still have fun together."

"What, you think you can revive the past through wishful thinking?"

"No, of course not... I just want us to be able to enjoy each other's company again, and be happy together for once. That's all."

"We're pushing thirty, Thomas. We're not teenagers dressing up for Halloween anymore, nor kids dreaming that they'll grow up to be Bruce Willis or something."

Thomas tried to lighten the mood.

"Don't you just crave some juicy roast beef right now? Maybe some Yorkshire Pudding, a slice of apple pie, a few

good wines, maybe a healthy shot of Cognac after a nice cheese course? You know, everything that's bad for your arteries? And of course, let's not forget, some good ol' rock 'n' roll!"

For the first time, Michael let out a sly laugh.

"Well, when you put it like that... It might actually prove to be the ideal way to help me get rid of the last symptoms of this damned pneumonia."

"There ya go! That's the spirit, buddy!"

But, deep down, Michael hardly shared his friend's somewhat forced enthusiasm on the subject and had trouble understanding this sudden great desire to revisit their shared past, a history comprised of much less pleasant moments that his memory seemed to recall, as if Thomas were desperately trying to find an audience for an elaborate stage show he had orchestrated. Where did his intention of having a discussion with his father fit into all of this?

This forced reflection allowed him to ignore his growing concern at the idea of being in Solange Simard's presence again. At least others would be present, so they wouldn't have to be alone with each other.

His eyes intently fixed upon the little car driving far away behind them, Thomas stopped talking.



While Thomas' car was racking up the miles under an increasingly overcast sky, Harvey was over at Linda's apartment, knocking on her door.

She quickly answered.

"You're here, finally!"

Linda let him inside and helped him remove his overcoat before showing him to the big easy chair, the one she

reserved for him when he decided to pay her a visit for an intimate encounter. Visibly uncomfortable, Harvey sat down.

He declined the beer she offered and asked instead for a tall glass of water.

“I’m impressed, baby. Is this a new resolution? No more booze? That’s a pretty strong argument in your favor during an electoral campaign. It not only serves to shut your detractors up, it also reassures me a little: you’ll be in fine shape for the upcoming battle and you’ll look as fit as a fiddle on your posters. While we’re on the subject, you might also want to start eating organic foods. Did you know that more and more organic producers are coming to our riding? I’m going to include a few visits to their farms in our campaign schedule; it’s sure to generate catchy pictures for the local papers.”

As she was talking, Linda had gone to pour them two tall glasses of mineral water, raising her voice to be heard from the tiny kitchen.

“You’re not very talkative today, Harvey. It is your ulcer again? It is painful?”

“No. Something else.”

Sipping her glass, Linda came back to the living room and sat down on the small sofa facing Harvey’s easy chair. On the wall behind her, a laminated poster of the last electoral campaign showed Harvey’s face, very much advantaged by make-up and the photographer’s touch-ups.

“Come on, talk to me. What’s wrong? Is it the press conference? Are you stressed out? I mean, it’s not like it’s your first time...”

“I’ve never been afraid to face the press. Not any more than I was when I had to face judges as a lawyer.”

“Then you could you please explain this sour-puss of yours, honey, so we can move on already? I have a lot of

news to tell you. Afterwards, maybe we can find a way to... raise your spirits, in a more... personal way.”

Without giving her time to brace herself, in a firm tone that took even himself by surprise, Harvey declared:

“I don’t think that organic food production goes hand in hand with the pollution caused by mega hog farms, Linda. How could you have gone behind my back like that?”

“Whoa, whoa. Speak so I can understand you, Harvey.”

“The Pouliot lady called me this morning. Apparently, she’s caught wind that you were paid \$75,000 by Counselor Comeau to try and convince me to accept mega hog farms in my riding. Is this true?”

Glass to her lips, Linda froze for a moment. Surprise was written all over her face. Then, cool as ice, she stared him straight in the eye and took a sip.

Harvey was dumbfounded. He had anticipated her protesting her innocence, vehemently denying the accusation by trying to demonstrate that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, she had never plotted against him. Harvey had even told himself that, should it turn out she was actually guilty of this accusation, if she had begged him for forgiveness, he would have granted it to her on the spot. He had imagined himself being magnanimous, touched, consoling. Linda’s cold and calculating look brought him sharply back to reality.

“You don’t deny it then?”

“No.”

“You do realize you’ve just destroyed my career, right? If that Pouliot lady goes to the press...”

“She won’t. She’s just a messenger. The party wants to scare you off, Harvey, that’s all. It wants you to renounce your candidacy.”

“But that’s blackmail!”

“Yes, it is. But have you ever thought that the party might also be scared of you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked you to come over because I’ve got some major news to tell you about. Tomorrow morning, at the press conference, you won’t be standing alone: five of your MP friends will also be there. They’re willing to quit the party and come work with you and be a part of your team. They’re fed up with the Prime Minister and his faction of upstarts that keep relegating them to the back benches.”

“I thought two of them were still on the fence? How on Earth did you arrange all of this?”

“My poor baby, I didn’t have to do a thing. They’re the ones who got in touch with me. They literally begged me to go to you and propose that we form a coalition of independents.”

“A what? A coalition of independents? What the hell is that?”

“They’ll be here in an hour to explain all of the details to you. While we’re on the subject, I think I just found the perfect name for our new party. The Movement of Independents... the Moovi! No, you know what, I think I preferred the Coalition of Independants. The CI, or something.”

“If you’re not going to explain to me why you accepted a \$75,000 bribe, Linda, I’m not sure I’ll still be here when they come knocking on your door.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Are you completely reckless? The woman in charge of my riding office has accepted money from a lobbyist in order to influence my positions, and you think I should find all of this perfectly normal?”

“It’s Counselor Comeau’s word against mine, Harvey.”

“I don’t follow...”

“That money no longer exists. It’s impossible to track down, Harvey. Payments were given to me by hand, in cash, and the amounts were then deposited into an account that a friend of mine opened for me in Ontario.”

“In Ontario?”

“In Cornwall, just on the other side of the border. She’s been a friend of mine since childhood, and it just so happened that she worked at that particular bank. She opened a fictitious account just for the occasion and made it disappear when the last payment was made. The money immediately went to an island in the South Seas. From there, it was routed to many other parts of the world before finally coming back here to Québec in a town whose name I’ll be keeping to myself. Stop worrying about this. There’s now way to trace it back to me.”

Harvey was dumbstruck by the revelation; his mistress seemed completely devoid of any remorse and oblivious to the look of condemnation that was apparent on her lover’s face.

He had a sudden epiphany: from this point on, all of his future political endeavours would be the result of the influence Linda exerted on him. He would become some sort of token figurehead for her and her allies and be forced to endorse actions that repulsed him. Linda would be the true ringleader behind this ‘Coalition of Independents’ she had created without his knowledge, not him.

Conflicting emotions jumbled about in Harvey’s mind. He suddenly saw himself as a puppet in machinations whose tenants were unknown to him and whose end game was beyond his understanding. Linda’s voice drew him out of his bitter reflection.

“What’s wrong, baby? Don’t you feel well?”

“What I feel is betrayal on all fronts. In another period of my life, I would have done everything in my power to fight the enemy and beat it, to retake control of my life. I may possess many faults, Linda, but at least I’ve always been, and have remained, an honest man.”

“Ah yes, an honest man who cheats on his wife and who, on occasion, himself embezzles money allocated to his riding office.”

“We might have shared the same bed, Linda, but you don’t know all there is to know about me. I don’t need to explain myself, nor the reasons behind some of the decisions I’ve made. But I’ve never accepted dirty money. Never. And I’m not about to start now.”

Stiffly, he got up. Looking about for his overcoat, he dramatically flung it over his shoulder in a grand gesture, accidentally hitting the lampshade next to him. In spite of Linda’s desperate attempt to save it, the lamp crashed on the varnished wooden floor.

Harvey stared at the pieces of broken ceramic and the dented lampshade for a moment, as if contemplating the shards of his ruined career. Raising his eyes to stare at Linda, whose face now expressed great irritation, in a weary voice he said:

“I forbid you from coming to the press conference tomorrow. I think we’ve said all that needed to be said here.”

“Harvey, if you leave this apartment right now, it will mean that you’ve decided not to run again. And if that’s the case, then I believe you are indeed correct: we’ll no longer have any reasons to see each other anymore.”

He stared her down. In her eyes, Harvey saw no trace of the feelings she had purported having had for him all these years. He nodded and left.

As soon as the door was closed, Linda got up and went to retrieve a half-empty bottle of white wine from the refrigerator. There was a hiss of air as she popped the rubber stopper of the wine saver. Pouring herself a large glass, she slowly came back to sit in the living room.

Swallowing a mouthful, she picked her cell phone off a nearby coffee table and, a pout of deep reflection on her face, absentmindedly started swatting her right cheek with it.

Glaring at the darkened television screen, she sipped her glass until it was completely drained.

A few moments later, her face had regained its customary impassibility. The hint of a smile appeared on her lips. She knew what she had to do; she started dialing the first in a series of numbers.



## 12

Early in the evening, Thomas and Michael had left the highway and had stopped at a bustling little restaurant to grab a bite to eat. Thomas had appeared increasingly restless. Constantly fidgeting, he had rambled on animatedly. To Michael's consternation, he had also drunk most of the bottle of wine they had ordered.

In spite of Michael's best efforts, Thomas had skillfully avoided any topic that might have led to him opening up and making confidences. In the end, Thomas had got the better of him; unable to endure the silence any longer, Michael had tried to make light conversation by recounting anecdotes that had occurred during the production of his television show.

The rest of the trip to the Simard family home had been somewhat chaotic. Thomas had given the impression of trying to put off their arrival at all costs by repeatedly slowing down along the way, which was uncustomary for him.

It was past midnight when they finally arrived; looking like a hearse heading to a funeral, the car slowly rolled down the two hundred meter path leading to the big white house. Cold rain had started pouring down, buffeted by gusts of wind.

Quiet as mice, they crossed the threshold and entered the vestibule, a small hallway barely lit by a single lamp standing on a credenza. In spite of their precautions, the steps leading to the first floor creaked under their feet. Thomas showed Michael to the bedroom he had often occupied in his childhood before heading off to his own room down the hall.

Entering his old bedroom, Michael turned on the lights. It took him a few minutes to pair what he saw with his memories of the place as a teenager.

The blue walls he'd known in his adolescence had since been covered up with flowery wallpaper. Textured blinds had replaced the roll-up canvas shade at the window, now framed by new curtains matching the color of the wallpaper.

All in all, most of the furniture had essentially remained the same. The single bed with its comfortable mattress was still there, as was the heavy easy chair in which he had spent hours lazing about reading a good book, the floor lamps, the old reading desk with its varnished wooden chair, the glass-paned bookcase lined with works that had so entranced him in his youth, everything in the room seemed to greet him as an old friend.

Hanging the slipcover containing his warm clothes in the closet, he dropped his suitcase on the bed and started unpacking his shirts, sweaters and pants.

The Jansenist crucifix he had hidden away in his suitcase glinted as he removed a pullover. As he felt every time he held it, Michael experienced a sort of revulsion at the sight of that long, distended body.

There was a slight knock on the door, and it opened.

Rushing to him, Annie gave him a peck on both cheeks. The proximity of her body against his troubled him. Apparently none the wiser to his sudden tensing up, she whispered:

“I didn’t hear you guys come in, I had my earphones on. But Thomas made such a ruckus in his room fumbling about with his suitcase that it was pretty hard to ignore. Thanks for coming, Michael. I’m so happy to see you again.”

“I should be the one thanking you for inviting me over, Annie. I am also very pleased to see you again after all this time. Are your parents doing okay?”

“Mom’s asleep. Dad went and locked himself in his den again; he must have fallen asleep too. He spent the entire evening on the phone.”

Stepping backwards, she whispered:

“I’ll let you unpack. I left some towels for you on the dresser... What the hell is that?”

“A crucifix... It... folds, for travel...”

“It looks really weird, Michael... It reminds me of something, but I can’t put my finger on it. Anyways, the trip must have tired you out. Riding in a car with Thomas for a few hours can be a harrowing experience, no? He still fancies himself a Formula One racer?”

Michael smiled.

“As always. I’m beginning to think he might have missed out on his true calling.”

“Poor little brother. He vents the only way he knows how. He seems so stressed these days. Well, I’ll leave you to it. It’s getting late and all. We’ll have ample time to catch up tomorrow morning. Good night!”

“Good night, Annie.”

Thoughtful, Michael stared at the closed door for a moment. Finally, he shrugged, trying to shake off his lethargy.

Stowing his clothes away in a little dresser, he unfolded the crucifix back into its normal position before placing it atop the nightstand.

Undressing for the night, he rejoiced that seeing Annie after all this time had been easier than he'd imagined. But the hard part was yet to come.



The creaking of a floorboard in the corridor outside his room pulled him out of his slumber. The glowing numbers on the small electric clock showed 2:46 am. He stretched and turned on his left side before pulling the covers over his back. The pleasure of a warm bed during frightful weather had always been one of his venial sins.

Sleep overtook him once more.

Restless, he dreamt a hand was grasping his crucifix away from him and jerked abruptly awake ten minutes later. He turned on the bedside lamp. The crucifix was still there; in the half-light, the martyr's face appeared distorted. He shuddered and stretched an arm to turn the light off again.

This time, sleep did not come as easily. Had the noise he'd heard really come from the corridor just outside his room? A remnant of his religious education forced him to push such improper thoughts out of his mind; it was unbecoming to succumb to such fantasies.

Suddenly, he thought he caught snippets of a heated exchange conveyed in hushed tones, apparently coming from the ground floor. The buzzing of the voices was clearly identifiable, although the subject at hand remained inaudible.

The argument continued a few minutes more before sleep finally released him into oblivion.

But his slumber was troubled by a recurring nightmare in which Mozart was fleeing down a sordid alleyway to the

beat of mind-numbing rap music, shouting: “NO! I’m but a child! Please don’t kill me...!”



Solange’s bedroom was bathed in the pallid light of morning as Annie finished combing her mother’s hair. Hearing conversation in the kitchen, Solange seemed impatient to come out of her room and participate. Outside, rain was still pouring down.

“Annie, please stop trying to give me the same curlicue every time. The state I’m in, I have long since abandoned the notion of winning any beauty contests.”

“I’m sure you’d knock ‘em dead at the ‘most beautiful woman in a wheelchair’ competition.”

“You find this funny?”

“I do, actually. From now on, I’ve decided that, every time you stubbornly decide to feel sorry for yourself, I would do everything in my power to make fun of you. By the way, the perfume you only reserve for special occasions will undoubtedly sway a few hearts this morning. It’s not too heavy, just the right amount of fragrance. It’s weird though, it reminds me of the one we used to smell, up in the attic.”

Solange looked away.

“All right, all right. Roll me over to the kitchen, will you? I want to have breakfast with the others.”

“Michael and dad are the only ones there.”

“Where’s Thomas?”

“He left an hour ago, after coffee.”

“I doubt he and Harvey managed to get much sleep. I overheard them talking in low voices in the den a good deal of the night. Didn’t you?”

“You know me, mom, the moment my head hits the pillow, I fall asleep like a babe. That’s what happens when your conscience is clear. All right, ready for Annie’s Taxi service?”

Grabbing the handles, she rolled the wheelchair out of the bedroom, taking her mother down the corridor towards the kitchen. By a strange coincidence, Solange’s right elbow struck a framed picture along the way, a photograph showing Harvey and Solange holding baby Annie and Thomas in their arms, knocking it to the floor. Annie hunched over to pick it up; putting it back in place, she noticed that the glass had broken in the fall.

“Well, I have to say, you’re as reckless a driver as Thomas is,” said Annie ironically.

But noticing Solange’s look of dismay, she decided not to press the matter.

A little to mock her, mostly to reassure her, Annie braked sharply in front of the swing door leading into the kitchen and leaned over her mother to tuck the tag of her expensive blouse back into her collar.

Solange gave her a worried glance:

“Am I presentable?”

“You will always be a great seductress, mom. Don’t worry about it.”

“Please stop being silly.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Solange shrugged her shoulders in irritation as the door swung open towards them to reveal Michael, napkin in hand, come to enquire about the noise.

As if she’d momentarily forgotten all about her handicap, Solange gave him the most radiant smile and Michael blushed.

“Mrs. Simard! What a pleasure to see you again...”

As he leaned over to give her a kiss on both cheeks, Annie noticed Solange's hand clutching Michael's arm insistently, as if to prolong the moment. She had the fleeting impression that, in the span it took for her to get her kisses, her mother had completely forgotten she was a paraplegic, for she instinctively looked for a handhold to try and stand up. Her face was beaming.

"Dear sweet Michael! I should chastise you for not having paid us a visit all this time... But I am so very happy that you decided to come and be here with all of us that I'm willing to let it slide."

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Simard. Being here with you, in this house, sure feels like old times... With all of you, I mean..."

"You used to call me Solange once, as Annie and Thomas did."

"I didn't dare, I didn't want to come across as impolite... But, now that you ask so nicely..."

Annie was growing impatient by this sugary display of etiquette.

"Come on, people. I haven't had breakfast yet, and I'm famished. What say we go into the kitchen, yes?"

"I... I'm sorry," answered Michael as he stepped aside, confused.

He held the door open for the wheelchair and they all stepped into the large kitchen where the family gathered every morning for breakfast. Annie noticed that Solange's hand had grabbed hold of Michael's; she held onto it until all three of them had reached the table where, already sitting down, Harvey was listening to news reports on a small battery-powered television resting next to his plate. Upon noticing him, Solange let go of Michael's hand.

Harvey was dressed for the occasion, decked to the nines in his navy blue pinstripe suit he only ever wore when

Parliament reconvened after summer recess. Taking his eyes off of his television set, he flashed Annie and Solange a smile and, getting halfway out of his chair, bowed to them cordially.

“Ladies, if you’d be so kind as to allow this humble servant to wish you a so very pleasant good morning.”

Annie burst out laughing.

“Oh dad, I love it when you try to use good manners. You sound like a man from a different age.”

Adopting an air of mock indignation, Harvey sat back down.

“I always said you were a rude young lady, Annie. A daughter should not mock her father on such a portentous day.”

“Harvey’s right, Annie,” cut in Solange. “He obviously believes that I am responsible for everything that didn’t work out with your education while he takes all the credit for your great personality. But let’s not launch into yet another one of our perpetual cock-and-bull tirades in Michael’s presence, shall we? And by the way, Harvey, why are you still here? I thought your press conference was this morning?”

“I’ve still got a couple of hours...”

“Ah...”

Unable to repress her disappointment, Solange’s lips pressed into a thin line. She started scrutinizing him with her piercing gaze.

“You look like you didn’t get much sleep, Harvey; you seem tired. Well, why don’t we eat breakfast. Today promises to be a very busy day. At what time is Mrs. Marcotte supposed to get here, Annie?”

“Midafternoon.”

“That’s cutting it a little close, isn’t it?”

“She called a few minutes ago to inform me that her daughter would be accompanying her to help prepare the meal tonight, and that we need not worry about a thing.”

“Her daughter? Here?”

Solange’s stare betrayed deep surprise.

“Yes, her daughter. Why does that surprise you?”

“Oh, nothing. I just think Mrs. Marcotte should have warned us in advance, that’s all. So... Well, are you going to serve me some tea or not?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Solange scowled at her. Then, turning to face Michael, who had taken his place at the table again, she flashed him a warm smile. As she opened her mouth to speak, Harvey interrupted her, switching off his small portable television.

“We’re in for a doozy, ladies! Weather forecasts are predicting a helluva storm over the weekend. They’ve even declared a storm watch, and that we should expect a veritable cocktail of precipitations. I just hope reporters will show up to my press conference.”

In a tone of voice dripping with sarcasm, Solange could not hold back from sending a barb his way.

“You really think they have nothing better to do this dreary Saturday morning than to attend your press conference? Get off your high horse, Harvey. It’s hardly a secret that you intend to announce your candidacy as an independent.”

“Dear wife of mine, you of all people should know that, in the world of politics, one should never place one’s faith in mere rumors... All right, I’ve got a few calls to make before I go. I’ll see you all later.”

Taken aback by his double entendre, Solange stared at him as he left the room.

“Is there something about your father you didn’t care to tell me, Annie?”

An enigmatic smile on her lips, Annie poured some tea into her cup.

“You know I hold no secrets from you, mom.”

Irritated, Solange added:

“I would also have liked to have a talk with Thomas before he left...”

Solange shrugged off her irritation and turned to face Michael once more, placing her hand on his.

“Why don’t you tell me a little more about what you’ve been up to these last few years, Michael? You know I’m your number one fan. I haven’t missed a single show of yours. Oh, if only Thomas had pursued his studies, as you did...”

“Mrs. Simard... I mean, Solange... Believe me, Thomas is doing quite well for himself. And he absolutely adores his job...”

Feeling a little left out of this saccharine reunion, Annie went to put some bread in the toaster. A crackling noise caught her attention. In the window above the sink, rain buffeted by gusts of wind had started freezing at the bottom of the pane.



Thomas was in the easy chair Harvey had sat in the day before. Nervousness made him antsy; always looking like he was on the verge of standing up, he kept cracking his knuckles in an almost maniacal fashion.

Caught in the process of removing her makeup wearing only her underwear, Linda had slipped on a bathrobe. Sitting across from him at the table in her little kitchenette, she was sipping some tea, cradling the cup in both hands.

Slowly, she put the cup down in the saucer. The small crystalline sound startled Thomas, making him jump.

“Nervous this morning, are we Thomas? You look like what the cat dragged in. Does your father know you’re here?”

“Why that question?”

“Why that answer?”

Cracking his knuckles more vigorously, Thomas got up and went to contemplate the rain pouring outside as strong winds smeared it across the long bay window of the living room. His back to her, he finally admitted:

“Yes... Yes, he knows I’m here.”

In an unambiguous gesture, Linda closed the collar of her bathrobe to cover herself; intimacy was no longer an option between the two of them.

Taking a deep breath, Thomas started walking about, trying to shake off some of his nervousness, but the confined space of the living room disconcerted him. Finally, he sat back down in the easy chair. The paleness of his unshaven face made him look even more sheepish, like a little boy who had been caught doing something naughty.

Linda was enjoying this. If not for the present situation, it wouldn’t have taken much for her to fall in love with this young lunatic all over again, a man who had managed to convince her that he had loved her in return. She had been caught in her own snare. Originally, Thomas was only supposed to be a pawn: she was to seduce him and convince him to sway his mother into helping Harvey out of his financial troubles for the sake of his political career. It was a game she had enjoyed playing. Bottom line. But things hadn’t exactly turned out the way she had anticipated...

She took another sip of her tea. Her voice became tinged with frost.

“Explain to me again how you plan on reimbursing me the \$30,000 that you owe me? I know your father certainly can’t afford this kind of money anymore. He spent most of his life trying to make up for your indiscretions and paying off your drug debts. And then, when he asked me to help you out, like a ninny, I went and lent you all this money. Your father ruined his reputation by letting everyone believe he had a gambling problem, and that he kept losing big at the casino all the time. He protected you for so many years from your mother by hiding the truth from her. And now, he’s caught by the short hairs, isn’t he? So now, please, try and be convincing this time, because I’m not sure I see where my interest in this wonderful new plan of your lies, exactly.”

Thomas was wrestling between anger and humiliation. He glanced at his watch: they still had a little over an hour and a half before the press conference.

“Last night, Counselor Comeau informed Harvey that the P.M. had asked you to represent the party during the upcoming elections. He had been told that his riding would be handed over to a star candidate. He was crushed when he learned that it would be you. He loved you, you know. He realized that going up against the powerful machine that is the party would be problematic at best, even in his own riding, where he’s not even sure he can win anymore.”

Impassible, Linda brought him a glass of water and Thomas took a sip. She stood facing him for a moment, observing him, then sat down in the little sofa in front of the easy chair. Waiting for the rest of his spiel, she crossed her legs, taking care to hide them beneath the folds of her bathrobe. She knew she had all the time in the world. In a low voice, Thomas continued:

“Harvey might be penniless, but he does possess important political capital. Against an independent

candidate like him, you'd likely end up causing another candidate to slip in between the two of you and get elected in your place. Harvey is more popular than you will ever be. He knows his electorate. A strong majority of the voters still have faith in him."

"I'm well aware of the situation in his riding, Thomas. I've worked with your father for ten years now."

"You're right, I'm sorry. Once re-elected, Harvey was banking on getting a job as an MP and using that revenue to pay you back what I owe you, on the condition that I go into rehab. Considering how things are going for him right now, I managed to convince him to renounce his candidacy during his press conference this morning and to announce that he had accepted to become your party planner instead. He'll work to help you get elected, pro bono, on the proviso that you erase my debt. If you both appear together at the press conference, and he announces that he'll be running with you and supporting you because you're the best person for the job and the ideal candidate to succeed him in his riding, you'll be entering the race with a very comfortable lead over your nearest competitors. You know the Official Opposition has already started spreading rumors about how they intend to replace Harvey with an influential candidate in his riding. This party of yours is hanging on by a thread, Linda, but around here, it would be a very different story. You'd finally get your hands on what you've been working for these last ten years. Harvey guarantees he can win you the riding. That would then position you to get your foot in the door at the National Assembly."

Linda's eyes lit up. She had understood the stakes when her former lover had first confusedly tried to make his pitch to her, but she had wanted Thomas to be at her mercy, to

stress him out because time was running out before the press conference, to let him believe she was hesitant in accepting his offer. Here was the opportunity of a lifetime to finally achieve her ambition. But all was not as limpid as Thomas would have let her believe.

“And what about the others... The... Coalition of Independents?”

“At the P.M.’s strong urging, two of the five MP’s have already reintegrated the caucus. Harvey’s convened the remaining three to meet with him at the restaurant where the press conference is being held, in about half an hour’s time. He’s already there; he’s waiting for your call. If you don’t get in touch with him within that time, he’ll assume that you’ve rejected our plan and will announce his intention of running as an independent with the other three. If you decide to call him within the next half-hour, he’ll use the time that’s left him to try and convince the others to accept his decision and recommend that they also present themselves as candidates for the party. He negotiated all of this with the P.M.’s executive assistant, who apparently wasn’t that hard to convince; the re-election of five MP’s will ensure that the party stays in power. As for you, it will avoid you having to hold that press conference you announced for tomorrow morning. Especially considering that the weather keeps getting worse and worse; I doubt anybody would show up anyhow...”

“How did you know I...”

Linda didn’t finish her sentence. Thomas let out a cynical laugh.

“Harvey’s made some pretty reliable contacts in the media over the years. You know that.”

Contempt shone in Linda’s eyes. The young man immediately regretted having mocked her.

Glancing at her watch, she got up and went to retrieve her cell phone sitting next to her cup on the little coffee table.

Her features hardened by rancor, she turned around to face Thomas. His heart pounding in his chest, he simply stared at her expectantly. In a monotone voice, Linda finally said:

“All right, kiddo. I’ll call your father and tell him that I accept your proposition. Now get out of here. I never want to see your junkie face around here ever again.”

“But... Linda...”

“Get the fuck out, Thomas. I’ve seen enough of you to last me a lifetime. I don’t want anything to do with a hopeless wretch like you anymore, a loser who’s let me down without even having the balls to tell me to my face.”

Turning her back on him, Linda walked over to the bedroom and started dialing Harvey’s number on her cell phone.

Shamefaced, Thomas fled the apartment; he had never in his life wanted to do a line of coke so much as he did right now.



Sitting at the kitchen table, Gisèle Marcotte and her daughter were enjoying breakfast.

“I haven’t slept this soundly in a long time,” commented Marie-Andrée after swallowing a generous portion of yogurt topped with freshly chopped fruit. “I’m feeling up to it, let’s do this.”

“I’m glad to hear that, sweetie. I’m so happy to see you again. You look better than you did last night. You looked so tired when you got here.”

“It’s the end of the semester, the stress of exams. You know how it is.”

“Yes, stress, I do know a little something about that...”

“What’s wrong? Are you worried about having to prepare supper over at MP Simard’s house?”

“The meal, no. It’s the family that I find a little tiresome.”

“Oh?”

“I find them somewhat isolated, insulated from the rest of the world. They’re a little snobbish, to be honest. Annie is a nice enough girl. She’s one of my regulars... You’ll get the chance to meet her tonight. Her mother is a paraplegic. Did you know that?”

“Oh you know me, I don’t really care about politicians and their families...”

“Yeah... Oh, whatever, we’ll see how it goes, I guess. After all, it can’t be as awful as I’m making it out to be, can it?”

“Come on, mom, I’ll be there to help you. It’ll be all right, you’ll see.”

“You’re probably right. But are you sure you won’t be bored, being in the presence of so many strangers?”

“Positive, mom. I find nothing more enjoyable than being around people who know absolutely nothing about me and who have no idea that I’m secretly observing them. Oh, by the way, do we still have a lot to do before we can head over there?”

“There are still a few things I need to buy at the supermarket. But with all the bad weather we’re having, I’m almost positive the store will be crawling with people intent on making provisions, just in case it stretches out. So let’s finish eating breakfast and head over there. After that, we’ll have all the time in the world to take a shower in time for supper. What do you say?”

“Is the Simard house far from here?”

“A good thirty kilometers. It’s very isolated. You know, listening to you right now, you’re starting to sound like a journalist, what with all those questions. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have preferred working at a newspaper instead of being a teacher?”

“Yes, mom, I’m sure. I prefer fiction to reality any day.”



Harvey was pacing up and down the living room, just as Thomas had done a few hours earlier. Linda once again was fascinated by the physical resemblance between father and son, the similar way they had of reacting anxiously to any aggravation that came their way. The cold humid air left her chilled to the bone, even wrapped in a blanket; lying down on the sofa, she took a swig of alcohol.

Staring out the window, Harvey was scrutinizing the maelstrom of heavy charcoal-colored clouds above. Strong winds regularly assailed the bay window with sheets of freezing rain. His watch showed 13:20 pm. He had barely touched the glass of Scotch in his hand; the overabundance of ice cubes had long since melted away and the alcohol now tasted like diluted syrup.

After the press conference, the former lovers had opened up to each other, confiding every last regret, every recrimination. And now, they had been reduced to embarrassment, sometimes giving each other sidelong glances, like exhausted boxers devastated at not having been able to vanquish the other.

“So?” asked Harvey.

“So, what?”

“You won. I withdrew. What more do you want? The press conference went according to plan. You’re sure to make the headlines tomorrow. And news broadcasts are going to spotlight the hell out of this; they love covering unexpected developments.”

“Do you really want to work for me, Harvey?”

“Thomas will never be able to pay back that kind of money.”

“And I can’t get elected without you. Whichever way we look at this, it would seem that we need each other right now.”

“In another life, I would have been so happy to hear you say that. But that’s over now, so let’s move on. We’ll need to draw up a contract in due form, by the book, solid. Agreed?”

“Don’t you trust the party’s lawyers?”

“You’re the one I don’t trust anymore, Linda. Look, I’ve gotta go. We’re having a little family get-together over at our house tonight.”

“I take it I’m not invited to the party?”

“Linda, when I mentioned this to you just two days ago, you told me that you had absolutely no intention of being there so that my ‘hag of a wife’ could rain insults down on you. In any case, I doubt Solange would greet you very warmly. Put yourself in her shoes.”

“If only that could have been so... You’ll excuse me for being contradictory, but are you going to just leave me here to freeze all alone in the dark?”

“You could go to the motel.”

“Very kind of you to offer. But on one condition: before you get out of here like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs, let me call the motel and see if they have any power on. Because if I have to freeze to death, I’d rather do it here.”

Linda dialed the number.

Harvey slipped off to the kitchen. Unable to hear the conversation over the rush of water running from the faucet, he tried washing away the streaks of alcohol that had gathered at the bottom of the stainless steel sink. He came back to the living room as she was saying “Well, thanks anyways” before hanging up.

“Power’s out at the motel too?”

“No, it’s on. It’s just that they don’t have a single vacancy. Apparently, a lot of vacationers were caught by surprise by the freezing rain and decided to stop there and stay in for the rest of the day. It’s been booked since noon. Some of the roads have already been closed.”

“Grab a few things, a toothbrush, pyjamas, whatever. I’m not going to leave you here all alone in the dark. You’re coming with me.”

“Two minutes ago, you said I wouldn’t be received very warmly...!”

“Yeah, well, I’ll call Annie and apprise her of the situation while you pack your travel bag. She’ll inform Solange.”

“Why do I get the feeling I won’t be winning any popularity contests tonight... Oh well, it can’t be much worse than shivering all alone in the dark, can it. Do I get my own room?”

“We’re not the Château Frontenac, Linda. But, I don’t know, we’ll figure something out...”



## 13

Early in the afternoon, Solange had asked Michael if he could escort her to her bedroom and, reluctantly, he had agreed. As soon as they had entered, she had quickly rolled over to the door and had closed it behind them in order to isolate them from Annie, who was busy answering e-mails in her room; Solange wished to get reacquainted with Michael on her own terms.

Sitting next to the large window that overlooked part of the alleyway, the wooded area bordering the house all the way down to the lake and the long path fringed with trees visible in the distance, she smiled.

“This is my favourite spot,” she said with calculated nonchalance. “When I’m not in bed, that is.”

She indicated an upholstered straight chair standing on the other side of a small coffee table and, somewhat shyly, Michael sat down. The hint of a smile on Solange’s lips only served to deepen his unease. She started reeling off banalities, giving the impression of trying to delay the inevitable conversation, while in reality, Michael was convinced that, at any moment now, she would bluntly broach the delicate subject of their shared past, most likely in an attempt to revive the climate of control she had always exerted over him. He tried to avoid her longing glances by

staring out the window at the wooded area outside. The freezing rain had become intermingled with heavy scattered snowflakes.

Solange knew that Michael's innate shyness, no doubt induced by a lingering sense of guilt, left him entirely at her mercy. He would never be able to scrounge up enough courage to interrupt their conversation and leave the room.

Being in Michael's presence rekindled her loathing of the infirmity that had prevented her from establishing intimate rapports for years now, which, in the past, had been a rather important aspect of her life. She tried to win him over by deviating the conversation onto her, recounting how her daily life had become bereft of joy, how her situation as a recluse prevented her from having anybody to talk to and how she instead had to seek refuge in works of literature.

The tactic of employing self-pity worked beautifully. Michael let his guard down for a moment, jumping at the chance to empathize with her condition, her health issues, even questioning her about the possibility of undergoing surgical procedure as he evoked documentaries he had seen on the subject, anything to try and veer the discussion as far away from their shared past as possible.

Convinced that Michael's desire to sidestep the issue at hand had numbed him into a false sense of security, Solange let him believe that he had gained the upper hand.

As any cautious person would when trying to postpone an unavoidable confrontation, he suddenly became very talkative, throwing out talking point after talking point.

From where she was sitting, Solange noticed Thomas' car arriving at the front of the house before stopping.

Trying to conceal the ruckus her son was making as he was entering the house, she raised her voice, adroitly taking control of the conversation again.

“Tell me, Michael, don’t you have someone special in your life?”

Somewhat taken aback, he smiled politely and said:

“You haven’t lost your ability to ask embarrassing questions, Solange.”

“Oh, come now, there should be no need for any unease between the two of us, should there?”

The innuendo expunged the smile from Michael’s lips. He hung his head. When he finally replied, his voice had changed.

“I hesitated greatly before accepting Thomas’ invitation to come over and stay for the weekend. I was dreading exactly this kind of one-on-one with you. I now realize just how right I was in being weary.”

“Do you fear me? Or is this disdain at what’s become of me...”

“No, Solange. Neither. If I feel anything right now, it is remorse. Remorse at not having had the courage to say no to you.”

“I seem to recall you rather enjoying our little get-togethers at the time...”

“I’ll admit, you had me completely dominated. I was fascinated by the way you used to create an aura of voluptuousness around those instances that we were together. But the whole time I was with you, on the inside, I was condemning myself and secretly wishing for atonement...”

“Atonement? Oh, you great big galoot... Is that why you sought to become a priest?”

“I was convinced it was the best course that life had in store for me.”

“But, you didn’t even receive... the calling, did you?”

Coming from her, the word sounded incongruous.

This time, he raised his head and stared her straight in the eye.

“Why did you use that word?”

“Isn’t that the proper term employed by a bishop when he refuses priesthood to a seminarian?”

“I just find it odd that you should use it in this instance.”

He kept his gaze fixed upon hers. In her eyes, Michael discerned the spark of not only vengeance, but also of great despair. And then, he had an epiphany.

“It was you! You ratted me out to the prelate! You told him about us? What, to obtain vengeance because... because I’d decided to leave this place!?”

Stunned, he stood up and took a few confused steps around the room for a moment, like a poor stray cat one lets in for some much-needed warmth but that still tries to find a hiding place out of habitual fear.

“My poor child, you had no business being in the priesthood in the first place. I was the only one who possessed the power to bring some meaning to your life.”

“The life of a puppet, you mean! I might have been a naive teenager, Solange, but even I knew that our guilty pleasures could never form the basis of a solid relationship. You were a married woman!”

“Harvey had long since found other ways to satisfy his penchant for libidinous activities. I agree, you were very naive, and have remained so to this day.”

Tense and nervous, Michael went to stand at the window. His breathing became increasingly spasmodic as asthma made his lungs wheeze.

“Please spare me your sarcasm!”

“Michael, I have loved you from the very first moment you stepped foot into this house.”

“Honestly! I was but a child!”

“Well, I did leave you some time to grow up first, didn’t I?”

“I was not even fifteen when you first seduced me!”

“The perfect age to start learning, wouldn’t you say? You were sufficiently developed to satisfy my needs. And as I recall, at the time, you didn’t seem to complain much about my methods.”

He raised his voice in anger.

“Do you hear yourself? Just... shut up! Please stop talking. Have you no shame?”

As if to appease him, Solange lowered her voice, in reality trying not to alarm Thomas and Annie.

“Love in and of itself is always a shameless act, my poor little fragile heart.”

“An old friend recently told me: “There comes a time in every individual’s life when they must choose between the past and the present.” Only now do I realize how true those words were. Well I choose the present; you can have the past.”

Solange’s tone hardened.

“Don’t you do this to me, Michael, not again. If you had stayed here, chances are I probably would never have become embroiled in that sordid car accident. Consequently, I would never have tried to lose myself in these vile political machinations. Don’t you dare throw me away like an old shirt or something. You don’t know the whole story. I...”

Solange was interrupted by a nervous knock at the bedroom door. It quickly opened to reveal Thomas, looking pale and overexcited.

“Sorry to interrupt. Could you come here for a moment, Michael? Annie needs our help. It’s important...”

“Sure. If you’ll please excuse me... Missus Simard.”

Michael’s insistence at trying to erect a measure of distance between the two of them made Solange smile.

“But of course, Michael. The young play with the young, the old play with the old, or... by themselves. Alone. In any case, the weekend’s barely begun. I’m sure we’ll have many other opportunities to pursue this exchange.”

The dark glare Michael threw her way made her flinch. Once the two young men had left the room, her face contorted into a mask of pure anger. She cursed herself for having played her hand so poorly. Rather than rekindling the affection she had so craved from him, she had aroused contempt instead.

She knew she was being pathetic. Furious, she struck the armrest of her wheelchair with her fist and turned to stare out the window.

From what she could see between the house and the wooded area, the freezing rain was falling copiously now. The smattering of ice particles crashing against the windowpanes did not portend well.

She let out a laugh of derision. Soon, no one would be able to leave this house; trapped inside, its occupants would be forced to submit to the game of truth. She would have ample time to resume her conversation with Michael, just where they had left it off.

But first, to find out what her inept husband had been up to!

Taking advantage of the fact that no one was observing her, she used quick and powerful motions to roll herself over to the living room and turned the television set on. Remote control firmly in hand, she started flipping through the channels until she found a twenty-four hour news network.

An anchorwoman was recapping the headlines. Solange was stupefied to learn that Harvey had announced his decision not to run again, thus leaving room for his 'loyal right-hand woman,' Linda Falardeau, to take his place. She turned the volume up so as to not lose any of the details. The network's correspondent exchanged a few words with the newscaster for a moment before they started playing a looped sequence of Harvey explaining how he had decided to leave politics for family reasons (which made Solange snark ferociously), and how his services had been retained by the party's new candidate to help her plan out her political campaign.

At that moment, a reserved looking Linda, trying hard to hide her satisfaction, stepped up to the podium and began thanking Harvey for having acted as her political mentor these last ten years, and for having prepared her in succeeding him. Not only would she continue to follow the path he had laid out for her, she also promised to make the economic interests of her riding the number one priority of her program.

The five former candidates of the once future Coalition of Independents simply stood there behind Linda, affecting the discrete smile of experienced politicians exuding confidence in the future.

"That bitch," growled Solange, turning off the television. "Everyone in the riding knows where you really got your political education, dear: in the sack!"

And to think she had almost confided in Harvey that, after mulling it over, she had decided she was now ready to support him in his campaign to try and get elected as an independent candidate. If he had stayed in his den just a few minutes more the other day, she would have had the occasion to inform him of her decision. In a low voice, she mumbled to herself:

“The Lord works in mysterious ways... At least, now I can show him out the door without feeling remorse. He’ll never ridicule me again.”

But Linda’s sudden candidacy also meant that Solange’s role as the Prime Minister’s confidante no longer had any reason for being. The party had solved its dilemma without her; Harvey had renounced running as an independent without her having to resort to blackmail. Weary and bitter, she pursed her lips. Come Monday, she would send her divorce petition over to Counselor Comeau along with the modified version of her testament. Harvey would have to leave this house as a pariah, penniless.

The murmur of voices floating down from Thomas’ room caught her attention. A heated exchange seemed to be taking place. Rolling her wheelchair over to the bottom of the stairs, she tried to listen in on the conversation, but to no avail. The dejection she had felt as Michael had left her room a few minutes ago deepened; isolation weighed heavily on her mind. Distraught, she rolled herself back to her bedroom and shut herself in. How she wished she could confide in him, perhaps even unburden herself of the heavy secret she had been carrying around these last ten years... She absolutely had to try and speak with him again.

Her pulse quickened. Contradictory emotions assailed her. She tried thinking of a way to impress Michael somehow, to prove her conviction, to cajole him by making a grand gesture of some sort, to dazzle him through her sheer force of will. Only then would he finally understand just how much she cared for him, how she needed him. Never again in his lifetime would he meet someone who could love him as she did. The fact that he led such a solitary lifestyle now was blinding proof of that.

Solange’s thoughts started maundering. She was already fantasizing about renewing a long and fruitful

relationship with Michael. She knew she could hardly serve as his lover anymore. But aren't there other ways one can satisfy a man in bed? Amongst other things, she could serve as sage advisor, mentor and companion to him, someone who could help him move further along in his career. From the nighstand drawer, she took out the old scrap book filled with newspaper clippings, all concerning Michael, and came back to the window, slowly turning the pages with almost religious zeal. She contemplated his face on magazine covers and in daily newspaper articles, overcome by a powerful desire she could no longer feel but in her imagination.

Her watch showed 13:50 pm. Just then, outside her window, the voices of the three youngsters discussing animatedly amongst themselves caught her attention.

Hiding behind a lace curtain, she observed them as they came out of the shed where Harvey kept his tools, first Michael, who was holding the door open, then Thomas, shovel in hand, and finally Annie.

Seeing her daughter gave her a violent start: against her chest, Annie was clutching the metal box she had hidden away in the attic ten years before, the one she had thought impossible to find.

Her secret had been discovered!

At that moment, an idea formed in her feverish mind. She let herself become absorbed by it, mindful not to discard it too quickly despite its incongruity.

Breathing heavily, she tried to regain control of herself. She had just enough time to call Juliette, her volunteer nurse.

As soon as she had her on the phone, Solange assumed the plaintive voice of a poor, harassed and sickly disabled person, telling Juliette how she was all alone in the house right now, and how she had called to ask if she could come

and check up on her for just a few minutes and help her with a task she couldn't possibly handle by herself. As usual, Juliette promised that she would come over as soon as possible, but warned her that bad weather was starting to make the roads slippery and that she might be running a little late.

In a whining tone that was enough to convince the caregiver that she had better hurry, Solange thanked her curtly. She hung up, confident that Juliette would not let her down.

Just thinking of the metal box Annie had carried off into the forest with the boys made her heart skip a beat. She suddenly felt a pain in her chest.

Intense buzzing assailed her eardrums, followed by a veil of darkness that suddenly blotted out all light around her.

“Mrs. Simard? Mrs. Simard? Are you all right?”

Her eyelids fluttered open. Juliette was staring down at her, eyes bulging; the thick lenses of her glasses were spattered with droplets of rain, as was her coat.

Solange started emerging from her confusion. The memory of having called the volunteer nurse resurfaced like a bolt of lightning. She let out a hoarse cry:

“Where’s Annie?”

“I don’t know. There’s no one in the house.”

The image of the tin, the last thing she remembered seeing before losing consciousness, made her flinch. For many long seconds, Solange became overwhelmed with distress as, her face next to hers, Juliette began checking her vitals, taking her pulse and examining her pupils.

The plan that had started forming in her mind as the three youngsters had headed off into the forest came back to her in a flash. Solange shook her head in irritation. Her

secret be damned, she would handle that particular situation later. But right now, she had a more important task to perform before the trio returned.

“I’ll be all right, Juliette. Probably just a sudden drop in blood pressure. Don’t worry about it. I feel perfectly fine now. But I need your help with something. Put your coat down on the chair behind you and get a hold of yourself. I have a message to write.”

While the volunteer nurse did as she was told, Solange rolled her wheelchair over to the nightstand and, from the drawer, took out some paper, an envelope and a pen. Using the scrap book filled with newspaper clippings as a backboard, she quickly started scribbling a message intended for Michael:

*‘My dear Michael. I need to speak with you in private. I can explain everything. Don’t be too hasty in passing judgment on me. And don’t feel guilty about a thing. Please, come see me as soon as you get back. Yours truly, Solange.’*

Hastily folding the sheet of paper, she nervously tucked her message inside the envelope and sealed it with a swipe of her tongue before inscribing Michael’s name on it.

Cramming the letter deep inside her cardigan pocket, Solange quickly rolled her wheelchair over to Juliette, who was patiently waiting for her at the bedroom door.

“Bring me to the staircase, quickly!”

Once again, the nurse did as she was told.

At the foot of the stairs, Solange grabbed hold of the ramp with both hands and managed to hoist herself over the seat of her wheelchair.

Pushing the wheelchair away with her foot, Juliette rushed over to try and support her.

“You wish to go up there? For all that’s holy, Mrs. Simard, why? Please let me go in your place...”

“Hold me up! I have to go up there and leave this letter in one of the rooms.”

“But in your condition, it’s pure madness! Give it to me. I’ll do it.”

“NO! I need to do this on my own. Hold me by the waist. I’ll use the ramp as support.”

Clutching on for dear life, Solange started making her way up the stairs, using only the strength of her wrists.

“Sweet Jesus! I had never noticed just how strong you were, Mrs. Simard.”

“Juliette, for the love of God, just shut up and help me, will you?”

Both women continued climbing resolutely. Trained to handle sick and handicapped patients, Juliette was proving extremely efficient, which served to reassure Solange, boosting her determination. As if in a trance, she was already celebrating her effort: this incredible display of willpower was sure to leave Michael in awe. At last, he would finally acknowledge her unwavering love for him. Fixated on the passion that emboldened her to commit such an absurd act of tragicomedy, Solange was puffing and panting as she tried to make her way up the stairs.

They finally managed to reach the landing on the first floor. With a nod of her head, Solange indicated Michael’s bedroom door. But this time, there was no ramp to hold on to. Gasping for air, she ordered Juliette to sit her down on the carpeted floor.

“I can handle it on my own from here. Go fetch the wheelchair and bring it up here, next to the door. I’ll be too tired to go back down the same way I came up.”

“Mrs. Simard! You can’t be serious!”

“Enough, Juliette! Do as you’re told.”

Under the nurse’s dumbstruck stare, Solange started crawling along on the floor, arms firmly extended in front of her, torso perfectly arched, dragging her legs behind her like two languid snakes.

Reaching the bedroom door, she turned her head around and stared at Juliette intently. Her irritated glare was enough incentive; the caregiver immediately rushed down the stairs.

Solange extended a hand to turn the knob and, once the door was opened, crawled inside the room. The scent of Cologne hanging in the air gave her chills. She noticed his pajamas hanging from beneath the unmade covers. She quickly slithered her way over to the bed. Grabbing hold of the covers, she hoisted herself to the level of the mattress, leaned against her left elbow, pulled the pajama top to her and buried her face in it. The musk of Michael’s body made her shudder in delight. In her mind, she could still picture him in his youth, lying beneath her as they’d made love.

But the fear of being caught in the act by the sudden return of the three youngsters suddenly cooled her ardor. Taking the letter out from her cardigan pocket, she placed it atop the bed next to Michael’s pajama and went to seek support against the nightstand. Contorting her body, she managed to position herself facing the door so as to be able to crawl back out. She could hear Juliette panting and wheezing as she was slowly making her way back up the stairs with the wheelchair.

Using her right hand, she tried to support all of her weight against the nightstand, but made it tumble over, sending the Jansenist crucifix perched atop it crashing down onto the varnished wood floor with a thud, along with a spiral notebook.

“Is there a problem, Mrs. Simard?” asked Juliette from the staircase.

“NO!” shrieked Solange. “Everything is fine. I’ll be right there. Wait for me in the hallway.”

The sight of the fallen crucifix froze her on the spot. At first, she thought it might have broken in the fall, but quickly realized it had simply come off of the wooden cross.

Picking it up to inspect it more closely, she noticed that the hands of the figure of Christ hadn’t been affixed by nails, but rather suspended on hooks meant to emulate ropes. Removing them from their bonds was very easy to do; the crucifix had obviously been designed that way. But now that the wrists had been freed from their restraints, the head and neck of the effigy seemed to form a sort of handle, with the arms serving as a guard, from which long slender legs jutted out, for all intents and purposes resembling some sort of crude dagger.

She suddenly felt ill. This strange object had not ended up here by accident. Why had Michael brought this thing in her home? Did he have malicious intents? After all, she had nothing but enemies in this house; anybody could decide to grab it and try to use it against her to eliminate her. Convinced she was right, she started panicking: she was in danger, she was certain of it. The discovery of the biscuit tin in the attic proved it.

With her left hand, she leaned against the mattress and stretched her arm to place the cross back on top of the nightstand, trying to put it back in the same position as before. But the figurine now seemed crooked. With her other hand, she grabbed the notebook that had fallen open on the floor.

Reclining against the bed, panting, she started flipping through the notebook. In it, Michael had scribbled a few

anguished musings spiced with mysticism concerning his fear of dying, most of them reflections borrowed from various religious authors. She shook her head in astonishment; how could he still be clinging to all of this?

She was about to close the notebook when a few lines on the last page, written that very morning, startled her. She read:

*I cannot ignore the great joy that I felt upon seeing Annie again, her radiant smile, her simple gentleness. When she kissed me on the cheek, I shivered. How could I have possibly lacked the courage to profess my love for her, all those years ago? The mere thought of it now fills me with great sadness. I have to try and find an opportunity to talk to her alone, to reveal how my feelings have only grown for her since last we saw each other... Will her mother continue to prove an obstacle between the two of us? Regardless, obstacles are meant to be overcome. At all costs.'*

“Mrs. Simard? I hear the sound of a car engine! What should I do?”

“I’ll be right there!”

Stunned by the revelation, Solange was distraught; she had just discovered that Michael preferred her daughter to her. Hands trembling, she placed the notebook back on the nightstand next to the crucifix.

Suddenly, inspiration struck; she had to take the crucifix away from him. Upon reading her letter, Michael would surely deduce that Solange had been the one who had taken it, and would most likely stomp straight over to her bedroom in order to demand explanations. He would finally have to accept that private meeting she had longed for more than anything in the world. She would then confront him, dash his boyhood fantasies and nip this

impossible infatuation with Annie in the bud. And taking the object away with her would also serve to help her feel more secure in her own home.

But first, she had to get out of this room immediately, before he came back. She unhooked the body of Christ from the cross and looked for a place to conceal it.

“Mrs. Simard, please hurry!”

She slipped the figurine inside her belt, tucking it beneath her blouse, and shivered as the cold metal brushed against her skin. Hands firmly planted against the wooden floor, she started crawling back towards the hallway, shouting to Juliette:

“Come help me!”

Visibly nervous, Juliette rushed into the bedroom, deftly deploying the wheelchair as she did so. She helped Solange up into the seat and quickly rolled her over to the staircase, taking care to close the door behind them.

“Don’t worry, Juliette,” panted Solange, her voice made hoarse by the exertion of the last few moments. “I’ll hold on to the wheels, it should slow our descent.”

“I’m not worried, Mrs. Simard. I saw what you’re capable of with those strong arms of yours.”

Going back down the stairs proved hard work, but both women finally managed to reach the ground floor without too much difficulty, glad to catch their breath.

At almost that exact moment, they heard car doors slamming shut. Two feminine voices rose up from outside the house.

Panting, Solange tried to regain her composure. Reconquering Michael’s heart would most likely prove an arduous task, and the battle ahead terrified her. But it was too late to turn back now.

“Thank you, Juliette. I truly appreciate it.”

“You know how devoted I am to you, Mrs. Simard.”

“Could I be a bother just a moment longer and ask you to help me over to my bed? I haven’t exerted myself like this in ten years; I’m so spent, I’m trembling all over.”

“Of course, Mrs. Simard. Let me take you back to your room.”

“Come to think of it, I think I can manage on my own. Could you instead go to the kitchen and fetch me a carafe of cold water with some ice, please?”

“With pleasure, Mrs. Simard.”

Taking advantage of her caregiver’s absence, Solange went to the living room and hid the crucifix before quickly rolling back to her bedroom. Glancing out the window, she noticed Mrs. Marcotte walking to the front of the house, accompanied by a young woman. Barely taking the time to look at them, she rushed over to her bed and, even though her escapade up on the first floor had exhausted her, managed to hoist herself up onto the mattress by herself. Lying down, she closed her eyes, trying as best she could to cover her torso with the bedspread.

“You’re already in bed?” exclaimed Juliette as she walked into the bedroom. “That was foolish, Mrs. Simard. You should have waited for me.”

Solange drank the water the nurse offered her, closed her eyes for a moment as if to think, then abruptly opened them again and grabbed Juliette firmly by the wrist.

“Listen to me very carefully, Juliette. We don’t have much time. I am no longer safe in this house. My very own family is plotting to get rid of me!”

“Oh, come now, Mrs. Simard!”

“I have proof. Tomorrow morning, come and pick me up in your car. I will tell you where to take me. I will compensate you generously for your troubles. Do not be afraid.”

“But... The forecasts are predicting really nasty weather for tomorrow...”

“That’s irrelevant. We won’t be going far. Just promise me that you will come and pick me up tomorrow, Juliette!”

“I’ll be here,” replied the volunteer nurse, visibly shaken by her patient’s distress. “Now, please, release my arm, Mrs. Simard, you’re hurting me. And get some rest. We can talk about all of this in the morning.”

Juliette pulled the bedspread up to cover her and Solange closed her eyes, taking deep breaths in an effort to try and calm her nerves.

But the anguish that had engulfed her mind mere moments before obstinately refused to fade away.

As soon as Juliette had closed the door, her eyes started welling up with tears of impotent rage.

## 14

Standing in the middle of the clearing, Annie came out of her stupor and said:

“Hurry. The weather’s taking a turn for the worse.”

The cold rain was falling harder and harder now, freezing on the branches.

Thomas grumbled. Cocaine deprivation was making him wary, and a little paranoid.

“Burying that stupid box was a dumb idea! We could have been spotted. Wait! Did you hear that? Sounds like someone stepping on dead branches...”

Walking slowly between the two men, lost in a deep reflection that made her purse her lips, Annie hung her head. She was still haunted by the distraught looks on Thomas and Michael’s faces as they had peered down incredulously at the contents of the open biscuit tin... Thinking back on what they’d just done, she started wondering if they had made the right decision after all.

Behind a hillock about five hundred meters into the woods, Thomas had frenetically dug a hole for Annie to bury the box in. The first shoveful of frozen dirt falling on the metal lid had produced an eerie metallic plinking. Hurriedly, her brother had started shovelling faster and faster, trying to get this over with.

In less than two minutes, the small box had been completely buried. Thomas had tapped the mound of dirt with the back of the blade a few times in order to pat down the disturbed earth, making it look like the head of a brown bear poking up through the snow. Annie had then covered it with a few leaves and some dead branches.

They had stood there around the improvised grave for a moment, motionless, unable to admit to themselves why the ritual they had just performed tormented them so...

Annie was surprised to notice a concerned look on Michael's face. Walking beside them, Thomas kept whacking the ground violently with his shovel.

Increasingly worried about his best friend's behaviour, gently, Michael took the shovel from his hands.



After waiting in the kitchen for a few minutes in case Solange needed her help again, Juliette drank a glass of water and went to retrieve her coat hanging on a hook in the vestibule.

Through the frosted window of the door, she noticed the radiator grill of another car parked out front. Buttoning her coat, she went outside, struggling to open her umbrella as it was quickly buffeted by the strong wind. The other car, smaller than hers, was parked a few meters away. Climbing into her own vehicle, Juliette placed her handbag on the passenger seat, rummaged around in her coat pocket for her keys and started the engine. Glancing at the other car, she tried to see who was inside, but the open lid of the trunk blocked the two women from her view.

Putting her car in reverse, Juliette cautiously backed

out of the slippery driveway and turned around to face the long path leading away from the estate. Peering once more at the two women as they were climbing out of their own car, she recognized Mrs. Marcotte, who was indicating to her assistant how to unload boxes of groceries and iceboxes from the trunk.

Seeing them here sent her into a state of panic. Shifting gears, Juliette immediately stepped on the accelerator; the tires spun uselessly on the icy ground for a moment before finally biting down on the road and propelling the car forward. Both women jerked their heads up in surprise and stared at her as she drove away at breakneck speed, skidding and sliding along the way.

At that very moment, Harvey's car appeared at the other end of the long driveway and started venturing towards the house.

Behind the wheel, Harvey was steaming. Linda had just admitted to him how she had been approached by the party, many weeks before.

"Oh, stop pouting, Harvey. I initially refused their offer to take your place, remember? I've always been loyal, regardless of what you may think. And if you intend to piss and moan the whole weekend long, then you'd better take me back to my apartment right now. Even without power, I'm sure the ambiance there will be much warmer than in your home."

"Knock it off!"

Furious, Harvey stepped on the gas.

Only at the last moment did he notice Juliette's little car heading their way at high speed, sliding from left to right along the icy road.

"Watch out!" cried Linda.

Harvey managed to manoeuvre just in time, veering to

the right just as Juliette was about to ram into them, thus avoiding a collision by the skin of his teeth.

That's when he noticed two other women, standing in front of the open trunk of their own car, staring wide-eyed at the oncoming vehicle. He braked sharply as both of them scampered in opposite directions.

His attempt at straightening out the steering wheel only served to broaden the car's skid, and it swerved violently in the middle of the road before diving head first into the ditch bordering the path, blocking off part of the driveway.

Linda's nose was bleeding. Mrs. Marcotte and her daughter ran towards them as they were extricating themselves from the car.

"Is everyone all right?" asked Gisèle Marcotte worriedly.

"I think Miss Falardeau bumped her nose when I braked. I'm all right. But where did that nutbag Juliette go?"

All four of them turned around to stare at the other end of the frozen path. In the distance, zigzagging all the way, Juliette's car turned sharply left at the end of the road before quickly speeding away down the highway.

As Harvey contemplated his car, trying to assess the damage, Linda managed to retrieve a small wrinkled tissue from the pocket of her windbreaker and started dabbing the end of her nose.

"Hello! I'm Harvey Simard and this is Miss Linda Falardeau, the future representative of this riding. Mrs. Marcotte, I presume?"

"Yes, that's me. And this is my daughter Marie-Andrée, come from Montreal just to help me out with tonight's preparations."

"Well, that's very nice of you, young lady. Erm... Is that your car, Mrs. Marcotte?"

“It’s mine,” replied Marie-Andrée.

“I realize my car is blocking the path,” said Harvey, “but no worries: I know the owner of garage Lapierre pretty well. He owes me one. I’ll just call and ask if he can come over with his tow truck and haul it out of here. But with this horrible weather we’re having, I’m afraid it might take a while.”

Gisèle Marcotte upturned her coat collar.

“Good Lord! What a mess! I hope we don’t all end up stuck here, unable to leave the premises, like... like prisoners...”

The other three stared at each other, suddenly grasping this new reality that had beset them. Harvey went to take Linda’s carrying case out of the trunk and both started heading towards the house before quickly disappearing inside.

The freezing rain was falling harder now, already forming a thin translucent veneer of ice along the branches and the trunks of the nearby trees.

Appearing at the other end of the path, Annie slowed her pace when she noticed her father’s car up ahead; it had swerved in the middle of the road and its left side appeared almost wedged against the back of someone else’s car.

Next to Mrs. Marcotte, whom she’d met before, stood a young woman who was busy unloading bags of groceries from the trunk of a blue subcompact parked behind Thomas’ car. In the distance, she noticed Harvey helping Linda navigate the icy ground just as they were entering the house.

“Mrs. Marcotte, hi!” shouted Annie to get her attention. “Thanks for coming! I knew we could count on you!”

Gisèle let Marie-Andrée continue unloading the trunk alone and turned around to face her. Recognizing Annie, she smiled warmly.

“Why hello, Miss Simard!” she cried back in turn. “I have to admit, if it hadn’t been for Marie-Andrée here, I think I would have had to cancel tonight. But with my daughter helping me, it gave me the courage to come anyways. The roads have become almost impassable. Rain has started freezing on the asphalt in certain spots and gritters haven’t even begun salting the roads yet.”

As she was talking, her daughter walked over to the oncoming trio to greet them, her face beaming.

“This is my daughter, Marie-Andrée. She works in Montreal. She decided to come and spend the weekend with me and help me prepare the meal for tonight. We don’t have many occasions to catch up anymore, so this will give us a chance to spend some time together.”

Annie shook Marie-Andrée’s hand enthusiastically before half-turning to reveal Thomas and Michael, who were coming up behind her at the same moment.

“Mrs. Marcotte, Marie-Andrée, I’d like you to meet my brother Thomas and our good friend, Michael.”

As they gathered in the middle of the road, Thomas addressed a nervous nod to the young woman and her mother before quickly walking away towards the house. Coming up to them, Michael shook their hands in turn.

“Pleased to meet both of you... If you’ll excuse me, I should really take this shovel back to the shed. See you inside the house?”

He flashed them a polite smile before also walking away.

As Annie and Mrs. Marcotte launched into a joyful and animated exchange while unloading the last of the groceries from the car, Marie-Andrée watched Thomas disappear inside the house. She bit down on her lower lip; no doubt about it, this was indeed the odd client whose identity she had discovered by leafing through the newspaper he had

left on the floor of the disused warehouse when last they had met. Of course, he knew her simply as Vicky.

She had taken care to adopt a neutral expression, to show him that he could count on her discretion. But the paleness of his face worried her. Would he try to blow her cover? She sniffed the air. For the first time since she had accepted to submit to his strange fantasies, she felt a growing unease. Had she made the right decision in choosing to come here and helping her mother prepare a meal for these strangers, just to witness their tangled destinies first hand?

The glacial humidity froze her to the bone. Accepting Annie's gracious invitation to step inside and get some warmth, Marie-Andrée followed her mother towards the house as their hostess kept babbling on about any and all things.

She let both women enter first and stayed behind a moment, glancing at the frozen surroundings, before finally stepping inside the house. The next few hours promised to be rather unusual, even for someone such as her, who had grown accustomed to lies, cop-outs and selective mutism.

The crackling of a fireplace coming from the next room quickly dispelled her somber thoughts. Thomas, who was just coming out of the large living room, had had the good idea of starting a nice little fire, which helped confer a bit of atmosphere to this old home ill-suited for a reception. He nodded curtly before immediately disappearing up the stairs and into his bedroom.

"Marie-Andrée?" said Annie, placing her hand on the young woman's arm. "Come with me, I'll show you the kitchen. Your mother's already set up."

Marie-Andrée felt a surge of warmth pass through her as Annie touched her arm.

“Yes. Time to get to work.”

“I’m so glad you came. There aren’t enough girls in this house, especially when my brother Thomas is in one of his moods.”

Laughing merrily, both women strolled over to the kitchen just as Michael was coming back inside the house.



An hour later, Marie-Andrée was setting the table in the dining room while, in the adjoining living room, Thomas and Annie were watching an American football game on television.

Sulking, Thomas was clutching a cushion to his chest, tossing it up into the air and catching it again. As she took out plates and utensils from a sideboard with glass doors, Marie-Andrée observed him from the corner of her eye; that kid was visibly going through withdrawal. She had seen enough of these poor guys roaming the streets of Montreal, trying to go without their daily fix... Rearranging the plates on the table, she threw a discrete glance at Annie’s irritated and worried face; she kept chewing on her lower lip and peering at her watch.

Marie-Andrée watched her as she got up and left the room. “Decidedly not the happiest bunch I’ve ever seen,” she thought to herself.

As she was setting some plates, Thomas suddenly came in and joined her at the table. Quickly looking around to make sure they were alone, his hands began trembling as he spoke to her in low tones, his voice hoarse.

“I... Er... I almost didn’t recognize you without the blond wig. I had thought maybe it was you when I overtook your car on the highway, but...”

“...?”

“I hope I can count on your... discretion?”

Repositioning a knife next to a dinner plate, Marie-Andrée mumbled without looking up:

“Concerning what? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“But...”

Taken aback, Thomas gawked at her. Marie-Andrée continued nonchalantly readjusting the utensils on the table. Without even looking at him, she expertly raised a white wine glass to her eyeline and started wiping away an imaginary smudge using an immaculate dishcloth she had left draped atop the back of a chair. Suddenly, Thomas understood that this was the young woman’s way of letting him know she had no intention of revealing that they actually knew each other.

Her reaction almost made him smile. Still not looking at him, Marie-Andrée put the wine glass back on the table and started looking over the entire display to make sure nothing was amiss. In a neutral voice, she whispered:

“It’s in both our interests that our working relationship remain a secret. In no way do I wish for my mother to get hurt. And if anyone tries to make a problem out of this, he’ll have to deal with me. Now, please excuse me, I have work to do.”

She finally raised her eyes to stare at him. Her face was impassible. Turning away, she slowly left the room.

Thomas gazed at her swaying hips as she disappeared down the hallway. He went back to the living room, sank into the easy chair in front of the television set again and resumed abusing his couch cushion.



Peering down the hallway, Marie-Andrée spotted a half-open door leading to a bathroom just as Annie was quietly entering her mother's bedroom. From her vantage point, she noticed a woman lying on a bed, squirming, her head poking out atop a bedspread lain haphazardly over her body. The door closed.

Not wishing to disturb Annie and her mother, Marie-Andrée hesitated. Her footsteps muffled by the carpet running along the corridor, she slowly made her way over to the bedroom door. Once there, the voices came to her more distinctly.

“Annie? Is that you?”

“It's me, mom. Did you manage to get some sleep?”

“What time is it?”

“It's past four.”

“Goodness, I slept almost three hours.”

“That much? You must have been pretty tired.”

“Yes, I... I didn't get much sleep last night. Insomnia, and all that. Am I mistaken or do I smell something cooking in the air?”

“Mrs. Marcotte brought a dessert. She just put it in the oven. Smells nice, doesn't it?”

“It is a rather pleasant way to wake up, especially on an empty stomach.”

“I brought you some fruits, biscuits and mineral water to make you a little snack. You were asleep when I came in an hour ago. I didn't want to wake you.”

In the hallway, Marie-Andrée smiled at the notion that her mother's culinary skills were being appreciated merely on aroma alone! She was about to quietly step away when

the conversation suddenly took a turn that hooked her interest.

In the bedroom, Annie opened the blinds to let in some daylight. As she came back to her mother's bedside, Solange said:

“Oh, I remember now... I saw you three youngsters heading off together. Why on Earth did you go into the woods in such awful weather?”

“If you saw us leave, then you know what we went and did.”

“The box?”

“The box, yes.”

“You opened it?”

“Yes...”

Stone-faced, Solange closed her eyes. Annie tried to make the most of the opportunity.

“Look, mom, I...”

“Shut up! This was none of your business. All you had to do was leave the tin in the attic where you found it. But you never could stop yourself from putting your nose in matters that don't concern you, could you?”

Marie-Andrée felt awkward about listening in on other people's secrets. Embarrassed by the turn of events, she quickly walked away.

Her heart thumping in her chest, she went and locked herself inside the small bathroom at the end of the corridor, out of earshot of the private conversation between mother and daughter. Staring at her face in the mirror of the medicine cabinet, she grimaced. What was the matter with her? Why had she done that? And what was all of this business about taking a box out into the woods?

In the bedroom, as if nothing had happened, Solange abruptly changed the subject:

“Can you help me clean up? And I’d also appreciate it if you could help me select an outfit that would make me look my best, for once.”

“All right, mom,” replied Annie wearily. “But first, I think I should give you a little heads-up. Freezing rain has caused a lot of power outages over the last few hours; most of the riding is in the dark. Dad had to invite Linda over for the night. There’s no electricity in her apartment, and no vacancy at the motel.”

“He brought his floozy here?”

The retort aroused a sudden surge of irritation in Annie. The events of the last few days had transformed her into a veritable pressure cooker, one that direly needed to vent some of its scathing steam.

“Solange, please! Curb your mysanthropy, for once. I’ve already got Thomas to contend with, sulking in front of the tv without saying a word, and Micheal, who keeps coughing all alone in his room. I’ve had it up to here trying to carry this family on my shoulders and acting as referee for all of your petty squabbles. If you can’t promise me you’ll act as a mature, intelligent woman, then I’ll simply leave you here to rot in your own filth!”

In the bathroom, Marie-Andrée flushed the toilet so as to no longer have to listen to the two women shout at each other. Had her mother made the right decision in accepting to come here and prepare a meal for this family of wackos?

Solange’s features became distorted with consternation. Annie’s outburst betrayed both her anger and her resolve. She sensed that her daughter had reached the end of her patience and decided to press on to more urgent matters.

“You’re... You’re absolutely right... sweetie. You can count on me. Let’s start over, and let’s clean me up. Will you also help me with my make-up and wash my hair?”

Annie let out a sigh of resignation.

“Of course, mom. You know I will.”

“What would I do without you?”

Holding back the answer she had almost let slip, the young woman shrugged.

“And when you’ve finished making me presentable, could you ask Michael to come and see me, please? I have a service to ask of him.”

Before her daughter even had the chance to reply, the light of the lamp on the nightstand flickered and died abruptly, only to turn back on two or three seconds later.

“Whew! For a moment there, I thought we were going to have to spend the evening in the dark,” said Annie.

Then, in a steady voice, she added:

“All right, I’ll take off your clothes while we still have some light...”

Coming back down the hallway, Marie-Andrée hurried past the closed door without slowing down.



Sitting at the kitchen table, busy peeling potatoes, Marie-Andrée was distractedly listening to her mother babbling on about old childhood memories, evoking how “today’s weather was all over the place,” compared to “back in her day, when winter started with the first snowfall of November blanketing the ground from Saint-Catherine Day only to finish in April, with snow lasting all the way up to Easter. Not like today, with this crazy weather and freezing rainstorms that keep breaking powerlines all the time.”

She loved her mother dearly, and listening to her rambling on and trying, in her own inimitable way, to

mend the sometimes tenuous bond they shared that had remained strong in spite of the distance that separated them, was a small price to pay. She appreciated her discretion; not once had she asked her what kind of job she did in Montreal.

Lost in thought, Marie-Andrée was wondering what kind of mother Solange had been to Thomas and Annie. The things she'd overheard through the walls had surprised her. What could possibly have transpired in this family for a boy like Thomas to become such a distraught man? On the other hand, she liked Annie, despite her nervous nature. Her big grey eyes had stirred something in her at first sight. She smiled to herself. What if fate had decided to intervene and place her in her path?

“Marie-Andrée! I think that's enough! You've peeled enough potatoes to feed an army! Don't forget, there's also some Yorkshire pudding to go along with the roast beef.”

She came out of her reverie. In front of her, the big cauldron filled with cold water held at least a dozen large yellow potatoes.

“Sorry. You're right. Don't know where I went there for a moment. I was just listening to you talk and I guess I lost track.”

“It's not the end of the world. It'll leave them some mash for tomorrow. You want to start on the beans next? I'll attack the hors d'oeuvres. The Simards are probably the kind of people who like to nibble on appetizers while they have their first drink.”

“It smells really good in here, by the way. It reminds me of the same aromas I used to smell in my childhood. I'm already hungry. I think I'll go take another look at monsieur Simard's car; there might be a way to drive around it.”

“But sweetie, it’s raining cats and dogs out there! You’ll catch the death of you!”

“Come on, mom. I’m just going to dash outside for a moment.”

Marie-Andrée went and retrieved her quilted vest from a small closet in the vestibule.

Stepping outside, she had to hold the door back with both hands, so the wind was strong. Darkness had fallen and the light coming from a lamppost a few steps away from the stairs highlighted a striking spectacle: a myriad of lashing droplets was pounding the frozen ground, creating the illusion of a thousand birds chirping all at once.

Treading hesitantly on the ground made slippery as an ice rink, the young woman slowly made her way over to Harvey’s car, grabbing on to the door handles of the other cars parked in front of it as she went along.

She didn’t have to go far. Holding on for dear life to the rear door handle of her little car with both hands, she studied the positioning of the dark mass that had become Harvey’s car. Halfway into the ditch, the other half blocking the road, even if they all chipped in and tried pushing it, they’d never manage to roll it out of its unfortunate predicament, especially in this weather; the sheet of ice rapidly accumulating on the ground would make the car’s tires skid and spin uselessly anyways. And Annie and Thomas’ cars were stuck in front of hers.

Marie-Andrée swore loudly and, trying to head back to the house, fell spread-eagled on the ground. Her hip hurting, she finally managed to get back to her feet. Returning to the Simard home proved a laborious session of uncontrolled skating.

A few steps away from the entrance, under the light of the lamppost, stood Thomas, hands in his pockets, as if in

a daze, looking pale. Marie-Andrée pitied him. She knew the kind of suffering he was enduring.

Making her way towards him, she took out a little tinplate box from one of her jean pockets and, trying to protect herself as best she could from the pounding rain, took out a joint. Using the collar of her vest as cover, she lit it, breathed in a small puff and handed him the lit joint without saying a word before turning away and heading for the door.

“Thanks,” said a hoarse voice behind her.

“No problem,” she replied without glancing back.

## 15

Leaning back against the closed door to Solange's bedroom, Michael felt even more uncomfortable than he had during their first encounter. Trying to avoid her longing gaze, he feigned interest in the granular effects and the crystalline striations that had formed in the crust of frozen rain accumulating against the windowpane.

All cleaned up, Solange now looked almost as beautiful as she had all those years ago, when they had both been younger. But the paleness of Michael's face made her tentative. It was too late to back out now; she had to make a move and take back control of the situation. Feigning difficulty, she rolled her wheelchair over to the little nightstand as a lamp perched atop it projected an overblown version of her shadow onto the wall. Michael became obsessed with the symbolism of it all.

"You found my note on your bed?"

"Yes. Who did you ask to go and put it there?"

Swelling with pride, Solange's eyes flashed with contemptuous conceit.

"Nobody. I went up the stairs myself while you three were out taking your little stroll into the woods."

"How did you manage to...?"

"It doesn't matter. All you need to know is that I am not the weak old woman everyone believes me to be."

“Or that you like to let on. What did you do with the Christ figurine from my crucifix?”

“I put it in a safe place. It’s a very nice design, by the way, very useful if you need to defend yourself... Or to attack.”

The word startled Michael. Staring at the disturbed look in Solange’s eyes, he tried to seize her meaning; her hardened features seemed almost unrecognizable to him. Was this Annie and Thomas’ mother in front of him, or the dominant woman who had exerted her troubling influence over him all those years ago? At that moment, she projected the image of an actor who keeps incarnating her role out of habit. Was she even aware of this?

“Solange, did someone threaten you?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it, my sweet angel. I have simply learned to safeguard myself against any eventuality. Let’s just say the evening promises to be... lively... But back to you three. Why did you head off into the woods?”

“Since you’ve obviously been monitoring our comings and goings, I’m sure you already know.”

“I suppose you opened the box...”

“Annie just came out of your room, she must have informed you.”

“Annie had no right meddling in my affairs... All of this should have remained in the past. It was my secret... And it was mine to reveal. I only wanted to divulge it to one person, Michael: you. But now...”

Michael’s own prophetic words to Father Cloutier when they had spoken a few days earlier flashed in his mind: “I find it unwise to try and stir the ashes of the past.” Walking about the room, he suddenly felt overwhelmed with sadness.

“That’s it? That’s all you’ve got to say for yourself?”

“Don’t be impertinent, Michael. In the name of everything we’ve shared, you at least owe me respect.”

“Respect has to be earned, not demanded.”

Shaking her head, Solange let out a sly cynical laugh. Michael felt a chill; this was no longer the cordial woman who had greeted him earlier. Bitterness distorted her voice.

“You always had a knack for spouting fancy quotations. Look at the ease with which you’re making me open up right now. But what makes you think that the... contents... of that box concerned me personally?”

“You all but admitted so when you accused Annie of meddling in your affairs.”

“You may be cynical, but you’re not wrong. What was I thinking? You don’t miss much, do you...”

“The... contents... as you say... was it yours?”

“My poor Michael. You would have made a most naive priest. Whose else do you think it would be?”

Michael remained speechless. Without saying a word, Solange stared at him with a baleful eye, as if defying him to try and solve the mystery that so obsessed him without her help.

And slowly, the answer dawned on him, at first suppressed many times over and relegated to the darkest recesses of his mind so the enormity of the revelation haunted him. He didn’t dare raise his eyes to look at her, conscious that she was waiting for just that moment to strike and reveal the answer he could already surmise.

In the end, he couldn’t hold back any longer. In his ears, his own voice sounded like a stranger’s as he stammered:

“It... it was... ours?”

The exchange came to an abrupt end when the room was suddenly plunged into darkness. In the hallway,

someone let out a muffled cry of surprise before quickly scampering away. The person didn't come back. To Michael, the patter of frozen rain striking against the bedroom window became almost deafening.

"Get a candle!" cried Solange. "I'm terrified of the dark!"

Arms outstretched, Michael spun around and ventured a few hesitating steps behind him in search of the bedroom door.

His fingers touched a hard surface, then a picture frame hanging on the wall. Groping around, his right hand finally caught hold of the doorframe, then slid down to find the handle. He stepped into the hallway.

To his right, at the end of the corridor, a ghostly figure was thrown into relief for a brief instant as it stood in front of the window, before quickly disappearing. Annie's arrival on his left, brandishing a kerosene lamp, made him forget about the half-glimpsed silhouette that had vanished in the shadows.

"Is mom all right? She has a tendency to panic during blackouts."

"I was just about to try and find a candle for her."

The glow of a candle spread meekly across the wall of the hallway. Marie-Andrée was walking as fast as she could, shielding the small flame with her hand.

All three retreated inside the bedroom, where they discovered Solange, cringing in her wheelchair.

"Get me out of here, Annie! I don't want to stay alone..."

"Marie-Andrée, shine some light down the corridor. I'll take care of the wheelchair. Michael, leave the kerosene lamp on the nightstand. If we have to come back here, at least it'll help us see more clearly."

In a jumble of shadows and strobing lights playing against the walls and the ceiling, all four of them headed for the living room just as a table lamp suddenly came to life. Thomas had plugged it into a portable power pack usually reserved for small electrical appliances; he and Mrs. Marcotte were standing next to the sofa.

Solange's disposition immediately became more amiable, as if the light had somehow revitalized her.

"Annie, go fetch your father, will you? It would appear that Thomas' resourcefulness has given us an opportunity to enjoy some well-deserved cocktails."

Taking control of her wheelchair again, she rolled as best she could over to Mrs. Marcotte. Her efforts to appear inept didn't escape Michael's notice.

"Mrs. Marcotte, how good to see you. And is that your gorgeous daughter there who came to my rescue? You are of course both invited to share some pre-dinner drinks with us."

Marie-Andrée blew out her candle.

"Where are my manners. Thank you so very much, young lady, for having come to my aid. You hail from Montreal, do you not?"

Marie-Andrée nodded; Solange's excessive graciousness was making her nauseated.

Thomas quickly went over to a round table, where a dozen bottles of alcohol and two or three sodas were being reflected in the polished surface of an ice bucket. Holding a large candle melted to the bottom of a saucer, Annie came back into the room accompanied by Harvey and Linda.

Solange flashed a warm smile to the newcomers, as if welcoming close relations whose friendship was precious to her. Rolling her wheelchair over to a bookcase lined with numerous works bound in burgundy leather, she swivelled

around in order to face the group whose silhouettes were halfway melded into the enveloping darkness, leaving only their faces illuminated.

“Is everyone here? Wonderful. Now, Thomas, be a dear: I could do with a glass of Sylvaner!”

Annie went over to Mrs. Marcotte and, in a low voice, asked her:

“Did we lose the meal?”

“No worries. Everything was almost ready anyways. The oven is still warm; as long as we don’t open the door, the Roast Beef should continue cooking for a while longer. And the water was already boiling in the pots; if we leave the lids on, the vegetables should be ready any minute now.”

“Well in that case,” cheered Annie, trying to sound enthused, “here’s to us!”

Glasses were raised, somewhat hesitantly.

Marie-Andrée scanned the room. Standing there awkwardly in the dark, the four family members and their guests could have fit perfectly well inside a painting entitled ‘The Pharisees.’ Just a few moments ago, you could have cut the tension in this room with a knife. But now, everyone was trying to incarnate the role of the well-educated, well-behaved individual, displaying nothing but grace and courtesy.

But beneath all of their good manners, she sensed bitterness and malice, and her instinctive street smarts dictated that she remain vigilant.

In the brouhaha of voices that immediately tried to fill in the void left by uneasy silence, Marie-Andrée slowly went to stand behind Solange in front of the bookcase, feigning admiration for the extensive variety of books and authors that the Simards had accumulated. The complete works of André Gide filled one of the shelves.

The memory of the excerpt from ‘The Fruits of the Earth’ permeated her mind:

“The present would be pregnant with all futures if the past had not already projected its history into it.”

What did this family’s past conceal that was so sorrowful for their present to seem so heavy to bear?

Turning to face the small gathering again, she noticed Annie staring at her intently...



## 16

In the kitchen, Marie-Andrée and her mother were quietly working away, their figures projecting a strange carousel of shadows against the walls as they stood in front of the many candles arranged on the table and the counter-top.

The cook would finish garnishing the plates, which her daughter would then quickly carry to the dining room on a tray, pushing against the swing door with her back so as to avoid inflating the pain in her sore hip. From the adjoining room, interspersed with the twangy nattering of a presenter streaming from the speaker of a small battery-powered radio, a chorus of mingling voices made boisterous by pre-dinner cocktails filtered to the kitchen, still cozy despite the lack of heating.

Each time Marie-Andrée came back for another service, her mother would invariably ask her:

“What are they talking about now?”

“Mainly the power outage and the ice storm. I heard the radio host mention how a cold front’s been coming down from the Far North. The entire south of Quebec and part of northern New England have been hit. Other blackouts are to be expected.”

“Good Lord, that’s hardly reassuring. Just the thought

of spending the night holed up in this place makes me shudder.”

“Thomas has kept the fire going in the living room. Don’t worry about it, mom; it’s already getting warmer in there, and the hallway too. Heat should eventually rise to the rooms upstairs. Oh, and Annie’s invited us to join them at the dinner table and eat with everybody else, as soon as service is completed of course. In the meantime, I think I’ll bring them some more wine.”

“Again? They’ve already downed three bottles, not counting cocktails!”

“It seems to have lightened the mood at least. They look more relaxed now. I’ll take the flashlight.”

As soon as she stepped onto the staircase leading down to the cellar, an odor of heating oil and dusty humidity grabbed her by the throat. A wicker basket under one arm, she leaned against the railing with her left hand, using her right to sweep the steps ahead of her with the beam of her flashlight.

Finally reaching the cement floor, she looked around, trying to get her bearings. To her left, the dormant furnace and its oil storage tank seemed to take up most of a corner of the cellar. Slowly sweeping the beam of her flashlight along the other walls, she noticed a large freezer in another corner and paused. Behind it on the wall, a fuse box had been affixed over a large circuit breaker, from which sprouted a multitude of red and white wires, looking for all the world like some sort of weird octopus. All of the telephone, television and modem cabling seemed to converge along a plywood panel screwed into the foundation of the house.

Marie-Andrée directed the glare of her flashlight onto the wall to her right, half of which was taken up by wine

racks in the shape of Saint Andrew's cross holding dozens of bottles.

Placing the little flashlight in her mouth, she reached into one of her jean pockets and retrieved a slip of paper on which she had written down the names of the wines requested by Thomas and Annie.

"Blessed be the person who took the time to classify all of these in alphabetical order," she sighed, picking out two bottles of Burgundy, a Chardonnay and a Bordeaux.

Taking the flashlight out of her mouth, she shone the light ahead of her and made her way back to the stairs, shivering.

"No doubt about it," she reflected, "these wines will definitely be at perfect serving temperature."

In her absence, Gisèle Marcotte had finished garnishing their plates. She was just carrying them into the dining room when she noticed her daughter coming up the stairs, holding a basket filled with bottles of wine. As they crossed paths, both grinned affectionately at each other and Gisèle leaned her back against the swing door to let Marie-Andrée pass first. Quickly getting up to help the young woman unload her burden, Thomas then produced a corkscrew and started opening a bottle of Burgundy on the spot.

Had the arrival of the two women at the dinner table somehow affected the mood? After receiving praise for the excellence of their meal, the conversation started to lag. Harvey unsuccessfully tried to renew the dialogue by recounting amusing banalities concerning the odd situation that had forced them into cohabitation for the night. Solange remained affable, but displayed just enough aloofness as to prevent the two new dinner guests from feeling fully integrated into the group. She pretended not

to see Linda at the other end of the table, sitting between Michael and Marie-Andrée, herself sitting on her mother's right; as if by sheer coincidence, the 'outsiders' had been seated together, facing the rest of the family.

Linda kept picking at her plate, hardly eating. At any moment, she would put her utensils down to check if she'd finally managed to obtain reception on her cell phone. Each new failed attempt made her fret even more.

When the rustling of group mastication and the clinking of utensils would abate for a moment between hollow exchanges, everyone could hear, coming from the outside, the sharp sound of snapping branches breaking under the weight of the ice. The eclectic gathering looked absolutely disheartened. No one dared admit it, but the thought that a large tree might come crashing down onto the rooftop at any given moment was making them all rather antsy. And the strong gales battering the house on a regular basis didn't help ease their worries any either.

As if she had succeeded in letting the group know that she was calling the shots in this house, Solange suddenly changed moods and had a surge of amiability; she started congratulating Mrs. Marcotte at length about her extraordinary homemade jams that Annie had made her discover.

Lowering her gaze, Gisèle Marcotte mumbled a barely audible and polite "Thank you." As if a monarch presiding over a banquet had given a signal, everyone started conversing with their immediate neighbour again.

Michael and Linda shared a passion for communications. They escaped into a discreet exchange concerning the upcoming season of Michael's television series.

Thomas was downing glass after glass in an effort to unwind. Taking an interest in Mrs. Marcotte, he started recounting how his job as a sales representative kept him

on the move, constantly travelling all around the province to sell sports equipment.

Annie swept Solange into a conversation with Marie-Andrée concerning the lack of appropriate home care for handicapped people.

Only Harvey remained pensive, safe in his own thoughts, occasionally dispensing his dinner guests with a word of approval or some brief insight.

After having cleared away the dinner table, Mrs. Marcotte and Marie-Andrée came back with a cheese platter and a cake already cut into manageable portions. Although everyone seemed absolutely elated over the quality and diversity of the various cheeses and desserts, few seemed to partake of them.

Then, Thomas went and fetched a server filled with after-dinner liqueurs. As he rolled it back to the table, the cook made a discreet sign to her daughter and, after having collected the dirty dishes, both retreated inside the kitchen. At that moment, conversations seemed to be going rather smoothly. Everyone began reminding each other about the happy moments they had shared living in this house together; you would have thought you were smack in the middle of a festive dinner where each guest just happens to be a fine conversationalist. This family's incredible knack for pretense made Marie-Andrée's puzzlement grow even deeper.

The drone of intermingling voices coming from the other side of the closed kitchen door became inscrutable and both women lost interest. They began tidying up, stowing away the leftover victuals and rinsing dishes and pans before filling up the dishwasher.

Long minutes passed by, filled with plodding activity.

The light of the dying candles fluttered against the

kitchen walls each time one of them would move about or crouch to put away a utensil or a pan.

With her hand, Mrs. Marcotte tested the hot water coming from the faucet.

“Barely tepid, but warm enough to wash the pots. It’s not like we can use the dishwasher anyways. Oh by the way, did Annie mention which rooms we would be sleeping in tonight?”

Marie-Andrée was about to answer when Solange’s shrill and scratchy voice suddenly blared through the door:

“You’re all just a bunch of cowards and incompetents! You’ll never amount to anything without me. You, Harvey: the party threw you away like an old sock full of holes, and you have the gall to believe that I was going to help you finance your campaign?”

They heard a murmur of indistinct protests, but Solange was already counterattacking:

“And you, Thomas... My dear son Thomas... A boy at heart, riddled with drug debts, who managed to convince his very own father to play the part of performing dog next to his sex bunny in order to help her get elected. Linda, dear, dear Linda, our headless chicken who lives in constant fear that she’ll have to reimburse the \$75,000 that fat cat Counselor Comeau gave her...”

“What-I-wh-what?!”

“Like I said, nothing but a headless chicken...”

“It’s... it’s... revolting to slander someone like that,” cried Linda. “If you weren’t a podgy, diaper-wearing, drunk and disabled little twat, I would knock you on your ass right here and now like you deserve!”

“Tramp. You really think you scare me? You think the party ignores the fact that you accepted bribes to try and bamboozle Harvey, my great dimwit of a husband?”

“Solange, shut up,” growled Harvey. “I think you’ve had quite enough to drink for one evening. What you’re saying right now, you’re saying out of cruelty, not some sense of justice.”

“Oh, I know this for a fact, my poor, poor Harvey. Want to know why? Because I’m the one who suggested that they give her that \$75,000! And believe me, I am fully prepared to reveal this to the public during your floozy’s campaign...”

A funereal silence fell over the assembly. On the other side of the kitchen door, Marie-Andrée and her mother exchanged stupefied stares.

Annie’s supplicating voice rose up:

“Mom, please, stop! You promised...”

“Oh, and here comes Saint Annie, off on one of her crusades again. You think I don’t know how you’ve been looking for a way to leave this house because you just can’t stand me anymore? Hm?”

“But...”

“Don’t you lie to me! It’s true! You went to visit an apartment on Main Street and even started looking for a job. Don’t worry. You’re the one who’ll inherit everything once you’ve all decided to get rid of me.”

Trying to hide her sorrow, Annie hung her head. In a low voice, she said:

“I don’t want anything from you, mom...”

“My poor girl, money is an important part of life, whether you like it or not. Isn’t that right, Harvey? Oh, but I kept the best for last. My sweet, innocent Michael... I popped this failed excuse for a country priest’s cherry when he was fifteen. And he was good at it, too; all those wonderful orgasms he gave me throughout his adolescent years are hard to forget. But now, this hypocrite despises

me, repulsed by the fact that I've become a disabled woman, stuck in her wheelchair and wearing diapers..."

"Mom, are you trying to say that Michael is that thing's..."

"Oh, it's much too early for that kind of revelation, Annie! Be patient, all will be revealed."

In the kitchen, Marie-Andrée and her mother were petrified. This unexpected outburst of hatred and verbal violence left them reeling.

"What should we do, Marie-Andrée?" whispered her mother.

"We can't very well go out into the freezing rain, mom..."

A little less fanatically now, Solange pursued her diatribe:

"And there are so many revelations yet to come... Concerning other individuals... who aren't necessarily part of our beloved family... But I think I'll keep the best for breakfast. Tonight, you'll all have nightmares because of me."

A loud lamentation rose, followed by the sound of a chair being knocked over. Running steps resounded down the hallway, then up the stairs. Thomas shouted:

"Annie, come back!"

Then, screaming at his mother:

"Are you happy now? Are you happy, mom? You just lost your daughter... The only one of us who still had a little respect and affection for you. You really do deserve to die alone, wallowing in your own shit!"

They heard heavy footsteps stomping down the corridor, then up the stairs. Harvey's voice rose, oddly calm.

"Care to explain what Annie meant about Michael, Solange?"

“That’s none of your business, dear husband of mine. Just keep shagging that partner of yours. But always remember, the chicken should never crow louder than the cock!”

Harvey pushed back chairs to get away from his wife.

“You’ve lost yourself, Solange. You’re drowning in spite. As soon as the weather clears up and my car is out of that ditch, I will be leaving this house. Something I should have done a long time ago.”

“It’s going to be pretty tight for you and your human comforter there, Harvey, living together in her small three-room apartment,” shot back his wife in a mocking tone. “Although she does have a nice little nest egg stashed away, thanks to all that bribe money she pocketed...”

“I think you’ve had your say, madam,” replied Linda scornfully. “The present is for the young, not the old and the weak! The Prime Minister himself has confirmed to me that you would no longer be playing a role within the party. That’s whom you’re trying to avenge yourself from by throwing everybody under the bus like this, not us.”

“You... You’re saying that just to infuriate me, but it’s not going to work! You... you little... imbecile!”

Hesitation had crept into Solange’s voice.

“Oh but it’s true, madam. If not for the storm and the power outage, he would already have advised you of this personally. He’s the one I’ve been trying to reach on my cell phone these last few hours. But don’t you worry; as soon as the power’s back on, I’m sure he’ll find a way to get in touch with you. And as it relates to the \$75,000 you mentioned, the party couldn’t care less. The fact that I was selected as the ideal candidate to replace Harvey is proof of that. And that money will prove very useful in the coming weeks. Especially considering that no one can prove it ever existed.”

Ignoring her mother's anguished expression, Marie-Andrée pushed the swing door ajar to see what was happening. Through the gap, she saw Harvey and Linda exiting the dining room, holding a candle to light their way.

Only Michael remained at the table, two seats away from Solange, who was sitting despondently in her wheelchair. The young man was nervously playing at sliding his glass of calvados from left to right; the foot of the wine glass caught in a fold of the tablecloth and spilled over. He pushed his chair back.

Quickly closing the swing door to avoid being seen, Marie-Andrée pressed her ear against it to listen in on their exchange.

"I think you've made it perfectly clear that you don't need anyone in your life anymore, Solange. It saddens me greatly, but not as much as realizing that you were hiding so much putrescence in your heart. That ungodly box is proof of that..."

"Michael, no, don't you leave me as well..."

She was answered with silence.

In the kitchen, both women heard a loud coughing fit as Michael went up the stairs with a heavy step.

Marie-Andrée pushed the swing door slightly open again. Solange was hiding her face, along with her sobs, in her napkin. Suddenly, she straightened back up, wiped her tears away and, displaying strength that took the young woman by surprise, rolled her wheelchair away from the table and to a sofa in the living room. Sliding her hand between the back of the couch and one of its cushions, she seemed to be searching for an object of some sort. In her agitated state, she threw a cushion to the floor and kept at it for many seconds.

When she spun her wheelchair around, she looked

positively livid. Glistening eyes shone in a face distorted by fear.

What she'd been looking for was no longer there.

Marie-Andrée watched her roll her wheelchair towards the hallway. Letting the door slowly close back again, she turned around to stare at her mother. Both of them were in shock. The sound of a bedroom door being slammed shut pulled them out of their discomfort. Neither of them tried speaking of the violent scene to which they had both been involuntary witnesses.

Letting out a long sigh, Marie-Andrée went into the dining room, leaving the swing door behind her wide open.

Her mother went to join her. In silence, they started filling two trays with glasses and cups. Mrs. Marcotte blew out the candles.

At that moment, the large emergency power pack started emitting a shrill insistent cry: the charge had reached its limit. Marie-Andrée went to silence the alarm. The lamp went out.

The complete darkness took them by surprise. Groping around to find their trays, they managed to make their way back to the open door of the kitchen, from which radiated the glow of dying candles.

Going in, Marie-Andrée turned to face her mother.

"I didn't have time to answer your question earlier. Yes, Annie did show me the room they set aside for us. Come, let's try and be quiet."

Walking past Solange's bedroom, both women noticed the glow of an oil lamp dancing at the bottom of the door.

Flashlight in hand, Marie-Andrée led her mother up the stairs where, at the end of the corridor, they found the door to the room that had been allocated them.

Not a sound emanated from Thomas and Michael's bedrooms, but at the bottom of their doors, they noticed

the faltering glow of candles reflecting along the wooden floor.

Although sleep had yet to gain on anyone, there now reigned a sinister silence in the entire house...



Solange awoke in the middle of the night. For a brief instant, she wondered what incongruous creaking had roused her from her slumber. On the nightstand, the oil lamp was projecting an oscillating circle of pale distended yellow against the ceiling. The slightly nauseating smell of burnt wick hung heavily in the air.

Leaning against her strong arms, she sat up and pricked up her ears, her eyes wide as she stared at the window suffused with the dusk of night. She concluded that the rain rattling against the windowpane as it was being buffeted about by strong gales was probably the culprit.

Groping around on top of the nightstand, she reached for the glass of water she could not do without at night. She was about to take a sip when something moved at the foot of her bed just as a slat of wood suddenly creaked, piercing the silence. Placing the glass back on top of the nightstand, she tried to peer into the obscurity.

She waited. A silhouette appeared, framed by the rectangle of the window behind it. In a sarcastic tone, Solange whispered:

“I had a feeling I would get a visitor tonight. I even left the door unlocked for you. But if you came to try and beg me again...”

No answer came. In the obscurity, she couldn't discern who it was.

“Annie, is that you? I managed to get into bed without your help. I even managed to undress and slip on my nightgown all by myself. Aren’t you proud of me? Why won’t you answer?”

The figure loomed at the foot of the bed for a moment before circling around it to go and stand on the right side. In the wavering light of the oil lamp, it became more distinguishable.

The sight startled Solange. She started opening her mouth. The last thing she saw was a flash of silver.



Drab dawn rose, forcing obscurity to retreat around the furniture of the bedroom. The oil in the lamp had almost completely burnt away, leaving nothing but a puddle at the bottom of the cut glass reservoir. The same odor of burnt wick still hung in the air, saturating the area around the bed.

Solange’s body lay stiffly on the mattress. The Jansenist dagger had been removed from her chest...

The whooshing of a flushing toilet echoed from somewhere within the house.

A shuddering slam! The electric hum of the refrigerator’s motor resuming along with the buzzing of the stove announced that the blackout had finally come to an end. With the power back on, life was slowly awakening in the Simard home.

On Solange’s nightstand, the glowing red numbers of her electric clock began flashing 12:00 repeatedly, with perfect rhythm, like a heart that had started beating again...



Upon entering the kitchen, Gisèle Marcotte had immediately started the dishwasher and was now busy setting up the flatware and the plates around the table in time for breakfast.

Marie-Andrée came in, yawning.

“Hey, mom. How are you this morning?”

“All right, I guess...”

“What on Earth are you wearing? Where did you get that blouse?”

“I stained mine doing the dishes last night. I found this one in the wardrobe of our room, hanging in a slipcover.”

As they were talking, Annie came into the kitchen, her complexion ashen.

“Good morning. Slept well?”

Both of them lied, saying that fatigue had made them sink into a deep slumber as soon as their heads had hit the pillow. Mrs. Marcotte jumped at the chance to thank her for having set up toiletries for them in their room. She showed her the blouse she was wearing:

“I hope you don’t mind me having borrowed this?”

“Not at all. You can even keep it if you like. My mother hardly ever wears it anymore. If you find anything else you fancy, don’t hesitate; the articles of clothing I left in your

wardrobe are all items I was going to give to charity anyways. Although they usually cost her a fortune, my mother quickly tires of her old clothes.”

The whirring of the dishwasher was hardly suited to polite courtesies exchanged in soft tones. Looking around as if trying to get her bearings, Annie yawned.

Mrs. Marcotte sprung into action.

“Would you like some coffee, miss Simard?”

“Maybe a glass of orange juice... I have to check up on mom and make sure she didn’t have too rough of a night before I can sit down for breakfast. She’s not used to drinking alcohol.”

She hung her head, sad and sombre, before straightening back up.

“I wanted to offer you both my apologies for what happened last night. It’s regrettable that you had to witness all of that.”

“Forget about it, miss Simard. In any case, it doesn’t concern us, we know our place.”

Annie took a sip of her juice before continuing:

“Her mood in the morning tends to perk up a little once she’s had her first cup of coffee, and the sweet aroma of yours undoubtedly must have woken her up by now. See you in a bit.”

Annie flashed Marie-Andrée a timid smile and left the kitchen.

As she was mixing her pancake batter, Mrs. Marcotte asked her daughter:

“You got up last night, didn’t you? I heard the springs in your sofa squeaking.”

“I went to use the bathroom downstairs. Sorry if I woke you.”

“I wasn’t sleeping; those damned folding beds with their wafer-thin mattresses. I’m so used to my own bed that

I find it hard to get any sleep when I stay over at someone else's house. Don't you?"

"Sure," replied Marie-Andrée distractedly. "I usually don't sleep very well when I'm in someone else's bed either."

The thought of that nocturnal episode troubled her. From the bathroom, she had heard Solange's voice coming from her bedroom. She had assumed that Annie's mother was simply talking in her sleep, and had gone into the kitchen to get a drink of water.

As she had left the kitchen, she remembered seeing a vague silhouette standing at the top of the stairs before suddenly vanishing... Unless it had all been a dream? Could it have been Michael or Thomas? Or even Harvey or Linda going into someone's room upstairs? But if so, why?

The grating 'rat-tat-tat' of a chainsaw someone was trying to start up brought her sharply out of her reflection. Through the kitchen window above the sink, both women saw Thomas get to work on a huge aspen that had broken in half behind Harvey's car, felled by the strong winds the night before. It's emplacement made moving any of the cars out of the driveway impossible. Armed with large shears, Michael was giving a first go at clearing up the fallen branches and the downed brushwood, stacking them haphazardly to the side of the path as he went along.

"Looks like the guys found something to do to take their minds off of last night's events," mumbled Mrs. Marcotte.

Marie-Andrée didn't comment. A pensive expression on her face, she simply stared at the scene outside as both men worked away beneath a uniformly cloudy sky. Fringes of fog clung to everything, trees and objects alike. The thought that Annie might have taken advantage of the dark

of night to sneak into Michael's bedroom made her heart twinge.

A shriek of terror suddenly brought both women out of their contemplation.

Marie-Andrée rushed down the corridor and almost bumped into Harvey as he was coming out of the bathroom, his face covered in shaving cream. Linda, already dressed and with her make-up done, opened the door to the den at the same instant. Through the half-open door, Marie-Andrée noticed that Harvey's mistress had been forced to sleep on an inflatable mattress lying straight on the floor. The covers and the linens had been neatly folded and left on top.

The three of them stared at each other, trying to understand the origin of the commotion.

Wiping his face with a towel, Harvey muttered:

"It came from Solange's room!"

The door to the bedroom suddenly opened, banging against the wall. Annie came out and started stumbling in their direction. Visibly shaken, trembling from head to toe, in a frail voice she managed to articulate:

"Mom... I think... I think she's dead!"

Outside, the loud buzzing of the chainsaw slowed down to the regular 'put-putting' of the lower setting, before picking back up again. As if a signal had been given, Annie crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Peering through the half-open door, the trio noticed Solange's body, lying on her back on top of the bed. A crimson stain as large as a dinner plate had soaked her nightgown above her hands, joined together by a rosary, giving her the appearance of a corpse lying in a casket.

Perfectly aligned with her pubis, a Raggedy Andy doll wearing a simulated smile of red wool tacking had been laid on top of her.

Holding her mouth with both hands to hold back the cry of horror surging in her throat, Linda started whimpering frantically. Clad only in pants and a tank top, Harvey stood frozen on the spot in his misshapen slippers, looking for all the world like a character straight out of a summer play.

Kneeling down next to Annie, Marie-Andrée held out her arms to try and sit her back up when her mother arrived and stopped her. Wet towel in hand, she knelt in turn and lifted Annie's head before pressing the cold compress against the nape of her neck.

The contact made Annie flinch and she opened her eyes; Mrs. Marcotte used the opportunity to lift the young woman's torso and started delicately dabbing her face with the towel. Her head lodged in Gisèle's hair, Annie gripped her arm and began sobbing uncontrollably.

Spurred by a nod from her mother, Marie-Andrée slipped her arm behind her waist and both women helped Annie get back on her feet. With their help, she lurched over to the living room where she let herself fall on the couch. The heavy sobs that kept gushing from her chest sounded like the cries of a wounded animal.

With a wave of her hand, Mrs. Marcotte invited her daughter to leave them alone for a moment.

Coming back to Solange's bedroom, Marie-Andrée was surprised to find Linda standing next to the bed, her arms extended towards the rag doll as if to pick it up. Harvey was coming back from his room, clumsily trying to button his shirt as best he could. Traces of shaving cream adorned the back of his left ear.

In a broken voice, he muttered:

“Is she...?”

Pursing her lips, Linda turned her head towards him and gave him a worried stare.

They seemed more astonished than disturbed by Solange's death. As if they hadn't expected this death to occur so soon after last night's little scene at the dinner table.

Marie-Andrée ventured a warning.

"We should probably avoid touching anything before the police can get here."

"The police?" asked Harvey anxiously. "You think that..."

"Oh, when this comes out..." muttered Linda. "My campaign..."

Entering the room, Marie-Andrée went to stand at the same spot where Linda had stood just a few moments before.

"I just wanted to..." tried Linda, nervously wiping her hands on her skirt. "It's just... If the sordid details came out... You understand?"

"I know," replied Marie-Andrée. "But better be careful regardless."

She noticed a little handheld mirror resting on the nightstand next to a lamp whose shade had been splattered with blood. She started reaching for it to place it near Solange's half-open mouth, but thought better of it. Something about that mirror caught her attention. Careful not to touch it, she leaned in to examine it more closely, but couldn't figure out why it intrigued her so.

Mulling it over, she bent over Solange's body and placed her ear barely an inch away from her open mouth. Straightening back up, she stared at them, shaking her head.

Harvey let out a deep sigh. The confirmation of Solange's death seemed to suddenly sink in. He asked:

"You really think she was murdered?"

The word gave Linda a start, as blasphemy would the faithful, but she remained quiet, rubbing her hands together mechanically.

Hesitatingly, Marie-Andrée replied:

“It’s hard to imagine she could have done this to herself.”

“But then that means that the murderer is... one of us?” stammered Linda, her face drained of all blood.

Marie-Andrée winced. There was no doubt as to the reality of their predicament: since no other visitors had come into the house during the night, only one of its current occupants could have been responsible for Solange’s death.

Linda trotted over to Harvey’s side and pressed her body against his to try and find some comfort. Harvey went to shrug her off, but then raised his left arm and draped it around her shoulders, lightly, as if fearing her touch.

“One of us murdered her.”

They all jumped upon hearing Annie’s hesitant voice as she appeared in the doorway, supported by Mrs. Marcotte. In a monotonous voice, she added:

“Mom always keeps... kept her door locked at night. When I came in a few moments ago to check up on her, it wasn’t. I thought she was just sleeping. She didn’t answer when I said good morning. Then I noticed the bloodstain. I shook her shoulders; she didn’t have any reaction. I touched her face, her hands; she was cold as ice. Poor mom...”

Then, suddenly straightening back up, she cried:

“Oh my God! We have to warn the guys!”

“I’ll handle it,” offered Marie-Andrée.

Heading to the back door, she unhooked an old down jacket hanging from a coat-peg and slipped on a pair of rubber boots, glad to escape the sight of Solange’s body.

As she was about to go outside, she stopped for a moment and examined the lock and the doorframe. No trace of breaking and entering. She had hoped to discover signs of forced entry, anything that might have helped her eliminate the suspicions floating over all of their heads right there and then, before they inevitably started manifesting themselves between the house's inhabitants.

The wind was still going strong, shaking off chunks of ice from the branches; the crystalline sound they made as they tumbled to the ground evoked the rustling of innumerable insects. Frozen rain had glazed over everything, trees and objects alike. Covered in a thick coating of ice, their cars had taken on surreal shapes.

The spectacle left Marie-Andrée speechless. The sense of solitude and desolation in this glacial air was so potent that she was suddenly overcome with a gnawing sense of dread. The motor of the chainsaw had stopped. She looked around for Thomas and Michael; they were leaning against the trunk of Harvey's car, conversing in low tones as they were trying to catch their breath. The image of them talking discreetly with each other reminded her of a penitent man confessing to his confidant.

The sound of ice breaking beneath the young woman's footsteps made them jerk their heads up in her direction. Michael waved at her, but Thomas' face darkened. From the looks of it, his fear that their strange liaison would somehow be revealed still weighed heavily on his mind.

A few steps away, shivering in the humid cold, she clutched her jacket against her chest and started carefully making her way towards them, almost slipping in the process. Michael grabbed her arm to help support her. Without really putting much thought into how she could give them the news, in a low voice she announced:

“Something horrible has happened... Solange died during the night. Everyone is at her side as we speak.”

For a brief instant, both men stared at her incredulously, as if Marie-Andrée had just addressed them in a foreign tongue. Then, Michael bolted ahead and started running towards the house. Thomas looked back at Marie-Andrée, a dazed look in his eyes, before following suit.

Seeing them slip and slide in the driveway, the young woman decided to take her time heading back to the house. Careful to avoid falling and risk aggravating her bruised hip, she started navigating the icy ground by grabbing onto the handles of each and every car door along her way. One question haunted her: why had Thomas reacted more slowly than Michael to the news, as if learning of his mother’s death hadn’t affected him as much? Or as if he had already been aware of the situation?

The door had been left wide open. She could hear muffled exchanges coming from inside. She went in and took off her boots and her down jacket. The carpet in the hallway was stained with wet sawdust.

Her first instinct was to head into the kitchen and pour herself a cup of coffee. Her back against the counter, she stood there sipping it for a moment, facing the closed swing door. The bitterness of the hot beverage made her grimace. A few swallows later, she finally stopped trembling.

The rustling of muffled voices became more distinct. She thought she heard Annie sobbing. Preferring to leave them amongst themselves for the moment, she scanned the room, trying to look at something, anything. If she could just find an object to stare at, she might be able to control the dizziness that kept threatening to overcome her.

Having reached the end of its cycle, the dishwasher suddenly stopped humming. Marie-Andrée took a deep

breath. The dizzy spell had passed. Noticing the wall phone next to the swing door, she went to unhook the receiver. The dial tone sounded deafening in her ear. She was about to dial 911, but stopped herself. What was she doing? This was none of her business. She hung up. She'd suggest to Harvey Simard that he should be the one to call the police. She felt in no position to inform the authorities that the riding representative's spouse had more than likely been murdered.

She took a swig of coffee. Solange's death had insidiously started creeping into their reality. She was still puzzled by Thomas' delayed reaction upon learning of his mother's demise.

Trying to keep her mind busy, she began preparing breakfast again.

This day was promising to be nothing short of surreal.



Half an hour later, as she was placing a jug of orange juice on the now dressed table, Harvey came into the kitchen wearing old work clothes, startling her.

"Sorry if I scared you... I just wanted some coffee..."

"I just made a fresh pot. Help yourself. By the way, did you manage to get in touch with the SQ?"

"I tried. But after waiting on the line for over twenty minutes, all I got was a recorded message. So I decided I'd try again later."

While he drowned his coffee in sugar, she asked him:

"What are the others up to?"

"Your mother and Annie opened the windows and made everyone leave the room after lowering the heat in

there. Annie locked the door. Linda went out in search of a spot where she could get a signal on her cell phone. Thomas has resolved to lock himself in his bedroom. As for Michael, he...”

“Here I am!”

Michael came in as they were talking and immediately headed for the coffee pot. But he was seized by a violent coughing fit and had to lean against the counter for a moment to try and catch his breath.

“Damn pneumonia. I thought I’d finally managed to get rid of it, but...”

Shivering, he started sipping his coffee, slowly, so as to avoid burning his lips, and tried to reassure the others by flashing them a weak smile. He seemed as frail as a sick bird looking for shelter under a park bench.

“No need to fret over me, I’m already feeling much better. Did you get a hold of the police, mister Simard?”

“The phone lines are overloaded. I keep getting a message suggesting that we either call back later or head straight to the nearest police station...”

“We can’t wait for that tree to be removed from behind your car and for your vehicle to be dragged up onto flat terrain, mister Simard. One of us will have to walk over to the village and warn the SQ from there.”

“That’s a thirty kilometer walk,” pointed out Harvey. “And with that layer of ice covering the ground, it would be impossible. I was thinking instead of making it to the road and trying to stop a passing car.”

“I’ll accompany you.”

“No, Michael. You hardly seem in any shape to go out there. Stay here, with Thomas and Annie; they’re both pretty shaken up right now and need you by their side. But I wouldn’t mind if you joined me, Marie-Andrée. That way,

if something were to happen to one of us, the other can come back for help.”

“All right, I’ll go get dressed. It’s like an ice rink out there.”

Uncomfortable, she threw a sidelong glance at the closed door to Solange’s bedroom and quickly headed up the stairs and to her room to put on some old warm clothes she had noticed hanging in the closet earlier.

Through the wall, she could hear Thomas picking tirelessly at the same guitar string over and over. The doleful thrumming started grating on her nerves. She slipped on her down jacket and left the room.

As her mother was coming down the corridor looking at her inquisitively, she summed up the situation for her in a few brief words, almost stumbling into Linda as she was coming back inside, a stymied look on her face, her cell phone peppered with droplets of rain in hand.

Outside, Harvey was coming out of the shed, holding two walking sticks fitted with metal spikes. He had an afflicted air, amplified by his moist eyes that he was clumsily trying to dab with the back of his hand. Not wishing for him to feel observed, Marie-Andrée took a few steps in the opposite direction to wait for him, grabbing on to her car door, her eyes fixed on the path encumbered with debris.

She feigned surprise when he came up to her, holding out a rustic-looking walking stick ending in a stud.

“Thomas made these a few years ago. They’ll help us stay upright. At least, I hope so.”

She nodded.

Falteringly, they made their way from car to car, stepped over the tree Thomas had felled earlier and started heading for the highway, barely visible at the end of the path, slipping and sliding as they went.

All around them, silence was broken only by the rustling of freezing rain and the crackling of sheets of ice falling to the ground. They couldn't hear a single engine noise coming from the road ahead. She pointed this out to Harvey.

He stopped for a moment to listen, turning his head from side to side. His face darkened.

"You're right. I can't hear a thing. If the roads are impassable and we can't get in touch with the police, our current situation is likely to become somewhat problematic, what with the presence of a... of Solange in the house."

Harvey started walking again, his back hunched. Looking at him take hesitant steps, Marie-Andrée became concerned. The spikes at the end of their walking sticks would sometimes slide against the layer of ice covering the ground, made even trickier by the rain, and she feared he would fall at any moment.

Progress was difficult, and they focused all of their efforts on avoiding a bad spill.

"Mister Simard, tell me... Did you hear a conversation coming from your wife's bedroom last night?"

"Nothing at all. I'm a heavy sleeper, and we did consume a lot of alcohol."

"And Linda...?"

"Linda slept in my den."

"No, I... I was going to say she might have heard something, maybe footsteps in the staircase or down the hallway. Or maybe she got up and left her room at some point. You see, during the night, I went downstairs to use the bathroom, and when I came back, I thought I saw someone's silhouette standing at the top of the stairs..."

Harvey stopped and turned to face her. His preoccupied face showed all the signs of inner turmoil. He stared

at Marie-Andrée for a few seconds, then, in a hesitating voice, said:

“There are eight of us in that house... well, seven now. It’s not unlikely that there was some... coming and going during the night. Maybe Linda went to pay Thomas a little visit or something; that’s their business. What I have a hard time wrapping my head around is the fact that one of us actually committed murder. I’ll be the first to admit that Solange didn’t elicit much sympathy from those around her, but to murder her...? I suppose you’re wondering if I’m the one who did it?”

“Oh, I feel so bad insulting you by even asking you that.”

“Don’t. I mean, at this point... Look, at least one of us is trying to keep their head on their shoulders and make some sense out of this mess, so sure, why not... In another time of my life, I might have given in to hatred and been able to do such a thing. But her despicable behaviour last night so disappointed me that I wouldn’t have had the nerve to try and kill her, even if she had decided to push her meanness to the limit. Leaving her and this house seemed a much wiser decision. But, apparently, someone in our group couldn’t resist the compulsion to commit such a... a senseless act. If we want to get to the bottom of this, we’re going to have to talk to each and every one of them. And hope that everyone will be truthful.”

He stopped talking. His sorrow was palpable. Marie-Andrée felt shame at having been so callous.

He suddenly added:

“I assume you and your mother were unwilling witnesses to the scene that Solange made at the dinner table last night...?”

“Yes... We also heard her say that she promised other revelations this morning... That could be a motive for the

assassin. Perhaps what she had to say didn't please one of us very much."

Solemn, Harvey nodded and started walking again, falteringly.

At the junction where the path met the road, they stopped for a moment, taking repeated deep breaths to try and calm their pounding hearts.

A disheartening sight greeted them. A fallen centenary elm tree blocked the highway towards the north, and to the south, multiple branches, broken by violent gales, had melted with the ice covering the road. No help would be coming this way, even if they did eventually manage to get in touch with the police.

"Maybe there's still someone in the house next door," tried Marie-Andrée, catching her breath.

"No... The owners are down in Florida and won't be back until May. Juliette is our closest neighbour, and she's ten kilometers away. And we don't even know if she's still got any power on. But we'll try and call her anyways once we're back at the house."

Harvey shrugged in irritation and tried stepping onto the pavement. He barely escaped a brutal fall when his companion in misfortune held him up with both arms at the last minute. He swore repeatedly.

They had to face facts. They were on their own. With a body on their hands on top of it all.

Harvey's dejection as they made their way down the icy path back to the house was a sorry sight. Was this his way of covering up his guilt? wondered Marie-Andrée.

Until proven otherwise, any one of them could have been the culprit. Solange had been horrible to every one of the dinner guests that had stayed at the table after desserts, humiliating them all in turn. But was that enough

motive to assassinate a woman confined to her wheelchair? What other possible motive could there have been for someone, man or woman, to commit such a despicable act?

And... what if the murderer struck again?

Suddenly, she had the intuition that she might have been involved with the crime without her knowledge. Solange could have learned about her and Thomas' 'working relation' and he and his mother might have quarrelled over her. Could the son have done such a thing out of anger? The hypothesis could not be discarded.

Making their way back to the house, they followed the parked cars, made glistening by the rain and covered in ice. Marie-Andrée promised herself that she would remain vigilant. As long as it would be impossible to contact the Sûreté du Québec, they were all in danger.

A few steps away from the house, Harvey stopped and pointed at the chimney with his walking stick. Wreaths of blackish smoke were curling up and out of it, skimming along the rooftop under the pressure of the humid air.

Annie opened the door at the same moment and stood there in the threshold. Shivering and clutching a large shawl around her shoulders, she cried out:

"Well? Is there any way to get through?"

"No," shot back Marie-Andrée. "The road is impassable. Did you manage to get a hold of the police?"

"No... And now I can't even get a dial tone."

"What?" exclaimed Harvey. "Well, looks like trying to get in touch with Juliette is off the table; we'll just have to wait it out. Who made a fire?"

"I asked Thomas to make one... The power's off again. On my little battery-powered radio, I heard that isolated blackouts had started occurring again..."

Harvey stopped walking and took the time to stabilize himself using a car door handle before turning to face

Marie-Andrée. His eyes betrayed his misgivings; the wait was going to be long and worrisome.

“Marie-Andrée... Before we go in... I mean, we won’t have many opportunities to talk in private. So I’ll get straight to the point. Out of this group, you’re the only one who’s had no prior contact with any of us. We’re all holed up here against our will and it’s impossible to gauge just how long we’ll remain stranded. You’re the only one who seems able to keep her wits about the situation and reason things out in a calm fashion. I’m asking you to do your best to try and shed some light on what might have actually occurred here.”

“But mister Simard! I have no right to meddle in your family’s affairs!”

“I’m not asking you to play the detective. Just... examine the clues. Think it through. When the SQ finally manages to make its way to us, maybe by then we’ll have found the key to the enigma... It would help hurry this whole mess along... And it might help this family avoid any further suffering...”

His back hunched, Harvey turned away and started walking towards the house.

Marie-Andrée watched him go inside. She shivered. Was she in any way capable of living up to that kind of expectation?



## 18

Huddled up on one of the sofas in the living room, Linda was attempting to read a magazine. She raised her head when Marie-Andrée walked in.

“There’s really no way to get through and get some help?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Well, this is gonna be fun. Someone in this house is a murderer, and could strike again!”

“That kind of attitude isn’t very helpful,” commented Marie-Andrée in a hollow voice.

“I call them as I see them. Besides, I already have my suspicions.”

She turned her head and went back to her reading. Although she affected indifference, Marie-Andrée was convinced that, on the inside, Linda was terrified.

She went and laid out her wet clothes on a chair facing the screen of the fireplace, where a sizeable fire was roaring away.

Coming from the kitchen, a subdued exchange between Annie and her mother caught her attention and, intrigued, Marie-Andrée headed over to join them.

In the drab light filtering through the kitchen’s only window, both women were sitting at the table, transcribing

notes on a sheet of paper. They looked like two serene servants straight out of an ancient Flemish painting.

“What are you two doing?” asked Marie-Andrée, a little taken aback.

“Your mother found a clever way to help me take my mind off of things. I just couldn’t stop thinking about mom.”

“I asked Annie to help me prepare a series of menus from a list of leftover provisions we found in the freezer down in the cellar. We should be able to manage with what we have left. The flow of traffic is bound to resume along the highway eventually.”

“That’s the mother I know and love. Always resourceful. By the way, Annie, I went downstairs to use the bathroom last night and thought I saw Linda heading up to the first floor.”

“I highly doubt that. Linda pops sleeping pills like dinner mints. And I don’t think she’s brave enough to wander around all alone at night in a house with no lights on. It must have been Michael or Thomas. Are you sure you saw someone?”

“Not distinctly. I was half-asleep. Oh well, see you guys later. I’ll go upstairs and see if Michael needs anything before I have some breakfast.”

Outside, the grating whine of the chainsaw suddenly roared to life. Thomas seemed to have emerged from the shock of his mother’s death and was trying to brush off his morosity by diving headfirst into physical labour.

As soon as she reached the landing, Marie-Andrée started hearing Michael’s hollow cough echoing down the corridor. She went to knock on his door.

“Are you all right in there, Michael?”

“...”

“Michael? Are you all right?”

“Yes... Yes...”

“Can I come in?”

“Yes...”

Slowly, she cracked the door open and peered inside. Lying down on top of the covers fully dressed, Michael seemed to be wrestling with the bedspread.

The strange crucifix on the nightstand immediately caught the young woman’s eye; it was oscillating as if it had just been put back in place. She walked over to the bed; visibly trying to hold it in, Michael coughed into the inside of his left elbow.

“Do you need anything?” she asked.

“I was trying to get out of bed. I have two pills to take, antibiotics. In my suitcase, under the bed, you’ll find a medical case. The big yellow ones.”

Kneeling on the braided bedside rug, Marie-Andrée opened the case; about fifteen vials had been packed tightly together alongside rows of inhalers, bronchodilators and nasal sprays.

“Sweet Jesus! That’s quite the collection you’ve got there, mister Mathieux. Are you sure you’re going to be all right?”

“Could we dispense with the courtesies, please? You’d think we were in a badly translated American show adapted in France. Call me Michael. Getting back to your question, I should probably be in an emergency room right now. The cold air combined with the dryness of burning wood in the fireplace to heat this big house has roused my asthma. But there’s nothing much we can do about that, is there? We’re stuck here. I heard you shouting to Annie that the highway was impassable.”

Staring at her reflection in a little mirror hanging above the sink, Marie-Andrée nodded, holding a glass under the

anemic stream of water dribbling from the faucet. From the corner of her eye, she saw him stabilizing the Christ figurine on its hooks to stop it from wobbling. She lowered her head and waited for the glass to fill up.

“Tell me, Michael, did you get up and walk about the house last night?”

She handed him the pills with one hand and the glass of water with the other; Michael’s feverish gaze betrayed his surprise. He swallowed a first pill with a swig of water and muttered:

“Uhm... No. I did not go downstairs last night.”

Marie-Andrée noticed that he had provided more than she had asked for; she had made no mention of him being on the ground floor, yet he had promptly told her that he hadn’t gone downstairs, as if somehow feeling accused of the murder.

He swallowed the second pill and drank the rest of the water before adding:

“What time was this?”

“I really don’t know. Around three, I’d say.”

“I was still in bed reading at that time.”

“During a blackout?”

“Well... Um... I use a battery-powered lamp fixed to a headband.”

“Ah yes. Like a spelunker.”

“Or those cross-country enthusiasts who like to go for a run on the lanes late at night.”

“That’s pretty ingenious actually. So you didn’t hear anything then?”

“As soon as I get into bed, I jam my earplugs in to help me concentrate. I thought I heard the toilet flushing though. Was that you?”

“Possibly... By the way, I thought antibiotics were supposed to be taken with meals?”

“With all of this morning’s hubbub, I didn’t have time to take them. But your mother brought me some toast and coffee about an hour ago, just before the power went out again. That should hold me for a while.”

“I certainly hope we don’t run out of water.”

“If we use it sparingly, we should be able to hold out for at least a few hours without having to rig the pump up. The water source here is about fifty meters underground, and most days, the water pressure is quite strong in this house. Even up in the attic.”

“Oh... There’s water in the attic? What a weird notion.”

“Oh, er... Yes... There’s a... a faucet in the attic that we use during the summer. Uhm... You know, in case anybody would want to do a little cleaning up in there. They usually shut the water off during the winter to avoid it freezing in the pipes. Uhm... Not to be rude, but I’d really like to get some sleep before going back to help Thomas.”

“No need. His father came to his rescue. And in your condition, it’s probably best you get as much sleep as possible; you sure seem like you need it. Last night was pretty rough, wasn’t it?”

A shadow crossed Michael’s feverish gaze.

“The truth had to come out eventually. And I do feel somewhat more at peace with myself today.”

“Liberated even?”

Michael stared at her, not angrily, but not confidently either.

“You’re thinking I might have had a motive to seek vengeance because of Solange’s revelations? I’m a religious man, Marie-Andrée. I would never allow myself to murder anyone, no matter the reason. No, what surprised me,

actually, was her announcement that she had even more revelations to make this morning. Perhaps what she had to say forced someone's hand... Now, I think I better get some sleep. Curious, isn't it? In the end, death is like everything else: after the initial shock, those left behind, the survivors if you will, go back to their daily routine, thinking only of themselves. Like ants getting back to work after having had their anthill stomped into the ground."

"I imagine that depends on the deceased..."

"True..."

"All right, you get some rest. My mother won't be far should you need her. I'll go and help Thomas. My clothes ought to be dry by now."

He flashed her a forced smile and closed his eyes; his face immediately transformed into a waxen mask.

She slipped away on the tip of her toes, quietly closing the door behind her. Fresh in her mind was the sight of Michael hastily replacing the body of Christ on its hooks.

What could that odd curio possibly represent to him? And why did he seem to accord so much credence to the revelations Solange had promised to deliver over breakfast? Did it have anything to do with that metal box she'd heard about?

Her stomach started grumbling. She decided to head down to the kitchen in search of something that might remotely resemble breakfast. When it came to improvising in the kitchen, she could always count on her mother's ceaseless imagination.



Harvey stopped trying to squeeze a stubborn branch between the blades of his shears and raised his head, pensive. This attracted Thomas' attention and he turned off the motor of his chainsaw. Both men were drenched in sweat from having deployed so much effort trying to cut the fallen tree into pieces.

“Did you hurt your back?”

“No. I'm thinking.”

“About mom?”

“Yes and no. Yes because she's part of the problem currently on our hands. But mostly, I was thinking about how we could get some power back on. It would help manage the situation posed by Solange's presence in the house.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about that too. I could turn on the engine of my car and try to recharge the emergency power pack by plugging it into the cigarette lighter?”

They heard the sound of footsteps walking on the ice and turned their heads. Marie-Andrée was heading their way.

“Looks like hard work,” she commented, coming up to them.

“Tedious would be a better word for it,” replied Harvey dryly.

“We were discussing ways of how we might try to get some power back inside the house,” mumbled Thomas, still sullen in the young woman's presence.

“Thomas was suggesting we could recharge the emergency power pack using his car battery, but it would take hours just to get about four hours' worth of battery life; that would consume a lot of gasoline for very little results. There might be another solution, though: the neighbour's portable generator. You remember, Thomas?”

We saw him use it when we had that seventy-two hour blackout three years ago?”

“That thing is so noisy, dad...”

“Well, that’s a very little price to pay to be able to eat something other than canned tuna and having to shave with cold water. What do you think, Marie-Andrée?”

“I’m with you. Let’s do this.”



Standing in front of a window in the living room, Linda yawned as she watched them leave in the freezing rain. The abrupt silence of the chainsaw had woken her. Watching them walk away, she raged over the fact that she had lost not only the father, but also the son in this story of political succession that had turned sour.

Marie-Andrée’s presence in the house irritated her more and more. She knew she was being observed, spied upon even, by this overconfident outsider. She couldn’t even manage to rejoice in Solange’s demise, a development that might actually help her conquer the father’s favours again one day... or the son’s.

She looked around for her cell phone and, realizing she must have left it in Harvey’s den where she had spent the night, headed there. A single glimpse towards Solange’s bedroom made her run into the den and slam the door shut.

The memory of the victim’s hysterical face as she had kept disgorging vitriolic spite the evening before suddenly flashed in her mind. A chill ran up her spine; haunted by the nearby presence of the corpse, she tried to shake it off by foraging in her personal effects to try and find her phone.

She kept coming back to Thomas. He might be a junkie, but he was a seductive junkie. With the fleeting memory of their last night spent together came nostalgic images of shared embraces.

Even if she had agreed to Harvey's offer of repaying Thomas' debt to her in full by committing himself to getting her elected, she had not yet discarded one last possible tidbit of extortion. Hadn't she noticed the looks Thomas and Marie-Andrée had been careful not to throw each other's way during the fateful meal?

And why had she left with both men anyways? Her instinct was telling her that the two younglings had something to hide, she thought bitterly. Thomas seemed way too intimidated by this 'too-cute-to-be-honest' young woman...



Harvey, Thomas and Marie-Andrée were only a dozen steps away from the residence of the absent neighbour. Broken branches had accumulated there just as everywhere else. In the backyard, the wind and the freezing rain had felled a large birch, which had thankfully fallen away from the house, scratching in the process one of the walls of the shed where Harvey hoped to find the generator.

He swore through clenched teeth.

“Oh for Christ's... It's padlocked...”

“Not a problem,” countered Thomas. “Mister Moreau invests most of his money into his vacation time rather than security. He always buys cheap. I'll handle this.”

Along the border of the pathway leading to the shed, Thomas found a series of rocks that had been painted

white. Picking one, he dislodged it from the accumulation of frozen rain and, with a powerful blow, slammed it against the shed's padlock; it immediately gave way, breaking into pieces. Thomas' resolute action made Marie-Andrée cry out in surprise.

"Whoah!"

Taken aback, Harvey bellowed:

"Why not bash the door down while you're at it?!"

Thomas shrugged.

"Necessity knows no law, right? We'll have ample time to explain our actions once he's back from Florida. At worst, we'll buy him a new one, more solid."

Harvey let out an irritated groan.

"If news of this leaked out to the papers, it could jeopardize Linda's campaign. As soon as the situation is back to normal, you'll come back here and repair it. No one must find out about this."

Cracking the door open, Marie-Andrée was confronted by a veritable pigsty: tools were stacked pellmell on the floor or leaning hapahazardly against the sides of the shed.

The generator had been stowed away beneath a shelf lined with bags of fertilizer, tomato supports, rusted tools and envelopes of stale seeds.

The sight of the machine reassured Thomas and Harvey. After pushing a few tools aside to clear themselves a path, they started hauling it outside. Harvey was already wheezing.

"Good Lord, this thing weighs a ton! How are we going to carry this all the way back to the house?"

"First, I think we should make sure it's in working order," proposed Marie-Andrée.

She checked the oil and gas levels. Satisfied, she turned the lever to the on position, grabbed the grip of the start-up cord and tugged on it a few times. After two or three

loud reports, the motor started sputtering, almost regretfully. She let the device warm up for a moment before pulling on the choke lever. Thankfully, the engine soon settled into a more regular rhythm as wisps of blue smoke started streaming from it. It seemed perfectly serviceable.

Harvey gave his son a dig with his elbow and smiled at him.

“Thank God she came along, eh Thomas? Marie-Andrée sure seems good with her hands!”

Taking his words as an allusion to their relationship, Thomas hung his head, shameful.

Abruptly, he turned the engine off.

“That’s all good and well, but now we have to find a way to lug this thing back to the house. Let’s use the ice to our advantage and drag it along on its runners. I’ll tie a rope at the front of it and pass a rake through a loop so we can use it as a handle. The three of us should manage to get it back in one piece.”

“Well, my son sure has a lot of imagination to spare, doesn’t he Marie-Andrée? I doubt he gets that from me...”

Thomas pouted, sniffed the air and replied in a sharp tone:

“I’ve never been an idiot, dad, and there are a lot of things you don’t know about me. But you were always too busy with other preoccupations to take an interest in me when I was a kid. I was just mentioning this to Annie and Michael when we went to... uhm... when we went out into the woods for a walk yesterday afternoon...”

He quickly stopped talking and busied himself trying to find a tool with a solid enough handle.

Searching in the shed for a rope of some kind, Marie-Andrée was careful not to lose a single word of their rather acerbic exchange.

“Thomas, your mother took up all the space in your life. In a way, she kind of pushed me to the sidelines, you know?”

“Like she pushed me aside to make room for Michael. And anyways, you always preferred Annie to me. Oh, you know what, never mind. Let’s start dragging this thing back to the house. I can’t wait to get warmed up in front of the fireplace.”

Harvey understood he would gain nothing more from him.

Side by side, father and son began pushing against the improvised halter, taking a few hesitant steps forward while, at the back of the generator, Marie-Andrée was putting all of her energy trying to push against it. The effort required to slide the device along the ground was more than they had bargained for. The soles of their boots had a hard time biting down on the ice. But, slowly but surely, they found a walking rhythm and started making progress. No one spoke, no one even looked at each other.

A hundred yards later, Harvey was wheezing heavily, trying to catch his breath. Thomas ordered a halt.

A few steps away, but still within earshot, Marie-Andrée knelt down to take some snow out of her boots and tie up the old scarf she had found in the wardrobe of her room. Turning her back to them, she feigned indifference and let them talk amongst themselves for a moment.

Taking a few deep breaths, Harvey finally managed to calm his pounding heart. Thomas leaned against a tree with both hands and began stretching his sore limbs.

“Although you’re not entirely wrong,” reprised Harvey, trying to remain calm, “it’s rather difficult for me to hear you complaining like that. I thought I had proven to you, as recently as yesterday, that I cared for you, Thomas, enough to sacrifice even my career for you.”

“Yes, that’s true. And I really wish it hadn’t come to that... If only mom had agreed to...”

“Leave your mother out of this! She’s no longer here to explain herself!”

They stopped talking. Without even looking back, Marie-Andrée instinctively knew that they had turned around to observe her; Harvey had probably signaled Thomas to shut up.

As if wanting to speed along their return home, both men went back to work. Over his shoulder, Harvey shouted:

“Are you coming, Marie-Andrée?”

She resisted the urge to turn around. She preferred letting them believe that she hadn’t overheard their exchange. Raising his voice, Harvey called out to her once more:

“Hey! Marie-Andrée!”

This time, she turned around, flashed them a smile and went to join them. They managed to hobble halfway down the pathway to the Simard house before having to stop again, exhausted and parched. None of them had had the forethought to bring a bottle of water.

Harvey spotted a large branch lying on the ground and clumsily went to perch himself atop it. Thomas took a moment to catch his breath before sitting on top of the generator. The need to take a breather had become stronger than the discomfort of their improvised seats. In an unspoken invitation to come and join them, they raised their eyes to look at the young woman. Marie-Andrée was not about to reject this gesture of trust.

Contemplating the fragments of ice that kept falling from the swaying branches before shattering on the ground, in a husky voice, Thomas said:

“I had no idea she hated us that much...”

“Maybe she was trying to take a shot at me by attacking everybody else like that,” tried Harvey.

“A real puzzle we’ve got on our hands here...”

“What do you mean?”

“She insulted everyone sitting at the table... As if she had actually wanted to provoke our ire... I wonder if...”

“What?”

“I wonder who, of all of us, could have felt either humiliated or wounded enough to the point that they’d want to kill her...”

“Who do you suspect?”

Thomas finally turned his head towards his father and, in one breath, replied:

“I hope it’s not you...”

Harvey’s face slumped.

“In other words, you think I’m the culprit?”

“I didn’t say that. There were five of us sitting in front of her at that table. Five people who each had a personal reason to seek vengeance against her... It’s as if... It’s as if mom had wanted for this to happen...”

“Are you feeling guilty, Thomas?”

“Who knows... We’re all guilty of something, even if it’s only desire. Oh, let’s get on with it. We’ve only got a little ways to go yet. Please excuse us, Vi... Marie-Andrée. I hope we’re not bothering you too much with our father-son confidences.”

In his eyes, she saw how petrified he was at having almost revealed the name of her alter ego, and said:

“I get the sense that I’m the one who’s bothering you with my presence.”

“Nonsense,” replied Harvey. “Quite the contrary, actually. Your presence here helps us say things we

otherwise would not have dared say. My son and I have not always been very close to each other; perhaps from now on, we'll be able to remedy that situation."

Standing up, Thomas extended his left hand out to Harvey and his right to Marie-Andrée to help them get back to their feet. Breathing heavily, they went back to the job of hauling the generator back to the house, each of them lost in their own thoughts.

Had one of these two men found the courage to commit such a grave act? wondered Marie-Andrée. What other secret remained in Solange's bag of dirty gossip that might have concerned them?



Lying on the carpet with their heads resting against cushions, Annie and Marie-Andrée were facing the fireplace, where a large log was blazing, projecting sparks against the wire mesh of the screen.

In the kitchen, they could hear Mrs. Marcotte working away. She had uncovered a good quantity of fuel for fondue burners and was opening cans of soup she planned on heating up in the pot.

Afternoon was already upon them, but no one had yet to manifest much appetite. Despite the presence of Solange's body in the room nearby, an odd sense of normalcy had started settling over the house, as if their shared misfortune prevented them from feeling any preoccupation or bereavement towards the deceased.

Tactfully, Marie-Andrée tried to initiate a conversation.

"Did your mother always keep her bedroom door locked at night?"

“Usually; I was the one who locked up after having made sure she was comfortably settled in for the night. I made a copy of her key in case she suddenly felt ill and couldn’t come open the door. Sometimes, she would lock it herself, from her wheelchair, the moment I’d leave the room.”

“Since you were the first one to leave the dinner table last night, I assume you didn’t have a chance to go and lock it, right?”

“No. I was so furious and so hurt that I was afraid I’d get angry if I tried to go and have a talk with her.”

“So either she decided to leave her door unlocked, or forgot to do so. Does your father also have a key?”

“No. Mom forbade him from entering her room unless he’d been invited first. And dad tried to cross her path as little as possible. He spent most of his time in Quebec City or in his riding office. His duties as MP required him to make a lot of public outings. It was very convenient for him, as he didn’t have to be in her presence that often.”

“Could he have used your key?”

“No one knows where I keep it.”

“And when you had to spend the night away from home?”

“Juliette, mom’s nurse, would come and spend the night here.”

“Had your parents been sleeping in separate rooms for long?”

“Ever since we were teenagers. They couldn’t stop fighting. Finally, one day, without giving him any advance warning, she took out all of his clothes from their room and threw them in a heap in his den. Dad had to resign himself to the situation. From that point on, he never missed an opportunity to let her know just how much he despised

her. I also think mom was a little scared of him; dad would sometimes lose his temper, badly. Stress and my dad weren't exactly compatible."

"So, she would lock her door at night because she was afraid of him?"

"In part, but also because she used to talk on the phone a lot. Sometimes, she would stay up late studying marketing campaign projects she would receive by messenger service. Advertising had been an integral part of her life before the accident."

"Did she suffer a lot from the after-effects of that accident?"

"The deepest wound was to her pride. The predicament she found herself in humiliated her. She started taking out her resentment on everyone around her, mostly me. She had created such a vacuum around her that, these last three or four years, her nurse and I became pretty much the only ones who could approach her. She started managing her entire life through the phone. She would often act cruel or mean towards me, only to repent two days later by doling out kind words. On the days I needed to take some time away from her, Juliette would come in; she was the only one who ever received a fair and polite treatment. I never stayed home to see what they actually did together, if anything, but from what I saw, she was usually treated with respect."

Annie blew her nose in a tissue. For the first time since that morning's dramatic events, she seemed assailed by a strong emotion.

Careful not to rush her, Marie-Andrée softly placed her hand on her forearm. Annie didn't move away. Trying to alleviate the climate of tension prevailing in the air, Marie-Andrée made sure her voice was neutral before asking:

“Is it true what she said, that you wanted to leave this house?”

Abruptly grabbing another tissue from the box on her left, prompting Marie-Andrée to remove her hand, Annie started dabbing her eyes in hurried little swipes. Sorrow drained from her face as quickly as it had appeared. Her voice hardened.

“Life with her had become intolerable. I was starting to have more and more problems dealing with her mood swings. It’s true that I had found an apartment, but I hadn’t rented it yet. In spite of everything, I believe that we actually did love each other. She... She had a heavy secret to bear... I’ll tell you all about it some time. And now, I’m going to end up having to deal with this big old house...”

She straightened back up.

“I’ll go and check up on your mother to see if she needs any help.”

She sat on her knees. Doing the same, Marie-Andrée added:

“Despite your many differences, you’re still the one she chose as her heir...”

Both women ended up face to face, kneeling in front of each other. Annie’s features hardened.

“If you think I might have killed my own mother to inherit her money, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

Suddenly, she got to her feet and started walking away. Marie-Andrée jumped up to stop her, grabbing her gently by the arm.

“Annie, please, wait. Don’t get angry. I just find it odd that your mother’s murder occurred right after she announced that you would be her only heir. It’s almost as if someone had wanted to seek vengeance at having been left out in the cold...”

Unable to vanquish the weariness sapping at her strength, Annie simply shrugged. Gently turning her around to face her, Marie-Andrée contemplated her features, moved by her simple beauty. In a low voice, it was all she could do to mutter:

“You can count on me.”

Annie nodded and both women walked out of the living room. Marie-Andrée was still perplexed by a point she had yet to elucidate: why was no one else besides her openly asking questions concerning the way this crime had been committed, or the weapon that had been used to murder Solange?

‘What a dysfunctional family,’ she thought. ‘Love and hatred, coexisting together, sharing as much importance at any given time...’

Over time, the house’s inhabitants started ignoring the irritating sputter of the gas-powered generator. Thomas had plugged a microwave oven, the refrigerator and a small electric grill, found in its original packaging at the bottom of a cupboard.

Mrs. Marcotte had assured them that she could manage a few simple dishes, at the very least grill up some pieces of meat she had found still safely stowed away in the freezer down in the cellar.

The work of clearing away the path leading away from the house had progressed. By tomorrow morning, they’d more than likely be able to start trying to haul Harvey’s car back onto the road and see if they can drive it up to the highway.

The return to normalcy meant that the bubble of affected impassibility they had all sheltered themselves in to avoid having to discuss anything concerning Solange’s death was about to burst.

No one had suggested that they re-examine the body to try and get a more precise idea of the mortal wound. Everyone had rushed to comply with Marie-Andrée's suggestion that no one touch anything.

Since then, everyone was trying to avoid getting near the locked door unless they absolutely had to, as evidenced by Linda, who kept running past it everytime she had to go into Harvey's den.

By the time darkness had started falling, the prospect that she would have to spend yet another night in this madhouse made Linda jittery. Locking herself away inside Harvey's den and unable to use her cell phone because the battery had run out, she was obviously waiting desperately for the highway to be reopened.

Marie-Andrée went to knock on her door.

"Are you doing all right?" she asked when Linda came to open. "You hardly ate anything at lunchtime."

"No, I'm not all right! Not at all," almost shouted Linda. "I'm freezing. With the windows wide open in Solan... in Mrs. Simard's bedroom, this house is like an icebox. Couldn't we close them, at least for a few hours?"

Marie-Andrée stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

"Annie has a key. You could ask to borrow it from her if you want to go and close them yourself..."

"Me? Why me? It's her mother! It's her house now! I am NOT getting anywhere near a dead body. I didn't even go to the funeral parlour when my own mother died. I absolutely loathed Mrs. Simard while she was alive, I don't see why I'd..."

She scowled even more and started walking around the room in an agitated manner.

Despite her apparent disdain for cadavers, Marie-Andrée remembered how, just a few hours ago, she had surprised

Linda in the room of the deceased, her hand extended towards the doll as if to remove it. Taking a bedspread from the neatly stacked pile of linen lying on top of the inflatable mattress, she unfolded it and went to drape it around Linda's shoulders. Without looking at her, she said:

“Why don't you take a nap? You wouldn't feel the cold as much.”

Linda let out the loud sigh of a spoiled child being interrupted in her moment of sulking; huddled up in the bedspread, she looked like a graceless antique statue.

“I hate waking up in the middle of the day; my mouth always feels as dry as old paste.”

Finally slumping down in Harvey's chair behind the work desk, she turned her head towards the window and started rocking herself gently for a moment.

“Over the course of the last few hours, you seem to have started your own little investigation there, miss detective. Well for me, you're nothing but another city girl who comes to the country to try and forget her horribly dull life because she just doesn't know how to live it to the fullest.”

Swivelling around in the chair to face her, Linda stared at Marie-Andrée with her piercing eyes. Her belligerence was plain to see.

“No one knew you before you stepped foot in this house just yesterday. And since this morning, it looks like you've begun your own private investigation. What do you do again for a living to be so... so...”

“Nosy?”

“I would probably have put it another way, but sure, if that's how you prefer it...”

Marie-Andrée paused for a moment as she walked over to a bookcase and grabbed former Premier of Québec Maurice Duplessis' biography from one of the shelves.

“I’m sort of a... social worker, if you will. I like fixing problems. I’m very proactive that way.”

“And you think I have a problem?”

“Well, at the very least, you certainly have the same one as the rest of us do. You’re a prisoner inside a house where a murder has been committed.”

“Thank you miss obvious. Oh, the timing couldn’t be worse. I can’t launch my electoral campaign from here! Journalists can’t even reach me on my cell phone to ask follow-up questions about my press conference! Each hour I waste being stuck in this place is crucial time lost that I could instead be using to take over from Harvey. I mean mister Simard.”

Marie-Andrée held back a smile. Was Linda really the person she so desperately wanted everyone around her to believe? Why was she suddenly drowning her animosity away by babbling like a teenager caught red-handed?

“Did Thomas mention we had a thing once?”

The unexpected revelation gave Marie-Andrée a start. Did this fling with the son of her lover have something to do with the ‘therapy sessions’ Thomas kept requesting from ‘Vicky’ when they’d meet up in the disused warehouse? She decided to opt for prudence.

“Why would Thomas admit to such a thing? To me? I’ve barely spoken to him since last night.”

“You tell me. Thomas keeps looking at you like he knows you or something. It’s just a feeling I have... His father is the one who introduced us. He thought it would do his son some good to develop relationships outside of his circle of addicts. But Thomas had, I mean has a serious drug problem. He’s siphoned thousands of dollars from me by promising me he would get the help he needed. His job as sales rep lets him travel all over the province, and he

never has any difficulty finding drugs anywhere he goes. Six months ago, he started pulling away from me, no explanation given. I deduced he had found another ‘sponsor.’ Turned out he had... His mother. Harvey thinks that Thomas probably convinced her to lend him some money on the pretext that he was willing to stop. Those kinds of treatments can be rather expensive, so she accepted to lend him a huge amount of money. But one day, thanks to her many sources, she discovered the truth. Apparently, Thomas was in fact using that money to procure himself even more drugs, all whilst shagging some whore in Montreal.”

Marie-Andrée was careful not to show any of the worry suddenly creeping up on her. Was it possible that they had been seen together, Thomas and her, and that the Simard family and their guests had been made aware of her true identity? Was Linda about to take a swipe at her and call her a call girl to her face? Was she waiting for Mrs. Marcotte to be within earshot so that her humiliation would be complete? What game was she playing at?

As Marie-Andrée’s heart began pounding in her ears, Linda kept prattling on as if nothing had happened.

“In any case, Thomas didn’t take the news that he’d been cut off lightly. He stormed over to the house one weekend and pitched Solange a huge fit. Harvey told me all about it afterwards. Thomas was on the verge of strangling his mother when Harvey managed to separate them. Thomas kept shouting that, one day, he would make her pay for everything she had made her family endure, and that she would pay dearly for her ‘damn secret’ — his words, not mine. But how events unfolded this morning seems to contradict him since his mother died without being able to reveal said secret to anyone.”

Linda suddenly became pensive.

Marie-Andrée let a few seconds go by; Linda was hardly the kind of woman who could be rushed into making confidences. She began flipping through the book she'd picked out and, forcing herself to adopt an air of nonchalance, mumbled:

“What’s this whole ‘dirty secret’ business?”

As if coming out of a trance, Linda raised her head. She was no longer the woman who, just a few moments ago, had been openly disclosing the inner workings of her private relationship with her lover’s son.

“No idea. Harvey’s never mentioned it. But it’s got to involve Thomas, I would think. It would explain his odd behaviour.”

The memory of Thomas straddling the inflatable sex doll flashed in Marie-André’s mind. What could possibly have disturbed that young man to the point of being reduced to staging such peculiar fantasies?

Upon arriving the night before, Marie-Andrée had noticed that, as they had come back out of the wooded area, Thomas had seemed the most taciturn of the trio. And why had Michael, Annie and Thomas needed a shovel of all things to go and take a walk in the woods?

Linda stretched as she got up.

“It did me some good to talk a bit. I think I’ll follow your advice and try to get some sleep after all. It certainly couldn’t hurt any.”

Lying down on the inflatable mattress, she yawned and curled up under the bedspread.

“Close the door behind you...”

Marie-Andrée smirked at Linda’s gruffness and glanced at her watch: 14:50 pm. She still had time to go and stretch her legs a bit before darkness started to fall...

Exiting the room, she noticed Annie holding the kitchen door open as she was talking to her mother. She

gave a slight cough and walked over to the young woman, indicating that she wished to speak with her in private. She led her into Annie's room and closed the door behind her. Annie seemed somewhat taken aback.

"What's going on?"

"I need to speak with your father. Can I use your room?"

"Dad? He's not here."

"What?"

"He let Thomas continue chopping that tree up into pieces and left, saying he needed to take his mind off of things for a while."

"All right. I'll go find him. But before I do, there's something else we need to do. Something unpleasant."

Marie-Andrée stared Annie in the eye.

"We have to go back inside your mother's bedroom and examine the body."

"Do we really have to?" asked Annie anxiously.

"Only for a few seconds, Annie, I promise. Would you rather I went in by myself?"

"Yes," replied Annie in one breath. "I don't feel strong enough to go back in there just yet."

Annie took the key out from one of her vest pockets and preceded Marie-Andrée to the end of the corridor. As soon as they opened the door, they were greeted by a gust of glacial air, chilling them to the bone. In front of the open window, curtains were whipping about, buffeted by strong winds. Annie grabbed Marie-Andrée's arm to make her open her hand and placed the key in her palm.

"Don't forget to lock the door once you're done. I'll probably be in Michael's room, checking up on him to see if he needs any help."

As if she were ashamed of herself, she hung her head and left on the tip of her toes so as not to alert Linda.

Marie-Andrée took a deep breath and entered the room, closing the door behind her. The cold reigning inside the bedroom had played the part anticipated by Annie: no nauseating stench had started emanating from the body yet.

Hesitatingly, she made her way over to the bed where Solange's corpse still lay, as stiff as a recumbent statue. The stain of blood on her chest had darkened as it had dried. Marie-Andrée's heart started beating faster. In spite of her repugnance, she leaned over the wound and started examining it more closely.

The hole in Solange's chest could not have been made by a bullet, since the retort of a gun would have alerted everyone in the house during the night. Also, a bullet fired at point-blank range would surely have left gunpowder residue on the nightgown.

No, it had to have been some other kind of weapon. Had the murderer pilfered a knife from the kitchen?

The stab of a kitchen knife would have produced a thin, elongated wound, larger than this. A dagger then? She mulled it over. In order to pierce the heart, the tip of a dagger would have to have been plunged very deeply, violently, and surely would have left the imprint of the guard on Solange's skin.

She bent lower to lean in even closer to the body. The uncomfortable position made her back ache.

She noticed that the orifice was splayed around the edges and of an unusually round shape. She observed it a few minutes more before straightening back up, trying to massage the pain out of her lower back.

The hole looked like it had been made by the forceful entry of some sort of metal rod. But surely that was almost impossible; to avoid attracting attention, the murderer

would have to have acted extremely rapidly, and with precision. So as not to give the victim any time to call out for help, the blow had to have been fatal on the very first try.

Suddenly, a light went on in her mind. She knew of only one object that could have created such an odd-looking wound, an object she had seen this very day, just a few hours ago, in Michael's bedroom!

Marie-Andrée shivered. The Raggedy Andy doll continued mocking her with its smile of red wool tacking. She bent over very low over the rag-filled doll and inhaled deeply. It reeked of old dust, humidity and some sort of perfume that had turned sour.

Puzzled, she straightened back up. This doll seemed to not fit in with the rest of the scene.

Neither did the rosary binding the deceased's hands together.

As if the crime had been committed by more than one individual.

A violent gust of wind suddenly whipped the curtains again, and the cold forced her to wrap her arms around her torso. She really should have put on warmer clothing before coming in here.

Not exactly sure what she was looking for, she decided to hurry her inspection along. She went around the bed and walked over to the nightstand. Nothing had changed since this morning, when she had leant over Solange's face.

The small handheld mirror caught her attention again. She knelt by the nightstand and began examining it attentively. This time, she understood what her mind had been trying to tell her earlier. Traces of white powdery residue were visible on the right side of the mirror's silver frame.

Marie-Andrée had seen enough. She had a better grasp on the situation, although all of her hypotheses were still rather circumstantial at the moment. She left the room, turned the key in the lock and walked over to Annie's room. The loud snoring coming from Harvey's den reassured her; Linda had unabashedly fallen asleep.

As Annie wasn't in her room, she left the key to Solange's bedroom on her computer monitor so she could easily find it when next she came in.

She closed the door behind her and, quiet as a mouse, walked away on the tip of her toes, trying to contain her growing trepidation.

## 19

The freezing rain had stopped, leaving in its wake a disaster of dazzling beauty. Upon entering the forest, Marie-Andrée was immediately seized by anguish, like a visitor discovering the morbid trappings of an unknown temple.

All around her, the trees had hunched over, dragged down by the weight of the ice binding their branches. Frozen to the ground, the tips of the branches rustled restlessly in the wind, trying to free themselves.

The numerous detours imposed by the crisscross of frozen branches made the trek tiresome. Her first concern was to not wander too far away from the trail she'd seen the trio take as she was returning to the house the day before.

The temperature was dropping; the cold would soon transform the patches of ice hanging above her head into deadly projectiles. She had to hurry.

After about twenty minutes of difficult progression, she thought she heard the screech of a shovel plowing the ground a few dozen meters ahead of her. She was not alone in these woods. Panting, she paused for a moment to calm her breathing and tried to locate the area she had heard the sharp hits coming from.

She ventured a few hesitant steps, careful to avoid breaking the dead branches trapped in the ice. Suddenly, the noise stopped.

Bypassing the trunk of a tall maple tree that had fallen across the trail, she noticed a little clearing up ahead. In the dying light of day, she saw a silhouette leaning with both hands against the handle of a shovel. His face red and glistening with sweat, Harvey was staring at the ground, his laboured breathing transforming into little emissions of vapour in the glacial air.

Bending a knee, he stretched his arm out and removed a metal box from the hole he had just dug up. Leaning against his shovel, he straightened back up with obvious difficulty.

Suddenly, a cry rang out in the woods behind Marie-Andrée, accompanied by the rustling of branches and the squeal of footsteps trying to navigate the icy ground.

“Dad? Dad, where are you?”

“Mister Simard? Please answer!”

Marie-Andrée turned her head in the direction where the cries were coming from. She recognized Annie and Michael’s voices. She had to take action, else she would be spotted and give off the impression that she was spying on each and every one of them. She decided to try and approach Harvey.

Taken aback, he stared at her as she walked over to him. Fatigue had kicked in; his entire body was trembling, as if old age had suddenly befallen him in the span of mere hours.

“Do you need any help, monsieur Simard?” tried the young woman gently.

Harvey Simard no longer resembled the determined man she had met the day before.

“I’m so tired...”

“Come. Sit on this large stump for a moment. You’ve had a rough day. What’s that box you’ve got there?”

Harvey let Marie-Andrée help him sit down on the stump. The shovel fell to the ground. The box trembled in his clenched hands. He couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

The din of cracking branches made them turn their heads. Wearing anxious looks on their faces, Annie and Michael appeared at the edge of the clearing and stopped a few meters away from them.

“Dad,” said Annie in a broken voice, “why did you take the box out of the hole? How did you know we’d buried it here?”

Harvey took a moment to catch his breath before finally replying in a scratchy voice:

“While we were hauling the generator back to the house, Thomas let it slip that... you three had come into the woods yesterday... It piqued my interest... It was hardly the ideal weather... to go and take a trek, what with all that rain we had.”

“But you didn’t see us either go in or walk back out of the forest. How did you guess we’d come to bury something here?”

Interspersed with a fit of hollow coughing, Michael’s words were hard to make out.

“When I went looking for walking sticks in the shed, I noticed that the shovel hadn’t been hung back on its hook properly. It had been left leaning against the wall; the dirt on the metal was still wet. Thinking back on your little forest expedition, I connected the dots... I followed your tracks to this clearing. When I got here, I noticed that the ground around this area had been upturned.”

Tense, Michael and Annie stared at each other. Trying to keep her voice calm, she said:

“Dad... Some secrets should remain... buried. That box belonged to mom. If she hadn’t been confined to her wheelchair, I’m sure she would have recuperated it and destroyed it. I discovered it in the attic purely by accident.”

“Annie’s right, mister Simard,” tried Michael in a wheezing voice. “Please, let us put it back in the ground.”

His plea was interrupted by a new bout of coughing. Quickly retrieving a bronchodilator from his pocket, he started puffing on it, inhaling deeply each time, trembling all the while like a spent swimmer trying to catch his breath.

Marie-Andrée held Harvey’s gaze as he looked up at her inquisitively, but was mindful to not interfere. Understanding her stance, he lowered his eyes to stare at the box adorned with faded decorations and, in an irritated voice, croaked:

“You gave yourself permission, you two and Thomas, to open this box and find out what it contained. Solange was my wife before she was your mother. I have the right to know what she’d kept hidden from me all these years...”

Clasping the box in his left arm, Harvey started unsealing the lid using little blows from his right hand. The lid creaked before popping up in one of the corners. Slipping his index finger under it, he flipped it upwards, provoking an odd bum note of tinsplate that took Marie-Andrée by surprise.

She walked over to Harvey and stared down inside the box. The smell of old mouldy biscuits dissipated around them in the glacial air.

On a white piece of cloth soiled with brownish stains lay the mummified remains of a three or four month old human foetus. With the passage of time, its skin had taken on the quality of brown leather, but its human features were still easily discernable; its withered and shrivelled limbs

seemed fully formed. A dessicated rose had been lodged between the little cadaver and the side of the box.

Tears were streaming down Annie's cheeks. Michael went and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. They looked just as they had when, once, long ago, he had told her: "Don't cry Annie... Don't cry... Girls... Real girls, I mean... Real girls don't cry..."

Feeling pity for the poor thing, Harvey extended his index finger towards the little body and examined the hardness of it; it felt like a wodden sculpture. Between his thumb and forefinger, he lifted the corpse by its frail shoulder and placed it down on its back. The child was female.

Sorrow permeated Harvey's features. Michael was crumpling under the strain of the moment. Somewhat inopportunately, he blurted out:

"I saw this fascinating show once, about the mummification of human bodies in the Ural desert, dating back five thousand years... This foetus must have been mummified by the combined effects of hot dry air and the constant aeration coming in through the hole in the eaves surrounding the attic's floor. The metal box must have served as insulation, protecting it against bacteria..."

The other three remained silent. Realizing the unease he had unintentionally helped to aggravate with his documentary maker verbiage, Michael stopped talking, even more confused now.

Before Harvey could place the mummified foetus back in its original position, Marie-Andrée asked:

"Did you check to see if the box contained anything else, a document perhaps?"

Confronted with Annie and Michael's stunned reactions, Marie-Andrée deduced that they hadn't even

thought about exploring the contents of the box, so traumatized had they been by the sight of the little cadaver.

Harvey lifted the piece of cloth, revealing a yellowed piece of parchment that had been folded into fours. He unfolded it; an inscription written in faded violet ink was still discernable: ‘R.I.P. Suzanne, August 10th 1997.’

His whole body trembling, he raised his eyes and stared gloomily at the trio.

“So this was Solange’s dark secret.”

Then, fixing his gaze on his daughter, he added:

“I must know, Annie. This child, is it...?”

“Dad! How can you even...! No, it wasn’t mine.”

Harvey hung his head.

“Please forgive me, Annie. It must be Solange’s child then. She was thirty-nine at the time. It’s not inconceivable... Her own mother had a stillborn child when she was forty-four... But I know it’s not mine. By that time, we had long since stopped having relations.

Shameful and furious, Annie’s face flushed. Marie-Andrée was hesitant to intervene. She feared that the tension that kept escalating minute by minute would end in a confrontation that would surely tip this family down from the uneasy equilibrium of its balancing act. She had to find a way to allay the tension and draw the burden of their discomfort onto another subject. Faced with their aggressive attitude, in a calm voice she said:

“Michael, you’re the expert here, what should we do with the foetus? Is there a ritual of some kind we need to perform before putting it back in the ground?”

Surprise crossed the other three’s faces. She had bet big, but it had been enough to help ease the tension. Harvey let out a sigh and fumbled with the lid, trying to place it back on top of the box.

“Forget religious shenanigans. Annie was right. We should have left things buried in the past. Isn’t that right, Michael?”

The young man opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“Are you insinuating that this foetus has something to do with the accusations Mrs. Simard made concerning me last night?”

“What do you think?” replied Harvey, kneeling down on the ground to place the box back in its hole.

Annie released Michael’s arm and went to pick up the shovel lying next to the little grave.

“Annie?” tried Michael.

She didn’t answer, instead throwing a fist shovelful of dirt on top of the box, creating a hollow rustling sound that chilled the three spectators to the bone. Michael raised his voice.

“Annie, listen to me... Everything your mother said is true. She seduced me and made me into her plaything. But I am not the father of that child. It’s impossible. I had stopped seeing you guys a year before the date mentioned on that piece of paper. I had gone off to study in Montreal to get as far away from her and her influence as possible.”

Annie stopped filling up the grave for a moment and raised her eyes towards him; her features seemed distorted by sorrow. She shrugged and threw another shovelful of dirt in the small grave.

They watched on as she delicately patted the dirt with her shovel to make the mound level with the ground. Once she’d finished, she stood there over the grave, her gaze lowered. Michael was unable to hold back the bouts of coughing assailing him.

After a moment, Harvey simply said:

“Marie-Andrée, could you accompany Michael back to

the house? This cold is going to be the death of him. I would like a moment alone with Annie.”

The young woman led her companion back to the trail, following the distinct tracks they had left in the crust of ice covering the ground. She kept playing the scene that had just transpired over and over in her mind, trying to avoid jumping to the inevitable conclusion.

Hesitatingly, Michael followed her, wheezing all the way. His laboured breathing forced him to regularly spit out the phlegm that had accumulated in his lungs because of the glacial air. But if Michael and Harvey both had a strong alibi concerning the paternity of that child, on whom could she now place her suspicions? Had Solange...

Michael’s coughing fit forced her out of her reflection. Marie-Andrée ordered a halt so he could catch his breath.

“The house isn’t burning, Michael, it’s not like we’re in a rush to save anyone.”

“Yes, there is someone who needs rescuing. Thomas.”

“Thomas? You think he...”

“Murdered Solange? Yes! Learning that his best friend had been having an affair with his very own mother must have plunged him into despair. We have to be there for him, in case he tries doing something irreparable to himself...”

Furtive images of the ‘therapy sessions’ she had orchestrated for Thomas jumbled together in her mind like billiard balls colliding on the felt. The memories started amalgamating without rhyme or reason. Was it possible that, in a fit of rage, Thomas had found a solution to erase the memory of Michael being in Solange’s arms by outright eliminating her?

Everything pointed in that direction. The fury he had manifested as he had kept taking his frustrations out on the inflatable sex doll, his great despair, his silences, his impotency...

But something seemed off about her assessment. Solange had been killed by a single blow from a hand-held weapon. By someone who knew exactly where to strike to obtain maximum results on the very first try. It could not have been made by the hand of a nervous man, made furious by the incendiary words of a woman who had humiliated him in front of everyone. Marie-Andrée had observed Thomas carefully during their encounters; he had a tendency to lose control when confronted with stressful situations.

A man so dominated by his emotions would have kept striking the body repeatedly. It was, however, more his style to succumb to the kind of scenario where he would bind her hands with a rosary in a caricatural pose, as if to express one last time his rancour and his irony.

But who else could have killed Solange? Had all the members of the family, including Linda and Michael, cultivated so much hatred in their hearts over the years that they had somehow managed to convince themselves of eliminating her?

They resumed walking in silence. At the edge of the woods, they started hearing the first signs of civilization, the loud rattling sounds of chainsaws coming from the highway. Straight as a razor blade, a horizontal incision the color of vanilla had torn the canopy of heavy grey clouds hanging above their heads. Night was falling.

Marie-Andrée looked to the south, towards the village where her mother had set up shop. An incandescent yellow dome loomed above the tall trees on the horizon. She didn't have time to think further on the question that kept rattling in her mind.

At the height of nervousness, Michael cried out:

“The highway will be open soon. I have to speak with Thomas, now! Quickly, let's go.”

“I think it would be preferable if I were there when you talk to him,” stated the young woman, holding him back by the arm.

“You think he might become violent?”

“I strongly doubt that, but I also have a few questions for him.”



On the first floor, in the drab light of the dying day, they came face to face with Thomas, who was just coming out of the bathroom. His shaved face showed traces of cuts he had tried to blot with specks of tissue paper. Fine droplets of red smudged the towel he had thrown over his shoulder.

Faced with their worried looks, he grumbled:

“What? I’m not used to shaving with a safety razor. Even with the water your mother heated up in the fondue pot, I managed to nick myself in a few spots.”

“Marie-Andrée and I need to have a talk with you, Thomas. Let’s go into my room.”

Thomas opened his eyes wide, then scowled before following them into his childhood friend’s bedroom.

The Jansenist crucifix oscillated in an almost imperceptible manner when Michael slammed the door shut behind them. Marie-Andrée stared at the strange object of worship. No doubt about it, the emaciated corpse truly did have the aspect of a crude weapon.

As Michael was filling Thomas in on the scene that had just played out in the forest, she approached it to examine it with care. Its resemblance to a dagger was evident. The slender legs of the Christ figurine had the shape of a crude

blade. A vigorous blow dealt directly to the heart of a defenseless woman lying on her back could have caused a quick death...

Thomas' emphatic protestations pulled her out of her reflection.

"Yes! Of course I had a motive! Yes! Solange became pregnant because of me!"

Thomas was trembling from head to toe. He tried to control his inner turmoil by adopting a tone of voice intended to sound calm.

"She had admitted it to me. When you broke away from all of us to go hide in your religious hokum over in Montreal, she decided to set her sights on me next. Dad was never home. I was all pimply, unstable, scared of life. I was heading nowhere fast. In college, I started smoking pot. I felt rejected by everybody. If a good pious boy like you succumbed to my mother's wiles, imagine how easy it was for her to transform me into her own private gigolo. But I have no idea how her pregnancy got aborted. She probably did it herself, in this house. But why keep the foetus? At the time, I suppose it was probably a way to blackmail me. But her car accident ruined all of her plans. She couldn't go up into the attic and remove that box to get rid of it, and she could hardly ask anyone for help without revealing its presence. It had to take Annie searching for old pictures up there for us to discover it."

"Why did you never tell me what your mother was making you endure at the time?"

"How could I have trusted a friend, the only one I had ever had in my life up to that point, who had fled to Montreal without any justification other than wanting to become a priest?"

"I felt guilty... Shameful..."

“Then you know exactly how I felt!”

Both men stopped talking, completely distraught. Marie-Andrée had the impression that not everything had been revealed. Michael coughed again and wiped his mouth with a tissue.

She surprised herself by realizing that most of the principal characters in this tragedy seemed ill somehow, physically or morally, as if a curse had befallen this family, crushing it. It was time for her to intervene, and she wasn't about to do so lightly:

“Thomas, tell me, why did you go into your mother's bedroom last night?”

The young man raised his head, afflicted and resolute all at once.

“How did you know that I did?”

“I got a first inkling this morning when I walked over to both of you to announce that Mrs. Simard had died. Michael was obviously not aware of the situation since he was the first to run off to the house. You seemed to hesitate for a moment and looked at me as if you were about to speak. Then, you went and followed Michael, from afar. And you should know that Annie opened the door for me a few hours ago to let me examine the scene of the crime. I noticed traces of cocaine on the mirror on the nightstand. And you're the only one of us who uses hard drugs...”

Thomas let out a long sigh of resignation.

“All right, look. I... I did go into her room last night. But I didn't kill her! She was already dead when I got there. The cocaine, that was for, you know, trying to get over seeing my mom's dead body. I snorted two lines of the last packet I had left that I was trying not to use. That's why I accepted that joint you offered me last night instead. The only reason I went to see her was because I wanted to ask

her to go back on her decision and lend me some money so I could pay Linda back what I owe her.”

Thomas seemed assailed by a violent emotion. He cried out:

“Why don’t you just come clean, Michael?”

“What? I didn’t kill your mother!”

In a firm voice, Marie-Andrée interrupted their altercation.

“First you need to explain yourself, Thomas!”

Thomas shook his head.

“I’d had too much to drink; her words kept resonating in my mind. I just couldn’t calm down, I was so angry. I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking that I had to try one last time to reason with her. Around three-thirty, I went and checked the door to her bedroom; it wasn’t locked. I swear to you, when I went in, she was already dead. The crucifix was still in her chest. I assumed Michael was the one who had murdered her; I had noticed the crucifix when I went over to his apartment to pay him a visit the other day. It became immediately apparent to me that he had avenged himself for the revelations mom had made about him over supper. I took it out of her chest and cleaned it up. While you were in the kitchen this morning, I went to your room and put it back in its place. I was about to confront you and force you to confess when Marie-Andrée came out and told us about mom’s death. I was trying to help you, Michael, from being accused of the murder... Even after all these years, friendship is friendship...”

Michael became supplicating.

“But Thomas, I did not kill her! I swear! Solange had grabbed the crucifix from my room while all three of us were out in the woods. She told me so herself when she confronted me in her bedroom, just before the blackout.

She said she had hidden it away in a safe place, I don't know where... She felt scared for her life... She told me that it was an object that could prove very useful should someone ever need to defend themselves... Or attack someone. From what she told me, she was anticipating a rather eventful evening. So I can only assume she had already planned on making a scene..."

Both men turned to stare at Marie-Andrée, still silent.

She looked at them in turn, her eyes charged with emotion.

"Until proven otherwise, I don't think I'm mistaken in believing that both of you are innocent. In spite of the hostility you felt towards Mrs. Simard, neither of you is capable of posing such an action. Michael, because your religious principles prevent you from taking a life, but mostly because you wouldn't have been stupid enough to leave your crucifix in her chest and incriminate yourself. And Thomas, because I know you found other ways of venting the burden of your hatred. If you had wanted to commit such a murder, you would have done it a long time ago, am I right?"

Michael stammered:

"I... I don't understand..."

"Thomas gets my meaning. That's all you need to know. It will be his responsibility to explain his actions to the police during the investigation. But you have to admit it wasn't the brightest of ideas to go and do a line of coke in your mother's bedroom next to her body."

Thomas hung his head.

"Everything in its own time," he replied quietly to the woman who would forever remain Vicky to him.

"I'll leave you guys alone. Try and use this opportunity to clear the air between the two of you. I have matters to attend to."

## 20

Only later would Marie-Andrée look back with bitter sadness on these somber moments when the course of her life had abruptly veered off in an unexpected direction...

Before anything, she had to make sure that she was mistaken and that the hypothesis that kept obsessing her more and more had no real basis in fact.

Quickly, she walked to the end of the corridor and went into the room that had been set aside for her and her mother. She frowned in disappointment: her mother wasn't there. She inspected the furniture for a moment, hesitated, then went to open the wardrobe door wide; numerous cardboard boxes had been stacked on the floor up to the bottom of the slipcovers hanging on a rod...

Clutching a plastic garment bag in her hand, she came across Annie in the staircase.

"You doing okay?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

"Yes. Dad decided to stay outside for a few moments. I think he didn't want to cry in front of me. He went to sit in a lawn chair inside the shed. I say it's a little late for sorrow."

"Annie, try and put yourself in his shoes..."

"No, it's all right... What I can't forgive is how he thought I could possibly have had a child as a teen... Oh,

and enough with the whining. I'll go freshen up a little and change; my clothes are still wet from our walk in the woods and I'm starting to get cold. What I wouldn't give to be able to go on the Internet and find out when this damn blackout is going to end!"

"It shouldn't be long now. We started hearing the buzzing of chainsaws coming from the highway. If we're lucky, maybe the phone company will have sent some of its employees to accompany the detachment of Hydro-Québec workers? In the meantime, I'll go see if mom needs any help in the kitchen."

"You should take care of yourself, Marie-Andrée! You've got bags under your eyes. And you're losing your voice."

Marie-Andrée answered with a weary shrug before heading down the stairs.

As she entered the kitchen, she thought she heard loud voices coming from outside. Her mother's absence only served to increase the restlessness that had crept up on her ever since she had noticed the glow of lights coming from the village reflected in the cloudy sky.

The imprecise conversation continued outside. She went to hide the plastic garment bag behind the refrigerator.

She unhooked the telephone. Nothing. She turned around; the flashlight her mother had used to retrieve provisions from the cellar still lay on the table.

A perfect opportunity to go and explore the basement!

Flashlight in hand, she went down the small staircase without hurry. The batteries had given the best of themselves and now projected but a pale halo of yellow light along the worn steps.

Stepping onto the cement floor, she shone the wavering

beam towards the back wall before walking over to it gingerly. The luminous circle stretched along the wall until she spotted the plywood panel to which had been screwed the little junction boxes for the house's telephone lines, next to the electric panel.

The wiring caught her attention. For a brief instant, she thought she was hallucinating because of fatigue; she leaned in closer to make sure. No doubt about it! The plugs were held suspended in their holes to give the illusion that they were still connected! Her pulse quickened. She pushed them firmly back into their respective outlets; the familiar clicking noise broke the silence.

But that would mean...? Someone had actually unplugged all of the phones?

She shone the faint beam along the electrical panel until she found the master switch made of black plastic mounted on the circuit breaker. It had been lowered.

Her heart started beating faster and faster, making her ears ring. She shoved the lever upwards... A loud slam rang out, startling her, and she let out an 'Ahhh!' of surprise.

Immediately, a lightbulb went on in the cellar; the motors of the oil furnace, the freezer and the pump for the water tank started up in unison. Coming from the kitchen upstairs, she heard the loud clacking noise of the stove's electrical resistor and the muted whisper of the refrigerator's motor coming alive.

A muffled cry from Annie filtered through the open door:

"My computer! My computer's working again! The power's back on! Marie-Andrée, come see!"

The flashlight twitched in Marie-Andrée's hand. So far, her hypothesis still held water. One of them had simulated the second blackout. Who could possibly have been

advantaged by forcing all of them to remain confined in such a harrowing predicament?

Tense to the extreme, she climbed up the stairs, now illuminated by the kitchen's fluorescent ceiling light.

Reaching the last step, she noticed that the exchange coming from outside had become more frantic. She recognized the voices of Harvey and Gisèle, who seemed to be talking animatedly with a visitor. Marie-Andrée went down the hallway.

Through the window in the door, she noticed the indistinct silhouettes of Harvey, Gisèle and a woman she'd never seen before.

The conversation had become louder and she could now make out their words more easily. The newcomer's protests became even more emphatic.

"Mrs. Simard herself asked me to come over this morning! I couldn't make my way here sooner because of the state of the roads. Why can't I speak with her?"

Harvey and Gisèle's quiet explanations hardly seemed to appease the woman's agitation. Visibly emotional, Michael and Thomas came running down the stairs and joined Marie-Andrée at the door. Michael put away the bronchodilator he had just used back in his pocket and started taking deep breaths. Arriving at that moment, Annie exclaimed:

"Did you guys notice? The power's back on."

"That was me," replied Marie-Andrée.

"WHAT?" exclaimed the other three in a unified voice.

"I'll explain later."

"What's going on outside?" asked Michael.

"I have no idea. But they seem to be having quite a lively discussion. Do any of you know who that woman is?"

"I can't really see who it is through the curtain," muttered Thomas.

“They’re bound to come in eventually,” tried Marie-Andrée.

Annie blurted out:

“Wait a minute: if someone managed to make their way here, then that means...”

“That the highway is finally open,” cut off Marie-Andrée.

“Ah...”

“How’s Linda doing?”

“I went to take a peek in the den earlier; she was slumbering like a hibernating bear,” announced Annie.

Harvey and Gisèle opened the door, holding up a grief-stricken Juliette who kept baying pitiful sobs. Standing straight as posts, Michael and Thomas were flabbergasted by the spectacle of the nurse in the throes of an ear-splitting fit of hysterics.

“Juliette???” cried Annie.

Marie-Andrée held the door open to let the three newcomers inside. Harvey’s gait was made hesitant, hampered by the nurse who kept interrupting his steps to stammer in a tearful voice:

“I can’t... It’s not true! Tell me it’s not true! I don’t want to believe it...”

When she reached Marie-Andrée, she suddenly started shouting at the top of her lungs:

“Mrs. Simard!!! Mrs. Simard!!! Answer me!!!!!”

“Come and sit with us in the living room, Juliette. Let us help you,” kept repeating Harvey, visibly troubled by the newcomer’s despair.

“Who’s that? What is she doing here?”

All heads turned to stare at Linda, draped in a wool bedspread, standing in front of the door to the den, her hair mussed up and her eyelids still puffy with sleep. The bear seemed to have woken in a bad mood.

“We’ll explain later,” snapped Annie. “Juliette needs to lie down. Thomas, go and pour her a drop of Cognac, will you? Mrs. Marcotte, would you mind fetching a basin of cold water and a towel, please? Come, Juliette, you’ll be more comfortable in the living room. It’s warmer there.”

A quizzical look on her face, Marie-Andrée watched the strange procession rush into the living room in chaotic fashion. Coming from the single lamp that had been turned on, diffuse lighting filtered to her through the archway. Juliette’s sobs resumed, twice as loud. Someone had probably helped her lie down. The sound of a poker rattling around the hearth of the fireplace punctuated fragments of unintelligible phrases. The neck of a bottle chimed against the rim of a glass.

Shaking her head, Marie-Andrée went back into the kitchen.

Her mother had a worried look on her face.

“You all right, mom?”

Gisèle answered by muttering through clenched teeth:

“Why the hell did she come here?”

“I suppose she’s going to tell us eventually, once she’s quieted down. She’s still troubled by the revelation of Mrs. Simard’s death. Do you know her?”

“A little... She’s a client...”

Without adding a word, Gisèle opened the door to the cupboard under the sink and retrieved a white plastic bowl hanging on a nail.

Washing the basin out for a moment, she let the faucet run to fill it up before taking out a dish towel and draping it over her forearm like a maniple. She grabbed the basin with both hands. Little eddies swayed back and forth along the surface of the water as she walked, reflecting the ceiling light.

“Hold the door for me, please?”

Marie-Andrée opened the door to the living room and let her mother through. Her face tense, she hesitated for a moment, then looked dourly around the kitchen. Making her decision on the spur of the moment, she went and retrieved the plastic garment bag she had hidden behind the refrigerator, concealing it beneath her shirt. Lost in thought, she went and joined the others in the living room.

Not one of them had thought of turning on more lights; as the group bent over Juliette in concern, the single lamp, fitted with a low wattage lightbulb, shone around them dramatically, creating an atmosphere straight out of a de La Tour painting. To Marie-Andrée, the drone of clichéd encouragements everyone was doling out to the nurse in turn appeared somewhat forced. Only Annie remained apart, both perplexed and disconcerted. Her eyes crossed Marie-Andrée’s for a moment before looking away.

The nurse kept hiccupping incoherent sentences.

“In danger... She knew... But I didn’t know... Come and pick me up tomorrow morning, she said... Needed to protect herself... Hide...”

“Hide? Hide from whom?” asked Harvey.

“I don’t know... She had promised she would explain everything.”

The members of the Simard family stared on in stunned silence.

Gisèle put down the basin on a low table next to the sofa. With the moistened dish towel, she started dabbing Juliette’s temples as the woman tried avoiding her gaze. Her body trembled as she whimpered, like a little puppy deprived of its mother.

Unsure what to do, they all stared at her. Juliette’s revelation disconcerted them all.

Using a bellows, Michael went to revive the embers lying under the firewood piled in the hearth. Grousing, he coughed and gasped for air before spitting into a tissue paper and throwing it into the fire. Replacing the fireguard in front of the hearth, he hung the bellows on the wall and went back to join the group. In a bleak voice, he said:

“I get the feeling that Solange had been preparing this scenario for a long time. She must have decided to assain her masterpiece by humiliating all of us with her revelations. Following the scene she made at the dinner table last night, she must have known that living alongside her husband and her daughter was no longer an option. Thomas and I hardly represented a problem for her, since we both live in Montreal. And Linda would likely never step foot inside this house ever again anyways. No, something else was troubling her... It might have had something to do with the contents of that box... Perhaps she wanted to get as far away from here as possible so she wouldn't have to deal with any of us anymore...”

For the first time in the last two days, the irritating jingle of the telephone rang out. Everyone looked at each other, uncertain what to do. Linda immediately jumped on the phone.

“It must be the Prime Minister calling me... Hello?”

She scowled and, in a bitter voice, barked:

“No! This isn't Mrs. Worryfree! Why don't you buy some glasses to read the phone book, you old birdbrain!”

She slammed the receiver down on its base.

“There should be a law against idiots!!”

Mrs. Marcotte stretched out her arm to dab Juliette's face again. The nurse's sudden movement to push her hand away didn't slip anyone's notice.

There reigned an atmosphere of confusion and unease in the living room, as if the lights coming back on had

exposed bitter thoughts, hidden away for the last two days under ice and fog.

“Juliette, do you know my mother?” asked Marie-Andrée softly.

Her eyes darting about, the nurse hesitated.

Gisèle preempted her reply:

“She’s visited my shop many times. She would bring Mrs. Simard in her car.”

Then, rather matter-of-factly, Gisèle continued in a friendly tone:

“Anybody want a spot of tea? I’ll go and infuse some. It’s a good thing the power finally came back on.”

She was already leaving, heading towards the kitchen.

Tense, Juliette kept staring at her as she sank further down into the corner of the sofa. The silence was palpable.

“I’m the one who turned it back on, mom,” almost shouted Marie-Andrée.

“Did you?” replied Gisèle.

She froze before half-turning towards her daughter.

“What made you want to go down into the cellar?”

“Please come back and sit with us, mom. I’d like to clear up a few things. I think we all need to have a talk.”

As Marie-Andrée was helping her mother take a seat, Linda shouted:

“Who the hell do you think you are? Columbo?”

“Shut up, Linda,” intervened Harvey. “I’m the one who asked her to try and solve what’s happened here.”

Marie-Andrée perched herself on the armrest of the heavy chair. In an emotionless voice, she began talking.

“One of us cut the power and unplugged the telephone wires. I just found out.”

There was an eruption of protests.

“What?”

“Why?”

“Impossible!”

Her face flushed with anger, Linda started ranting.

“You mean we nearly froze to death for nothing? And the Prime Minister couldn’t get in touch with me because of one of you? Well, I can’t wait to see who’s responsible for this farce, because I, for one, am not laughing. Whoever it is, they’ll have me to contend with.”

Marie-Andrée was shrouded in anguish. She would have to deal with the uproar sure to follow her revelations, but she could no longer hide the truth. She resolved to see this through.

“Please, let me speak.”

The murmurs trailed off.

“The first blackout was genuine; we all know that. It was confirmed by the announcer of that regional radio station Thomas managed to tune in to. Mrs. Simard’s... murder occurred during this first blackout, but, as of yet, at an undetermined time. I employ the word murder, even though it could have been an unpremeditated and involuntary act... The police investigation should prove so if it turns out to be the case.”

“You mean it could have been an accident?” asked Michael.

“Only the person who committed the crime can tell us...”

“But,” exclaimed Thomas, “how could one of us have created a blackout in the house without the others finding out? We were always in each other’s presence. Surely someone would have noticed...”

“We should first determine who was actually present inside the house when the sabotage occurred. Mister Simard and I were walking towards the highway at the time, trying

to assess the state of the roads. And... Mrs. Simard was already dead by then.”

“So that only left the four of us: Thomas, Michael, Annie and I,” exclaimed Linda. “Well, I can already tell you that I had locked myself inside Harvey’s den. I repeat: I have a phobia of cadavers, and I really didn’t want to have anything to do with you lot anymore.”

“And I had gone up to my room,” intervened Thomas. “I played a little guitar to try and calm my nerves. Others must have heard me. I know I could hear Michael coughing in his room. So that gives us an alibi, no? And you, Annie, where were you when all of this was going down?”

“After opening the window in mom’s bedroom and turning off the heating, Mrs. Marcotte and I left the room and I locked the door behind us. Mrs. Marcotte went inside the kitchen and I went back to my room to try and call the SQ on my phone. I dialed it numerous times, but all I got was a recorded message. After a few minutes, I tried again; the phone had gone dead. And that’s when the second blackout occurred...”

She suddenly froze.

“But, Marie-Andrée, that means that one of us...”

The young woman draped her arm around her mother’s hunched shoulders, as if to protect her.

“Only you could have had the opportunity to do it, mom, isn’t that right? No one paid you any attention. No one even thought of including you on the list of suspects. Linda herself even said: ‘It only left the four of us...’”

She cradled her mother’s shoulder and, in a quiet voice, asked:

“Can you explain to us what happened, mom?”

Gisèle let out a long weary sigh.

“I think you already know. Yes, it’s true, I did cut off

the power, and the telephone lines. I needed some time to think about...”

“Don’t say another word, mom!”

Gisèle stared at her daughter intensely, let out a long sigh of resignation and sank back into the chair.

The small gathering looked utterly defeated. In a voice devoid of emotion, Gisèle Marcotte started recounting the events:

“It happened this morning, while many of you were outside...”

“Mom, you should wait for the police to get here before you say something you might regret...”

“Marie-Andrée’s right,” agreed Harvey immediately. “I’m still a lawyer, you know! Mrs. Marcotte doesn’t need to reveal anything without a lawyer being present.”

“But I want to!” shouted Gisèle.

She frumpled the wet dish towel in her hands.

“I had decided to turn the power back on tomorrow morning, after having thought one more night on how I was going to confess my actions to you all. But Marie-Andrée deduced the truth too quickly... I went down to the cellar to disconnect the wires; then I turned the power off for the entire house. I came back up just in time to come face to face with Annie, who was coming into the kitchen in search of some candles. I had just closed the door to the cellar; she almost caught me in the act.”

She interrupted herself, as if trying to find the right words.

In a shaky voice, Marie-Andrée whispered:

“You also killed Mrs. Simard, didn’t you? I found your blouse in our room.”

Almost regretfully, Marie-Andrée took out the garment bag from under her shirt and showed them the blouse that

had been splattered with blood on the front and along the right sleeve.

Everyone's face was tense with stupor. Even Linda, her mouth agape, had been stunned into silence. Livid, Annie stammered:

“But why kill her, Mrs. Marcotte? Why murder an invalid?”

Gisèle hung her head. She no longer resembled the good family woman whose generosity and kind regards had been appreciated by all since the evening before. This time, when she spoke, her voice was firm:

“Because, my poor child, your mother was a cruel woman. She couldn't bear to know that her son Thomas was having a... let's say 'working relation' with my daughter. She would often pay me a visit at my shop and threaten to put me out of business unless I intervene and convince Marie-Andrée to stop frequenting Thomas...”

“Mom...”

“When I learned of this, it hurt me more than you will ever imagine. But I had sworn to myself never to broach the subject with you. I just waited for all of it to end, like a bad nightmare.”

Linda chose that moment to sling a hurtful barb their way. In a low voice, she snarled:

“So I was right. I knew Marie-Andrée was no Mother Teresa.”

“Shut up, Linda!”

Thomas' shout rang out like a shot.

“You want me to shut up? Well it's too late for that, little man. Now everyone knows how you were shagging a whore!”

Michael and Harvey threw themselves on Thomas to stop him from rushing Linda, who went to clutch Annie's

arm for protection. Annie had a hard time hiding her nervousness. She growled:

“Thomas, why don’t you go into my room and try to regain your senses. And call the SQ and ask them to come over here while you’re at it.”

“Fine, I’ll go.”

He threw Linda such a hostile glare that she clutched Annie’s arm even tighter.

“Mrs. Marcotte, perhaps we should wait for the police,” tried Harvey politely.

“I feel no shame in confessing to everything...”

She took a deep breath to try and control the sobs surging in her throat.

“Mrs. Simard had threatened me that she would tell all of her friends and her acquaintances that... that Marie-Andrée was a... a...”

“An escort, mom. You can say it; at this point, it won’t change anything...”

“I say it in my mind, sweetie, but not in words. It’s just too disheartening for me. Annie, your mother had begun putting even more pressure on me. She had the support of that Pouliot lady on the municipal council to cause me all sorts of troubles; I kept getting fines for the slightest piece of paper lying on the ground in front of my shop, even when it had been because of a negligent customer. A columnist from the local paper started writing groundless gossip about the quality of my home products. A large part of my clientele went away. I began having trouble paying the rent. The mortgage on the building, paying back the loan I had taken out at the Caisse populaire to purchase everything I needed for my kitchen, paying off the vendors and the contractors... It came to a point where I couldn’t even pay myself a salary anymore. I couldn’t pay off my taxes and all of those fees. I just couldn’t make ends meet.”

“Is that why you asked me to lend you some money the other day?” breathed Marie-Andrée. “Why didn’t you tell me the kind of trouble you were in?”

“I didn’t want you knowing that I had found out about your choice of lifestyle. I wanted you to continue believing that my little enterprise could still prosper, in the hopes that you would one day come back to me, as if nothing had happened. I just wanted to give you a fresh start, sweetie, to help you begin a new life...”

“Poor mom... If you only knew how much I was thinking the same thing... I had made the decision to get a job around here. If only you’d spoken of this to me earlier...”

“I felt too ashamed to mention it to you. I was too humiliated to let you know that she was blackmailing me to distance her son from you. You have to understand, I was in a vice; I couldn’t tell you about Mrs. Simard and her son without admitting that I knew about your... various activities.”

“But who on Earth could have revealed all of this to her?” asked Annie in a pained voice.

“Well this little Columbo is pretty naive, if you ask me,” declared Linda. “I’ll tell you who. Counselor Comeau, obviously! He’s not only the party’s treasurer. He’s also the man in charge of keeping the MP’s in check. He’s got files on everyone. He even uses cameras to film those he suspects of being... how to put it... philanderers, shall we say, the ones who cheat on their wives, the ones who prefer the company of... girls like Marie-Andrée. You know, sex workers. Oh! I’m so sorry, I mean ‘escorts’... That’s how they got to you, Harvey. And you as well, Thomas. You were being filmed without your knowledge.”

“That would explain why I had the impression someone had moved the table in the warehouse,” murmured Marie-Andrée.

Everyone was embarrassed. Silence hung heavy between them for a few seconds.

Then, in a low voice, Michael ventured:

“Okay, but... Is that really a good reason to take the law into your own hands...?”

Gisèle raised her head to stare at them, fire in her eyes.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be old, to be afraid of losing what little you have, and all because a viper one day uncovered a family secret. One can forget one’s past, but no one can forget the future. And for me, that future was with my only daughter. It’s easy to lose track of people we’ve known in the past, even forget them in time when we begin to no longer see them very much. But you can never forget your child. Because that child represents your own survival, your reason for being.”

The group exchanged furtive glances. Each of them was thinking about the box in the attic whose discovery had signaled the end of this family. But Gisèle’s despair saddened them so that no one dared interrupt her. She was already continuing, her eyes welling up with tears:

“Annie, when you called me to ask if I could prepare a family meal for all of you, I almost managed to say no. But eventually, I came to my senses: I could hardly afford to let pride get the better of me and refuse the money I was being offered. And I persuaded myself that it might just be the ideal occasion to talk with Mrs. Simard in a friendly context and try to reason with her, convince her to stop extorting me. I had absolutely no intention of killing her. But when I heard her announce that she had other revelations to make, I understood that she would never, ever stop trying to hurt Marie-Andrée and I. That she would eventually make us as unhappy as she was. I immediately knew what had to be done.”

“Why take the crucifix?” asked Michael in a broken voice. “You were trying to seed doubt by letting suspicion float over my head?”

Marie-Andrée’s heart tightened. She felt the unease assailing her mother as she was being confronted by all of these questions. Gisèle frowned, but remained calm.

“I didn’t ‘take’ the crucifix, as you say, Michael. I discovered it by accident. When Marie-Andrée went outside to go and take a look at mister Simard’s car, I decided to explore the dining room and the living room. No one had thought of showing me where I would be serving the meal; so I went and examined the walls and the disposition of the furniture. There was no one in the living room at the time. When I saw that one of the couch cushions was misaligned, I went to rearrange it and noticed the head of the Christ figurine poking out from behind it. I pulled on it with the tip of my fingers and, noticing its resemblance to a dagger, I knew I had just found the ideal weapon. I decided to stow it safely away in the kitchen, under napkins in a drawer. During the night, I went and retrieved it from its hiding place. I was determined to prevent Solange Simard from spewing even more bile and gossip, and stop her from tarnishing Thomas and Marie-Andrée’s reputation.”

She stared at the fire burning in the hearth, as if none of that held much importance anymore, all things considered. When she resumed her account of the events again, her hesitating voice had begun to falter.

“I was scared that I had been spotted when I went back up into our room, but Marie-Andrée didn’t notice that it was me standing at the top of the stairs.”

“I was coming back from the bathroom and saw a shadow, that’s all.”

“And I was also the one in the corridor leading to Mrs. Simard’s bedroom when the blackout occurred late in the

afternoon. I know Michael and Annie saw a glimpse of me, but didn't recognize me..."

Both nodded their heads in silence.

"At the time, I was coming to Mrs.' Simard's room to try and beg her to stop blackmailing me. I wanted to speak with her about my daughter, and make her understand that Thomas was the one who had called upon Marie-Andrée. Not the other way around. She had nothing to fear, she wasn't going to lose him. Men don't marry... they don't marry escorts... I was certain that her presence in this house would finally convince her. My little Marie-Andrée is such a sweet girl... I would have told her: 'Why are you attacking us? We never did anything to you!'"

She lowered her head, her features slumped in sorrow. After catching her breath, in a broken voice she muttered:

"But the blackout changed all of that, as if Solange had found the perfect opportunity to strike at everyone... In any case, I think she agreed to let Annie hire my services simply to have a chance to humiliate me in front of all of you... After I... Afterwards, I couldn't sleep for the rest of the night. I heard someone go down the stairs. Most likely to get rid of the dagger, since I didn't see it in the bedroom this morning when Annie opened the door. But I didn't touch the body. I did not place her hands in prayer and I certainly did not leave that doll on her."

Coming back into the living room, Thomas cut in quietly.

"That was me. I removed the crucifix to protect Michael, whom I thought had been responsible for the murder. Why did I place her hands in prayer? I don't know. Probably because I had taken too much coke, I guess. It was instinctive... As for the doll, it was lying on the dresser in the bedroom. I wanted to mock her by suggesting that Solange was pregnant. It was my way of getting a measure

of revenge. After all, she forced me to sleep with her for four years... I think I was the one she was targeting by harassing Mrs. Marcotte and Marie-Andrée like that. She couldn't accept sharing me; she wanted me to belong to her, and only her."

"But what were you doing in her room in the middle of the night?" asked his father in a sharp tone.

"I wanted to ask her one last time to reimburse Linda and spare you the humiliation of letting her get elected in your place. Or, worse yet, spare myself the shame of having to see you help her get elected in your place... That's when I did a line of coke..."

"Poor little momma's boy addict," grumbled Linda bitterly.

Thomas replied by throwing her a baleful glare.

Harvey walked away from her and Annie turned her back on her. Linda started realizing the vacuum forming around her. For a brief instant, her eyes showed a glint of surprise. But soon enough, they reassumed their usual coldness.

"Well! I certainly don't need to be here anymore. If anybody wants me, I'll be in the den. I have important phone calls to make, you know. I have an electoral campaign to run! Whether you all like it or not!"

She stomped away, clicking her heels.

All eyes turned once again on Gisèle Marcotte, who was slowly sinking into mental dissociation. Marie-Andrée bent over to hug her with both arms. She was in a state of shock; just like Solange Simard, her mother had fallen prey to the weakness of loving her child too much. Her whole body trembling, she said to Gisèle:

"Don't worry, mom, my sweet little mommy, I'll take care of you. I'll never let you down..."

Her mother raised her head. Her eyes were drowning in barely contained tears.

“I couldn’t see any other solution, sweetie. It was like a light went off in my mind. She might have been terribly unhappy in life, but she had no right to make people who had never done anything to her pay so dearly...”

An uncomfortable silence followed, punctuated only by Linda’s nasal voice piercing through the closed door to Harvey’s den, until Juliette whispered:

“She also had control over me... Through emotional blackmail...”

Slowly, each of them turned to face her. Sitting straight as a rod on the sofa, her eyes were fixed on her hands as she kept wringing them together.

“I’m the one who performed the abortion. She had learned from a colleague of mine that I had once committed grave professional misconduct which, had it been made public, would have resulted in me getting barred for life from the Quebec order of nurses. I agreed to help her in exchange for her silence. After her accident, she convinced me to take care of her and act as her chauffeur.”

Juliette hesitated for a few seconds. Then, in a low voice, she whispered:

“In the end, we sort of developed a kind of friendship. She never again made allusion to my past...”

Annie opened her mouth, but no words came out. Marie-Andrée hesitated, then went to her.

“Annie?”

The young woman turned around, a blank expression on her face.

Marie-Andrée couldn’t find the right words. She refused herself the right to cry. Then, Annie took her in her arms.

Michael and Thomas had taken a seat on the chesterfield next to the fireplace. In the hearth, the logs had started crumbling into embers. Harvey had sat down next to Juliette and both were conversing quietly.

Feeling utterly abjected, Gisèle started rocking her torso back and forth in her easy chair, the interior tension she was feeling apparent on her face.

Then she raised her eyes to look at her daughter, smiled at her and babbled:

“Do you remember, sweetie, how I used to sing you a song to help you fall asleep when you were a little girl?”

“Mom...”

“I still remember it, you know...”

In a quavering voice that bore straight to their hearts, she started singing softly:

“Talk to me of love,

And speak of tender things...”

Standing in front of the window, in the diffuse light of the late fall afternoon, Annie held Marie-Andrée in her arms.

“Your pretty talk, my heart

Never tires of hearing...”

Their eyes dry, both women contemplated the blinking lights of the police and the ambulance cars as they slowly made their way down the icy pathway.

“As long as forever,

You repeat these supreme words:

I Lo-oo-oove youuu...”

Their isolation had ended.

Real life was resuming its course, minus the happiness.

THE END

# REAL GIRLS DON'T CRY

A wealthy family and a group of select guests find themselves at the mercy of an ice storm assailing the ancestral Quebecois country home. The situation soon becomes dire; it is a crucial time in the lives of these people who no longer love each other, as personal problems start taking their toll on already tense relationships.

Burdened by cruel memories of the past and forced to hide their true feelings from one another, each of them tries to remain calm under the mounting pressure of the stressful atmosphere. But an unexpected development soon triggers an unpredictable reaction, one which will result in murder.

Somewhere in this vast residence located in a remote area lurks a killer. But ice and sleet have made the roads impassable, and now, no one can escape.



Photo : Diane Létourneau

Claude Daigneault served as publicist, journalist (for 24 years), movie critic and script editor for television and cinema. He has authored numerous books, short stories, children's stories and illustrated albums geared towards younger children.