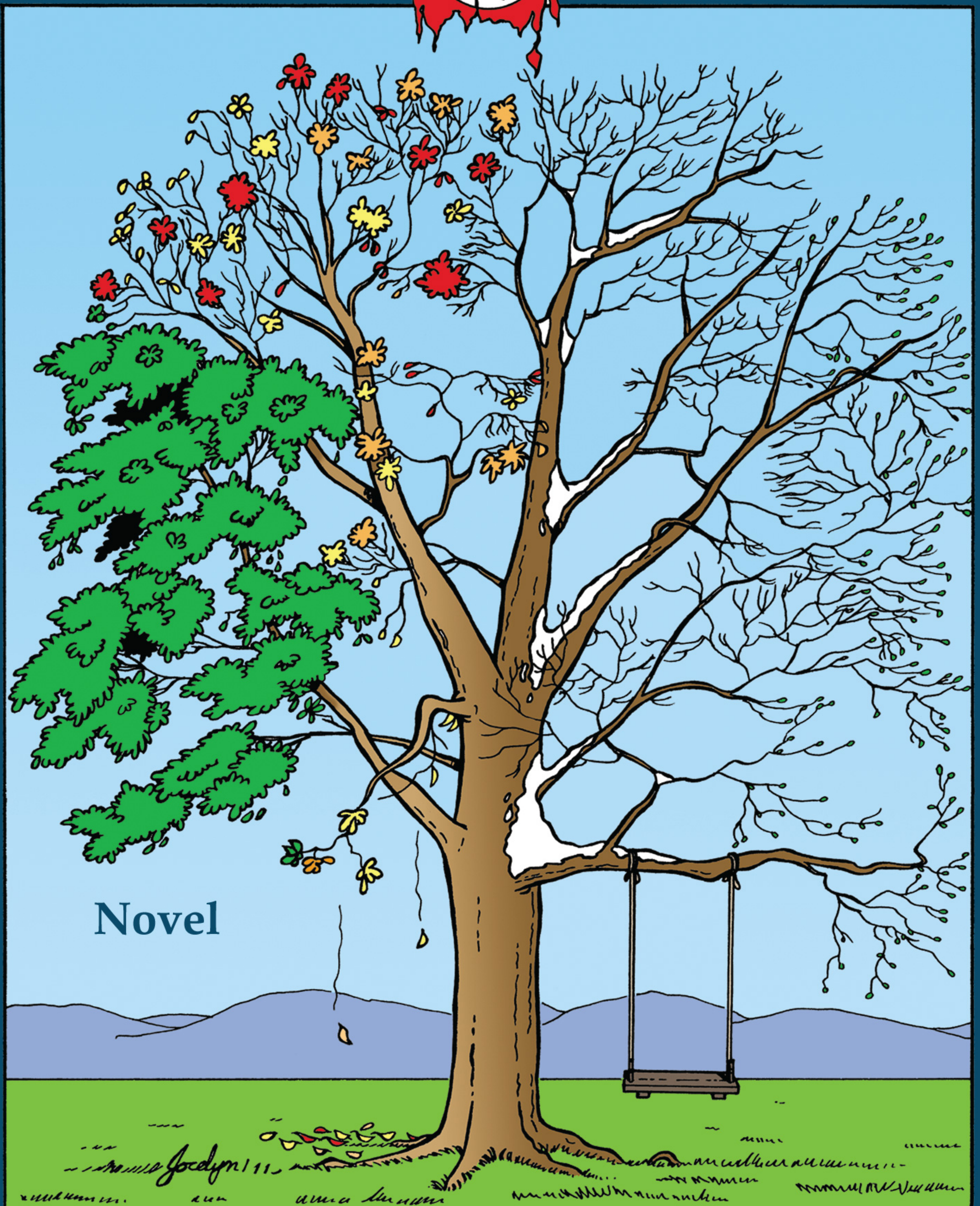


Claude Daigneault

The child who dreamt of being a tree



La Caboché

**The child who dreamt of
being a tree**

Claude Daigneault

The child who dreamt of
being a tree

Novel



Translation
Mathieu Daigneault

Layout

Pyxis

Picture of the author

Jean-Pierre Rivest

Illustration

Jocelyn Jalette

Catalogage avant publication de
Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec
et Bibliothèque et Archives Canada

Daigneault, Claude, 1942-

[Enfant qui rêvait d'être un arbre. English]
The child who dreamt of being a tree

Translation of : L'enfant qui rêvait d'être un arbre.
Electronic monograph.

ISBN 978-2-924187-26-5 (ePub)
ISBN 978-2-924187-27-2 (PDF)

I. Daigneault, Mathieu, 1972-
II. Title. III. Title : Enfant qui rêvait d'être un arbre. English.

PS8557.A445E5413 2013 C843'.54 C2013-941605-6
PS9557.A445E5413 2013

Legal Deposit

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2013
Bibliothèque nationale du Canada, 2013

Éditions la Caboché
Phone: 450.714-4037 Fax: 450.714-4236
E-mail : info@editionslacaboche.qc.ca
www.editionslacaboche.qc.ca

Write to the author at :
cdaigneault@ilavaltrie.com

All rights reserved for all countries

Chapter one

The smell of dry dust mixed with Lysol wafting in the parlor of the Sœurs Jésus-Marie de Sillery convent makes my eyes water. Ahead, perfectly aligned brown chairs are practically glowing from the layers of wax that countless hands have religiously applied to them over the years. In a scalloped pot of polished brass, at the centre of a pedestal covered with drab, peeling white paint, a fat fern sits in a corner, bathed in a warm ray of lemon-colored sunlight.

A young nun with a ruddy, round face, tightly wrapped in the garb of a novice, excuses herself from my presence, saying in a low voice as she passes:

“Sister Saint Mary of the Transfiguration of the Christ will see you shortly.”

The antiquated nun’s name really does not suit my aunt at all. For me, all of those outdated appellations represent a form of tenderness without tenderness, a synonym of cold compassion that smells of ‘industrial’ floor wax, of orphanages, of boarding schools, and of benevolent priests, like those who paid for my classical education, all in the hopes that I would one day succumb to the call of the priesthood. My memories are like so many spider webs!

While I wait, I take out from my briefcase the notes for the Latin class I will be presenting in two hours at

Saint-Jean-Eudes college, trying to summon the inspiration to convince twenty-eight pimply teenagers of the delicate beauty of verses such as:

Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi...

“My DEAR Julien !”

My aunt comes into the parlor before I even have time to get up and greet her properly. Draped over her body, she wears one of those modernized nun’s garment, in vogue since the recent council of John XXIII.

Softly, I brush my lips against her cheeks, soft and white, like quality toilet paper. With a wave of her hand, she bids me to sit down on the same hard chair I had just sat on, then sits on the one directly to my right so that, in order to look at her, I must lean forward slightly to avoid the glare of the noonday sun hitting the window at an angle.

“I won’t be inviting you to my chambers, Julien; I don’t have much time, today. You are well? You look pale...”

“A little fatigued... The upcoming end of the school year, and all that...”

“How goes teaching?”

“Oh, it’s all right, I guess,” I answer with a sigh. “I don’t know, I still feel like I’m lagging a generation behind. I mean, teaching *Latin*, in today’s world?”

“Come now, dear Julien. Young people always need culture; it helps nurture their minds.”

“I should opt for Quebecois literature, instead. That way, at least I could teach these kids some *joual*.”

“Cynical as always. How can you ridicule so many young authors whose only wish is to rejuvenate literature, novels, theatre, and poetry?”

“But why go about it in such a roundabout way? I prefer beauty, perfection, straight lines, silence, Bach. That’s

why I took to Latin so much. I still can't fathom why the Catholic Church decided to abandon Latin in favor of what it calls the 'vernacular language'. Dialects hold no interest for me. I sure did everything I could to forget my parents'..."

"Julien, Julien... Bitterness never solved anything. Sometimes, I think that the Fathers of the Très-Saint-Sacrement were wise when they decided not to let you take your last vows. I am not sure your religious vocation was as unwavering and resolute as you pretended it to be at the time."

"Perhaps. In any case, that particular episode helped me realize that I didn't believe in anything, really. But I can't help holding a grudge against all of these people who robbed me of my childhood, of my youth."

"All things change, Julien. One must survive evolution, lest its tides sweep us all away, like... like dried seaweed on a beach."

"Like they did Baba..."

"You still think about your grandfather?"

"I knew happiness, thanks to him, thanks to his simple imagination, and his way of telling me stories that made me feel validated..."

"You were five years old!"

"That's also what I liked about college. My old teachers were like so many grandfathers to me. They made life seem somewhat less... difficult."

"You needed to be reassured."

"And I was!"

"Enough to confront life head-on? Enough to deal with society, with challenges?"

She pretends to wait for my reply, but adds quickly:

"You have to stop sulking, nephew! It's the middle of

the sixties, a period of great intellectual turmoil that you are seemingly willing to ignore.”

“I don’t need anybody. I’m comfortable simply staying at home, in my own universe. With my books, my records, and my solitude...”

As the words leave my mouth, I know my dear aunt is about to hand out one of her usual admonitions:

“Life is also about being with others, Julien. You’re twenty-six years old, you should have friends. You should be having fun, traveling, thinking of starting a family...”

I smile in spite of myself. For a sexagenarian nun, my aunt flaunts a decidedly modern attitude that never ceases to amaze me. She’s been a part of so many battles, including the time she was on the Parent report preparatory committee for education overhaul. She was almost banished from her community because of her avant-gardist ideas. I like her, very much, and I know I owe her not only my education, but also my survival; she’s the one who, year after year, always managed to find some ‘benefactors’ to pay for my classical education and my university studies. But her desire to see me lead a ‘normal’ life aggravates me.

“You’ll always surprise me, Julien. You hide in your apartment like you did as a child, when you wound up in the most incongruous of places... And those long forest walks when you forgot to even come home... How many calls did I receive from worried attendants over at the orphanage, and then later, at the seminary?”

“I no longer hide in attics and cupboards, if that’s what you mean. I did keep my love for long walks in the forest, though. And, with the help of a ninety-three year old surveyor I sometimes visit at the old folks’ home, I’m currently preparing a monograph on various tree species that were brought to the Charlevoix region by a settler from the Poitou, around the XVIIth century.”

My aunt smiles, wryly.

“My, what devotion! Is that why you refuse all of my invitations to go to the restaurant, and why you spend all of your weekends cloistered in your lair?”

The sarcasm of her words doesn’t escape me.

“I do regret that, believe me. I love talking with you. A nice exchange in a refined language offers me much needed distraction from my students’ usual ramblings and musings. But I do crave my tranquility. Plus, I have a lot of work to do.”

“Oh, go tell *another*, Julien! You’re hiding, and you very well know it! This pedantic way you have of speaking is a perfect example of what I’m saying. But never mind; let’s forget all of that. I didn’t call you over here to preach your sermons, rest assured.”

She lowers her head slightly, contemplating her slender white hands, resting on her knees like two dead fish. Taking a deep breath to sum up some courage, she turns her head and stares back at me, straight in the eye.

“Your sister, Michèle, phoned me earlier. She would like to meet with you as soon as possible.”

Although surprised, my answer is cold and impassive.

“Why? I don’t want to see her again.”

“She spoke of a document concerning your family that some people have apparently discovered and wish to give to her. She would like you to be present for the occasion.”

“After twenty years, my dear sister finally remembers that I exist, and she thinks a simple phone call will make me run back to her?”

“Julien, she’s your only sister! Why are you always this harsh, this bitter? You know nothing of the circumstances surrounding the reasons why Michèle chose not to stay in touch with you.”

“When I was a child, she meant the world to me. She was the only faint glimmer in a sea of gray. And she knew it. Would it have been such a chore to just... write me a few words and explain her absence over the years?”

“Well, why don’t you go and ask her in person?”

Even the thought of going back to Sherbrooke makes my skin crawl. I don’t dare look at aunt Imelda. Suddenly overcome by so many repressed memories, I find myself quivering on the inside. A quick succession of visions assail me: Michèle sobbing, collapsed on her bed, my father, on his knees, his voice cracking as he begs my mother to please, please forgive him, my mother screaming like a lunatic: ‘Leave! Leave, you bastard, you damn pervert! Leave, before I sic the cops on you!’ Then, the long corridor of the orphanage where aunt Imelda found me a refuge. Me, crying at night in a little metal bed, lined up next to dozens of other similar little beds...

“Why did you never go back and visit your sister?”

“I never... found the time...”

“Oh, come on, Julien! You live in Québec! That’s less than three hour away by bus...”

Like a lifeline, the fleeting image of the modest apartment I occupy on Couillard Street, not far from the seminary, suddenly springs to my mind. I picture the monstrous Schefflera I’ve been nurturing for years, the one that blocks out the living room window behind the opaque white curtain. The afternoon sky, spitted with raindrops, spread out behind the houses of the Old Quebec neighborhood... There, time stops. There lies happiness. Even the idea of abandoning my safe haven, my dear refuge, makes me feel nauseous.

Aunt Imelda brings me back to reality.

“Julien, listen to me. Regardless of who we are, one

day or another, we must all deal with our past. We must all, each and every single one of us, learn to unburden ourselves from all of that weight which prevents us from progressing further in life.”

I nod my head, uncertain.

“I’ll think about it...”



It takes me three days to overcome my misgivings. On the spur of the moment, mostly to make sure I won’t be able to back out of it at the last minute, I leave a message with the receptionist at the television station where my sister works to inform her of my impending arrival the following day.

At the bus terminal on Charest Boulevard, I get on board just as the driver is about to shut the heavy door.

What I desire above all else right now is to avoid the company of strangers who might embroil me in unnecessary conversation. I avoid their stares and their glances while trying to keep my balance as the vehicle backs out.

I head for the three seats at the rear, situated right next to the cramped toilet from which emanates a strong odor of disinfectant. No one likes sitting next to the lavatory.

Peace at last.

I take out a worn copy of *Regards et jeux dans l’espace* by St-Denys Garneau, but my cherished poems can’t seem to engage me as they usually do. My eye is constantly solicited by happenings on the street as it passes by behind the dust-speckled window.

When we stop at a red light, I have all the time in the world to contemplate a young mother as she tugs harshly on a toddler’s arm while the kid wails away like a banshee.

She stops, barks a few threats at him, then stomps off again, child in tow. The toddler seems less reticent now, but keeps crying...

The bus gets rolling again. The rumbling of the engine lulls me to sleep. For the first time in what feels like centuries, I think of another child...

Chapter two

I'm four and a HALF. I learned that from my grandfather, 'the invalid'. He even showed me how to display four fingers while crossing the index from my other hand across my thumb. This trick never fails to make Mia and Maxi, my father's two elder sisters, squeal with delight each time. They visit us two times a year, once on Twelfth Night, and again at the end of May.

As a reward for this little dog trick, my aunts always give me a couple of mints, which I then scamper away with to devour privately in my secret lair, the wardrobe of the cramped room I share with my sister Michèle, my father's pride and joy. For her twelfth anniversary, Michèle has been blessed with the appearance of two tiny peaks poking beneath the cloth of her blouse. Through the half-open door of my wardrobe, I sometimes watch her as she softly rubs her chest with her hands, scrutinizing her reflection in the glass protecting the framed image of the Good Sainte-Anne.

The mothball-smelling cubby-hole I inhabit defines the limits of my universe, my sanctuary, the burrow I disappear to when I need to escape from the forest of legs all around me, trees with bark of nylon and cloth, perfumed with the exotic smells of the street.

The street... This strange and fascinating territory I'm never allowed to explore.

During winter, my mother forbids me from going outside by saying:

“It’s too dangerous. You’ll get swallowed by the snow blower.”

In summer, it’s:

“It’s too dangerous. You’re gonna get hit by cars.

Fall:

“It’s too dangerous. You’re gonna catch a cold.”

Only springtime does not seem to represent any specific danger, but instead inspires a more personalized form of interdiction.

“You’re gonna come back full of mud and get it all over my floor... And don’t you dare, cuz I just gone and finished my spring cleaning!”

And so, I am deprived of experiencing adventures in the ‘real world’, at least, the one I sometimes catch glimpses of as, my face glued to the bedroom window, I observe the disorganized frolicking of the kids in our neighborhood.

The wardrobe is the cockpit of my dream machine, my own private little projection room. When I push the door slightly ajar with the tip of a finger, a movie unfurls right in front of my eyes. I observe the trees of legs as they begin to grow and form a jungle, before disappearing just as they began to sprout.

I am content with this personal, private space, hidden away between an antique black leather travel bag whose varnish is starting to peel, the cane my grandfather no longer uses, and a pile of Delly’s romance novels, which Michèle borrowed in secret from one of our neighbors, the ‘Merry Widow’, a twenty-six year old woman who, ever since her husband died in the war, seems to have a funny way of mourning.

And so I wait impatiently for another tree to grow and

for it's voice to whisper, in a tone as mysterious as the wind rustling in the leaves:

"Juuuulien? Where aaare you, honey? Where's mama's little boy got to now, hmm?"

I shiver in anticipation each time. I feel wanted. People are searching for me. I know I'm on the verge of being discovered. They'll find me, they always do, but what a thrill it is to believe that, this time, I'm so well hidden that I could stay safe in my greenhouse for the rest of my life...

But each time, the door opens and the screen blurs. The movie of my adventure breaks. My mother's arms stretch out towards me.

"Don't stay in there for hours like that. You'll get sick. Wardrobes get chilly, during winter."

I climb up the mommy-tree. I can finally see the world the way grown-ups do, from on high: old furniture with flaking paint, the doilies of white lace my mother uses to protect the backs and armrests of chairs from grease spots, the long dark-brown bed in the dining room that doubles as a bedroom for my parents, the linoleum with floral motif lining the corridor leading to the kitchen and to the room reserved for grandfather Basile, the man I call 'Baba'.

But today, the mommy-tree shakes her limbs a little more quickly than usual.

"Mama can't carry you very long, dear. You're too heavy. Go see Baba. Mama's got cleaning to do."

In my world, Baba is the only unmoving tree, sitting in his wheelchair all day or lying in his bed. Baba is a fun-tree, a tree you can play with, like the one that fell in that vacant lot behind which naïve little children go and hide when playing 'kick the can' with the older kids.

For me, Baba is a tree I can play games with. For example: I push his wheelchair out of the room and set up crazy races down the corridor. It's even better when Baba,

chuckling all the way, grabs onto the wheels and tries to brake before we hit anything. After a few round-trips, my grandfather is laughing so hard that the front of his shirt becomes spattered with drool.

Another one of my guilty little pleasures is something I like to call: ‘The-Lying-Sleeping-Tree-Game’, where I simply go and lie down next to Baba in his bed during his afternoon nap, on which occasion he usually accepts me without too much protest.

After too brief moments of relative immobility, I place my head on my grandfather’s chest, enchanted by the cavernous whistles that emanate from it, even when Baba tries his best not to breathe. I brush his rough cheeks with the tip of my fingers, I blow on the hair growing in his ears, I lift an eyelid to peer at his eye, I even pinch his neck. Although Baba is pretty good at imitating a sleeping tree, I have a hard time keeping still and holding my breath.

Then comes the moment he can’t take any more: he starts to laugh in spurts, like the toilet tank as it finishes filling up. Our game always goes the same way, but I never grow tired of it. That’s what lying- sleeping-trees are for.

Baba only speaks to me. Rarely to Michèle. And never to my parents, who will tell anyone within earshot that it’s ‘because of his brain *naneurysm*’. In private, and even in front of guests, they call him ‘the invalid’. Nothing else. Like a stranger one encounters on the street, or a cheese that’s starting to smell bad.

“We all have our cross to bear in life,” would sigh Simone, my mother, when condescending to speak to the young widow next door as she hangs the laundry out to dry on the clothes line spread out between our home and a post planted at the rear of the backyard. “Me, it’s my father. ‘The invalid.’”

Being an invalid means not being able to go to the bathroom by yourself. Baba doesn't pee like me. Underneath his pant leg, he has a long gray rubber hose connected to his 'wee-wee' that ends in a pear-shaped container which is closed off by a little stopper of cork. Numerous times a day, my mother has to retrieve from beneath Baba's bed a large granite basin, navy-blue and stippled with white flecks, that she then places next to the wheelchair. She removes the pear from the pant leg, uncorks the stopper, and empties the pee into the basin (which she keeps safely hidden away so she doesn't inadvertently use it when preparing meals, or so she claims.)

"Your pee is mighty dark, pa. It looks like Kik Cola."

Baba never answers back. He simply looks out the bedroom window, as if searching for trees, I think. But, through the window of his cramped bedroom, all one can see are the bars of the balcony, and behind those, the red brick wall of the neighbor's house, which starts blocking the sun very early on in the afternoon.

When my mother leaves the room to go empty the basin in the toilet, Baba doesn't even look at her. He simply closes his eyes.

I wait. I know that, in just a few minutes, he's going to let me climb on top of him and that, together, we're going to keep our eyes glued to the movie screen that is his bedroom window until something, anything, happens. Sometimes, the 'Merry Widow', as my father Pierre calls her with a wry smile, swoops by and waves her hand at us. Sometimes, a sparrow perches itself atop the handrail and hops around nervously for a moment before taking off again like a bolt of lightning.

Without opening his mouth, which is as crooked as knothole, Baba begins to hum *À la claire fontaine*. We wait

impatiently for my mother to finish ‘her dailies’, as she calls her chores. She speaks to herself using short sentences, always the same:

“Sinful. Dust bunnies this big in such a small apartment. Tsk-tsk-tsk.”

Or:

“Work, Simone! Work, you ninny! You didn’t wanna get an education, then work!”

Or:

“Well, that’ll about do it for me for today, I think.”

She then goes out onto the balcony that spreads along the entire length of the building, a sort of two-story hovel where four apartments are corded together in a row above a garage and a used furniture store, and whacks her mop across the ramp to make the dust fall into the cluttered backyard.

When it’s nice outside, it’s like a signal. As if by happenstance, the women from the other apartments come out, mop in hand, and after having vigorously whacked their implements, salute each other and gather in groups of three or four to ‘chat’.

Sitting in front of the movie screen that is the bedroom window, Baba and I listen in attentively.

“Have you heard the news on the radio?”

“Ya, they says the war might be over by the end of spring.”

“I heard that the Germans have been treating the Jews pretty rough.”

“That kinda thing wouldn’t happen over here! Damn savages...”

“Ya. First of all, we don’t have a ton of Jews over here. Except for mister Rosenbloom, over in his rag store...”

“I hear ya. Since they killed our Savior, them Jews sure seem to keep getting the raw end of the deal, don’t they?”

Regardless of who's speaking, these women all speak the same way, all spouting the same inanities. Through the little curtain of white cotton cloth, Baba and I can only see their backs. Dressed in cotton robes with flowery motifs, their shoulders are already hunched over from years of effort. Their 'chats' never last very long. They each try to convey to the others how busy they really are. Once each of them has gone back inside, the sparrows come back and peck at any breadcrumbs that might have fallen from the tablecloths. The peeping of the little winged warriors inspires me a new game. I call it: 'Messages'.

I lean into Baba's ear and whisper:

"Little birdy says: 'Time to pee, quickly-quickly.'"

My grandfather cackles like a little kid and motions for me to come closer:

"No. Birdy says: 'Don't wanna come here no more!'"

We both have a laugh and resume our waiting game, sighing here and there impatiently, occasionally glancing towards the kitchen. Certain sounds help us believe that our wait is finally nearing its end.

Baba begins to sing softly.

"Ah, if only my little sp-sp-sparroooow could still d-d-daaance..."

"I'm off to the grocery store!"

My mother's cry kindles our excitement. As soon as she's out the back door, I run to the bathroom and climb onto the edge of the old bathtub with legs to spy her movements through the narrow window. She slowly goes down the steps, clutching her worn black leather purse tightly against her chest.

When she finally reaches the last step, I leave my perch, come running back to my grandfather with a great big smile, and give him the good news.

Baba hurriedly rolls his wheelchair out of the bedroom as best he can. I push behind him with all my might. We zigzag our way to the forbidden living room.

With his good hand, Baba turns the radio knob. We wait for what seems like an eternity for the old bulbs to warm up, and for the characteristic static to appear. Finally, music starts emanating from the entrails of the enormous varnished device. Baba starts to smile again, wryly, the kind of smile that always reassures me so. He stutters:

“Mu... Music b-b-b-beautiful...”

We spend long minutes listening to the strange lamentations of violins and the little cries of a piano. But there always comes a time when Baba finally sighs heavily and, regretfully, turns the radio off.

We hobble back to his room. I do what I can to push the wheelchair close to his bed while, using his good hand, Baba leans on the mattress, lifts himself up, and lets himself fall back down onto the bed.

I push his legs on top of the bed, then, paying absolutely no heed to how much weight I’m putting on his already weakened bladder, I climb on top of him, bury my head in his sour-smelling unbuttoned shirt and wait for the miracle to begin.

That’s when Baba gets to work inventing a story for me. It spills out of his crooked mouth, along with a stream of drool that rolls down his miss-shaven chin, all the way down to his rumpled shirt.

“On’e upon a time... ‘ere wuz a li’l boy... which wuz called... Hulien. Hulien lived... in a war’robe...”

My own bladder tells me I have to go pee, so overcome with delight am I at the idea that another little boy just like me, with the same name, might also live in an enchanted world where wardrobes are huge and smell of

the fragrance of garments left behind by princes and princesses.

I don't even want to consider the possibility that Baba is actually making up a story based on me and my propensity for hiding everywhere, in any nook and cranny. My resemblance to the Julien from his stories doesn't really surprise me anymore, so happy am I to savor the illusion, to delude myself, to believe in an adventure... until Mother comes home, and chases me off to my room again.

"Leave Baba alone. The old man needs his rest."



At night, I listen to the radio with my parents and Michèle, (along with Baba, when we roll his wheelchair into the living room.) Father reads the paper while smoking a pipe of Cdailiesanadian tobacco he chops himself. Mother folds some laundry or mends shirts while listening to her favorite program: *La fiancée du commando*. Michèle does her homework on the kitchen table. Most of the time, we can hear snoring coming from Baba, slumped over in his wheelchair.

I never know how any of the episodes end. No matter how much I beg and promise to be as well-behaved as the little alabaster Jesus sitting on my mother's dressing table, my mother will hear nothing of it. When the first bubbling noises of soap commercials come on the radio, it's time for me to go to bed.

I resist the temptation of sleep. Instead, I dream up some new adventures for myself. I become Dollard Ménard, the soldier Father speaks of so often and with such admiration that it makes his voice crack.

"One of ours," he'd often say. "One of our boys."

And then I fall asleep.

Tonight, however, is no ordinary night. Even Baba can't seem to find sleep. Daddy pretends to read the paper, but he's just turning the pages listlessly, unable to focus his attention on the war reports. The volume of the radio set is louder than usual. Michèle is trying to read a *François* album she borrowed from the municipal library while I keep going from one to another, restless.

Why? I didn't quite understand the instructions my father mumbled during suppertime. Any more than I understand the ones currently being given out by the radio announcer. Mother says it's like a game for adults, but where kids can also play. I envy my sister for being able to read: she can occupy herself by reading up on the adventures of *Mouchette*, adventures that she will only read to me the following Sunday morning to keep me entertained while my parents are off attending High Mass.

For the ninth time in the last ten minutes, braving my father's threat of a smack on the back of the head, I ask:

"Is it starting soon?"

The promised punishment now seemed headed for my rear end, when the radio suddenly starts wailing the loud and gloomy complaint of a siren. At last, playtime!

My father throws his newspaper underneath a table, jumps out of his chair, and lifts me up off the ground like a bag of rags. Michèle stands up and grabs my mother's hand. Even Baba seems to believe in this game: he grips the wheels of his chair tightly with his hands.

We end up on all fours under the kitchen table. Baba's gone and placed himself under a doorframe.

"Goddammit! The lights!"

Clumsily, Father crawls out from under the table and goes around the apartment, turning off the few lights that are still on, before coming crawling back under the table

with the three of us. I am so excited! I learn what true fear is; not the fear of apprehending a slap on the back of the head because I purposefully dropped my glass of milk on the floor, but the fear that makes us tremble because some sort of mystery is afoot. I adopt the appropriate plaintive tone of voice:

“Why are we doing this?”

“It’s a drill...”

“A what?”

“The drill in case we get attacked. If the bad guys come over here and bomb the house, we’re supposed to hide like this to protect ourselves.”

I don’t understand any of this and quickly lose interest in the whole thing. The entire room is bathed in the sickly light of the wintry night coming in through the kitchen’s only window, frosted over with ice particles. We hear the radio announcer’s voice crackling in the living room. I’m already bored. My hands and my knees hurt from being on all fours all this time. Damn bad guys! Why can’t they just stay home?!

Someone stirs behind me. The voice of my mother rings out:

“Pierre!”

My father sighs heavily and the stirring stops. Well, almost all of it: Michèle takes a flashlight out from under her skirt and tries to continue reading her picture book.

Poor Michèle! My mother’s smack hits her right between the braids.

“So *you’re* the one who stole the flashlight, you little sneak! Turn it off this minute! You want the Germans to see your light in the dark and bomb the neighborhood? Never mind, you little scamp. You and me are gonna have a little chat later!”

Michèle groans in frustration. Silence falls. Just enough to allow us to hear the snores coming from Baba, lulled to sleep by the darkness.

The siren wails out from the radio set once more, announcing the end of the simulated alarm.

My father is the first one to extricate himself from beneath the table. Walking stiffly, he goes to the wall and flicks on the light switch for the ceiling lamp in the kitchen, while my mother grabs my bottom to shove me out of our improvised shelter.

The sudden blinding light hits us all in the face, as if we'd been struck by the bomb that could have fallen on us, and I find myself in my mother's arms, from where I can see Baba, his head resting on his chest, ensconced in a peaceful sleep where there is no room for bad guys dropping bombs.

"It's beddy-bye time, Julien."

I don't protest: I love the mommy-tree and the smell of fig cookies mixed with leftover roast beef drippings that follows her everywhere. From all the way up there, I can see everything around me: the sinuous parting in Michèle's braids, the dust accumulating on top of the two-level wood stove warmer. From up there, the people-trees seem less impressive.

In my bed, feigning difficulty unbuttoning my blouse and taking off my pants, I yawn, pretending to be quite sleepy and extremely clumsy. I stop thinking about Baba, Father and Mother, and Michèle, whose muffled voices I can barely make out, coming from the kitchen.

"Come on, already. Mama's got other things to do, Julien."

I adopt the vacant look that inevitably manages to rile my mother up. I feign interest in the image of the Sacred Heart she hung up on a nail above Michèle's bed. My

movements are dreadfully slow and amount to absolutely nothing constructive.

As I had hoped, Mother loses patience, and starts undressing me in quick bursts. In the wink of an eye, I end up in my underwear. That's what I wanted. To be touched by slightly calloused hands, reddened by constant laundry. She shakes me around a bit, for good measure, but I get the feeling she actually enjoys this little game between us, which allows her to give me some affection unnoticed.

"Go to bed. It's late. It's past nine."

I protest a little, just for good measure.

"But why do *I* have to go to bed and Michèle doesn't?"

"Michèle's older. She has homework to do. Now go to sleep, buddy. Now."

I don't feel like arguing tonight. Sleeps begins to overtake me. I slide under the covers and hide there with great pleasure, snuggling in the humid coldness of the small metal bed. This is the moment I relish the most: huddling in the cold without moving and waiting four or five seconds for my body heat to create a comfortable little nest for me.

Mother bends over to give me a quick peck on the forehead.

"Say your prayer to Jesus in your head."

"Is Jesus gonna let the bad guys drop bombs on our house?"

"Honey, if anyone can stop the bad guys from dropping bombs on our house, it's Him."

"Why are there bad guys, mama?"

"I'm not the one who can answer that, sweetie. If it was up to me... Look, just ask Jesus when you pray to Him; maybe He's got an answer for you..."

I move my lips, but no words come out. I don't like praying; Mother tells me every night how much Jesus loves me, and that there's a place for me in His paradise, but I don't understand why grown-ups find Him so interesting. I prefer hiding in my wardrobe, or behind chairs, or taking time to explore my secret lairs under the beds, snuggling up with Baba in a corner of his mattress, or thinking about all of those fabulous trees surrounding the vacant lot where I long to be able to go and play, one day...

She turns off the light and closes the door, leaving it slightly ajar. The glow from the kitchen lamp comes up to the foot of my bed; I can hear bits and pieces of conversations, but I've already lost interest. The whole bedroom has become a giant hiding place where I can conjure dreams for myself, one of which starts with:

"Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Julien. Julien lived in wardrobe..."



Because I saw the 'Merry Widow's' cat meandering lazily on the balcony earlier, I dream of animals, always the same dream. It's Christmas time, and I don't find any presents under the decorated tree; so my father, noticing my disappointment, bursts out laughing and takes me into the kitchen, where I discover, in a cardboard box, a small animal. Sometimes it's a cat, sometimes a doggie. And sometimes, it's a little gray rabbit that sends me kisses with its funny little mouth that never seems to stop moving. But never a bird.

The next morning, I wake up with the certainty that a gift waits for me in the kitchen. I rush there before everybody else, but always end up disappointed when I

don't find the dreamt-of cat or dog.

Mother doesn't want any animals in the house. ("We don't have any room for it. They piss everywhere. They stink. They cost a lot to feed. You have to go after them when they run away...")

Ma mother has a knack for long enumerations of logical arguments. She strings them out with great conviction, and always ends up winning the bout. And if Father, Michèle, or I dare to argue with her anyways, she terminates the discussion by shouting:

"I said no, and that's that!"

None of us have yet dared cross this final boundary.

But for a few days now, when I awaken from one of my cat dreams, this time involving a cute little Calico that keeps meowing as if it were calling out to me, I return to my wardrobe to be with 'Tonon'. He's the secret friend who's recently entered my life. Tonon's almost as nice as a dog. Or a cat. I wouldn't know: I've never held either one in my arms before.

I found Tonon by rummaging through a dusty old cardboard box, hidden behind the briefcase with the varnish that's starting to peel off in flakes. The box itself was tied together by a piece of black string, but I tugged on it, and it broke.

Tonon was inside, wrapped in silky mauve paper. It's my mother's fox, the only fur she's ever owned. When she takes it out, once a year, in autumn, when she counts her money to see if either her or Michèle will be able to get a new coat or some kind of outfit, she inevitably repeats the same thing to my father:

"Maybe I should get my fox stole sewn to my old coat. It'd keep my neck warm, and my coat would look brand new."

“Oh come on, Simone. Those things have gone out of style. We’re not in the 1930’s anymore, you know...”

“I’ll have you know that my fox is still very pretty! No moths or nothin’. And you seemed quite happy when I wore it around my neck on our wedding day. You wanna see the pictures again?”

“That won’t be necessary. It’s just that... Well, I think that... It’s gonna look dated, that’s all.”

“Are you saying you’d be ashamed of me?”

My father’s denials have become less hardy in recent years, while my mother’s proposition of having her vaunted fox stole recycled seems to come with less and less enthusiasm.

But no one knows that it now belongs to me. Each morning that I wake up from a cat or doggy dream, I get out of bed and go stroke Tonon, trying to console myself by giving him hugs and kisses. His glassy yellow eyes always stare at me the same way, but in my mind, I try to imagine that they’re offering me tenderness and understanding instead. Using all my strength, I manage to open his mouth, in which the furrier inserted a spring-loaded clasp that allows him to bite his own tail so the stole will hold in place around the wearer’s neck.

But I have to be careful: sometimes, Tonon clamps down hard on my fingers, and it hurts. But I don’t mind: it only makes him seem even more alive.

Then, I clutch him tightly and tell him that he’s much nicer than any dog or cat, even if he doesn’t talk. He doesn’t pee, it doesn’t cost anything to feed him, he’ll never go outside and get lost, he doesn’t bark ever, and he smells of mothballs. But above all else, he listens to everything I confide in him, and never repeats it to anybody else afterwards.

I softly tell him about the story of Julien, the little boy who lives in a wardrobe. I recount the highlights of the adventures starring Baba's invented hero. I make him approve with little nods of his head and make him clap his front paws together. It's more problematic to try and make him laugh, as his little mouth is always clamped down, like he was pretending he didn't have a sense of humor.

Then, when the glow I can see coming in through the wardrobe door turns gray, Mother gets up. I hear her foraging in the wood stove to make the ashes fall. She rolls up a piece of paper, then stacks kindling and a couple of small logs. I know all of this without seeing any of it. It's her daily ritual.

I inform Tonon.

"Now listen. She's gonna put water in the kettle to make it boil. She's gonna make coffee, then oatmeal. When the stove becomes scalding hot, she's gonna make some toast on the back burners. It's gonna smell great. You hungry, little Tonon?"

I always make him say 'no' by moving his head.

After Baba, he's the one I like most of all. Well, that is, until today...

This morning, while Baba plays his own game of 'Lying-Sleeping-Tree', after breakfast, and after Father and Michèle have left the apartment, I sneak back into the wardrobe and take Tonon out of his box to give him some more hugs. From the kitchen, I can hear echoes of Mother's favorite morning radio play, *Jeunesse dorée*, the din of which almost manages to cover up Baba's snoring.

I'm bored, and Tonon seems to have noticed; he lingers in my hands longer than usual.

Then, as if he understood my distress, he offers me a surprise.

In the back of the wardrobe, in a pair of old boots my Mother never got around to throwing away, I hear sharp little squeals that I first mistake as being pipe squeaks. But Mother has stopped washing the dishes now; sitting at the kitchen table, sipping her coffee, she takes a few moments to rest so as to not miss a single moment of her favorite characters' tribulations.

The little squeals persist. I bend over to inspect the boots lined with fake fur. In the left one, I discover the most beautiful spectacle a lonely child can behold: a mother mouse, all gray, with beautiful pink ears and great, big, bright black eyes, nursing a litter of five or six young mice. She panics because she can't escape without abandoning her babies, and looks at me pleadingly. Their little cries make them even more endearing. My heart is all aglow in my chest.

I immediately deduce it must be a gift from Tonon: he knows how much I want a little friend that's really alive, and so he's decided to give me many of them. I get all excited at the idea of teaching them tricks. I will love them, and they will love me. I'll show them how to... well, I don't really know what kind of trick you can teach mice. But that's not really important. I'll be able to hold them tightly against my chest to keep them warm, and stroke them with the tip of my fingers. That's already a lot.

I leap into the kitchen and to my dumbstruck mother I shout:

"Come see the gift I got! Come, quickly!"

I have to drag her by the hand all the way to the wardrobe.

"What did you dream up *this* time, you little rascal?"

Showing no enthusiasm whatsoever, she follows me reluctantly, already regretting having to lose track of her favorite program. I am absolutely convinced she'll be

enchanted to meet my new friends. She'll be glad to know I now have someone to keep me occupied all day so I won't always be in her skirts, as she often complains.

I bend over to retrieve the boot from my lair and proudly present it to her, holding it at arm's length in front of her face as she hunches over me.

"Look! Aren't they pretty?"

She screams out in surprise, so disgusted by what she sees that she has to lean against the wall a moment. She lifts her apron all the way up to her face, just beneath her eyes, as if cover herself. She seems assailed by a terror I can't even begin to fathom: I present my new friends to her, and she seems on the verge of losing consciousness. I mean, really!

"Take that boot to the bathroom, quickly!"

Her tone is so dramatic and imperious that I can only stammer:

"B-but...why?"

"Come on, quickly! Hurry up!"

Vexed, I obey, as my mother's hand urges me forward with little shoves in the back so I'll walk faster. As we pass through the kitchen, from the corner of my eye I notice Baba, a weary look on his face, probably just awakened by my mother's screams of alarm. I can see him in his room, trying to lift himself up by leaning on an elbow.

Standing in front of the white toilet bowl, I hesitate. I have not yet understood my mother's full intentions. Maybe she wants to make a little nest for my new friends with those pieces of cotton wrapped in navy blue paper I've seen sitting on a shelf of the medicine cabinet.

"Flush THAT right now! Now!"

I have trouble understanding. She can't mean for me to commit such a crime?!

“Now!

“But mama, they’re gonna drown!”

“Julien, if you don’t flush THAT right now, I’m gonna make you stand in the corner for a week!”

She’s not joking. Her way of saying ‘THAT’ by referring to my new family is devastating. I fully understand the seriousness of the maternal command, but my arm is frozen in hesitation. From the bottom of the boot rise squeals of terror that capsize my soul. How can one resist such beauty and grace? My mother’s heavy hand falls upon my shoulder. Her fingers clamp down just hard enough to make me understand that there will be no avoiding this.

A lump in my throat, my eyes already swollen with tears, I dump the family of mice into the toilet bowl. Their screams are heart-wrenching.

My mother’s hand immediately pulls the lever to flush them away and, trapped in an interminable whirl, the mice depart for a long journey without any skiff to help them on their way.

The toilet reservoir is just starting to fill up again when I throw myself on Baba’s bed to tell him all about the terrible tragedy that has just befallen me. My grandfather hasn’t managed to get up on his elbow high enough to catch me properly. I dive onto on his bladder without warning: he purses his lips. He questions my mother with a glance as her shape fills up the bedroom doorframe.

“Julien, we can’t keep dirty animals like THAT inside the house...”

To Baba, she says:

“He found a bunch of mice... Julien, stop crying. Hey, wait a minute: now that I think about it, how come my fox is no longer in it’s box?”

A new sense of panic assails me. For days, now, I have made Tonon my confidant, without ever once fearing our secret relationship would be discovered... Out of fear, I stop crying. My body trembles as I lie on Baba's stomach. His breathing sounds like a storm of wheezes.

The ensuing silence allows me to hear Mia Riddez's voice coming from the radio set. Maybe Mother is too anxious to get back to the rest of her radio play, because finally she says:

"Oh, never mind. I haven't worn that thing in years anyways. You can keep my fox. Better a dead fox than live mice, if you ask me."

She goes back to the kitchen, feigning having to scrub the sink, all of a sudden.

I look at Baba. With his crooked mouth, he tries to flash me a smile, as if to say:

"Well, at least you managed to save the most important thing..."

I throw myself back onto his stomach without noticing the look of growing alarm on his face as, unable to hold himself any longer, he starts to urinate profusely into his long rubber tube. I stop crying a moment to listen to the strange little gurgling noise.

And that is how Tonon acquired the right to be a part of my life.

Chapter three

For a week now, night after night, I make my mother pay for the odious crime she forced me to commit: she suffers my recurring nightmares in which Jesus Himself comes to me and shouts in my face about how cruel I've been and how I deserve to roast in hell, where, according to my mother, all the bad little boys who don't eat their peas end up.

I am prone to nightmares: I like being afraid, especially in the dark.

At first, I believe Mother actually felt a little guilty about the whole thing. She would hurry into my room the moment I started crying. After a while, she started taking more and more time coming over to console me. Eventually, she stopped taking me into her arms altogether. Now, she simply stands in the doorway and dryly tells me to go back to sleep.

Michèle also got tired of my 'nuttiness'. Last night, when Mother didn't even bother showing up, I heard my sister shout:

"Stop your whining, Julien, or I won't read you any more *Mouchette* stories!"

That made me think.

Tonight, once again pursued by an Infant Jesus of Prague wearing a pink dress and holding a flaming sword,

I wake up with the certainty that my bottom has been set on fire. This time, however, I refrain from crying out: I won't shout, I won't cry, I simply refuse to go to sleep.

I listen to the ambient noise: Michèle is stirring in her sleep. Her little metal bed, painted apple green with some spare paint donated by one of our neighbors, squeals like a big mouse someone's trying to drown down the river.

I play at scaring myself, imagining that my sister's bed really is a mouse. A queen mouse, the likes of which no one has ever seen, who decided to leave her subterranean kingdom to come up here and punish me. I almost believe myself. The fear I feel is delicious: I expect to see her enormous whiskered head plop onto my legs at any moment and hiss to me, between blood-dripping teeth:

"Jesus has sent me to take you to hell!"

I become extremely excited. This is it. The big mouse is complaining again. She's getting closer. She... Nothing. I can't summon enough fear to imagine her anymore.

What's the use... I cuddle up under the covers. Sleep overtakes me, dawning as a series of white spots on the inside of my closed eyelids...



As soon as Michèle has left for school, I continue sulking with Tonon in the wardrobe. I'll spend days in there, weeks, months even if I have to! I want my mother to understand the gravity of the situation, the wound she inflicted to my heart by forcing me to betray my mice friends and participate in their execution.

Mother tries to reason with me. Busily wiping a plate clean with one of those washcloths she makes using old bed sheets worn-out from constant bleaching, she leans in through the open doorway to try and convince me.

This must be the fourth time she's come by. She just stands there, all the while wiping a plate or a glass, telling me in a whining tone:

"You haven't even eaten breakfast, yet. If you come out of your hole, I'll give you a nice cookie."

She waits. I hesitate. The offer is tempting, but still a little weak.

"Two cookies. Fig ones. The big kind. I made 'em last night."

So *that* was the extraordinary aroma that was still floating around the house when I woke up this morning... Refusing this delicacy, which I call 'frig cookies', is a hard thing to do for a child that doesn't quite remember why he's sulking anymore. But it's too early in the game to simply give up. I haven't quite purged all of my rancor, yet. Silence.

"Well then, stay in your cubbyhole, you nitwit! But if Grippy comes and bites your toes, don't come complaining to me!"

Would I have enough courage to face this new unexpected threat? Grippy is the youngest of demons, the one whose job it is to sneak into the bedrooms of bad little boys like me and prick their butt cheeks when they're asleep, or sometimes even worse, according to my mother, he kidnaps them for a few hours and takes them down to hell to teach them a little something about respect due to one's parents. My heroic determination begins to waver under the influence of her threat...

I hear the swishing of my mother's old slippers as she walks away on the linoleum of the little corridor that leads from my room to the kitchen. She's probably grabbing another plate, patiently, methodically wiping it, just enough so as to not lose a single moment of the radio play she listens to with such devotion each and every morning.

Long minutes go by, too long. She's not coming back. If I'd known sulking would be so boring, I would have ended my protest earlier. Especially since the mental image of executing my mice friends doesn't seem to have the same potency to make my eyes mist over anymore. Let's be honest: as adorable as the little mice were, they're nothing but a distant memory to me now.

Tonon is of no help whatsoever; he stares at me with his yellow eyes, his spring-loaded mouth permanently frozen in a little rictus. Thankfully, his fur is soft; I often burrow my face in it, methodically tickling my nose until I have a sneezing fit. But soon, even that little game bores me.

Have I slept? Probably. The clanging of the back door when Mother leaves the house to go get some groceries yanks me out of my nap. Only the 'tek-tuk' of the big mural clock fills the air. That clock is the only thing Baba has left of the life he spent with grandmother, who died well before my birth. It's actually quite a subject of discontent in this house: not a week goes by that Father doesn't complain about how the clock prevents him from sleeping at nights. Although, admittedly, it does indicate the passing of each hour by chiming twice; which means that, come midnight, it makes a hell of racket!

I then hear the rubber wheels of Baba's chair creaking on the overwaxed linoleum. He angles his way through the doorway to peer into my bedroom; I barely have time to close the wardrobe door, leaving it slightly ajar so I can observe him.

He puffs from the strain; the tip of his big pink, humid tongue squirms between pressed lips. Finally, he manages to blurt:

"Hu... Hu... H Julien. C-Come see... Baba... Baba's gonna... continue 'is story..."

This offer is even more tempting than that of Mother's 'frig cookies'. I long for our 'Lying-Sleeping-Tree' game. I miss thinking that roots might actually sprout from my feet if I wrap them up in the catalogue my mother placed on the end of Baba's bed in lieu of a bed cover. ("It's so much cleaner, and it doesn't hold the smells as much. You know, that's important when you keep an invalid at home...")

But most of all, I long for Baba to say to me:

"On'e upon a time... 'ere wuz a li'l boy... which wuz called... Hulien. Hulien lived... in a war'robe..."

Oh!, how I would just love to go and lie down on Baba's big belly and listen to the comforting sounds of buckwheat waffles battling brown sugar syrup and strong tea in his stomach, just like they always do in the morning. But I resist. I become mulish, as my mother calls it when recounting one of my shenanigans.

"Hu-lien... Baba... Baba very sad..."

How do you think *I* feel?

Baba rolls his wheelchair back to his room. I feel like bounding out of my hiding place and throwing myself at him, even at the risk of painfully compressing his weak bladder yet again. But I refrain, unable to swallow my pride.



Around noon, the irresistible aroma of meatball stew and pig's feet finally overcomes my dwindling defiance. Dignity becomes a very fragile value when one is about to turn five years old and hunger triggers uncontrollable rumbling in one's stomach.

To clear my conscience, I submit the question to Tonon:

“D’you think I’ll die and Grippy’ll drag me down to hell if I don’t eat?”

Mother didn’t raise no fools, so I make him bow his head in approval by imparting an ample movement of my right hand.

“So that means my little mice friends’ll forgive me for flushing ‘em down the toilet?”

A new nod of consent from my confidant, unequivocal in its cadence.

“Well, all right, then. I’ll go. If it’ll make you happy...”

And so, as he no longer has any absolutions for me, Tonon quickly finds himself straddling the old travel bag while I venture outside my lair for the first time since I awoke, my head brushing against the coattails and the pant legs suspended on coat hangers as I head out on all fours. I might not exactly have established an endurance record, but I’m persuaded that Mother *gets* it now, and that, in the future, she won’t be so cruel towards my friends, if I ever make any new ones.

Sitting in his wheelchair at the kitchen table, his entire chest covered with an enormous bib my mother made from yet another old bed sheet, Baba’s trying to sip a clear soup, loudly. His hand shakes as he tries to put it into his deformed mouth using a big spoon.

He’s the first to spot me as I linger at the boundary between the corridor and the kitchen. His mouth splits wide open in a grimacing smile, exposing gums that have been deprived of teeth for ages. He stutters:

“Hu... Hulien!”

Mother, then Michèle, just back from school for lunch, raise their heads and stare at me, feigning indifference. But the malicious look in my sister’s eyes betrays her disinterest. I think she even flashes me a quick wink. Mother appears less enthusiastic.

“There you are, you little rascal! Well? What happened? Did Grippy finally prick your backside?”

Pretending to appear as indifferent as her, I approach the table and take place at my usual seat. A setting has been laid out, as if it was clear to all that my protest would not last the long months I had proclaimed in my crazed fury.

“I didn’t even see your so-called ‘Grippy’,” do I courageously answer back as I dip my little bent spoon into the bowl she hands me.

“Well, *I* talked to him when you were sleeping in the wardrobe, and he says he’s ready to give you one *last* chance, but only if you promise to go to bed without whining for an entire week.”

Has my mother really been in contact with that minor devil? Who knows? Can I really take the risk of braving the dreaded Grippy?

I opt for prudence. I’ll just have to complain a little bit before going to bed, just for good measure. After all, a week goes by so fast...



It must be Sunday. My parents put on their best clothes and leave for church together to attend High Mass. Mother has promised me numerous times to take me with her one day, but I’m in no hurry to go there. Michèle, who attends Low Mass early in the morning so my parents can then go and offer their own weekly devotion, admitted to me that she gets really bored in church. If it weren’t for Blacky Blanchette, one of the neighborhood’s older kids I sometimes see playing ball in the field out front, a boy who goes out of his way to sit right behind her in the pews during sermons, Michèle wouldn’t see much of a point to the whole thing.

She told me that Blacky stays on his knees long after what she calls communion has been given, and that, when she goes to sit back down in the pews, he stuffs his nose in her hair and proceeds to take deep breaths. Grown-ups are silly!

I kneel in front of my bedroom window, my head resting on my arms as I lean against the windowsill. Outside, spring is turning into summer. The branches in the trees are dotted with tiny green leaves, and the tall yellow hay in the field seems to have lost its battle against the encroaching green grass.

It's too early in the day for children to be amassing there. They haven't taken off their church clothes yet; mothers only permit kids to do so after lunchtime, when it becomes clear that they won't be able to keep them still any longer.

The 'Merry Widow's' big white cat, noticeable for the long gray streak running down its back, also seems aware of the neighborhood's daily rituals: he slowly crosses the field, sometimes stopping to chase after a fly who, excited by all of this new warmth, darts about nervously. Looking for bigger game, the cat resumes its rounds, taking measured paces, slowly, towards the fringe of trees surrounding the field. It hesitates, then, with infinite precaution, sneaks through the prickly branches of the yellow-barked shrubs. Gone.

I sigh heavily, thoroughly bored now. Nothing left to pique my interest.

Will we be making our traditional visit to the old aunties this afternoon? Sometimes, on Sundays, my parents decide to take a little stroll around the neighborhood, which inevitably leads to my aunts' home, about ten streets away from our place.

This is the only outing my mother allows. It gives her the opportunity to inundate me with repeated warnings against the potential dangers of the street, seemingly inconspicuous on Sundays. My only regret is having to abandon Baba, whom Father can no longer carry down the stairs in his arms because of the ‘loubaygo’ that’s been torturing him for weeks, now.

While my parents courageously sip the awful green tea prepared by my aunt Mia, I’ll obtain permission to venture into the backyard. Fenced, of course, or my ever-fearful mother would have objected without any possible appeal.

Then they’ll have the same conversation, as usual. My aunts will take turns assailing my mother with spiteful phrases, such as:

“You coddle him too much, Simone. A boy needs to play *sports*.”

They have a peculiar way of pronouncing that word, as if they really know what they’re talking about.

“He’s not dressed for it,” is my mother’s usual reply. “He’s gonna get all dirty.”

“Clothes can be washed, Simone,” will then answer the two crones.

Forsaken by all — even my father, who normally agrees tacitly with his sisters with mocking silence — my mother inevitably concedes, and I’ll end up rolling around in the grass, intoxicated by smells other than those encountered in the wardrobe. Lying on my back, I’ll then observe the big apple tree, the only tree in the backyard, the one my celibate aunts nurture with all the love they weren’t able to give a child.

I’ll have the impression that I can hear its roots growing in the ground beneath me. I’ll imagine them foraging everywhere to find food, sucking in as much dirt

juice as possible, all the way up to their branches, where, soon, those big plump Macintosh reds I love so much will begin to sprout.

And that's when I start dreaming of being a tree myself. To be free to do anything I want, to greet the sparrows on my branches and let them sing their tiny hearts out. To grow beautiful leaves, then beautiful flowers. To feel the rain, the wind, the Sun on my branches. I'd make sure not to grow too far away from our house so Mother wouldn't worry too much. Otherwise, she might have to cut me down, have me transported inside the house, and placed in a water bucket, just like the Christmas tree.

"What are you doing?"

Michèle snuck up on me, a piece of toast in her hand. She stuffs it in her mouth, leaving a trail of jam on her lips.

"Nothin'. I'm bored. I'm waiting until we go see the aunts."

"Then you'll be moping around for a while. Want me to read you *Mouchette's* adventures again?"

"No. I know that story by heart."

Michèle hesitates. She means well, I can tell. Blacky must have snorted her hair longer than usual, today.

"We could..."

Now fully alert, I bubble with impatience, waiting for her to reveal her plan. She pretends to think furiously for a moment, searching for an idea. I'm almost fooled. I love waiting feverishly. (If it was up to me, life itself would be one long wait; like when it's Christmas... When Christmas time comes around, it goes by so fast that all that's left behind is the remorse at not having savored it longer when it was there.) But this time, she's pushing it. I'm so bored that I start wishing for something, anything, to happen right this minute. 'On the double,' as my mother would say.

“Just say it!”

“We could play... hockey! Or, er... ‘Floorball,’ as the head nun calls it.”

What a great idea! The forbidden game *par excellence* inside the apartment, forbidden because my mother fears like she fears hell itself that any kind of excitement indoors would assuredly signal the demise of her precious fern along with the destruction of our only table lamp, an old thing with a yellowed lampshade.

“Oh yes-s-s-s-s!”

Begone, boredom! I’m about to embark on a quest for the Stanley cup, that thing my father keeps talking about incessantly during suppertime, even though no one really pays him much attention.

Michèle and I run all over the place, trying to find the implements vital to our happiness. The discolored ‘bolo’ ball is discovered hiding behind the soaps and the scouring powders concealed in the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink, where Mother had hidden it a few weeks ago, after the regrettable incident in which the carved resin ashtray got broken. Baba’s old cane, almost devoid of varnish now, will serve as a forward’s stick, while a broom ought to act as a perfectly reasonable goalie stick. While Michèle ties two old frazzled catalogs to her legs to simulate goalie pads, I go and take out Baba’s spats from one of the boxes in the wardrobe, discovered since last we played, nice gray spats with buttons grampa was so proud to wear, when he was a young man.

Now all we need is Baba, who’s sleeping in his room. Baba’s indispensable to our game: he’s the net! To score a goal, the ‘puck’ has to roll between the wheels of his wheelchair.

Baba also serves as linesman, referee, spectator, coach,

and even supporter, whenever I get upset because Michèle managed to stop one of my throws.

When we arrive in his room, all excited and brandishing our ‘sticks’, our get-up quickly informs Baba that his moment of peace of mind has come to an abrupt halt. He worries. Baba doesn’t seem too keen on the idea of serving as our hockey net, today.

“‘Mone don’t want you to...”

Of course, she doesn’t. My mother Simone perfected the art of forbiddance. But there’s still a half-hour left before she comes back from church. We’ll have ample time to tidy things up before she comes back home, her head held high and her lips pursed under that little black felt hat that looks like an upside down biscuit tin.

Michèle undertakes the task of wheeling Baba into the living room. Baba still seems reluctant.

“Come on, grampa, we have time. Just a little game, to make Julien happy.”

Baba tries to turn his grimace into a smile, but it’s clear that his concern has not entirely dissipated.

To try and assuage his misgivings, Michèle rolls him in front of the door that gives out onto the balcony, where I’m not allowed to go without supervision, and even then, only when it’s sunny out. That way, tables and pieces of furniture ought to be protected from the occasional bounces of the ‘puck’, as well as from possible cane hits and broom strikes.

Michèle, who sometimes listens to hockey games on the radio with Father on Saturday evenings, has only vague notions of the actual game, but that’s still a whole lot more than me. As I get ready to whack the ball like a madman, she stops me and shows me how to adopt the proper stance. Then, she tries to imitate a referee’s whistle to

signal the start of the period, but only manages a barely audible ‘fu-uut’.

That’s enough for me. With barely concealed clumsiness, I go for the ball, trying to keep control of it as it rolls along the shiny linoleum, freshly waxed the day before. The ball repeatedly threatens to disappear under the sofa or behind a table, and often ends up in the corridor leading to the kitchen. Finally, I manage to position it in a straight line in front of my sister, who’s trying to hold her broom like she imagines a goalie would hold his stick.

Leaving her no time to prepare for the onslaught, I whack the ball like a golfer. The little red rubber sphere flies right through her legs, hits the door behind Baba, who’s jittering in his wheelchair as much as his paralysis will allow, and rebounds dangerously close to the frame housing my parents’ wedding picture hanging on the opposite wall.

“One nothin’ Hu... Hulien!”

I proudly raise the cane over my head, much to Michèle’s horror. I almost hit the ghastly chandelier made of orange glass, which supports fake metal candles into which are screwed bulbs of red and yellow to emulate the flickering of flames.

Nothing’s broken, but that was close. Michèle’s face is as white as a sheet.

“If you’re not gonna be careful, I’m not playin’ anymore!”

“All right, already. I won’t do it again...”

I’m willing to make any commitment to keep playing. The game resumes, this time under the auspice of controlled excitement imposed by my sister, who seems more preoccupied with saving the rare and dreadful knick-knacks my mother has arrayed on tables and windowsills than really playing goalie.

Baba seems happy. He encourages me and pretends to be a nuisance to Michèle by bumping his wheelchair into the back of her legs once in a while. My sister protests, but the wink she gives our grandfather should serve as an indication that all of this is staged, and that she's doing everything in her power to let me score goals repeatedly.

I feel charged. I get excited. I lust for triumph. I am elsewhere. My head echoes with the cries of encouragement from the crowd. The blue linoleum becomes a real ice rink. Having taken off my shoes in order to 'skate' better, I slide along the surface in my socks, flying like Maurice Richard, whose exploits Father often recounts during meals, the day following a game.

Michèle and Baba burst out laughing as I struggle against imaginary foes. I don't even think about throwing the 'puck' in their direction anymore. I run all over the place, racing into the kitchen, avoiding the table and chairs, momentarily losing the ball between the cooling stove and the wood box standing next to it, before finding it again under the sideboard where it had bounced off to, come back full steam ahead into the living room, and suddenly find myself... face to face with my mother!

Behind her, I see my father, smiling proudly at the idea that his son might one day become a professional hockey player, then notice Baba and Michèle's more concerned looks.

But it's my mother expression that worries me the most. Lips pursed, eyes sparkling, she glares at me intently with all the bitterness she can conjure.

"It's Sunday! Can't you keep calm for just one day?"

"We didn't do anything wrong! We were just playing!"

I have just transgressed the fundamental law that governs the relationship between my mother and I: never, under

any circumstance, talk back to her. Father tries his best to intervene:

“Simone, they were just having fun... They didn’t brake anything...”

“Oh good, take their side, why don’t you. He could brake *everything* in this house, and you’d still be defending him. You’re not the one who has to spend her weeks washing, cleaning and cooking. Sunday is Our Lord’s day. It’s meant for resting, not fooling about.”

My father stops protesting. He’s developed an infallible method of strategic retreat: by loosening the tie around his neck, he turns his back on my mother and suddenly becomes fascinated by the cover of *La Patrie du Dimanche* that he bought at Mr. Fournier’s canteen on the way home from church. To Mother’s indignation, no doubt, as she firmly believes that every store, regardless of its nature, should remain closed on Sundays.

Michèle sits on the floor next to Baba, unhurriedly untying her catalog pads. I sit on the floor next to her to remove Baba’s spats. His old cane quickly ends up in my mother’s wardrobe, the one where I’m never allowed to go. My grandfather looks at me with a sorry look, sympathizing with my chagrin.

Suddenly, he flexes all of his muscles and, in a pitiful effort, manages to roll his wheelchair around by using his one good hand. Awkwardly, he goes and places himself right in front of my mother and, his face flushed, begins to yell, drooling as he shouts:

“Mone a ba... a ba... a bad girl! Hu...Hulien, g... good boy.”

He defies his stunned daughter with a stare, then, with the same pitiful awkwardness, launches himself as best he can towards his bedroom before entering it with great difficulty.

Michèle dares a little smile, intended for me, and places a finger on her lips to warn me from uselessly adding fuel to the fire by rejoicing too openly.

From beneath a small table, I recuperate the ‘bolo’ ball my mother missed when confiscating our equipment, and head back to my dear wardrobe, where I join up with Tonon, the silent confidant that always lets me pet him.

Through the open door of the wardrobe, I see Michèle come in the bedroom. She throws a glance towards my secret lair before sitting at the tiny child’s desk that separates our two beds, ready to begin her homework, when suddenly, we hear loud knocking at the front door, followed by some shouting:

“Mr. Lussier! Mrs. Lussier! Quick, turn on the radio! The war’s over!”

After a brief hesitation, my father goes to answer. On the other side of the screen door, Blacky Blanchette, his hair in disarray, is trembling with excitement.

“What did you say?”

“The war, sir! The war’s over!”

Wiping her hands on her upturned apron, my mother hurriedly comes out of the kitchen to join them. I follow Michèle out of our room. We can hear Baba’s rasps as, out of breath, he tries to extricate his wheelchair from his bedroom doorframe so he can come and see what the commotion is all about. Michèle seems stunned to see her Blacky in the flesh, face to face, for once. Mother is the first to react. She turns the knob of the enormous console radio that dominates the living room. As we are forced to wait while the radio set warms up, we hear hisses and pops, and suddenly, the voice of radio announcer Gilles Desroches rings out at the precise moment he announces that he’s looking at the cenotaph honoring the combatants.

“Earlier, just a few minutes ago, the bells of Saint Patrice church rang out. Earlier, klaxons and factory sirens rang out in the town of Sherbrooke to express the joy of the entire Cantons de l’Est population...”

Roused by the same instinct, we all go outside to stand on the long balcony. Other families rush out of their homes at almost the exact same moment. Down in the streets, children are running everywhere. Car horns let loose cadenced calls. Men shake each other’s hands to celebrate, as if they were the ones directly responsible for the happy turn of events. Women laugh and weep, crying ‘My Gosh, finally!’, as the radio announcer’s voice begins reciting all of the names of the municipal council members who have showed up in the studio to strut next to him as he attempts to read the cenotaph.

In each neighboring apartment, radio sets start spreading the word about the huge crowd of people gathering at the corner of King and Wellington streets, where *Red Ensigns* and *Union Jacks* are being raised along with the Star-Spangled Banner. And when Gilles Desroches’ voice proclaims: *“Finally, Nazism has been crushed, and the Allied forces are victorious in Germany!”*, my mother lifts me in her arms and, surrounded by the cheers of neighbors who have just heard the same news, shows me five fighter planes as they streak by in formation over our heads, golden and resplendent under the warm May sun. She bellows in my ear, the happiest I’ve ever seen her:

“The war is over, Julien! The damn war is over!”

I turn my head towards the apartment: no one thought of helping Baba across the raised doorstep. He’s still inside, alone in the shadows. I notice his eyes, moist and sad. He waves feebly towards me, before zigzagging back to his bedroom...

Why can't Babas have fun at the same time other people do? I want to climb down the mommy-tree, but her arm-branches hold me tight.

Soon, the excited hustling and bustling down in the street makes me forget all about my grandfather's plight.

Chapter four

My mother justifies her propensity to overprotect me by arguing that I am ‘delicate’ and ‘prone to sickness.’ My father counters that I’m probably always sick because she coddles me too much.

As for me, I wouldn’t know. I am torn between the desire to always remain sick, when I’m allowed to stay in bed all day and drink some eggnog with a drop of brandy, and that of being fit as a fiddle, so I can finally go and run in the field out front.

My sister Michèle brings back countless quantities of germs from the outside world, or so claims my mother who, at the slightest sneeze, unleashes preventive measures sure to stop any epidemic. I always have to wear a sweater, even in August; in winter, I am condemned to swallow my daily spoonful of cod liver oil, and in Fall, if she detects even the slightest hint of a fever on my brow, it’s off to bed with a couple of pills of *Baby’s Own* (which everyone calls ‘babyzones.’)

Sickness is my mother’s preferred way of coercing me.

“If you get well quickly, mama’s gonna let you go outside on the ‘balc’ny’.”

“If you don’t catch anything on the ‘balc’ny’, mama’ll take you to the grocery store.”

“If you don’t get sick coming back from the grocery store, mama’ll take you for a bus ride.”

The list of unkept promises grows long. It never goes past the balcony, except when we go and visit Mia and Maxi. Isolation has rendered me so sensitive to dust that I sneeze any time my nostrils feel ticklish, and off to bed I go again, confined to my room, squeaky clean, purged, and ordered to get well as soon as possible, while my mother goes off on yet another cleaning spree to sterilize the apartment.

“That child will be the end of me,” says my mother for the umpteenth time to our neighbors as she hangs the laundry out to dry. “He’s always sick.”

“Maybe you spoil him too much, Mrs. Lussier,” tries Blacky Blanchette’s mother, who herself birthed ten children into this world, and who lets them run all over the place and do as they please.

“You really think I have time to spoil him any when I have ‘the invalid’ livin’ here at home with us?”

“There *is* that... Must be a hell of a burden...”

Mother inevitably lets out a heavy sigh that sums up her profound conviction that she’s a martyr to filial duty, and proudly returns to her kitchen; when there’s so much work to be done, one can’t spend all day chatting...

Today, summer is exploding everywhere. In spite of her thorough inspection, my mother is unable to sense any kind of illness on me, so I get the permission to go out onto the balcony, along with Baba, but without Tonon, which my mother vehemently forbids me from taking outside.

“You can play with my stole, Julien, but not on the ‘bale’ny’. I’m putting my foot down. And to be honest, I’m starting to wonder if that thing’s not what’s been infecting you with all of these illnesses of late. Maybe you’re ‘allurgic’ to fur.”

Baba and I are sitting side by side: him in his varnished wooden wheelchair, leaning aslant against its weaved wicker splat, and me, on a little wooden rocking chair that once belonged to my sister, which explains the shoddy pink paint job.

My mother's authorization does not include the privilege of taking my favorite toys outside with me, lest I get them dirty, which would certainly trigger even more 'allurgies'. All I have at my disposal is a little kaki-colored plastic car sporting scarlet wheels. It's decorated with a white star that's already begun to fade, as I play with it incessantly since I got it as a present for my fifth birthday, two weeks ago.

Rolling it around along the loose planks of the balcony does not represent a very stimulating game. Quickly bored, I try to occupy my time by rocking myself in my little chair.

On occasion, we can still see a few military trucks patrolling the streets, with their heavy tarpaulins, but amongst our balcony neighbors, no one really talks about the war anymore: these are young families, and the eldest of the children aren't of age to become cannon fodder yet. There were whispers about Mrs. Blanchette's brother to the effect that he'd gone 'awall' and had deserted his unit, but they caught him a week later in the woods near Lake Memphremagog, stricken with cold and fear.

Father learned that the man was condemned to prison for desertion. Father knows a lot of gossip; business at his dry cleaning shop has been slow of late, ever since demobilization robbed him of uniforms to clean. These days, he spends most of his time chatting with the local barber, reinventing the world over at the store next door. Mother has been scolding him more and more for wasting his life away.

One evening, he was talking about Mrs. Blanchette's brother to my mother while they were doing the dishes, and he brazenly said:

"Damn *blokes*! Again, one of our boys is paying the price."

My mother immediately replied angrily:

"Pierre, I don't want you speaking ill of English people. Our priest says that we should forget all about our *fratri...* *fatri...* about our 'faticide' quarrels with each other and pull together so we can better battle the Antichrist. Mrs. Blanchette's brother is only getting what he deserves. I don't want you speaking about this anymore in front of the kids!"

The late morning heat is numbing, today. Baba nods off again. If I dared, I could sneak down the stairs and risk exploring the marvelous field of mystery that lies out front, just out of reach. There, I could spy on the neighborhood kids as they assign each other roles in a story I know absolutely nothing about, but which has seriously been starting to pique my interest of late. Blacky Blanchette has once again managed to enroll them in one of those great games of his that he loves to set-up and prepare in advance, all while letting the other kids think that they're the ones who actually came up with it.

I would so love to play a role myself, like a tree, a great big tree on which one of the kids could lean his head on folded arms and count to a hundred to play a game of *kick-the-can*.

Even from the balcony, I can hear them arguing:

"And I'm telling you *I'm* gonna be playing Frontenac!"

"Aw come on, you got to be Frontenac last time. It's my turn!"

"I wanna be d'Iberville."

“I wanna be Dollard.”

The three girls staying on the sidelines, sisters or friends of the seven or eight turbulent kids trying to find new ideas on how to forget that their summer vacations are passing by too quickly, are resigned to play Jeanne Mance, Mère d’Youville, and Mary of the Incarnation. Only my sister Michèle, of whom I’m jealous for having received permission to hang out with that particular gang, distinguishes herself by her choice: she will play Mata Hari, much to the chagrin of the history aficionados amongst them who, while permitting themselves some merry anachronisms on occasion, have a hard time accepting her taking such wild liberties with chronology.

“She didn’t even live in Canada!”

The argument falls on Michèle’s deaf ears.

“All right, then we’ll just say I’m one of Mata Hari’s ancestors, and that I’m spying on the English for the French.”

This horde of kids has a but single idea in mind: to occupy a parcel of this beautiful day as quickly as possible before it ends. Concessions are rapidly made, although without much enthusiasm.

In this revised version of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, it is indispensable that each player assign himself a historical name he must then shout out loud and proud for all to hear, regardless of the fact that some of the characters were already pushing up daisies by the time the actual events the little troupe was trying to re-enact took place.

The group soon divides into two clans: the French and the English. So role attribution has to be somewhat modified. After much bellyaching and complaining, Blacky relents to play Wolfe. My sister Michèle rapidly decrees that

she will now be playing the general's wife. The two youngest members of the gang immediately line up behind Blacky, whose face is turning beet red at the idea of playing Michèle's 'husband.'

The rest of them become Montcalm's army. Today, Montcalm will be interpreted by Dauphinais, a chubby boy who immediately begins barking orders:

"That big dead tree over there's gonna be our fort. Just try and take it from us!"

Shouting cries of encouragement, the valiant French army goes away to hide as best it can behind the fallen tree trunk and the stumps of rotting branches. A few kids break off some of the branches to use as swords. Then, the first of many insults start raining down.

"Come on, ya damn *blokes*! We'll answer you with the mouths of our cannons!"

The word cannon seems to evoke an amused reaction from Blacky Wolfe, who immediately drags his meager troops to the edge of the woods while being assailed by the incessant jibes thrown by 'Montcalm's French forces.'

Had the word been mightier than the sword? Had the insults hit their mark? That would be sorely underestimating our Blacky. This son of an ironmonger had hidden a secret weapon that he was now preparing to unleash upon the enemy.

I lean against the balcony ramp to closely follow the maneuver, of which, of course, I understand absolutely nothing. The other camp seems as perplexed as I am. 'Wolfe' takes out an empty paint can inside which he pours gray powder, which he had hidden away in his pocket in a little brown bag. He then orders his three acolytes to each spit in turn on the powder. Putting the lid back on the paint can, he then stands on it, using all of his weight to

seal it properly, before wedging it at a slant against a rock, just a few paces away from the ‘enemy.’

As the adversaries stare silently in wonder, Blacky strikes a wooden match and places it near a hole he pierced in the bottom of the can using a nail. Without warning, a deafening ‘BLAM!’ rings out: a long lick of orange flame suddenly propels the paint can lid up in the air and straight into the enemy’s ranks, where the French forces immediately retreat to their homes, screaming in terror. The deserters have just had the misfortune of being witness to the power of carbide, a powder Blacky ‘borrowed’ from his father, which produces thundering results, but without any real potential for harm.

All around the neighborhood, worried mothers surge out onto their balconies. Once they realize that they got scared for nothing, they can hardly contain their fury.

“Damn kids! Ill-bred bums!”

Mrs. Blanchette comes out onto her balcony a few moments later, wiping her hands on one of her husband’s shirts she was about to put in her noisy washing machine, the one that drones on and on each and every day. Not bothering to hide her indignation, she says:

“I’ll have you know, Mrs. Dauphinais, that *my* children are *very* well educated, much better than *your* brats. *My* kids do their shenanigans in broad daylight, not hidden away in a hangar somewhere with their pants around their ankles, like *yours*.”

The cacophony of insults exchanged between the two shrews wake up Baba, who stares around with a dazed look on his face. My mother, attracted by the possibility of a group bicker, also pops out on her balcony, intent on enjoying the show. But she becomes disenchanted rather quickly when she notices Michèle’s presence by Blacky’s side.

“You come here right this instant, you little tramp!”

“Ahhh... Mammmmaaaaa!”

“I said *now*, young lady!”

Grumbling all the way, Michèle takes an eternity crossing the hundred feet or so that separate her from our house. When she finally makes it up to the top of the stairs, she’s greeted by a:

“Go to your room, and don’t come out ‘til I tell you!”

Michèle grumbles some more, but relents to coming inside. The screen door slams behind her. Without uttering a word to Mrs. Blanchette, who’s deliberately ignoring her, Mother turns back to me before going inside the apartment.

“You see why I don’t wanna let you go and play in that field? It’s much too dangerous!”

As if by magic, mothers and children disappear inside their abodes. The echoes of furious reprimands quickly fade away; it’s too hot today for parents to punish their children, and punish themselves by imposing their turbulent presence inside the house. In half an hour, all of the penitents will be back down in the street, still friends although enemies in war, but wise enough to choose a less compromising game.

Then, time stands still. The few cars that do pass by don’t interest me anymore. I haven’t played with my little plastic car in ages. The singing of a white-throated sparrow interrupts the incessant noisy rustling of crickets at regular intervals. I’m so bored I feel like a lump of butter that’s been left on the kitchen table for too long on a Sunday afternoon. I discover melancholy. I progressively master the power of magical thinking. I elaborate wishes:

“If I really, really believe it, mama’s gonna let me go down in the yard and play. If I really, really believe it, mama’s gonna open the door and come tell me that I can

go and buy two cents' worth of licorice balls over at Mr. Fournier's because I behaved the entire morning..."

"You're bored, aren'tcha honey?"

I didn't hear the Merry Widow approaching. She's just next to me now, radiant under the noonday sun. She looks like a real-life Virgin of Fatima. The upturned collar of her sleeveless white blouse highlights her blonde curls; her tight waist outlined by an ample cotton skirt with flowery motif. The smell of Breck shampoo emanating from her freshly washed hair gives me chills. I discover the joy of seduction, and at the same moment, I get the feeling that my wish is about to come true. Well, maybe not exactly the wish I'd had in mind, but almost.

"I was lookin' at ya in the window over there, and I told myself, I said: I do believe Mrs. Lussier's baby boy might like to read some comic books, yes?"

In her arms, clutched against her bosom, where the neckline of her blouse reveals her cleavage, she holds a pile of American comic books. I deduce so from the back cover of the magazine at the bottom of the pile, where I notice one of those short comic strip ads in which they try to sell you weights by featuring a scrawny fellow getting sand thrown in his face by some big idiot at the beach. My sister sometimes hides a few copies in her wardrobe, under the boxes and the Delly books. I sifted through them once or twice, but never understood the passion Michèle had for those kind of stories where the girls' eyelids always cry rounded tears, the ones that make her sigh so. So at first, I'm a little hesitant to accept our neighbor's generous offer.

"Look! There are all sorts of funny characters and weird little critters in 'ere, see? Some of 'em are quite beautiful stories, real *classics*. They're supposed to be famous

stories, like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Prisoner of Zenda*, and *Last of the Mohicans*. There's even a *Cyrano de Bergerac* in there. I didn't read that one all the way, but I think it's the story of this guy who fights people with a sword 'cuz they keep making fun of his big nose."

Damn her, I'm hooked. Her offer is tempting. I feebly stretch out my arms; she hands over a dozen comic books with colored covers printed on glossy paper. I dare blurt out:

"Th-th-thank you, ma'am..."

Her red lips smile, revealing bright white teeth. She puts a hand in my hair and ruffles it a little before carelessly putting it back in place. I feel tremendously guilty, at this moment, of preferring her to my mother.

"If ya want some more, just let me know, okay sweetie? Bye now."

She undulates in front of Baba and I to reach the staircase that leads down to the street, where awaits a sparkling burgundy De Soto convertible. I lean forward and press my face against the balcony bars to follow her descent.

As she's about to climb into the car, where a man in a white shirt with a cigarette in his mouth is nonchalantly waiting for her at the wheel, she turns around at blows me a kiss.

Long after the car has disappeared and the dust of the unasphalted street has billowed back down, I feel warmth in my chest, triggered by her gesture.

I glance at Baba. His mouth twists around in a sort of wry little smile, and I think he actually winks at me as he says:

"Widow... pretty."

Clinging to the smell of her hair, I sigh, then dive excitedly in the examination of my newfound treasure.

What a discovery for a child who is forbidden from even venturing down to the bottom of the stairs on his own. What an extraordinary journey into imagination: Plastic Man, Wonder Woman, Cyrano de Bergerac, Superman, Mickey Mouse, Little Lulu... As I don't know how to read yet, the fact that all of the dialogues and the notes inscribed at the bottom of the panels are in English leave me completely indifferent.

Instinctively, I understand the distinction to be made between good and evil, between the good guys and the bad guys. The crude colors are positively enchanting. The women's pointy breasts poking beneath their clothing troubles me. The heroes' courage dazzles me.

I flip through them quickly. I feast on images and first impressions, with the decided intent of coming back to them later on to savor each page.

"Julien! It's lunchtime!"

What a catastrophe! I had forgotten all about lunch! I need a quick solution to hide this reviled form of literature from my mother who, since the priest denounced it from the top of the pulpit as being 'foreign poisons that undermine the souls of our youths,' forbids its presence in our home.

Mother was so impressed by this expression that she repeats incessantly, so that I learned it by heart without even knowing what it actually means. I do know, however, that it would be unthinkable of introducing this 'poison' into our home, right under my mother's nose.

"D'ya hear me, Julien? Now!"

Her tone is already biting. Pressing my precious bag-gage of dreams against my heart, sitting on the edge of my little chair, I consult Baba with a desperate glance. He seems to have perfectly understood the stakes of the situation.

He signals me to slide the magazines down his pants, pressing them tightly against his belly, and with his one good hand, pulls his shirt as best he can back onto his stomach.

“Goshdamn H-E-double-hockey-sticks! Do I have to go out there and drag you by the ears?”

“Coming! I’m just... uh, helping Baba turn around.”

I hold the screen door open while Baba struggles to roll inside the apartment, huffing and puffing like a locomotive coming into a station.

“I’ll help you, grampa.”

From out of nowhere, Michèle comes to our aid and begins tugging on the wheelchair, and I start breathing easier. Our team finally makes it to the kitchen, where prevails a stifling heat.

“Go wash your hands.”

I almost reply, like always, that they’re not dirty, but hold back at the last moment. It would be pointless to fan the proverbial flames of my mother’s ire at this juncture.

“Baba, too... Hulien.”

I push grampa to the cramped bathroom, where I enter first. His massive silhouette fills the doorway behind me. I turn the tap, but before getting my hands wet, I hurry and retrieve the precious bundle from under his shirt and hide it between the wall and the bathtub on legs, where I’ll be able to recuperate it later, when my mother is out buying groceries.

The mischief I see glinting in Baba’s eyes feels like a medal of valor awarded a proud soldier. We wash our hands together, snickering the whole time...



The ‘as good as gold’ child that I have become over the last two days is making my mother very perplexed. As soon as her back is turned, I sneak like a fox into my wardrobe and, under the beam of light coming in through the slightly opened doorway, I regale myself with my new comic books.

The balloons coming out of the characters’ mouths hold no interest for me, nor do the obscure twists and turns of their strange adventures. What fascinates me are their faces. I analyze each rictus, each expression. I admire the desperate looks in the faces of women in constant peril. I giggle at Donald Duck’s bad temper. I long to assist Cyrano de Bergerac in his duels. In other words, I mash everything together; forced to compose with my mother’s constant fretting as she goes about doing her ‘dailies,’ I escape to a made-up universe where truth and realism are absent.

At any moment, I lower the magazine I’m reading and let myself float away, savoring the forbidden fruit, an Oh!, so willing victim of the sulfurous charm of these superior beings I so desperately crave to emulate...

My fondness for daydreaming becomes my weakness. If my mother hadn’t pretended to ignore me for these last two days, days filled with warm, heavy rain — it should be said that I even took care of spacing my little trips to the wardrobe to avoid arousing her suspicions — it was greatly underestimating her on my part to have thought I was actually left to my own devices.

Because you see, she ambushes me at the exact moment I’m contemplating the image of Lizzie Borden cutting her husband down with an axe. Now, children my age are not as easily impressed by this kind of horrific imagery as much as adults might think. (Actually, this

particular comic confounds me. I much prefer Wonder Woman's stunning physique to that of Lizzie Borden's well-concealed body. Truth be told, this Lizzie character doesn't hold much interest for me, mostly because I can't understand a thing about her story.)

"Whas'is?"

Silence. What's the point of denying anything when you're holding the forbidden fruit right in your hands.

"Where'd you get that?"

I'm not about to betray the pretty neighbor that smells so nice! Without thinking, I blurt:

"I found it..."

Having herself instituted the draconian regime of my perpetual balcony imprisonment, which prevents me from wandering off too far from her, she immediately knows I'm lying.

"Where'd you find that? Where?"

She brutally rips the comic right out of my hands, not caring if she rips it. Her horrified stare leaves no doubt as to the kind of effect Lizzie's sharp antics are having on her.

"I want to know where you got this!"

I realize in the nick of time that she thinks this is the only copy I have in my possession. Thankfully, the others are safely hidden away under a box in which I keep all of my treasures: Tonon, Baba's spats, golden caps of Dow beer bottles, candy wrappers, a picture of Maurice Richard I haphazardly cut-out of a copy of *La Patrie du Dimanche*, along with a few marbles my sister Michèle discovered some time ago...

Remembering those damn marbles, I'll admit I automatically make the association without thinking. I make a confession that I shouldn't have.

"I found it in Michèle's desk."

The ‘desk’ in question is a small wobbly reading desk that replicates in small scale those that fill up typical classrooms. It’s my sister’s safe. She even glued a sheet of paper right in the middle of the top panel with the inscription: ‘Private property. Sneaks will burn in hell.’ I know the wording of the warning by heart because it gave the whole family a good laugh when they first saw it. Without thinking about what I’m doing, I’ve just signed my poor sister’s unequivocal condemnation.

My mother leaps to the little desk, lifts the lid, and discovers three copies of *Love Story* comics, the ones in which the girls always have big tears drooping from their lower eyelids...

Immediately summoned to our room by a stern command, my poor sister swears she’s got nothing to do with it, that yes, she did buy those three love stories with money given to her by her godmother Alexandrine, but that she’s never even *seen* the gory piece my mother keeps brandishing about. Unfortunately, the circumstances are damning. Whoever bought three comics must also have bought four, concludes my mother.

Her precious *Love Story* comics are ripped apart in front of her eyes and thrown in the bin. Amongst other things, she’ll have to go to bed earlier, without any supper... Luckily, I only get deprived of a ration of *Pouding-Chômeur*.



That night, as we both lie in our beds with sheets made sticky by the current heat wave, we both sigh repeatedly, unable to find sleep.

I’m surprised Michèle doesn’t seem too angry when she asks me:

“So where *did* you find that comic?”

The least I owe her is a confession, which I quickly provide. Upon learning that I still have a dozen or so other publications in my possession, she can’t hide her astonishment.

Silently, so as to not attract the attention of our parents, who are gently rocking themselves on the balcony, where the air is more tolerable than it is inside, I sneak into my wardrobe with Michèle and, under the dim glow of the flashlight my sister never gave back to my mother, show her my collection.

On the promise that she’ll also be able to read them, I obtain her forgiveness. Suddenly, life is beautiful again. Back in our beds, we finally manage to fall asleep, and dream of all of the adventures that, from now on, we’ll be able to enjoy together...

Chapter five

Summer vacation is over. Michèle's gone back to school. I feel somewhat abandoned now, since she doesn't have any time to read me my comic books anymore. With the coming of the new school year, my sister's started balking again; each morning, she has to don her mandatory school uniform, a simple white blouse and a navy blue dress with suspenders.

The crushing heat wave of early September that's numbed everyone into torpor managed to convince the nuns at Michèle's school to wait a little before imposing the long beige socks to the young girls. Michèle almost prays for the sticky humidity to perdure, so enchanted is she at being able to avoid the ordeal of having to wear socks that constantly irritate the skin of her legs.

I envy Michèle's chance of being able to go to school. Lying on my back behind the cooling wood stove, I watch them both, Mother and her, as they diligently wrap new and secondhand schoolbooks with rigid brown paper furnished by the Royal Bank of Canada. My mother starts complaining about the price of books again, repeating, as she does every start of a new school year:

"Will someone *please* explain to me why they make you get new books each and every year? Why can't you use the books your father and I used when we were kids? One

plus one will always equal two. And it's not like Canada's history is gonna change any time soon: everyone's dead! Frontenac ain't gonna dig his way out of the grave to come and tell us ghost stories. And religion: that doesn't change either. I say the less we know, the better we're off any-dailiesways..."

Michèle quickly grows tired of this endless spiel.

"Mamaaaa! The world 'evolves' each and every year, the nun said so. We're learning all sorts of new things now. Arithmetic gets more complicated every day. We're learning subjects that weren't even in the program back in your day..."

"Right. So pretty soon, you kids will know more than all of us parents do, and you'll start lookin' down your nose at us..."

Michèle refrains from answering back. Experience has taught her that any attempt to reason with Mother usually proves fruitless. Soon, Mother will stop griping, but not without having first recounted this anecdote for the hundredth time:

"When *I* was little, nuns would teach us the alphabet by skipping over the letter 'Q'." (*Editor's note : It should be noted that, in French, the letter 'Q' is a homophone of the word 'ass'.*) "When they got to the 'Q', they'd say: 'indecent letter', and move on."

"You already told us that one, ma. These days, the nuns teach us to pronounce it 'ke' instead of 'ku'..."

I observe Michèle glue the folded corners of the cover protectors, moistening them with a damp washcloth. I envy her. I get the feeling that I'm going to feel even sadder in the days to come, because I'm going to be spending all of my time alone at home with Mother and Baba. I am still forbidden from exploring the backyard, and barely allowed

to sit on the balcony, where I rock myself in my little chair next to Baba, who's sleeping most of his days away now, overwhelmed by both heat and illness, stewing in the tangy smell of sour milk and urine.

To know that I'll be deprived of Michèle's presence, that I'll no longer be able to rely on her to come up with new games for us to play when Mother goes out to buy some groceries, leaves me dejected. I go out onto the front balcony, pretending to ignore the motherly warning:

"Don't go too far, you little rascal!"

On the other side of the street, at the end of the vacant lot, my favorite tree, a maple tree that grew crooked and that always looks on the verge of tipping over, now sprouts a tiny clump of orange leaves on top. Even he seems to be preparing for the coming change. Lucky fella!

If I'm to remain a prisoner of both my mother and the apartment anyways, why not be a tree? A real one, with roots digging into the ground, not a chopped down Christmas tree like the one Father puts in water each year to prevent it from shedding its needles too quickly...

What does a tree think of? Does it dream? If I were a tree, would I feel the brushing of a hand against my trunk? Would it hurt if someone tore a leaf off one of my branches? Would falling raindrops tickle me? If my branches swayed in the wind, would that mean that I'm talking? Does it take a long time to become a tree? Is there a Jesus for trees?

All of these questions jumble together in my mind. Little by little, sliding my right hand down the banister, I take a few tentative steps towards the beckoning stairwell, without any specific intent in mind. At least, not at first. I just want to move about a little, position myself to get a better view of my favorite tree and its new orange toupee.

I find myself hovering over the first few steps of the staircase. I hear my mother's voice as she starts ranting again about how priests and nuns make too much money off of new schoolbooks, and how they surely must force themselves to write new ones each year just to ruin poor, honest parents like her...

I place my right foot on the first step. With my right hand, I firmly grab hold of the banister. A little too tightly. The head of a nail jutting from the peeling paint pricks my palm, painfully. I hold back from crying out so as to not alert my mother.

The left foot has now joined the right one on the same step. I did it! I dared! I am assailed by vertigo. I retreat to the balcony. I wait, feverishly. Mother shows no signs of having spotted me. This time, summoning all my courage, I go down three steps, carefully, before immediately retreating back to the balcony on the tip of my toes.

Emboldened by the consenting silence that accompanies my endeavor, I decide to risk everything and head down the stairs, stopping on each step to prepare a quick retreat in case I hear any hint of my mother calling out to me.

Nothing.

Sounds seem to change between sky and ground. The rumbling of automobiles appears more menacing from down here. My brazen confidence wavers when I notice that, beyond the last steps, only emptiness awaits. Is this really worth it?

Halfway down, I stop, intent on going back up, when I notice, clinging to the big cement bloc that serves as a support for the staircase, a greenish thing that just grew there, neglected by all. Shrub, weed, flower, hay? My knowledge of these things are that of my age: nil.

Regardless, it's a living plant, that's all that matters. No doubt destined to become a big tree, some day. I owe it to him to go and see him. The motherly threats suddenly hold little weight. With the same nonchalance I've seen other kids employ in the neighborhood, I force myself to go down the last few steps and, dazzled by my own spontaneous courage, end up kneeling on the big cement bloc, scraping my knees on the rough surface. I bend over the little green miracle that grew there, just for me.

Well who says it's not because I wished it that this vegetable friend decided to grow near my home? Can this, at last, be the proof that really, really believing in things can sometimes be enough to make them happen?

I stretch out my hand. I risk touching the pointy star-shaped leaves. I am surprised by how soft they are. The little plant seems so fragile. And docile at the same time. Like Mother's stole, which lets itself be bent all kinds of ways, pliant to any wringing, any wrestling move I apply to it. I know that I could break this plant, that it belongs to me.

"Whad'ja find there, Julien?"

I leap to my feet, immediately guilt-ridden.

My father is looking down at me, a smile on his face, with that weary look he always sports when coming home from work. Is he going to tell on me? Or reprimand me, as Mother would? He lingers near me. I manage to blurt out:

"There's a tree there."

He leans over me, as if taking the discovery very seriously.

"That's no tree, little man. That's a dandelion. It's a weed. I'll just rip it out."

"No!"

“Julien, it’s just a clump of dandelions. It’s a useless weed.”

“I don’t want you to rip it out. I want it to become a tree. I want it to be my new friend. Mama doesn’t want me to go and see the trees across the street. So this way, I’ll have one growing near the house.”

Father seems torn between laughter and compassion. Finally, he says:

“Would you like to have a tree of your own, Julien?”

“Yes, but a real one. Not a Christmas tree.”

He smiles, thinks for a moment, then, still lost in thought, announces:

“Next Saturday, I’ll take you to the market downtown. I need grapes to make my wine anyways. And you’re gonna come with me. I’ll buy you a potted tree. But you must promise to take care of it, okay?”

Then, pretending not to notice the joyous reaction that makes my eyes grow wide:

“All right, well, get back up there before your mother has a fit cuz you skipped out on her...”

I hold my father’s hand tightly. I repeatedly had to promise Mother that I’d do so because, until five minutes before we left, she was still objecting to my leaving!

“Why’d you have to go and promise him such a thing anyways? The market is a big place, Pierre, and there are lots of people there. You could lose him. Ya got any other bright ideas like that I should know about by any chance?”

“Come on, Simone... Will you stop being so ridiculous? The kid spends so much time inside the house he’s starting to turn into a leek. Exercise will do him some good.”

My mother grumbled, raved, negotiating firm agreements and coercing my father with veiled words. But we finally got permission to leave the apartment. About time, too: the fear of being deprived of this excursion had already driven me twice to the bathroom, a victim of diarrhea.

I discover King Street East, which follows the length of our apartment bloc. The shops, the Shell garage painted in bright yellow, the traffic lights, the cars, the occasional buses, everything enchants and fascinates me. I try to hurry along so as to not slow my father down.

“Take your time, Julien. We’re in no hurry. The longer we take, the later we’ll get back home. C’apisce? You understand?”

Do I ever! Just liberated from my mother’s hold, the intoxication of sudden freedom overwhelms me. I am proud to show my father my extended knowledge of traffic light signals (which I learned just last night from my sister Michèle); I keep to the sidewalk until the light turns green. My father smiles at my efforts of being up to the task.

We tackle the long descent that will lead us to the Saint-François river. Father knows all of the important buildings in town and, as we walk, provides brief comments on each that serve as so many landmarks in my life.

“You see that big red building over there, the one on your left? That’s the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul hospital, where you were born. And on the right there, that’s the Duranleau and Jalbert funeral home. That’s where your grandmother Eulalie, Baba’s wife, was lain in state when she died...”

“*“Lainin’ states?”*”

“Yeah, er... in her coffin, in the parlor. That’s where they put dead people so friends and family can come and see their loved ones before they get buried in the cemetery.”

I don't understand any of this, and frankly don't care to know any more. The idea of death doesn't really appeal to me, not since that episode where my mice friends ended up in the toilet.

"You see that big yellow house over there, the one with two stories? That's where your mother and I were staying when Michèle was born."

My hand has become sticky in his. The humidity of August had nothing on this September heat! I doubt my Father is delighted at the idea of holding my hand either. Imperceptibly, he releases his hold, hangs on to two of my little fingers in his hand, then one. Then none.

"Listen, Julien. It's too hot to be holding hands today, okay? Just... promise to stay close to me, and I'll let you walk on your own, like a man."

Like a man! Pride makes my heart flutter. I am awash in the greatest bliss I've experienced in my short life. The regard in which my father holds me is invigorating. I resume our little stroll, more alert than ever.

We approach the last third of the long slope. The curve of the hill already allows us to see the metallic structure of the old Aylmer bridge.

"You see that little coupon store over there on your left? That belongs to old lady Marcotte, one of your aunties' friends. We'll go and say hello some other time, okay? She, er... tends to chat a lot. She can jabber for hours, and I really don't feel like enduring that today..."

Our walk continues, spiced up by my father's running commentary, as well as the occasional greetings he addresses to some acquaintance or another. Upon meeting, they exchange words, take a few steps back, then salute each other before turning away. I don't fully understand the mechanics behind these exchanges, but I'm proud to learn that Father knows people and that he can talk to them.

Stopping in front of a small shop window, he turns to me and says:

“And this is where daddy works.”

The modest shop disappoints me. I had imagined something more impressive, like all children who fervently wish to believe that their fathers aren’t actually butchers, but rather prominent doctors. My father doesn’t even offer me a visit of the premises, like he’s ashamed.

Instead, he takes us to the little barber shop next door, where a cheerful man dressed in a white smock seems to be waiting for us, leaning against the frame of the wide open front door. His bald head does not bode in favor of his profession.

“Hey there, Pierre,” says the man to my father. “Don’t tell me you finally managed to convince your wife to let you bring him in here?”

“Not exactly,” replies my father awkwardly. “She... doesn’t know yet. I wanna make her a surprise. Think you can do this without the kid screaming bloody murder?”

“Well, of course! Come on in!”

“Come with me, Julien. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Up to this point, I’ve refrained from revealing the secret of my hairdo because it’s a rather taboo subject in our home. You see, I am one of those rare representatives of a fashion trend that seduced certain mothers, including mine, in these 1940’s: my hair is as long as a girl’s. In ringlets. With a little tuft on top of my head. My mother got the inspiration for this from a picture of the Dionne quintuplets’ hairdo she saw in a photograph.

It’s my mother’s pride and joy, much to my father’s despair, who would so like for his son to look like a real boy. As for me, I don’t really care: my appearance warrants me my sister Michèle’s attentive care, who brushes and

combs my hair like she would with a doll. But, for having endured numerous lively discussions between my parents as they talked over my head, I know that Father is highly irritated by the fact that his son has come to be called ‘Absalom’ by some of the other fathers in the neighborhood, as he told my mother a few weeks ago.

I sit as best I can on the little booster seat that the barber put up on the swivel chair. The man’s excessive cheeriness pains me a little, but what can *I* do about it? In a flash, I find my neck wrapped in a paper towel and my entire body covered by a large white sheet where, here and there, still cling a few hairs and whiskers from preceding clients.

“Snip, snip, snip,” sing the bald man’s scissors as the droll barber goes off on a loquacious rant, exposing his theory on Hitler’s survival, whom he firmly believes has actually fled to South America.

“They haven’t recovered his body, you understand?” insists the barber to my father.

“Oh, come on! Of *course* his body was recovered. He committed suicide with his mistress, that... ‘Brown’ lady... Eva, I think...”

“That’s what they *want* us to believe. I think he’s gone off to open shop again somewhere else in the world.”

“Honestly, Hubert Saint-Georges, you’re talkin’ outta your ass. You should read the papers once in a while, they’re quite informative, you know...”

“Well I do read them, let me tell ya. But I also read magazines. English magazines, from the States. And let me tell ya, there are *lots* of rumors floatin’ around out there...”

The top of my head starts feeling breezier. On the sheet covering me and on the floor all around the big barber’s chair, my beautiful ringlets lie like fallen logs of fur. Where

those funny little things really mine? Odd. A part of me is being cut away, and yet, I don't feel any pain...

"Ow!"

The barber's scissors pull on my hair as I turn to look at a fire truck passing by in the street. I am tempted to sulk again, even though I don't really feel like crying. Didn't my father just tell when we were walking down the hill that I was a 'man' now?

"Sorry, little buddy, but that one's on you. You gotta keep still."

The barber doesn't have to tell me twice. Under the sheet, I grip the armrests firmly with both hands. Not even Hitler's new army could make me turn my head now!

Next, it's the electric clippers' turn to run amok atop my head, trimming around the ears, removing the last defiant hairs still clinging to my neck. The barber's comb flattens my hair, then parts it on the left side, 'just like a man.' With a long bristle brush, he then spreads a generous application of perfumed talcum on my neck.

"So whadda ya think, Pierre?"

The smile on my father's face is eloquent enough testimony.

The barber slowly rotates the heavy chair and I end up looking at myself in a large mirror. My little head peering out atop the big white sheet, I discover my new hairdo. My father and the barber gather around me, beaming and laughing, nodding their heads in satisfaction, mumbling approvals.

I remain silent, unable to decide whether to love or hate the new me. It's quite a shock to go from looking like a girl twenty minutes before to now looking like a child that would be indiscernible amongst a group of kids playing *kick-the-can*.

“Since you behaved, Julien, daddy’s gonna take you to eat some fries on the other side of the bridge. The best fries in town.”

That’s all I needed. I just *love* my new look!

Father hands over a quarter to the barber, congratulates him on a job well done, and off we go again, headed towards the bridge. I feel like it’s windy outside, my head is so light.

But I become somewhat less enthusiastic as we begin crossing the bridge. Peering through the bars of the guardrail, I notice that the river below us seems to be flowing too vigorously, swirling about in little whirls. I grab my father’s hand.

“Don’t worry. The bridge’ll hold.”

I want to believe him, but decide that I’ll only let go of his hand once we’ve reached the other side, where I can already make out the fry stand, a clunky old bus forever deprived of wheels and whose entire interior has been transformed into a kitchenette.

After having to wait in line for a moment, it’s like a revelation. Thanks to my father, I discover foods forbidden by my mother: a hot-dog covered in relish and mustard, French fries with vinegar, and a Coke. We go and sit on a cement extension next to the bridge to observe the river as it feuds with bits of dogwood on the river bank.

I attack my sausage and fries as if my survival depended on it.

“Take your time, Julien. We’re in no hurry.”

“I know, I know. ‘The longer we take, the later we’ll get back home’,” do I tell my father.

We burst out laughing. I let out a loud burp of satisfaction, brought on by the cold Coke that I get to drink straight from the bottle, ‘like a man.’

We stay there for long minutes, watching the river flow by, breathing in the wonderful aroma of fries emanating from the grease stand. I'm in seventh heaven, my insides reduced to a quivering mass from the pleasure of it all.

But the goal of our little expedition has yet to be reached: my father hasn't purchased his grapes yet.

"All right, time to go. We've still got things to do. The market's right next door."

This time, the walk feels more tiresome. The muscles in my legs seem to have shortened. The early afternoon Sun is coming down hard. Thankfully, the market really is right next door, just as my father promised.

As soon as we push the door open, a torrent of strong odors assails us. Lukewarm meats, blood sausage, fish laid out on crushed ice, fresh fruits and vegetables still smudged with dirt, maple sugar and taffy, various cheeses, all bathed in diffused sunlight that barely manages to pierce the dirty glass window panes that are never washed and that act as cover for the market.

The cacophony of voices is dizzying. Sensing my disarray, my father grabs my hand tightly.

"Stay with me so you don't get lost."

I accept without protest; this moving forest of adults isn't easy to navigate. Dragged along by my father, I try to weave between all of these bodies that smell of sweat, homemade soaps, camphor wood, and coal.

Not without some difficulty, we manage to reach Mr. Roselli's stall. The man seems to recognize my father, and greets him good-naturedly.

"So, signor Pietro... We have come to buy ze graypes for ze vino, eh?"

"That's right, Mr. Roselli."

They dive into a spirited discussion about the price of fruits, the kind of juices they produce, their taste. As I

don't feel concerned by any of this, without letting go of my father's hand, I begin observing my surroundings.

In the aisles, a man dressed in a long brown hooded robe, his feet clad in sandals, is meandering about in a slow, studied pace, carrying a huge wicker basket on his back, his gaze glued to the floor. From time to time, he stops by a stall, then waits. One of the vendors eventually notices him and, understanding the man's intent, donates a cut of meat, a bushel of fruits, or a bunch of vegetables, depositing the items straight into his basket. Then, without saying a word, the man gently bows his shaved head before moving on in measured paces to the next stall.

"Here, Julien, try this..."

My father stuffs a grape in my mouth before I even have time to protest.

The taste is unusually perfumed. It's pleasant enough, even on top of the acrid taste of fries and vinegar left over in my mouth.

"It's good, eh?"

I nod my head. My father goes back to his dealings, and I resume my investigation.

This time, some ice vendors attract my attention. Two stocky fellas wearing caps rapidly clear the aisles by charging towards the fishmonger, each carrying two giant blocks of dripping ice in the maws of their double hooks. Without saying a word, they approach the stall, drop the blocks in the spot indicated by the vendor, and start furiously hacking away at them with their picks. In the blink of an eye, the big blocks are reduced to mere ice pebbles. The vendor hands over a few coins and the two men immediately depart the way they came.

On this Saturday afternoon, the crowd roaming the market seems very homogenous. I notice mostly housewives, holding big sturdy brown paper bags fitted with

white string handles. Only meat seems to warrant special care, as it is wrapped in pink paper or waxed brown paper. Other foodstuff items, bought in bulk, quickly end up in large grocery bags. The hubbub is incessant.

“WELL IF IT ISN’T MY SWEET LITTLE JULIEN!”

I start. I let go of my father’s hand. In front of me surges the Merry Widow, overexcited to be in the presence of her new beau. A one-armed veteran, still garbed in his old uniform, throws the young couple a dark look as he passes by, perhaps annoyed by the cushy life of this young man with his impeccable hairdo held in place by abundant draughts of Vitalis.

Upon hearing our neighbor’s cry, my father turns around, while Mr. Roselli begins to align four baskets of Málaga grapes on the counter before covering each with a wooden lid lined with blue cheesecloth.

“Well if it isn’t Mrs. Chouinard...”

“Hi, Mr. Lussier. Out buying some groceries?”

“It’s this thing I do about once a year,” answers my father, laughing. “At the end of summer, I come here and buy grapes to brew my wine.”

“He brews his own wine... Talk about a man of the house, eh, honey?”

“Ya, whatever,” grumbles the good-looking, jaded young man.

“Am I gonna get to have a taste, at least?”

I notice my father’s face suddenly flushing. A big dumb smile seems permanently etched under his nose.

“It’ll be ready in time for the holidays. I’ll, er... make sure and remember you.”

“Isn’t he nice! What about you, kiddo? Haven’t rolled under a car yet? Wait a minute: what happened to your hair? Looks like you got a mighty big trim, there, buddy...”

I had completely forgotten that my head no longer looks like anything even my mother would remotely recognize. So has Father, apparently, for upon hearing the widow's fateful words, he becomes agitated and starts sputtering:

"Yeah, the kid was getting way too hot with all that hair. It was time to do something about it."

"And how! So, Julien, ya still enjoying those comic books I gave ya?"

"Yes, ma'am. 'Specially the one about 'Ouander Ouomenn'. She's so pretty, just like you."

The Merry Widow lets her eyes mist over for a moment, then bursts out laughing.

"Well, aren'tcha a sly little one, Julien. You're gonna make a lot of mothers cry, you know that?"

My father agrees, politely, trying to find a way to grab hold of his four big baskets of grapes all at once.

"You're not headed back home like *that*, are ya?"

"Yes we are, Mrs. Chouinard. Julien and I were just about to take the bus."

"Oh, come on! Hey, honey, ya think we could give these poor folks a ride home? I gotta go home and change anyways."

"Ah, I don't know..."

"Sure ya do. You *do* want me to wear my strapless tonight, dont'cha?"

"Oh, all right..." grumbles the other.

"It's settled, then. Come on, you two: Johnny's ride is just out front."

"Oh, I... I don't know if we should," tries to protest my father, already seduced by the idea of not having to schlep his heavy load all the way back home, but also painfully aware that Johnny seems as enthusiastic as a potted plant.

“Come on. It’ll be our pleasure. Right, honey?”

“If ya say so, babe...”

And off we go, all four of us headed for the exit. Johnny and the widow, obviously inebriated as she stumbles around on her high-heeled shoes, both grab a basket of grapes while my father proudly carries the last two, with me scampering along behind them on my weary little legs. Just as we’re about to cross the market threshold, I cry out:

“WHAT ABOUT MY TREE?”

My father’s face tenses up. I notice that the Merry Widow’s impromptu arrival seems to have completely expunged the promise he had made from his memory. His mouth twists into a grimace.

“Er... what tree is that, son?”

“MY tree! You know. You promised!”

“What’s he talkin’ about?” asks the widow, lurching back towards us.

“Oh, I, er... I remember, now. I promised him I’d buy him a little natural tree so he can... make it grow...”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, Julien. I’ve got somethin’ muuuch better. Come with us, we’ll take a nice ride in Johnny’s car, then, once back home, I’ll give you a tree that smells reeaaal nice.”

Shamefully, bending to the dolorous lamentations of my leg muscles, I follow the adults out of the market...

The De Soto convertible rumbles back up the hill, speedily retracing our steps. What earlier seemed to me like a true adventure out into the unknown now feels like a simple car ride. I stop listening to the adults’ chatter, torn between the sadness of coming back home without the promised tree I’ve been dreaming of for the last three nights and the sensual pleasure of being sprawled out on

the backseat of this big car that seems to climb up King East hill in the blink of an eye.

When the car gently parks in front of our house, I feel nausea rummaging around in my stomach. My father thanks the couple profusely, all while painstakingly trying to take out his grape baskets from the car.

“Julien, I almost forgot!” shouts the widow. “Here’s your tree!”

From the rearview mirror, hung up on a piece of dirty string, she unhooks a piece of green cardboard shaped like a fir. The powerful stench of artificial pine musk and old aunties’ perfume almost makes me retch. I hurriedly grab the piece of cardboard, push my father aside, and rush up the stairs.

The screen door to our apartment flies open before I even have a chance to touch it. Upon seeing my new look, my mother lets out a cry of horror as I trip over the brown hessian doormat and collapse at her feet, scraping my elbows in the process. I start heaving uncontrollably: good-bye hot-dog, French fries, and Coke!

Chapter six

The motherly pardon concerning my new hairdo is long in coming. For over three weeks now, my father has to beg for the few words my mother will deign address him. The only common activity they share these days is when they go and attend High Mass together. They also paid a visit to my two aunties last Sunday, but without me, however, since Mother now refuses to show me in public.

I don't even dare go out onto the balcony anymore, not since Blacky Blanchette's mother ogled me with her mischievous little eyes while I was helping Baba sit up straight in his wheelchair. Upon seeing me, she cried out:

"My God, Mrs. Lussier, your li'l Julien's actually a real boy? Why, we always thought he was a girl!"

I was shamed. Sensing my unease, Baba let me stay with him in his room where, when not pretending to be lying-sleeping-trees, we sit in front of the window together.

Lately, when we want to speak with each other, Baba, Michèle and I have to whisper in low tones. Meals are taken in silence. After supper, my mother cleans the dishes, then passes them on to my father without saying a word.

These days, the Sun sets earlier and earlier, but the chill of late autumn hasn't really arrived yet. It's still the season of multicolored leaves falling on rainy days, the

gloomy season that forces Michèle to wear the raincoat my father had to cut up and redesign for her from the one aunt Maxi doesn't use anymore. She's also been forced to hide her legs under those long beige socks again, the ones that make her skin itch.

My sister's rather irritable these days. Each night, when she comes back from school, she grumbles and complains.

"The nuns always give us too much homework. I don't have time to do anything else."

"And what else would you be doin' anyways?" asked my mother one evening, adopting her usual bitter tone.

"I dunno... I could go to Ghislaine Couture's house, maybe listen to some records..."

"You think I'd let you go out when it's dark, you little tramp? Look at her. Twelve years old, and already she wants to go chasin' after boys."

"Ah, maaaaa!"

The exchange ended on that indignant protest from my sister, who dove right back into her Biblical history studies, trying to remember exactly why Saint Sebastian was pierced with arrows in the first place.

Michèle no longer reads me *Mouchette's* adventures anymore, nor the Merry Widow's comic books, which are still hidden away in my lair under Tonon, who takes watch duty without ever complaining.

Tonon is a good watchdog. After that little excursion downtown with my father, I owe him the safety of my comic book collection. I spend wonderful moments whispering secrets to my mute friend, with the added benefit of not constantly being 'underfoot', as my mother always says.

My father started brewing his wine the day after our little trip into town. A great bustle reigned in the kitchen

that entire afternoon, even if Mother made sure we knew we were disrupting her ‘dailies’ by banging pots and pans noisily and slamming cupboard doors. But, since she didn’t want to speak to anyone anyways, she finally went out onto the balcony to rock herself and read an old frayed copy of Jean Narrache’s *Quand j’ parle tout seul*. How this book ended up in our house is a complete mystery to me. It’s the only book my mother will read over and over again, slowly, as if, each time, she were rediscovering it anew.

My father and Michèle patiently used forks to crush the freshly washed grapes into two large granite platters before emptying this blue and red mash into a big gray jar. Then went in freshly boiled water that had been left to cool, sugar, yeast, and some other ingredients I don’t know about. My father then stirred the whole thing with a long wooden rod he’d carved out of a plank of wood.

And, as he needed a place to let his mixture ferment for a few days, he decided to store it in my wardrobe. The jar was set on top on an old bed cover and, with the help of Michèle who slid it gently along the floor, my father dragged the precious receptacle all the way to my hideout.

I barely had time to jump ahead of them, under the pretext that we needed to make some room first, lest they risk injuring Tonon.

I interrupted their progression just in the nick of time. I dove into the wardrobe, pretended to rummage around, moving things, muttering some recommendations to Tonon while quickly hiding my comic books under the cardboard box I use to conceal all of my treasures. Posing him in a realistic attack position to make him look as threatening as possible, I then laid down my mummified fox friend on top of the box.

“Can you hurry it up, Julien?”

I came back out on all fours, and my father delicately slid the pot-bellied jar in the corner opposite Tonon in lieu of the old black briefcase with the cracked leather, which he discreetly went and threw away in the garbage in the backyard.

“It’s not like we travel much anyways...,” did I hear him grumble.

Since then, it’s been rather cramped in my lair, where I have proclaimed myself official guardian of the wine. Under my father’s supervision, it’s been my responsibility to carefully remove the lid once a day and slowly stir the mash to accelerate fermentation. Little bubbles have begun popping up on top of the frothing, foamy surface. The pulp of crushed grapes changes color day by day, taking on a pink and gray tint. The sickly sweet smell that emanates from the receptacle is both repugnant and tantalizing.

I like to sit down next to the jar, put my ear against its cold surface, and listen to the liquid frothing inside as it starts to ferment.

Oddly enough, the familiar fizzing has vanished this morning. While I was sleeping, last night, my father poured out the liquid to get rid of what he calls the sediment layer, a sort of rotting pulp that’s starting to accumulate at the bottom of the jar. He filtered the liquid through an old bed sheet in which he cut out little chutes, then decanted it back into the jar that Michèle had washed with great care.

I know this because I heard Baba and Michèle talking to each other about it in low voices this morning, between two sips of Mother’s robust coffee...

I hear the kitchen door slamming. My mother must be on her way out to Mr. Fournier’s grocery store for the daily purchase of provisions.

Again, I place my ear against the cold surface of the jar. Silence. Has my father's grape-flavored *Kik* cola lost its special properties? Maybe if I just took a peek inside...

Mimicking the way my father showed me, I delicately lift the lid. I don't see anything. The half-open doorway of the wardrobe just doesn't let enough light filter in for me to see anything inside the jar. I push the door wide open. This time, I downright remove the lid and drop it on the floor next to me.

The liquid's still there, slightly blurry, but of a beautiful purple-red color. From it emanates an admittedly pleasant aroma that I breathe in numerous times, and at length.

"I wonder if it tastes like grape flavored *Popsicles*..."

The moment I formulate the question in my mind, my decision is made. I rush to the kitchen. I glance towards Baba's room: he's sleeping, crumpled over on his right side in his wheelchair, facing the window that allows him to stare at the neighboring house's brick wall when he wakes up.

This opportunity will not come again. I push a chair to the counter next to the sink and grab the communal drinking glass. The half worn-off little blue flowers decorating the glass are a reminder that it once held the pimento cream cheese I hate so much.

Baba snorts in his sleep. I sneak back to my wardrobe, holding the precious glass tightly against the ridiculous little white short-sleeved shirt my mother refashioned from one of Michèle's old blouses, the one she forces me to wear all the time.

I leave the door slightly open, sit on the floor next to the jar, and carefully dip the glass into the liquid, just enough to collect a few spoonfuls.

I taste the mixture, hesitantly.

No, this doesn't taste like grape flavored *Popsicles* at all. It's sweeter, more sugary, with a spicy aftertaste. I sip a little bit more. No, decidedly, this doesn't taste like anything I know.

The glass is already empty? This time, I fill it halfway up, and resolutely swallow a mouthful. In my haste, I almost choke on it. The liquid seems tastier now.

Too bad the strong smell of the widow's little green pine tree, hidden away in my treasure box, starts wafting all around me in the wardrobe; otherwise, I think I might take a liking to this strange liquid. To convince myself, I swig another mouthful...



It's past noon when my mother, surprised by my absence from the dinner table after having already called me three times, loudly and irrevocably, finds me huddled up around the jar in my wardrobe, the empty glass still in my hand.

I reap a storm of curses that almost reaches the same level of intensity as what my father received for having had my hair cut without authorization.

Weak in the knees, I feel myself dragged roughly by the arm into the kitchen and summarily sat down in front of a plate of lukewarm white egg sauce (it must be Friday.)

Baba and Michèle, both starting to get an idea of what the ongoing 'drama' is all about from my mother's irate cries, give me bemused looks as I yawn and peck at my plate with a small dessert fork taken from an old dispersed set.

The sickly sweet smell of the lukewarm egg sauce makes me gag, then a second time, then...

My mother barely has time to slide my chair back. I vomit the plonk onto the freshly scrubbed kitchen linoleum, unable to avoid hitting the cupboard doors beneath the sink. What is it with me and smells?

Michèle cries out:

“Euargh! Disgusting! Mamaaaa, make him stop!”

“You think I find this funny, you little nitwit? My beautiful, clean floor!”

This time, I find myself being promptly dragged all the way to the toilet bowl by my mother, who bends my neck over the site of my ‘micecide’ crime like a penitent man. This fleeting memory is enough to make me evacuate the last remnants of my father’s grape-flavored *Kik* cola in astounding heaves.

Still grumbling, my mother summarily removes my soiled shirt, my undershirt, and my pants.

“Go on, ya little brat. For this, you’re gonna stay in bed all afternoon without eating.”

Finally some good news! The mere thought of having to eat even another bite of those eggs in their sauce was giving me shivers.

Without protesting, I dash off to bed and anxiously hide under the covers.

My mother arrives soon after, a glass of water in one hand and the inevitable bottle of ‘babyzones’ in the other. I immediately gulp down two pills with a drink of water that would quench even the milkman’s horse I can hear trotting in the street outside.

I fashion myself a little nest under the covers, digging in with my entire body. My head feels like it’s splitting in two. Without complaining for once, I fall asleep, even if it’s still daytime.



On the horizon, the autumn Sun is battling two enormous gray clouds, fending them off with blows of his ray-swords. I've been awake for only a few moments now, still bedridden in my room in this cool late afternoon, still slightly disgusted.

Baba managed to roll his wheelchair halfway through the bedroom doorway. He stares at me affectionately, a hint of worry in his eyes.

"You 'oin' okay?..."

I grimace a vague sign of assent. I don't feel like talking right now.

"Baba 'ell you... a s'ory?"

It's been a long time since my grandfather has had the occasion of telling me my favorite story. It's also been a long time since we've had the opportunity to play our lying-tree game. It was too hot during summer to play those kind of motionless games in his bed. I nod 'yes' in agreement. He begins:

"On'e upon a time... 'ere wuz a li'l boy... which wuz called... Hulien. Hulien lived... in a war'robe..."

"No. Not that one, Baba. Not the wardrobe."

Perplexed, Baba stops. He lets out a big sigh, grimaces with his crooked mouth, thinks for a moment while scratching his 'wee-wee' with his one good hand. And then he finds it.

"Hulien lived... in a... f... f... field. Hulien... was a... a... t-tree... A great 'ig t-tree. Green. Lotsa... Lotsa 'ranches."

My heart leaps! How did he know? Have all of those melancholy afternoons spent on the balcony with him allowed my grandfather to understand my secret? When

he was napping, was he still watching over me the whole time? Has he deduced the secret envy that inhabits me? Listening to him stammer through the ludicrous story of a boy who becomes a tree in order to greet birds properly, to feel downpours on his branches, and especially to see the world from on high, higher than any adult ever could, I let myself drift away. I yawn, but out of contentment. The soft dampness of the bed numbs me into a feeling of well-being.

Noticing my reaction, Baba keeps pouring it on. He invents a mysterious grove where a sick old tree depends on a child-tree named Julien to come to his aid, to provide him with shade during heat waves, to protect him from winter gales, to scare away boys looking to carve their initials in his bark with a pocketknife.

I begin to feel stronger, like the Julien who grew up to become a big tree. More courageous as well. And when Baba ends his story on these fateful words: “And for a long t-time... Hulien... ‘ro... tected... the ol’ tree a’ainst all... of the b-bad li’l rascals,” I can’t help but ask him:

“Was it a grampa-tree?”

Baba laughs softly, then adds:

“Well... ‘aybe.”



I napped and slept for so long that, come nightfall, I lie in bed, restless, unable to find sleep. It must be late; Michèle’s already dozing in her bed.

My parents’ harsh whispers attract my attention.

“You and your horrible wine. The kid coulda died from it. Isn’t it enough you disfigured him with that damned haircut?”

“Oh, come on. At least he doesn’t look like a sissy boy anymore. And it’s not like *one* little glass of wine is gonna...”

“When are you gonna stop chasin’ after windmills? Always dreamin’. Each Fall, you just *gotta* brew that damned wine and go and dirty up my kitchen. Can’t you just be satisfied with what you’ve got?”

“Well, it’s not like I’ve got a *lot* to keep me satisfied, these days...”

“Careful where you’re treadin’, Pierre Lussier!”

“Simone, it’s not normal to be acting this way. You should go see a doctor, or a specialist or somethin’.”

“You sayin’ I’m crazy? Come on, say it! Well I *do* go see a doctor, let me tell ya, and next time, I’ll tell him *all* about those dirty things you wanna do in bed. We’ll see who’s the crazy one then!”

“Not so loud. You’ll wake everyone up.”

The distant creaking of the rocking chair tells me that my parents are still up, having their weekly row in the kitchen. From the sound of it, it seems that my father is once again trying to adopt a conciliatory tone, while my mother’s voice keeps going up, shrill and hysterical.

“Shuuuush,” warns my father again.

I have a hard time discerning their muted words now. From the end of the corridor, the eleven loud chimes of the big clock drowns out their conversation. An unease I know full well, the warning signs of impending diarrhea, grabs my lower abdomen. My flannel pajamas are drenched in sweat. My parents’ quarrels terrorize me: they inevitably give me unspeakable nightmares, one of which, recurring, is the one where my father is forcibly shoving clumps of my hair down my mother’s throat while screaming: “Will you... just... shut up!”

The silence that follows the clock's chiming was only a prelude to an even more virulent exchange. My father's tone sounds scolding now. I picture his face, tense, with his neatly trimmed black mustache that sits across his face, his forehead bulging under his frizzy hairline:

"You think it's *normal* to wash clothes twice every time? To use *bleach* to do the dishes? To wash and wax the kitchen floor every two *days*? Look at your hands! They're all cracked!"

A moment of silence, heightened by the sputtering of the wood stove.

"You even boil my *shirts* before you wash 'em!"

My mother's voice lashes out:

"What, you afraid of a little cleanliness now? Well, that shouldn't surprise me, coming from a working stiff who toils away in muck and filth all day long..."

Upon hearing her reply, I suddenly imagine my mother's face: it must be beaming right now, just like it always does when she proclaims an irrefutable truth. But when he tries to resume the conversation, my father doesn't seem particularly embarrassed. On an almost benevolent tone, he says:

"Other people's filth is what allows us to make a living, Simone. You know full well that my job isn't the problem here. It's like you've become... obsessed or somethin'. Every day, you go around the apartment, dusting. You mop the floors each morning. All day long, you're always cleanin' things, scouring somethin' with a steel wool or scrubbin' a wall. You don't feel like doing anythin' else anymore..."

"Ha! I knew we'd get around to *that* eventually!"

The 'that' hits home like a slap in the face, like the time my mother forced me to drown my little mice friends.

In my bed, terrorized by the impending threat of diarrhea, I flinch, imagining that the word refers to some horrible secret I'm not intended to overhear. My mother speaks again, loudly and aggressively:

"You think just because I don't wanna do Satan's dirty dance with you that I've become some kinda maniac? I'll let you know that I'm a respectable woman, Pierre Lussier. And a respectable woman does *not* spend all of her time doing '*that*'!"

A pause... Only the familiar 'crrr' tells me that my father's still rocking himself in his chair. Then, with more self-control, as if she were putting an end to the whole conversation, my mother adds:

"And it soils the sheets..."

"Simone... Why are you sayin' stuff like this?"

The answer doesn't come immediately. When my mother finally does reply, her voice has changed, as if she were soliloquizing. Her words come to me as a declamation.

"It's like childbirth. It soils everything. That's why I don't want no more kids. Before, I was happy to work for doctor Lefebvre. He was always tellin' me how I was the best cleaning lady he'd ever had. Everythin' in his examination room was clean and tidy; I'm the one who used ta clean his ins'ruments... Everywhere you'd look, everythin' was always perfectly clean... The doctor always said so: 'I don't know what I'd do without you, Simone.'"

Again, an enveloping silence. I am assailed by a uncontrollable shiver. My intestines are about to commit the irreparable.

The fear of soiling the sheets becomes stronger than that of being reprimanded for still being awake at this hour. I jump out of bed and rush to the bathroom, crossing

through the kitchen, barely noticing the irate look my mother gives me.

Sitting on the toilet bowl, my eyes fixed on the small fogged up window where wind keeps whistling quietly, I ponder what I've just heard as I relieve myself. Everything seems clear to me now: I know I'm responsible for the unhappy life my mother leads.

I was born dirty, and my mother, who so loves cleanliness, must have been greatly saddened by this.

"You about done, you little rascal?"

My diarrhea is subsiding. I shout back:

"Just a minute! I'll be right out!"

When I finally haul out of the cramped bathroom, my pajama in disarray, I notice my father is no longer in the kitchen.

Wait! I forgot how much Mother loves cleanliness! I hurry back to the bathroom and quickly wash up, spraying copious ablutions on the toilet and the back wall.

"Hurry up, Julien! It's late!"

I run back to the warmth of my bed, not without noticing my mother's saddened face as she rinses two cups under the tap.

I dive under the covers, stockpiling countless images of trees in my mind to try and forget all that I've just heard.

Chapter seven

For over ten minutes now, I've been on the lookout, hiding behind a grove of legs that both scares and beguiles me. Hunkered down under the long brown bench where my mother left me before letting me know with a dark glare of her big eyes that I should 'keep quiet', I observe the leg-trunks all around me.

I'm in church. After months of unkept promises, my mother has finally decided to take me with her for the first time.

"It'll do you good to get out, get some air."

Ah! the mystery of maternal contradictions. Last summer, she was forbidding me from even going down and playing in the backyard, but now that it's freezing outside and that snow has begun to fill the interstices of windows and doors, *now* she consents to expose me to the outside world, thus signifying her total control over little old me.

On this Saturday afternoon, the church has drawn only a few dozen faithfuls, whose behavior is leaving me somewhat perplexed: they kneel, bow their heads, then, sighing heavily, stand back up again, one by one, and go line up next to some sort of big cupboard. A glass door in its center allows us to distinguish a man dressed in black and white inside, sitting beneath pale light. Half-length

curtains of dusty violet velvet conceal cramped cubicles on both sides, where people enter one after another to kneel.

In the choir, about fifteen men, under the direction of a tiny little man who speaks with a commanding, high-pitched voice, are rehearsing Christmas hymns to the sound of an electric organ being played by a rather large, patient woman. I amuse myself for a while by watching her as she tries to decipher her sheet music from behind glasses that look as thick as the bottom of the green Coke bottle my father offered me during our little escapade.

My mother selected a pew near the cupboard where sits the odd man in black so she can keep an eye on me while she waits in line with the rest of the attendees, composed mostly of elderly women who keep muttering to themselves with their gaze cast downward. From the cubicle where they each enter in turn emanates a buzzing of whispered words I can discern at regular intervals.

Ignoring the disapproving looks I can see in my mother's irascible stare, I sit on the cement floor and try to play Peek-a-boo with her from behind an armrest. She remains unyielding, visibly irritated. In fact, it's been a while since she's said to me: "Juuuulien? Where aaare you, honey? Where's mama's little boy got to now, hmm?"

Last week, I tried yet again to play hide-and-seek with her, during a dreary afternoon; she refused unequivocally:

"You're too old to be playin' stupid little baby games like that."

That made me feel weird. Since the hair-cutting ordeal, it feels like my mother's been trying to find all kinds of excuses to let me know that I'm getting too old to do most of anything these days...

"Santa ain't gonna bring you many gifts this year. You're gettin' too old for toys and knickknacks anyways."

I still haven't gotten over that...

My mother's almost at the front of the queue now. I sense her trepidation. Soon, I'll be liberated from her constant surveillance, at least for a moment. I know this, and fully intend to make the most of it. I crawl underneath the pews, between the leg-trunks, then pop my head back up and stare right into my mother's eyes, savoring my hold on the situation.

She jerks her head vigorously, trying to order me back to my place, even feigning a few steps toward me as a warning, but stops when a blushing young girl comes out from behind one of the velvety curtains.

I catch sight of my mother's lips, silently articulating the command to go back to my place this instant. I pretend to acquiesce and go out into the aisle, slowly heading back to the pew where she had ordered me to remain. Half reassured about my good intentions, when her turn comes up, she disappears inside the strange cubicle...

I find myself alone in a public place for the first time. To know that my mother is within earshot gives me confidence. I start doing the same little cat-and-mouse routine I had practiced going down the staircase in front of our house, the time Father promised me he'd buy me a tree.

I take a few uneasy steps up the aisle, firmly holding on to the pews on either side of me as I pass. I waddle about, then hurry back to my starting point. An old lady with a veiled hat gives me a 'Sssshhhh' by placing a finger on her pursed lips, then smiles.

Everything seems okay so far, so I forge ahead. I go further up the aisle, scrutinizing my surroundings. Plaster statues with garish colors stretch their arms out at me, some sporting mournful faces, others empty stares.

At the front of the church, a varnished railing prevents me from accessing a large area, where sits a sort of table that must be used to serve meals as there are candlesticks already laid out on the tablecloth.

I dare not climb up the little stairs. Mother has often told me that it's impolite to go eat somewhere where you've not been invited. Plus, the tableware hasn't even been set up on the tablecloth yet.

My hand on the odd railing, I turn right and head towards a little group of children and parents who are whispering in front of some kind of little house in which dwell a series of small statues. Can this be the famous crèche my mother's been bending my ear about for days now?

What a perfect opportunity! I approach in measured paces, trying to look innocent. The set-up seems rather rudimentary. A gray canvas, on which a clumsy beadle has painted brown, green, and white spots with swipes of a large brush to simulate rocks, has been draped over racks and boxes holding flower pots meant to represent the shape of a grotto. In the folds of the fabric, an amateurish hand has thrown in some Ivory laundry detergent to stand in as snow; in the air floats the characteristic smell of Monday mornings at our house, laundry day.

The plaster characters are few: there's the Holy Virgin, who, despite being afflicted with permanent squinting, otherwise appears in perfect health thanks to some pink blush spread on her cheeks and a rather sparkling set of ruby lips; the bearded Saint Joseph, who hangs on to his cane as if his knees were about to buckle; and in between, lying on a pile of hay, little baby Jesus, made out of wax and, for some reason, bigger than both his parents, with his curly yellow hair and wearing an embroidered white robe that falls to his knees. In front of him, on each side

of the ‘grotto’, stand a brown ox with white spots and a verdigris colored donkey who both seem like they’re on the verge of licking the tip of baby Jesus’ toes.

The departure of the young visitors and their parents facilitates my approach. I am tremendously disappointed. Just like when the real tree promised by my father turned into the Merry Widow’s little odoriferous fir tree.

Mistaking my chagrin for piety, an old lady slowly approaches me. Silently (is it me, or has *everyone* lost the use of their voice in this place?), she kneels next to me and points at a plaster angel sitting next to the crèche, near the railing. Clad in a pink dress, its wings majestically spread out all around it, the angel holds its hands joined together in contemplation near its face, where shine two ruddy cheekbones.

The good woman rummages inside her little coin purse and pulls out a silver coin before dropping it into an urn concealed in the folds of the robes of the angel sitting at her feet. Immediately, the angel bows its head in gratitude.

Wow! I am fascinated. An angel that bows its head! What is this miracle? The lady inserts coin after coin, pennies this time, into the slot; and each time, the angel acknowledges her contribution with a slow nod of its head. With a smile that reveals teeth as irregular as they are rotten, the lady nods her head, inviting me to insert coinage into the angel’s torso as well.

Ignoring the edict of silence, I whisper to her, loud enough to be heard all the way from the back of the church:

“I don’t have any pennies...”

She lifts a pallid finger to her wrinkled old lips, implying that I should lower the tone of my voice, rummages once more inside her little purse, takes out another silver

coin and, after dangling it in front of my eyes for a moment, hands it over to me.

With nods of her head, she prods me to go and insert the coin inside the torso myself. I take it and... immediately hesitate. Hasn't this angel received its fair share of coinage already? I know from Michèle's personal experience that silvery coins have a lot of value on the gumball market, especially over at Mr. Fournier's shop... My mind is quickly made up. In a rather loud voice, I say:

"Thanks, lady!"

And I leave her there, stunned, before running away towards an open doorway leading to a corridor on the right side of the church. I venture forth into a strange room where half-open cupboard doors reveal long white robes and colored vestments.

What a wonderful wardrobe to hide in! That old lady will never find me here! And the smells! This new cupboard must have all sorts of new odors to discover. I step over the threshold and stop dead in my tracks. At the back of the room, a man clad in a long black garment is sitting on a straight chair, looking exhausted. In his hand, he holds a bottle from which he keeps taking big swigs. It sort of looks like my father's grape-flavored *Kik* cola, the one that made me so sick. This man must be warned about the potential dangers that await him. I call out to him:

"Hey, old man..."

Before I even have time to warn him, clumsily trying to hide the bottle in the folds of his robe, the man turns to me and says:

"Go away, kid. You ain't allowed to be back here. Go see your mama. Come on, scoot! Get outta here!"

He doesn't have to ask me twice. If he wants to be sick, that's his problem. Clutching the coin in my hand, I

hurry back out, passing by the old lady who's still on the lookout for me, and return to the pew where my mother had asked me to stay. She still hasn't come out of the big funny cupboard. Maybe I should go and wait for her right next to it, so that she won't have to look for me when she comes back out?

Nearer the curtain, my mother's whispers and the man's mutterings become somewhat more audible.

"... can't do it anymore, Father... it's disgusting..."

"... hmmm... good Christian woman's duty... hmmm... denying your husband his right..."

"... don't care... can go elsewhere..."

The man's mutterings suddenly become more menacing.

"... HMMM... a sin to think... HMMM... repentance..."

The whispers have stopped now. The curtain moves. As my mother comes out of the dark little cubby-hole, her tormented face betrays a shock of surprise at seeing me so near. To try and reassure her, I shout at the top of my lungs:

"PEEK-A-BOO!"

My little joke doesn't seem to please her very much. She rolls her eyes at me, grumbling between clenched teeth:

"I'll show you 'peek-a-boo', you little nitwit. Come here, now!"

Her fingers sink into my shoulder and, before I know it, I find myself being shoved back to our pew, where she forces me to sit while she kneels. She bows her head, then closes her eyes.

Her lips barely move. I don't understand what's happening to her. Behind us, the little choir conductor's falsetto voice rises from the tiny jube.

“No, no, no! *Adeste fideles*, not *Adestay fiDAYlaysia*! Oh Lord, we’ll never be ready in time for Midnight Mass if you keep goin’ at it like that. All right, from the top!”

The organ roars to life again. My mother’s hand grabs my arm, roughly: that’s our cue to leave. I dare look at her. Her face seems sad, but calm.

As we walk down the aisle that leads to the big front doors, I ask her:

“Why are the Jesus and his parents all alone in their little shack?”

“Shush! Not so loud! It’s cuz the others are on their way, but they haven’t arrived yet. The shepherds are all gonna get here in time for Midnight Mass, then the Three Wise Men will get here next week. Now come on, you li’l bugger. And put on your tuque!”



I know that the Three Wise Men have finally reached baby Jesus in time because the two old aunties, Mia and Maxi, Father’s elder sisters, have been invited over to help us get rid of the other half of the turkey that’s currently browning in the oven of the wood stove.

Each year, during the holidays, my mother buys a twenty-five pound turkey she asks the butcher to saw right down the middle. She freezes one half in the shed on the balcony out back, and we eat the other half on Christmas night.

On New Year’s Day, we’re all invited over to Mia and Maxi’s home to eat more turkey. It’s quite a party because, since Baba can’t walk, we all get to go there by cab.

Then, come Twelfth Night, the last celebration of the holidays, we get to eat turkey again, but this time, over at

our place. I don't fully understand the relation between the holidays and eating turkey, but now that I've observed that adults seem to need it to be happy, I don't complain about eating it so often. Each time we all get together, everyone's in superb spirits. It feels good not to see them quarrel like they do most of the rest of the year.

Hidden behind the half-open door of my wardrobe, I observe the little gathering happening in the living room. With the help of my mother, who kept ranting as she worked that all of this was 'giving her more trouble than it was worth', Baba has donned his nice navy blue suit, his white shirt, and his green tie with yellow polka dots.

Sitting next to the two sisters, he forces himself to mumble a few words in an intelligible voice, but spends most of his time smiling and drooling. When he starts dripping too much, Michèle goes and wipes his chin with a little embroidered handkerchief.

They're chatting animatedly now. In spite of my mother's objections, my father has invited the Merry Widow over. Single for the last couple of months, the widow soon managed to seduce everyone with her cheerfulness (except Mother, of course.) My father shamelessly discarded his vest in favor of the large gray suspenders he wears over his starched white shirt.

My father's home-made wine has already been passed around the room three times, and the mood reflects it.

"Your vino ain't bad this year, little brother," declares aunt Mia, the more talkative of the two sisters.

Mia owes her loquaciousness to the fact that she's been working at the Rosenbloom clothing factory for the last thirty years, often in the company of uncouth men of whom she had to push away the daily primal advances. Now fifty-six, Mia rarely gets offended by their saucy jokes anymore.

“Yeah, feels good goin’ down,” adds Maxi, the more delicate of the two, the one who always smells of violets and who turned fifty-nine on New Year’s Day. She’s lived her entire life between the kitchen and her bedroom, taking care of her sister as she would a husband. Her only passion is trying to talk ‘prahperly’ by repeating words she unearths in *Radiomonde* and *Le bulletin des agriculteurs*.

“So *that’s* your famous wine, Mr. Lussier!” exclaims the Merry Widow a little too enthusiastically. “It’s really somethin’ else!”

“Would’ja like ‘nother?” immediately asks my father, indifferent to the dark glares my mother keeps throwing at him as she sits askew on the edge of a kitchen chair she dragged into the living room, nervously smoothing out the folds of the large white apron that protects her mauve dress.

Baba seems as happy as can be. With his good hand, he raises his glass of grape-flavored *Kik* cola to his crooked mouth and manages to sip a mouthful without spilling any on his shirt. No matter if a few drops eventually stain his navy blue vest; we can’t see the difference anyways.

Suddenly, concealed under the long beige socks that keep irritating her shins, Michèle’s legs appear in my line of sight.

“Make room, Julien.”

I huddle in the back of the wardrobe, close to Tonon, whom I gave a free pass of hugs and kisses for today, and my sister huddles as best she can against me, bringing in with her the smell of Mother’s Camay soap she used without permission. She closes the door halfway to conceal us from the adults’ attention. One of her long braids hangs near my face, and I grab hold of it to tickle my nose with the tip tied together with a beige elastic.

“Adults are so crazy, eh Julien?”

“I dunno...”

“Look at them, saying niceties, giving each other compliments. They’re all liars.”

“Baba too?”

“No, not Baba. He’s nice for real. But he’s old, and he’s sick.”

“So? What’s *that* got to do with anything?”

“Well, he’s got to be real careful if he doesn’t want to end up in the old folks’ home.”

“Whuzzat?”

“That’s where old people end up when they’re no longer useful.”

“I don’t want Baba to leave!”

“He’s not leaving. I overheard Mother telling Father that he’d be better off staying here with us, because of the inheritance and all.”

“The herriwhat?”

“It’s sort of a big gift you leave to others when you die.”

As conversations and reveling continue in the background, I meditate on this for a few minutes. The Merry Widow’s cigarette smoke, as well as my father’s and my aunt Mia’s, form a sort of bluish fog over everyone’s heads. Today is a holiday: Mother has allowed smoking in the living room.

Everyone looks almost happy. Even Baba. Maybe it’s because of the gift he’s going to leave behind one day when he leaves... The conversations grow louder and louder.

“Where do you work again, Mrs. Chouinard?” asks Maxi to the widow.

“I’m a saleswoman in the underwear department at Saver’s.”

“That big store on King West street?”

“That’s the one...”

The brouhaha continues for a few minutes, maintaining itself at a grumbling level, before my father’s voice suddenly rises above the others’.

“You heard the one about the guy who...”

“Pierre, careful with your stories. Don’t forget that the kids can hear us.”

“Oh, come on, Simone, you know my stories are always clean. I’d be much too scared of having to tell them to our priest during confession...”

A general round of laughter (only my mother satisfies herself with a little smile as she looks around for us from the corner of her eye) greets this statement

“As I was saying... It’s the story of this guy who’s lost his cow...”

Michèle sighs heavily.

“Dad and his boring stories again. It’s gonna be a while before we get to eat.”

“So what?”

“Well, at this pace, we’ll leave the supper table so late that I won’t be able to go and slide down Quatorze hill. Blacky Blanchette promised we’d go sledding together.”

“Lucky you...”

“Ya. Seems like I won’t be able to go after all. Goddamnit!

“He still sniffs your hair in church?”

A wane smile stretches my sister’s lips.

“Ya. He’s a little nuts...”

A moment. Michèle gets a vague look on her face.

“Julien, if I tell you a *really* big secret, you wouldn’t tell anyone, would ya?”

“Promise.”

“Cuz if you do, I’ll tell Mother that you hide your comic books under your treasure chest.”

The threat strikes home: even the fear of being punished by having to stand in a corner for a week will not make me reveal her secret.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

My sister deliberates for a few seconds. Then, she takes the plunge:

“The other day, at the skating rink, Blacky Blanchette kissed me... On the mouth. He said I was his girlfriend.”

I was expecting a much graver revelation, something that would be worth sacrificing my life to save my precious comics books. With affected disdain, I reply:

“So?”

“Don’t you get it?”

“Er... no.”

“It means he loves me!”

“Oh, come on. You have to be older to love somebody. Like mommies an’ daddies.”

“Idiot! Anybody can love, at any age. You love your fox, don’t ya? And you give him lotsa kisses, right?”

The comparison takes me aback. I have a hard time trying to make sense of it all. I’ve always made the distinction between Tonon and Baba, between Tonon and my parents. But it’s true that the result is pretty much the same. As much as I love my parents, I don’t get any more of a reaction from them than I do from my mechanically-jawed fox. Is Michèle right? Is it possible to love without being an adult? Real love I mean, not just the love of candy and meatball stew?

My sister continues:

“The other day, at school, the nuns showed us a movie before we left for Christmas break. A real movie, on a screen and all.”

“You went to the movies?” do I blurt out, completely stunned by the rarity of the event.

“Well, it’s not like going to the movies in a real movie theatre. But it was a real movie, yeah. In French. French from France, I mean. It was called *Les anges du péché*. It took place in this convent. It was the story of this young nun who loved a sinner so much that she sacrificed herself to save her.”

“Does that kind of stuff happen for real?”

“I think so, yes. Probably in the Old Countries.”

I ponder on this notion of love for a moment, this feeling that escapes me. So, one can be a nun and love another nun, or have so much love for Jesus that one can die from it. I get confused. I don’t think I’d be willing to die for Tonon, or even my comic books.

“What’s it like, goin’ to the movies?”

“Well, they begin by turning off the lights and lowering the blinds in the windows. There’s this sort of... big sheet hung up at the front of the room. Behind us, in the back, there’s this sort of machine with big wheels on top of it and a lamp in front. And when they turn on the light of the machine, we see images moving on the sheet.”

“They move like in real life?”

“Of course, bonehead, that’s what movies are.”

“Can ya hear people talk?”

“Sort of. The sound comes out of a box on the floor, behind the big sheet.”

I let out one of those great big sighs only I know the secret to.

“Gosh how I’d like to go to the movies too...”

“You will when you go to school.”

“Really?”

“Ya. Sometimes, there’s this man from the... the ‘Enneffbee’, I think, who comes to school with his

machine and shows us some movies about fishermen, and farmers, and some old ladies who're knittin'. And soldiers..."

The prospect of going to school is starting to enchant me more and more.

"Peek-a-boo! You guys playin' hide-an'-seek?"

A glass of wine in her hand, the Merry Widow appears in the half-open doorway, crouching in front of us. Her face is beaming. A waft of her perfume reaches my nose, making me melt inside. Michèle immediately says:

"We're not really playin', Mrs. Chouinard. We're just checkin' out the grown-ups."

"And ya don't like what ya see?"

The question is too abstract for us. We don't know what to answer.

"Ya still readin' 'Ouander Ouomenn', little Julien?"

"Erm... Michèle's the one who reads them to me..."

"Ya know how to read in English, Michèle?"

"Well, no...", admits my sister somewhat shyly. "In school, the nuns only teach us stuff like 'Merry enn Djayne go tou skool.' I just... look at the pictures and I get the gist of the story. So I make 'em up for my little brother. And you? D'ya speak English, Mrs. Chouinard?"

"Kinda have ta. Without it, I wouldn't be able ta sell any clothin' ta the big English ladies from the north side of town."

"IT'S READY! COME AND EAT!"

My mother's call rings out from the back of the kitchen. The Merry Widow promptly straightens up. I can only see her legs now, wrapped in close-fitting nylon stockings. Two slender trunks, magnificent in their splendor. I unfurl from my hiding place as she smooths out her skirt with a quick swipe of her hand. I touch the back of her right leg, where the black seam of her stocking

curves away towards the foliage of lace that forms the pleats of her flouncy half-slip.

A great desire to lose myself in this odoriferous foliage grabs hold of me and, without thinking, I embrace both legs with my arms, stuff my head under the white half-slip, and try to climb up.

“What are you doin’?!”

Michèle’s cry startles me, but not enough to make me release my hold.

The Merry Widow bursts out laughing.

“Look at that little snooper! Come here, you!”

She bends over to lift me in her arms and holds me against her buxom chest for a moment before landing a big wet kiss on my cheek. Under my Sunday clothes, a prolonged shiver crisscrosses my body.

Through the bedroom doorway, I notice the bemused looks on my father’s, Baba’s, and my aunts’ faces.

“A real heartbreaker that one,” shouts my father.

“Like father, like son,” adds aunt Mia.

The general cheerful disposition of all reassures me. I feel comfortable in the tree-widow’s branches. We all head to the kitchen, where my mother’s severe face greets us.

“You’re old enough to walk on your own, Julien. Go wash your hands. It’s time to eat.”

Her bitter tone of voice puts a damper on my enthusiasm. The widow slowly puts me back down.

The awkwardness is palpable. I feel no urge to contest her maternal authority when she uses that tone of voice. As I go to the bathroom, I hear my father’s voice as he tries a form of appeasement:

“Come on, Simone, it’s the holidays...”

“That kid’s already spoiled enough. I don’t need anybody else to spoil ‘im even more!”

The water running from the tap prevents me from hearing the rest of the exchange. I was almost happy for a few seconds, there. The shock of my mother's aggressive attitude has bereft me of all joy.

Michèle joins me in the bathroom and starts washing her hands as well, using red Lifebuoy soap. We exchange a look.

"Don't worry about grown-ups and all their silliness, Julien."

"But everyone was in a good mood... Why did it have to stop?"

Michèle lets out a long philosophical sigh.

"That's life! Life's not like in the movies, unfortunately."

We head back to the kitchen. My mother and my aunt Maxi are busily filling up plates of food and silently bringing them to the guests. The widow smiles at me discreetly. She's sitting next to Baba, whose wheelchair was pushed to one end of the table. The seat next to my grandfather is available, so I hurry to go occupy it.

As the conversation between my father and aunt Mia concerning the big snow storm we got on New Year's Day slowly resumes, albeit with some difficulty, and while Michèle and the Merry Widow discuss the advantages of learning English from the nuns at her school, Baba leans towards me and, with his drooling mouth, whispers in my ear:

"Hulien... tree... growin' fast."

I look at him. His sly wink warms my heart. I feel less sad at having been so happy for a just a few seconds...

Chapter eight

For a few days now, Baba has been playing the ‘Lying-Sleeping-Tree’ game without me. He spends most of his days lying in bed now, his head turned towards the half-frosted window that looks out onto the brick wall of the house next door.

He only comes out of bed once a day, at night, for supper. He then listens to *Un homme et son péché* or *La pension Velder* on the radio. This never fails to make my mother grumble, as she’s the one who has to help him get out of bed and check if his ‘wee-wee’ is still connected to the hose that ends in the pear-shaped container where his pee drains. Before putting him back in bed, she takes him to the bathroom. She stays in the doorway, encouraging him to ‘push.’

Today seems to be an exception. Mother’s been grumbling for at least five minutes now, trying to dress Baba up.

“Pierre, could you come in here and help me get him up instead of foolin’ around?!”

My father teases Michèle, who’s finishing her lunch before going back to school. Even from the safety of my wardrobe, I can hear everything that’s being said in the kitchen. My father’s probably tickling her, or giving her little pecks down her neck with his prickly moustache, because Michèle cries out again:

“I said stop it, poppa!”

My father chuckles. When he teases Michèle like that, he gets an innocent look on his face that gives him an odd expression. I can hear his footsteps now, heading from the kitchen to the bedroom, then the sound of his voice:

“You’re gonna have to help yourself there a little, pops. You’re gettin’ heavy.”

Baba doesn’t answer back. He doesn’t speak anymore, even to me. These days, his sad gaze always seems to be looking through us, beyond us. He lets himself be wheeled around in his wheelchair and never asks for anything. Either Mother or Michèle have to spoon-feed him, then wipe his mouth clean, like they would a baby.

“What a waste,” bemoans my mother each time. “He swallows next to nothin’, and soils all of his clothing in the process.”

Michèle manages to leave for school without having to wash the dishes, Mother and Father being too busy trying to put Baba back in his wheelchair to stop her. I crawl to my bedroom door, where I can hear bits of broken up conversation.

“Poppa, ya gotta help yourself up a little, darn it!” hisses my mother between clenched teeth.

“She’s right, pops, you’re like a bag of wet cement.”

A few groans, then:

“You all right there, poppa?”

“He looks all right,” concludes my father. “Doesn’t seem to drool as much. That oughta help his shirt stay cleaner a bit longer.”

“Well, roll him into the living room, Pierre. ‘He’ ought to be here soon. Hey! Hands on the handles, not on my... not on me!”

“You’re such a prude...”

“Don’t you start! ‘He’ is gonna be here any minute now!”

“So, so what? We see him every week! While I certainly can’t say the same about you; I don’t get to see much of *anything*, these days...”

“Idiot.”

“Princess.”

These quarrels, more and more frequent, are the subject of many explanations under the covers, late at night, between Michèle and myself. I report what I’ve learned throughout the day, and she tries to reassure me...

“What are you doing there?”

My father surprises me as I lean in the doorway. Lost in thought, I didn’t hear the ‘psiik-psiik’ of the badly oiled wheels of the wheelchair.

“Come here, you little monkey. Might as well be a part of this, just like the rest of us.”

Baba doesn’t even smile to me as he passes by. His eyes are ashen now, like they’re swimming in tears that never come to fall. While Father rolls his wheelchair around the sofa next to a chair, Mother pops up in the corridor and says:

“Come on, Julien. We have to be ready when the priest gets here.”

“Who’s the *priess*?”

“The man who gives mass at church.”

In my mind, I immediately picture the little choir conductor who was making people rehearse Christmas hymns in time for Midnight Mass the last time I was there.

“Are we gonna do a song and dance for him?”

“You’re not too far off from the truth there, Julien my boy. He’s actually coming for the tithe,” grumbles my father acidly.

“Hey! No one speaks ill of priests in my household, are we clear? No, Julien, the priest is doing his annual visit to his parishioners. He’s comin’ over to bless us all.”

“Is it gonna hurt?”

I involuntarily evoke nervous laughter from my parents. I swear even Baba seems to crack a smile; a little more drool comes out of his twisted lips.

My father leans over me and pinches my right ear between his thumb and forefinger.

“Dear Julien. What a kidder. A real little Ti-Zoune.”

“Ti-Zoune?”

“The performer. I’m sure you’ll have a great future playing cabarets when you’re older.”

My mother turns towards him, burning holes in him with her stare.

“You sayin’ you think he should become a bum?”

My father immediately straightens back up.

“Poor, poor Simone. You’ve gotta be mighty twisted inside to deform what everybody says like that. Sometimes, I think you actually get a kick out of making yourself even more detestable than you really are. And *that’s* not an easy thing to do.”

My mother doesn’t have time to counter. Someone knocks at the door. A silhouette can be seen behind the lace curtain Mother hung up on the door to protect us from the stares of our neighbors, who have to pass by our front door to access the staircase leading down into the street.

“Sweet Lord, he’s already here? What a punctual man. Pierre. Let ‘im in.”

My father opens the door to reveal a man with graying hair, dressed all in black, his face stern. Immediately, my father and my mother both fall to their knees. Are they sick? My mother tries to force me to join them, but can’t

manage to make my knees bend as I cling with all my might to the back of a chair.

I am in a state of shock, assailed by deep emotions: this odd character wearing robes, who's chasing away imaginary flies with a strange movement of his hand while muttering words in a language I'm not familiar with over my parents' bowed heads, is the one I saw in the sacristy, the one who had a dazed look on his face as he was drinking grape-flavored *Kik* cola straight from the bottle. I still remember his bitter tone when he told me:

"Go away, kid. You ain't allowed to be back here. Go see your mama."

Apparently, he doesn't seem to remember me. Does he even see me? I observe him intently: he holds his hands together over his chest, mumbling some more, eyes closed. My father seems to have lost his cynical frown.

The visitor then bids my parents to straighten back up and, as my father hurriedly goes to help him, consents with a weary little smile to remove his wildcat fur overcoat.

"Oh, Father, you don't need to take your boots off. The floor's already dirty anyways..."

What? I've been confined to my wardrobe all morning because Mother was washing and waxing the linoleum on her knees, and now she says that the floor's *dirty*? Unfortunately, the intruder doesn't leave me time to rectify the facts.

"Come now, dear lady. My blessed mother raised me well and taught me good manners. Even a priest wouldn't dare dirty a floor you, as a proper parishioner, most assuredly furbished with joy in your heart."

'Furbished?' Who talks like that? What does that even mean? My mother seems to understand, because she snickers in delight, as if the priest's just told a funny joke.

While Mother looks like she doesn't quite know what to do with herself, the priest leans against the doorframe to remove his overshoes and, in spite of what he just said, drops one on a few pages of *La Tribune* that serve as doormat for the front door and the other on the marbled linoleum floor, where it leaves big blackish droplets. Mother pretends not to notice, but seems unable to completely repress a grimace.

She hurriedly takes his lustrous beaver fur cap and, holding it as if it were a holy relic, puts it gently on the shiny O-Cedar table, next to the shaded lamp my father turns on at night to read his paper.

“Take that chair, Father. It’s the best.”

Sacrilege! That’s my *father’s* chair! The one Michèle and I are forbidden from sitting in.

“Hey, that’s my dad’s!”

Immediately, my father puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing hard.

“It’s okay, Julien. Daddy doesn’t mind.”

So this stranger can just show up in our home and be given every leeway? As if all good things on this Earth were his to receive, the holy man shows no hesitation in letting himself sink down into the chair reserved for the father of this family. Exercising galloping humility, both my parents seem to accept this situation with ease, good Christians that they are.

What’s the use in protesting? Truly, I do not understand how parents think... What a bunch of liars.

Once the ceremonial placement of the holy posterior over and done with, the priest finally seems to notice Baba, slumped over in his wheelchair.

“And what about you, good sir Labrecque. How goes your health?”

Baba stares at him intently, as if trying to make him understand the stupidity of his question. Does one spend most of his days lying in bed or sitting in a wheelchair because one is getting ready to play for the Canadien?

“Our patient here doesn’t talk much anymore, I’m afraid,” explains my mother. “He’s really taken a turn for the worst, you know?”

“Is he in a lot of pain?”

“Hard to tell. I mean, he doesn’t complain much. But it’s quite a burden to keep him at home. Sometimes, he cries all by himself. Other times, I think that maybe the Good Lord forgot all about him. Or that maybe He’s letting him stay on this Earth so that we can earn our place in Heaven too.”

“Tsk-tsk, Mrs. Lussier. God works in mysterious ways. If He chose to let you bear part of His cross, perhaps it’s because He has grand designs yet in store for you. You’re a little bit like Simon of Cyrene that way. Or perhaps I should say... Simone of Cyrene?”

The infantile wordplay manages to make my mother’s face light up. My father’s face, on the other hand, seems draped in a frown of irritation, which has become quite familiar to Michèle and I.

Then, ensconced in his own private little universe, the priest continues, addressing himself to Baba:

“You must miss attending church services quite a lot, don’t you?”

Baba maintains his big sad eyes fixed on him. The lips of his closed mouth suddenly start trembling, unable to prevent drool from coming out of the left side of his mouth and rolling down his miss-shaven chin. The trickle grows in size as he exerts superhuman efforts to formulate a word.

“Good Lord, I think he’s about to speak,” mutters my father.

And, as if he could no longer hold himself back, my old grandfather, who hasn’t spoken a word in weeks, lets out a cry, only one, but imbued with incredible potency:

“N-N-NO!!!”

The priest’s face betrays an expression of stunned surprise; my mother’s reddens immediately. And I believe I notice, in my father’s eyes, a glint of malice. The awkwardness doesn’t last. Ever the great specialist of handling difficult situations, my mother immediately exclaims:

“You’ll have to forgive him, Father. My poor father is a man who can’t control himself anymore. He’s fallen back into his second childhood. His head’s not altogether there, anymore. It must be a joke or somethin’.”

The priest laughs hollowly, then rummages in his memory to find the most prized mask of his entire collection, that of the self-satisfied, smug forgiveness of a man who has seen so much misery in his life that nothing can no longer affect him. To save face, he deigns to finally notice my presence.

“Well, well. A future priest. Is that lovely young man yours, Mrs. Lussier?”

“He’s our youngest, Father,” answers my dad.

“Security for my old age,” immediately adds my mother.

“Do you have any other children?”

“Yesssss! We also have a daughter. Michèle. She’s in school,” proudly points out my mother.

“Ah... Two children. That’s not a lot... If our ancestors had decided to only have small families, today, we’d all be Anglophones. Worst yet: Protestants! You must know that the battle against assimilation is never over, Mrs. Lussier. We must fight on, always fight on.”

My father and my mother exchange a furtive glance.

“You’re not preventing family, are you I hope?” asks the priest point blank, his face stern.

“Don’t believe it for a second, Father!” retorts my father in a falsely honest tone.

“It’s not that, Father...,” interrupts my mother with great hesitation. “It’s just, well... It’s a health issue... I, er... I had the ‘big operation’.”

The cleric’s face cannot hold back his obvious contempt for these ‘woman maladies’.

“You are aware, of course, that, er... intimate relations in a marriage are reserved only for spouses who can procreate, yes?”

“Oh, no danger of that, Father. We’re *well* aware,” answers my father with an irony that is lost on the man of the cloth.

“Anyways, we’ll talk of this some more when the child is not present,” declares the priest as if handing out a prison sentence. “By the way, child,” he says, turning to look at me once more, “you’ve been taught our Lord’s prayers, I hope? Hail Mary, Our Father, etc.?”

My mother jumps on the chance of deflecting the conversation.

“Julien already knows a *lot* of prayers, Father. He really loves baby Jesus. He talks to him. He locks himself up in the wardrobe to pray to Him. Ain’t that right, Julien?”

What does she mean, pray to Jesus in my wardrobe? I am dismayed by my mother’s shamelessness. I feel the need to rectify her statement.

“I don’t pray to the Jesus. I talk to Tonon.”

“What was that?” asks the priest.

My father chuckles, sneering.

“It’s not Jesus, it’s his...”

“It’s a toy!” cuts in my mother with the unequivocal tone of voice that we know and love so well. “Oh, you know, Father, games are kind of like a way for children to pray, right?”

“Erm... yes. Yes, yes, perhaps,” comments the priest, who’s starting to look a little bored.

“In any case, Julien already knows more than just prayers. He also knows compliments. Right, Julien? Wanna tell the priest here your cute little ‘poam’?”

“No!”

But this time, even my father doesn’t seem in the mood for my usual tomfoolery. He asks me again, frowning:

“Come on, Julien. Quit stalling. Just say that little thing your sister taught you.”

I sigh heavily to emphasize my reluctance and, scratching the back of my head, I go and stand in the middle of the living room, reciting:

Li'l Jesus, in my heart

Who put Him there?

Mercy did.

Who took him out?

Sin did.

Go away, evil sin, go away!

I will never sin again!

“Marvelous!” exclaims our visitor. “I thought I detected the cut of a future pastor in him! And when you’ll finally go to school... because I don’t think you go to school yet, am I right?”

I feel like showing off all of a sudden. The chance to shine my brightest comes to me in all its splendor. I don’t

like how people continually look down on me because I'm not of age to attend school yet, which invariably warrants me the nickname of 'li'l baby'. And by a curious coincidence, I've just learned a wonderful new expression from my sister Michèle, an expression I heard her use in a conversation with one of her friends, one evening, in front of the door to our apartment. So, proud of my vast knowledge and intelligence, sure to impress all by demonstrating that I'm not, in fact, as they presuppose, a 'li'l baby', I cry out:

"No, sir. I fuck around!"

To my great surprise, instead of admiration and adulation, it is consternation that I provoke. Three stunned faces turn to look at me. If my mother blushes any redder, she's going to look like my father's grape-flavored *Kik* cola. The priest's horrified stare almost makes his eyes pop out of their sockets. My father looks irate. What have I said that could have insulted them so? If I understood my sister correctly, 'fucking around' simply means skipping school, right?

At the moment I feel my father's terrible grip grab my biceps to haul me out of the room, something unpredictable occurs.

Baba, who's been following the conversation without looking as if he were, bursts out laughing. He chokes a little at first, then begins laughing out loud, his chest heaving with spasms, sending spittle flying everywhere, seemingly drooling all of the saliva in his body all over his shirt. My Baba hasn't laughed so joyously since Twelfth Night, when he sat next to the Merry Widow.

He laughs and quivers so much in his chair that... the little cork stopper of the gray bladder, filled with wee for way too long now, is expelled from its orifice, and the

grandfatherly urine starts pooling on the waxed linoleum all around him, at the base of his wheelchair.

Our lowered gazes soon inform Baba of the catastrophe. When he also notices the presence of the little puddle of pee under his wheelchair, he starts to crumple in on himself in shame. Then, he gives my mother a tearful look, as if to beg her to roll him out of the living room. But instead, she immediately takes off for the kitchen while my father stumbles over his words:

“You’ll... have to excuse him, Father. My father-in-law didn’t mean to...”

Overcoming with apparent difficulty a wave of disdain as obvious as it is immense, his eyes fixed on to the puddle of urine, the priest mutters:

“No need to excuse him. I know all about illness. Don’t worry, Mr. Labrecque. The Good Lord will hold a nicer place in His Heaven for you.”

This is too much humiliation for Baba. His lower lip trembling, his eyes moist, he tries to wheel his chair forward with his one good hand, but only manages to make it move a few inches. He starts crying in rage. his belly heaving. He raises his eyes towards me, stuttering:

“Hu... Hul-ien!”

I understand his plight. I immediately go place myself behind his wheelchair and, leaning as best I can against the back panel, both feet in the puddle of pee, I manage to impart a feeble rolling movement to the wheels of his chair. Feeling that I’m starting to get a better handle on the situation, I start rolling him out of the living room.

My father comes and cuts in. In a sheepish tone, he says:

“It’s okay, kiddo. Papa’ll do it with ya.”

We pass by Mother who, a wet rag in one hand and a

bucket of water in the other, is coming to ‘clean up the damage.’ To Baba, she barks:

“Couldn’t ya have held it in a little?”

Baba doesn’t even look at his daughter. We push the wheelchair into his bedroom, where my father undertakes the task of hoisting him as best he can onto the unmade bed.

Once lain down, my grandfather closes his eyes. His face is jaundiced. He looks sleepy.

My father grabs my shoulder, more softly this time.

“Come on, monkey. We’ll let Baba take a little nap.”

I free myself from his grasp and throw myself onto Baba’s bed. My father hesitates a moment before heading back into the living room.

Baba doesn’t even seem aware of my presence. I slowly back away, staying in the doorway. I can now hear the rustling of the adults’ conversation.

“I’m sorry I can’t give any more, Father. Since the end of the war and all, business has been rather slow in the dry cleaning business. As the soldiers aren’t stationed around here no more, I don’t have any uniforms to clean these days.”

“And having an ‘invalid’ at home is starting to rack up the bills, ya know,” adds my mother.

“I know, I know. But don’t forget that the tithe is mandatory. It is a command from our Holy Mother the Church.”

“We know that, Father, but when ya don’t have much to begin with...”

“One must learn how to deprive oneself of some earthly pleasures, Mr. Lussier. Spiritual matters must have precedence over material ones. And don’t forget what I told you concerning procreation.”

“We won’t forget, Father,” promises my mother on what almost sounds like a cheerful tone.

The front door closes. I contemplate Baba. His whistling breathing proof that he’s really fallen asleep, this time. My father’s angry voice rings out in the next room.

“You’re pretty proud of yourself right now, aren’t ya?”

“No need to shout, Pierre Lussier.”

“‘We won’t forget, Father’,” mimics my father in a twangy, shrill voice. “His sermon on procreation suits you pretty well, doesn’t it? The Holy Prude has finally found a raven to prove her right!”

“I’ll let you know that... I’ll let you know that... I’ve been having doubts for a long time now about the fact that we didn’t have ta... ta... ta do those *dirty* things with each other anymore.”

“Oh, well, if you can’t act like a real woman anymore, let me tell ya, I’m still a real man, dear Simone. This is not the end of it!”

“Yain’t ever touchin’ me again, d’ya hear me?”

“You’re not the only woman on this planet, you know that, right?!”

“Right. Go back to chasin’ every skirt you see! I hope you like your stay in Hell!”

“I don’t give a crap!”

The intensity of their quarrel really scares me this time. Under my parents’ livid stares as they stand defiantly in front of each other in the living room, I flee to my wardrobe.

I close the door and, in the darkness, lit only by a beam of light coming through the doorsill, I search for Tonon with taut, stiff hands.

He’s waiting for me, calm and soft, as always. I grab hold of him, wrap him around my neck, rub my nose in

his big silky tail, and try to reassure myself by softly singing the words to a lullaby my mother used to sing to me, long ago:

*There was a little gray hen
Who went into the church
She laid a li'l egg for
Julien to eat then sleep.
And then a little black hen
Laid 'nother in the closet
Eat it while it's warm, child
Then it's time for sleep.
Time for sleep, sweet Julien
Beddy-bye, nappy time
Time for sleep, sweet Julien
Good night, good night.*

Chapter nine

The weather keeps dithering between winter and springtime: it's snowing rain and raining snow. My mother and father have formally forbidden me from approaching Baba; I'm only allowed to look at him from afar, peeking through the bedroom doorway. He continues to play the lying-tree game, but by himself now, under a big with his eyes closed. I'm not even sure he can hear the patter of snow and rain falling on the window pane anymore.

The quietness prevailing in our home is making me morose. I have all the time in the world to listen to the fire as it makes the wood sputter in the stove. When the radio plays these days, it's only in quiet tones; from the safety of my wardrobe, where I spend most of my time now, I no longer hear my mother laughing when listening to *Quelles Nouvelles*. Today, the moment Michele left for school, once again cursing against the bad weather that keeps soaking her coat in a matter of minutes, I fled to my lair.

After giving Ton on a few hugs, I take out my new favorite comic book from its hiding place. *De lass ov de Mohicans*, as my sister pronounces it; she gave me an idea of what the story was all about, at least, what she could manage to decipher. Sitting by the half-open door of my wardrobe, I try and follow the plot, scrutinizing the story

image by image, even if I don't quite always grasp the link connecting them all together.

Suddenly, my mother opens the door, pretending not to notice the forbidden comic book I'm holding in my hands, so pleased is she that I'm not bothering her with my presence today.

"Go and watch your Baba while I go to the grocery store. If anythin' happens, just run and warn Mrs. Blanchette."

She's been repeating the same recommendation for a week now, as if she weren't even aware she was doing it anymore. Mother isn't any gentler than before, nor any more likeable. She only seems a little sadder; so much so that she hardly gets angry these days. She doesn't even talk to herself out loud when cleaning the apartment anymore.

I sit at the kitchen table with Tonon and take over watching duties for Baba. My mother, her head covered with a scarf and shivering in her broadcloth coat against the gale that assails her as soon as she cracks the back door open, goes out to run her errands.

A few minutes and a few yawns later, I'm already bored to tears, not knowing what to do with myself. Baba is snoring louder and louder, although somewhat hesitatingly. From the corner of his crooked mouth, a trickle of drool rolls down a used washcloth my mother wedged between his cheek and his shoulder to try and contain the damages. I contemplate the framed picture of 'Saint Joseph, Patron of a Peaceful Death' that Mother hung up over his bed last night. It's a good thing Baba sleeps so soundly, otherwise he would surely have protested at being constantly watched over like that.

His chest heaves at regular intervals. From the kitchen, as I clutch Tonon a little tighter, I can hear him trying to catch his breath, then exhale slowly when he finally mana-

ges to find it. For a moment, I think about going to lie down next to him in his bed so we can play the lying-tree game together, in spite of the explicit warning from my parents not to do so anymore, but I resolve to simply watch him from afar. Maybe Baba prefers to play the tree game by himself today?

I let out a long sigh. I hum a few words to *Beautiful gray lark*, which Michèle taught me, but quickly grow tired of this.

“Baba? Baba? Wanna tell me my story? The one about the other Julien?”

What’s the use in trying to talk to him? He doesn’t even answer anymore. We never know whether he’s hungry or thirsty. Or if he’s asleep. I sigh loudly. Twice, three times. Tonon seems to mock me with his beady little glass eyes. If only Baba would notice my presence.

The other night, during supper, Michèle said that the nun who teaches them at school had explained to her that our grandfather ‘was in a coma.’

“Well, we already knew that,” cut in my father between two spoonfuls of barley soup. “You don’t need a classical education to realize that pops isn’t doing very well these days.”

My bum is getting sore; the wood of the chair is so hard. Baba seems calmer now. His chest doesn’t emit those hoarse whistling noises anymore.

“You sleepin’ Baba?”

No answer. Now I know he’s sleeping.

I’ve seen my mother pour a little spoonful of water between his lips from time to time.

“Want some water?”

No, he doesn’t want any water: he didn’t shake his head.

“Would you rather be left alone, Baba?”

This time, he lets out a long sigh that makes a lot of noise, as if he were burping: I’m certain he said ‘yes’.

Confident that I’ve properly interpreted his permission for me to leave, I retreat to my wardrobe and dive right back into vivid images of Indians and woodsmen. My heroes are lucky to have the freedom to roam amidst great forests, where trees are free to stand tall...

If only Mother would give me permission to go outside... I’d take Baba to the grove on the other side of the vacant lot. There, we’d get to see real trees, with real branches. We would play at hiding behind them, remaining as motionless as they are to prevent Mother from finding us. And we’d laugh together at hearing her loud voice call out for us to come in for supper.

I can picture us being there, together.

Baba abandons his wheelchair. He points out a squirrel climbing up a tree, a chickadee that brushes past us in a flash, the broken branches that are already starting to jut through the melting snow.

Now, it’s summer. We sit in the grass, under the shade of a great maple tree that sways its branches in the wind to salute us. I lean my head against Baba’s rounded stomach as he begins to tell me, very distinctly this time:

“Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Julien, who lived in a wardrobe. Julien loved trees greatly, almost as much as he did his grandfather. Julien so wanted to build a tree house for his Baba...”

How sweet it is to hear him lull me with his words, words that soar, words that have never before been spoken within our family. I feel tremendous joy upon hearing Baba’s real voice, and let myself be moved as if it were that of an angel’s...

Hysterical shouting wrenches me from my dream.

“Poppa! Poppa! Wake up, poppa! Oh, no! Oh, God in Heaven! Julien, where are ya, ya little rascal? Come here this instant!”

Dragging Tonon by the tail, I crawl out of my lair and head back to the kitchen, where I find my mother in a rather agitated state. I notice her grocery bags stacked haphazardly on the table. Her drenched coat has been thrown on a chair and hangs limply, threatening at any moment to fall onto the flowery linoleum.

Panicked, she screams:

“I *told* you to go get Mrs. Blanchette if anythin’ happened!”

“I know.”

“So why didn’t you?!”

“Nothin’ happened...”

“Julien, you poor sprout, look at your grampa!”

Her face ravaged, my mother seems on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She leans against the kitchen table, trying to contain the panic forcing her to breathe in great spasms.

But no matter how hard I examine Baba, I can’t seem to find anything wrong with him. He’s just sleeping, peacefully.

Mother suddenly realizes that I’m not registering the situation, and bursts out in great gurgling sobs. Her mouth as crooked as Baba’s has been lately, she splutters:

“Julien, poor dear... Your Baba’s *dead*!”

She screamed that last word. Now, she sits at the table, buries her head in her furled arms, and starts sobbing next to her grocery bags.

I stand there, not knowing what to do. I glance back at Baba, who still looks like he’s only sleeping, then at my mother, who’s sniffing.

But already, she straightens back up. She takes out a little embroidered handkerchief from her shirt sleeve, wipes her tears away, and blows her nose. In a voice that's already more assured now, she says to me, putting the handkerchief back where it came from:

"Stay here. I'm going over to Mrs. Blanchette's to make a call."



The door is barely closed that I'm at Baba's side. What does it mean: 'being dead'? It's probably a lot like sleeping, apparently; Baba seems so calm in his bed. He can't have changed that much; wasn't he just telling me my favorite story a few moments ago, in my head?

His eyelids aren't completely closed shut, and I can see a line of milky white forming under his eyelashes. There are no more tears. The last filaments of drool have formed a little layer of whitish magma in the corner of his mouth.

"Baba? You done sleepin' now?"

No answer.

I poke his stomach a few times.

"Baba, it's me, Julien. Come and finish your story..."

Nothing.

Maybe that's what death is. No longer wanting to continue a story. I involuntarily start pouting. Is it possible Baba's become deaf?

The door to our apartment bursts wide open. My mother and Mrs. Blanchette rush into the bedroom.

"Keep away, Julien. Go to Mrs. Blanchette's while we wait for the doctor to arrive."

"I don't want to! Baba's waiting for me next to our tree to finish his story."

The two women stare at each other without understanding. My mother looks at me disconcertedly, anger already glinting in her eyes. She has a movement of impatience, as if she were about to make a grab for my arm. Putting a hand on her shoulder, Mrs. Blanchette tells me sweetly:

“Come with Mrs. Blanchette, li'l Julien. She's gonna give you some nice ice cream.”

“I don't want any! I want Baba to finish tellin' me his story!”

My mother erupts.

“Julien, you little pig-headed nitwit! Do as you're told!”

“NO!”

And before they even have time to attempt a single action, I rush between the two, still dragging Tonon behind me, and run back to hide in my wardrobe, where the obscurity of this late afternoon quickly envelops me, victorious against the beam of light trying to sneak in under the doorsill.

I turn the key in the lock. My mother tries to come and open the door. Too late.

“Why you little, mule-headed...! Fine, *stay* in your damned wardrobe! But if Grippy comes over lookin' ta prick your backside, you can fend him off by yourself!”

I clutch Tonon tighter and, feeling around me in the dark, find Baba's cane. I grab it. Come and get me, Grippy! I'm ready for you!



Bothered by cramps, I have to shift positions regularly in my little cubbyhole to find one that's comfortable.

Half-sleepy, half-attentive, I follow, from my lair, the events that are rapidly plunging the apartment in disorderly agitation.

The doctor arrives at the same time as Michèle does; just back from school, my sister is completely unaware of the unfolding drama. Upon hearing my mother's dry announcement concerning Baba's death, Michèle goes and throws herself on our grampa's bed, sobbing in little spurts. A few tense minutes go by, then, sniffing, she approaches the wardrobe, tries to open it, once, twice. In a weary voice, she says flatly:

"Julien, stop foolin' around. This isn't the time right now. Open the door."

"No. I want Baba to come and finish tellin' me his story. Wanna know what we're gonna do up in our tree house."

Again, she tries to reason with me:

"Julien, just... come out of there. Come out so you can see that Baba's really gone to Heaven..."

The argument sows doubt in my fierce determination: religious mysteries intrigue the child that I am. Of all the odd things my mother has told me lately concerning what happens to us when we go to Heaven, I only know that you can no longer come back home to play the lying-tree game, or to tell stories to your Julien...

But I refuse to yield and, confronted with the failure of her endeavor, Michèle lets out a long sigh of annoyance before blending back into the brouhaha reigning in the kitchen.

I listen closely. Sometimes, the voice of my father, called back from work by Mrs. Blanchette, who got in touch with him at the barber shop next door, rises above those of others I have a hard time identifying. The floors

of the entire apartment creak and groan under the hubbub of many people.

The impromptu arrival of the doctor and my father in my bedroom so they can exchange a few words without having to worry about me puts me on alert.

“From all indications, it seems your father-in-law, Mr. Labrecque, has suffered a cerebral embolism, Mr. Lussier. Do you understand?”

“I... I think so, yes...”

“It’s obvious he hadn’t fully recovered from his previous stroke.”

“Oh? Well, he was a really sick man, you know. But, still, we managed to take really good care of ‘im, these last few years...”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry about it. Would you like us to perform an autopsy?”

“Er... I don’t really see the point in that, do you, doctor?”

“No, not really. I’ll sign the death certificate and grant authorization for the funeral parlor employees to come and take the body away.”

“Er... How much do we owe you, doctor?”

“Ten bucks.”

“Oh... Well, it’s not like I have that kind of money on me, right now...”

“I’ll send you a bill.”

“Oh... All right, then...”

The decreasing protests of the slats of the wooden floor signal they are both leaving the bedroom.

Darkness has almost completely invaded my hideout. I can barely distinguish my hands under the little beam of light coming in under the doorsill. No matter how hard I clutch Tonon and Baba’s cane against my chest, I only

manage in half-reassuring myself. The buzz of conversations stills fills the kitchen. All sorts of sounds start to interweave: the tap, the rushing water of the toilet, drawers being opened and closed, the sound of furniture being moved, etc.

What if I just went out and took a peek?

The doctor's loud voice rises above the discussion as it intensifies:

"And I'm telling you, the stairs out back are too steep. You'd risk wedging the stretcher in the bend."

"Yes, but doctor, the ambulance is already parked in the back of the house," argues a voice I do not recognize.

"So? Go park it out front."

Some grumbling. The back door slams shut. In the kitchen, the rumbling of conversation starts to diminish.

In the corridor that runs behind my wardrobe, I can hear a stretcher being pushed up to the front door.

"Mind the doorframe," requests my mother dryly.

"There's enough room, Simone, don't worry 'bout it," replies my father.

"You say that now, but after they're done, we'll find that they managed to scratch it all over anyways."

Little spinning wheels make an odd purring noise as they roll along the linoleum floor. The beam of light grows wider under the doorsill: the ceiling lamp has just been turned on.

"All right, I can see the ambulance backing up next to the staircase," announces my father.

Suddenly, I can't hold back anymore: I need to know. I want to see Baba before he leaves for Heaven. I want to ask him to finish telling me his story. I also want to see the ambulance; the last time one came to our street, it was to pick up the little Dauphinais boy who'd gotten hit by a

‘Stoodbaker’. And Mother had forbidden me from looking out the window at the time.

I discard Tonon. Standing up on stiff legs, I fumble with the key in the lock. Disaster! I give it one too many twists, and the key becomes stuck. I desperately try turning the handle. Nothing doing: I’m a prisoner. I bang on the door with Baba’s cane. Nothing doing. No one pays me any attention.

The front door of the living room opens. The cold air from outside starts creeping in through the slit under the wardrobe door, crawling around my feet.

The morgue employees speak to each other using short sentences:

“All right, lift it... Higher.”

Groaning, whistling, and long sighs replace earlier conversations.

“Careful... Bend to your left... The *other* left, you idiot!”

“It’ll pass. Barely, but it’ll pass.”

I redouble my efforts at banging against the wardrobe door.

“Let me out! I wanna see Baba!”

Michèle comes and jiggles the handle.

“Turn the key, Julien.”

“I did!”

She tries again.

“You turned it the wrong way. You’re locked in.”

Cold air stops swirling about my feet; the living room door has been closed again. The exchanges between the morgue employees are quickly muted. I can’t hear them anymore.

“I’ll also be leaving now, madam,” declares the doctor. “My condolences.”

“Thank you, doctor. How much do we owe you?”

“I told your husband I’d be sending you the bill.”

“Oh? Well, all right, then. Thanks for comin’ over, doctor.”

A new draft of cold air assails me. The doctor leaves.

Michèle informs my mother:

“Julien’s stuck. The key’s caught in the lock.”

“Too bad. That oughta teach him. We’ve got other things to do. Come and help me and Mrs. Blanchette; we have to clean the invalid’s room before preparing supper.”

“Right now? What about Julien?”

“He won’t be in our way for once. Now come on.”

Long moments go by. I stop banging on the door. A new draft of cold air on my feet informs me that Father’s back. Then, from the kitchen, I hear Michèle ask him if he can come and free me.

I hear his footsteps echo down the corridor, then in the bedroom. He tries the handle, then immediately gives up. He walks away. I hear him rummaging in a drawer, then slowly coming back.

Using a hammer and a screwdriver, he begins to remove the bolts from each of the three hinges. Between mighty blows that make the wardrobe door shake, I hear snippets of an exchange coming from Baba’s room:

“Ugh, it stinks...”

“... piss...”

“The mattress is done for...”

“Gonna need bleach...”

“... sheets and covers...”

The bolt from the third hinge is yanked upwards. The bit of the screwdriver finds its way through the slit between the door and the frame. The door resists a moment, before finally dislodging itself from the frame.

Under the blinding light of the ceiling lamp, my father, whom I have never seen so tall, leans the door against the wall. With a firm grip, he grabs my arm with one hand and, with the other, gives my bottom a few good whacks. The pain makes me cry out.

Immediately, he takes me in his arms, pressing me tightly against his chest that smells of sweat and cleaning products.

“Don’t cry, monkey. Don’t cry.”

Between sobs, I scream:

“I wanna see Baba!”

Chapter ten

“**B**aby Jesus wants Baba to go and live with Him in His paradise,” keep tirelessly repeating aunts Mia and Maxi, to whom my parents have entrusted me, in spite of my tearful protests. As soon as she heard the news of my grandfather passing away, the Merry Widow offered to let me stay with her, assuring my parents that she’d take ‘good care of me’, that I wouldn’t be ‘any trouble at all’, and that this way, I’d be ‘nearby’.

My mother flat-out told her, dryly and promptly:

“We don’t need nobody!”

The evening Baba died, two days ago, Mr. Blanchette drove me to my aunties’ house in his milk truck. My spare clothes had been hastily bundled inside a big brown paper bag.

The whispers of Father’s elder sisters, sitting at the kitchen table to sip a cup of their noxious green tea, once again prevent me from finding sleep tonight. The folding bed they’ve prepared for me in Maxi’s bedroom is uncomfortable. My belly hurts. I have a hard time digesting the ‘Chopped Chewie’ Maxi forced me to eat; it tasted of molasses and that flour glue my sister uses to build kites out of old newspapers.

But my restlessness is mostly caused by the thought of being able to see Baba tomorrow. Because, as both aunties

explained to me on numerous occasions, taking care to add different details each time, tomorrow, they're going to take me to a parlor where there will be a lot of people, a 'fiewnneral' parlor, where Baba is resting before his big trip up in the sky.

My sadness at having missed his departure in the ambulance is attenuated: I know Baba's waiting for me so he can finish his beautiful story about the tree house we were going to build together. At least, this is what I've garnered from all of their long and confusing explanations. Mother will be able to hear Baba's beautiful tale, and she'll finally understand why we loved to play the lying-tree game together so much.

Every ten minutes or so, one of the two old maids comes and cracks the door open, frowning their eyebrows when they notice that I'm still stirring in this bed that's starting to look more and more like a pile of rags.

"Still not asleep? Well, hurry up! Otherwise, your grampa's gonna go up to Heaven without waitin' for you."

Are they ever going to leave me be? How can I sleep when they keep checking up on me all the time?

The ironic face of the Merry Widow resurfaces in my mind. After my mother's vehement refusal, she flashed me a little smile, and whispered in my ear, bending over so close that her perfume once again gave me all kinds of odd sensations:

"When all a' this is over, if ya miss your grampa too much, just come over and see me, 'kay? I'll give ya milk and choc'late cookies. Real ones, full of 'marchmellow'. I'll even lend ya some brand new comics!"

Slowly, my head begins to fill with fantastic colored images. My favorite heroes, along with others I make up on the spot, start having more and more extraordinary

adventures. Plastic Man and ‘Ouander Ouomenn’ are giving chase to the Penguin. Robin and Batman battle the Riddler’s evil acolytes, who were trying to pick a fight with Dick Tracy over his watch. With his sharp rapier, Cyrano de Bergerac fends off a guard working for the Cardinal who’s insulted his beautiful Roxanne, an evil man who looks a lot like the barber to whom my father entrusted my head, last summer. The female hero looks exactly like the Merry Widow.

In this story devoid of any logic, I see Baba rush towards me in a sparkling wheelchair he immediately ditches and, cheerful as I’ve never seen him before, he says to me:

“Julien, if only you could see the beautiful golden trees up here in Heaven!”

I fall asleep...



Mia and Maxi have decided that the trip to the ‘fiewnneral’ parlor would be made by taxi. In spite of the joy of being able to travel through unknown streets aboard a ‘machine’, I’m somewhat disappointed that we arrive at our destination too quickly. In broad daylight, the neon sign (a powder blue cross lying under a little violet branch) hanging above the entrance to the Duranleau and Jalbert establishment is lit up; the cross threatens to fizzle out at any moment because of a bad connection that keeps making it crackle.

With its windowed doors that protect ambulances and hearses from inclement weather, the ground floor evokes the feel of a garage. The first floor can be accessed via an interior staircase that leads up to a large viewing room.

As soon as the heavy varnished door is cracked open, I am assailed by a barrage of conversations, cigarette smoke, and the bland smell of flowers. Without leaving me any time to recover, Mia firmly imprisons my hand in hers and, together, we undertake the difficult climb up the steep staircase, made even more difficult by the fact that I'm wearing rubber boots that are way too big for me and that once belonged to my sister Michèle.

As we reach the landing, we immediately end up in the viewing room, where the constant brouhaha tones down somewhat upon our arrival. My mother, wearing a black dress I've never seen her wear before, notices us and begins to make her way through the crowd. Her livid face seems sadder than usual because of the red blush she used to over-color her cheekbones.

"You doin' okay, honey?"

I vaguely assent with a nod of my head, letting her remove my tuque, my coat, and my gloves.

My father excuses himself from a group of smokers gathered together in a little area at the back of the viewing room and comes over to rescue me from the trio of women.

"So, monkey, you doin' okay? You didn't miss us too much, I hope? Come on, let's take those boots off."

He leads me to an unoccupied chair leaning against a wall and hunkers down in front of me to remove the overshoes that give me the demeanor of a guttersnipe...

"Poor Julien. That really doesn't look good on you. Looks like we're gonna have to get you some new boots, eh?"

Noticing my untied shoes, my socks dangling around my ankles, and the suspenders of my short pants slipped over the sweater I'm wearing back to front over a haphazardly

buttoned shirt like an uncoordinated bachelor, my father exclaims:

“Jiminy, kiddo, you look like what the cat dragged in!”

It should be noted that my old celibate aunts have absolutely no notion of how to take care of a child, and that they’ve left me to dress myself, without any regard for my incorrigible ‘devil may care attitude’ my sister often has to curb.

Here she comes now, running towards us, as if she instinctively knew I needed her help.

“Let me do it, poppa. I’ll dress him properly.”

She kneels in front of me and unabashedly takes down my trousers, untucks my sweater, and unbuttons my shirt.

My father uses the opportunity to give her an insisting caress with his hand down the nape of her neck, between the long braids that hang over her navy blue schoolgirl uniform.

Michèle instantly shrugs it off, reprimanding him in a loud voice:

“I said stop it! Gosh, you’re so annoying!”

The looks our neighbors shoot us as well as those of a few parents sitting nearby are enough to calm my father’s display of affection. He smiles awkwardly, then, to no-one in particular, says:

“Spittin’ image of her mother, eh? Am I right?”

His joke only garners ambivalent smiles. Hesitatingly, he goes off in search of the group of men whose loud exchanges manage to reach us despite the droning voice of sister Saint Mary of the Transfiguration of the Christ, one of Mother’s younger sisters, who insists on reciting her rosary as she kneels in a corner.

As Michèle undertakes the task of trying to make me look presentable, I inspect the attendees over the back of

her lowered head. All of these bodies draped in black or brown, all of these gray heads form in front of me a rather peculiar wall.

“Who dressed you up like this? This is horrible!” complains Michèle as she strains to slip buttons into their proper buttonholes.

“I did. And by myself, you should know...”

“I wouldn’t brag about that, Julien...”

Finally, I am now presentable. Each eyelet of my brown ankle shoes sport well-tied shoelaces, my sweater now hides the suspenders, and my shirt collar tips are properly aligned.

All of a sudden, the wall of visitors parts, letting my mother through as, pretending to mourn, she goes from one group to another, garnering condolences that are promptly dispensed in order to avoid having her repeat the same, weary twaddle she’s already inflicted upon our neighbors while I was waiting to be driven over to the aunties’ house, two days ago.

My mother’s slow demeanor creates breaches in this sea of individuals who, for some reason, all seem to be standing. The casket catches my eye. I instantly grow impatient.

“Where you goin’?” asks Michèle, surprised.

“I wanna see Baba!”

Her hand on my shoulder, she stops me the moment I take a few steps towards an unknown grove of legs. I try to shake off her grip to free myself, but Michèle’s hand quickly slides down to mine and squeezes it.

Whispering gravely, she says:

“Let’s go together.”

The human wall disperses a little more in front of us, assailing my nostrils with emanations of cheap perfume, pipe tobacco, and lukewarm coffee.

Aunts Mia and Maxi move away from the casket, pretending to sob quietly into little lace handkerchiefs. Michèle brings me closer before kneeling in turn. I emulate her, but, from this vantage point, I can't even see my grandfather. I immediately pop back up and stand on the hassock, gripping the casket.

Upon finally seeing Baba, I let out a sigh of contentment; he waited for me! He's lying in a simple wooden box that's covered in thin gray felt and equipped with golden handles; behind him, two small wreaths hung up on holders, along with freshly cut flowers placed in a vase sitting on a pedestal with flaking paint, look for all the world as if they'd just been abandoned there.

Only his torso and his head are visible; his legs are hidden away beneath the half-lid of the casket. He's wearing his nice navy blue suit, the one he only takes out for special occasions, along with a well-starched white shirt. The polka dot tie he wore on Twelfth Night is tied under the collar. My father cleaned all of his clothes at his shop, and there still hangs a smell of naphtha around him.

I finally dare to look at his face. I am reassured. Evidently, he's just sleeping. The rosy color of his freshly shaved cheeks, his bright pink lips, his hair expertly combed and parted on the right side are all proof that he waited for my visit before going off to live with Baby Jesus, since he donned his nice holiday suit. My old aunties hadn't lied.

The words to *Our Father* recited by Michèle ring in my ears. This should take a while; I should have enough time to wake Baba up. Over the white satin gathers of the cushion on which he lies, my hand creeps towards his arm. I poke it. Stiff, the arm resists. I try again. Baba must be sleeping soundly. He shows no sign of any reaction.

“Hallowed be Thy Name...,” drones my sister in a low voice.

I poke Baba with more insistence. He’s never played the lying-tree game with such conviction before. But I’m not worried. He’s played this trick on me many times before when we were in his bed together; he’d pretend to be asleep, even to the point of holding his breath to try and fool me. I’d push him a bit, tickle him, even shove him a little, blowing in his ears bristling with black and gray hairs, before he’d finally burst out laughing, saying:

“Hu... Hulien... is... is a l’il rascal...”

“But deliver us from evil. Amen,” concludes Michèle.

This time, I shove Baba more forcefully, pulling on the sleeve of his jacket with all my might. His silence unnerves me. In a tone of voice that is far from a whisper, I exclaim:

“Baba, I’m here. You can wake up now.”

Michèle, who was about to get back up, turns towards me and lifts an index to her lips, giving me a loud ‘Shush!’ Then, leaning over my neck, she whispers:

“Grampa’s gone to Heaven, Julien. He can’t hear you anymore.”

Again, this story about a mysterious celestial kingdom I know nothing about. I know, I’m sure of it, that Baba wouldn’t have left without telling me where he was going, and certainly not without first finishing his story about our treehouse. All I need to do is wake him up. Under my sister’s wrathful glare, I reply:

“Baba’s only sleepin’. I want my story.”

“No, Julien. That’s not Baba. It looks like him, but it’s not him. The real Baba is with Baby Jesus now...”

Him again! The frustration of being misunderstood and especially that of being superseded by someone no one’s ever even seen except in pictures or in a crèche

triggers my anger. I climb back down from the prayer stool and, refusing to listen to Michèle anymore, I start pushing the casket along on its heavy roller.

“Come on, Baba. We’re goin’ home!”

Using all my might, I manage to push the big roller right up to the potted flowers sitting on the pedestal. Crash! The vase shatters on the varnished floor, sending water flying all over the legs of nearby visitors. Cries of astonishment ring out. Paying no attention to them, I continue exerting myself to the limits of my strength and force the casket ahead; the big pivoting wheels suddenly go a way I hadn’t anticipated, and the casket makes a loud ‘poomp’ noise as it hits the wall.

“Julien!!! Stop that right now, ya little nitwit!”

My father’s voice booms out with such force that it eclipses the brouhaha triggered by my rescue attempt.

His hands fall heavily on my back. I grip the edge of the roller tightly, crying out at the top of my lungs:

“I wanna take Baba with me! I wanna go and climb trees with him!”

“Let go of that this instant!”

“No! I want Baba to finish his story!”

My mother manages to make her way through the sea of stunned visitors. When she reaches me, she leans over and gives me a resounding slap on the back of the head, the hardest she’s ever dished out.

“Are you crazy, you li’l pinhead? Stop humiliating us with all of your nonsense!”

Her face no longer shows any signs of the air of compassion she wore just a few minutes ago. Pain shoots through my heart. I release my grip to rub the back of my head. My father’s hands immediately lift me up in the air. I try to wriggle free, without success. He takes me away.

I scream even louder:

“Baba! Come and finish your story!”

The rage of being held prisoner opens the floodgates: I start crying in long, hysterical protests, gleaning snippets of comments along the way:

“This is just awful!”

“I know, but he loved his grandfather so much...”

“So what? That’s what happens when you spoil your youngest...”

“Thank GOD that’s not mine!”

The crowd quickly parts around us as we make our way to the chair where Michèle left my clothes. Before I even realize what’s going on, I am subjected to motions as angry as they are awkward as my father hurries to get me back into my street clothes.

Hissing between clenched teeth, he says:

“Wait ‘til I get you home, you little bugger. I’ll show you what happens to spoiled brats.”

Him too? Even Father wants to prevent me from listening to Baba’s story one last time?

My shoulders begin to tremble. Snot droops from the tip of my nose. My lips quiver uncontrollably. I’ve never felt so abandoned. My sobs are like long, heart-wrenching protests. Tears prevent me from clearly distinguishing the visitors all around us as they stare at me.

The pallbearers approach the casket that’s been rolled back in more or less the same spot from which I had ousted it. The visitors turn away from me and form a half-circle around it, withdrawing Baba from my sight forever.

Michèle comes to my father’s aid as he struggles to dress me, so great is his anger.

“I can take care of him, poppa...”

For the first time in her life, my sister finds herself rebuked by my father.

“You go back to your mother! Now!”

Michèle gives me a look of dejected helplessness before blending back into the group of visitors that’s already started to put their coats and hats back on before leaving for church.

I realize I won’t be able to see any of the vaunted ceremony my aunts told me so much about that I’d begun to imagine it as a grand spectacle designed to reward me for my good behavior. I cry even more.

My tuque sitting crookedly on top of my head, my coat half-buttoned up, my steps accentuated by the clapping of boots that are too big for me, I am dragged by my father, who holds me by the hand as he tries to slip his other arm into the sleeve of his coat. Without letting go of me, he switches hands and slips on the other sleeve. Trying to adjust his gray hat, he’s already dragging me towards the exit.

Halfway down the stairs, we come across the Merry Widow, dressed to the nines, come to give my grandfather a last farewell.

Seeing her seems to calm my father down somewhat.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Lussier?”

“Sort of... I think Julien’s a little shaken up about the, er... his... You know what I mean...”

“Poor darlin’!”

“Don’t feel too sorry for him. He’s being a very naughty brat right now. I’m takin’ him back home.”

“You’re gonna miss the funeral?”

“Well... It’s not like I have a choice.”

“Listen, I’ll take care of Julien. I got a cab waitin’ for me anyways. I just came over for a little courtesy visit so your wife won’t think that I... I’ll take Julien back to my place. I’ll make him eat. Ya can come and pick him up after the funeral.”

“You sure that wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“Not a bit. You’ll play nice, right Julien?”

I must be dreaming. I sniffle and wipe the snotty residue forming under my nose with the back of my hand. My eyes are still moist, but I’ve already stopped crying. Me? Alone with the pretty neighbor that lets me read all the comics books I want? And to be able to take a trip with her in a ‘machine’ on top of it? Is it Christmastime again?

I almost forget my sorrow. I free myself from my father’s hold and throw myself into the Merry Widow’s arms.

“I’ll be real, real, real good. More gooder than my Tonon.”

I hear my father ask hesitantly:

“You sure this is all right with you?”

“Sure! Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

The widow goes back down the steps, clutching me against her chest which always smells of nice flowers. My arms clutch her neck so tightly that she laughs and says:

“You’re chokin’ me, sweetie!”

I release my hold a little. Just enough to reassure myself that I’m not going to lose her and that such a great joy will not suddenly vanish.

We sit in the backseat of a taxi that trundles off as soon as the car door is shut. As the vehicle leaves the plaza of the funeral parlor to make its way into the street, I have time to notice my mother, coming out the entrance we’d just passed through and running in our direction as she waves her purse around, trying to grab our attention.

I pretend not to see her and select not to mention a word of it to my great friend who’s smiling at me so affectionately.

The taxi speeds up and dives between two rows of houses that fly by as if they’d been erected on rollers...



Sitting at the kitchen table under which my friend's cat is sleeping, my back against the oil stove that fills the apartment with stifling heat, I am lost in trying to puzzle out a brand new comic book my hostess just bought at the local restaurant.

It's the story of a polar bear, lonely and sad, who rolls himself around in mud to convince other brown bears that he's actually one of them. Unfortunately for him, a sudden downpour takes him by surprise and reveals his true nature. The other bears rebuff him before expelling him from their clan.

If it weren't for the big glass of milk and the box of Whippet cookies the widow set out on the table next to me, I believe I might actually surrender to the feeling of crying this story stirs up in me, so the plight of the big rejected bear mirrors my own present situation.

When I interrupt my 'reading' to take a gulp of milk and bite into a cookie, I take a look at the living room through the kitchen door. The Merry Widow is sitting on a sofa, meticulously applying bright red varnish to her fingernails. In a sculpted glass ashtray next to her, a cigarette lets a little wisp of blue smoke rise up into the air, backlit by sunlight.

She senses I'm observing her, lifts her head, and flashes me the sweetest smile anyone could imagine. I almost feel like going to the bathroom, so warm it feels in my belly.

"Ya doin' okay there, my dear Julien?"

My teeth stuck on the marshmallow cookie, I answer with a 'Mmm'. She called me 'her dear Julien'! That's the balm I needed to heal my wounded heart, still drowning

in the sadness of being deprived of Baba. I take a chance and ask her the question that's been nagging me:

"Don't you have a husband, Mrs. Chouinard?"

The question visibly catches her off-guard. The warm smiles dies on her lips.

"Why ya askin' me that, honey?"

"Well, I... I never see one around here..."

She sighs and goes back to finishing her nails.

"I had one, but he... He didn't make it back from the other side a' da pond... From France."

"He went to Heaven like Baba?"

"That's right."

Seeing her suddenly so sad, I get the great urge to console her. Unless it's the chocolate cookies that are making me more audacious. In one breath, I tell her:

"When I'm a grown-up, I'm gonna marry you, Mrs. Chouinard. That way, you'll have a husband again."

She erupts in a beautiful crystalline laughter that inflames me.

"You're sweet, dear Julien. Ya can count on me ta wait for ya. But aren'tcha afraid I'm gonna be too old for ya?"

"No way! You'll always be young and pretty."

She bursts out laughing again. Her eyes sparkle.

"You're so cute. Now get back ta readin' your story before I'm of a mind ta go ta church and marry ya!"

The slight irony does not escape me. But I'm so glad to have found the courage to declare my feelings for her and to comfort the Merry Widow that I pay it little mind.

I dive back into the adventures of my sad and lonely bear. Chased off from the clan by the other bears who have unmasked him, he wanders around like a lost soul, infinitely disheartened at not being accepted. Of course, I don't understand anything written in the captions, but the

ridiculousness of his situation is quite obvious: still speckled with dirt, his head bent low, the bear tries to hide from the other bears' stares by edging his way through the trees.

Then, the images imply a certain agitation. The size of the letters in the dialogue balloons becomes larger and full of little sticks. Distressed, the band of brown bears looks desperate. As if someone were calling out to him, the white bear raises his head and hurriedly makes his way back towards the group.

I turn the page: the mystery is revealed. A cub has fallen into the tumultuous river amidst pieces of floating timber. The mama bear looks desperate. The white bear leaps into the air like Superman. He dives into the raging waters and, braving danger, swims to the terrified cub before dragging him back to the riverbank.

As he's about to make off after having performed his incredible rescue, the other bears prevent him from leaving and make him understand that he's now one of their own, despite his difference. And, carried on their shoulders, the white bear triumphantly returns to the bear village a hero.

What a delightful story! It stirs something in my heart. So, one can be different from others, but still end up being able to prove one's own worth. Of course, I don't grasp all of the implications of this rather simplistic morality tale, but it suits me perfectly. Baba would have liked this story...

Suddenly, sharp and repeated knocks jar the front door.

The Merry Widow takes the time to seal her Cutex bottle and, blowing on her nails, goes to open it.

"WHERE IS HE?"

My mother's strident voice rings across the entire apartment. Standing in the doorway, her face swollen with anger, she cranes her neck, trying to find me.

“Come in, Mrs. Lussier, come in,” says the widow.

“Come in there?! Never! This is no place for an honest woman. A house of sin, this is!”

Finally, she sees me, sitting at the table.

“Come here this minute, you little scamp! I don’t want you hangin’ around with ‘people’ like *her*!”

I get down from the chair, terrified by such an open display of hatred, and roll the vest I had dropped onto the back of another chair in a ball.

“You should be ashamed of kidnapping children like that! Don’t you have enough with all a’ those bums comin’ over here to ‘visit’ you? You lookin’ to add little boys to your house of debauchery as well?”

“Mrs. Lussier, I think you’re losin’ touch with reality, here. Ya have no right ta say things like that to me. I know the day’s been hard on ya, but please, try and control yourself.”

While I gather my clothes and my boots, the exchange continues, getting more and more virulent. Their tone of voice reaches deafening proportions.

“Julien is MY son, an’ I won’t allow *anyone* else to take care of him. Especially not ‘people’ like *you*!”

“Mrs. Lussier, listen. I offered your husband to babysit Julien during the funeral so you’d all have a moment’s peace. I didn’t do anythin’ wrong.”

“What does a tramp like you know about takin’ care of children?”

“Hey, watch your language, there! My private life is no concern a’ yours, and I got nothin’ ta be ashamed of!”

I come up to the two angry women and shout:

“Stop it! I don’t want people fighting anymore!”

It’s too much for me. I cry and scream like a calf deprived of its mother.

“Come home this instant, and stop your whinin’!” shouts my mother, even louder than me.

I push away the hand she offers me and stomp out, shoving her aside, paying no attention to the raging voices still booming behind me.

“I don’t want you even *approaching* him anymore, you hear me?!”

“Poor Julien. Stuck with a mother like you, the kid’s gonna have a hard time findin’ his way in life! You need counseling, you know that, Mrs. Lussier!?”

Running as fast as I can along the large balcony where I used to sit with Baba, I throw myself into Michèle’s arms just as she arrives at the top of the stairs. Down in the street, my father closes the door of the taxi that brought them back home and lifts his gaze towards us. Understanding the situation, he nods his head wearily.

The widow’s door slams shut. I hear my mother’s footsteps coming behind me. I clutch my sister as tightly as I can and, my face buried in her coat that smells of mothballs, I sob:

“I want Baba... I wanna see Baba... Baba, come and take Julien away...”

Chapter eleven

Baba's death has plunged my childhood universe into upheaval.

I'm still allowed to take refuge in my wardrobe, but only when my sister's at school. Our room has become 'her' room.

Although my bed is still in there, I never sleep in it anymore.

Mother makes me sleep in her bed. Father's taken over Baba's room and now sleeps in his bed. I don't understand the reasoning behind this, but I think the situation suits my parents fine, since, by and large, they hardly speak to each other anymore since Baba 'left for Heaven'.

I doubt this vaunted Heaven is very far from our home, because Baba often comes and visits me. I see him in the apartment when I'm bored and I don't know what to do. He comes and finds us in the wardrobe, Tonon and I. Some evenings, he stands in the middle of the living room while the whole family listens to the radio.

The first time he came to visit me, it was on a weekday morning. I got up from the kitchen table and threw myself at him to wrap my arms around his legs.

Mother shouted to me:

"Julien, sit down and eat your oatmeal while it's still hot!"

I replied:

“I wanna play with Baba. He’s over there, next to the stove!”

Both my mother and my father stared at me with eyes rounded in surprise. Michèle got scared. She started screeching:

“Mamaaaa! Tell him to stop tellin’ lies like that! I’m gonna have nightmares all week now!”

I screamed at the top of my lungs:

“I’m *not* lying! He’s right there!”

But he’d already disappeared by the time I’d turned back. I sat back down at the table and started pecking away at my oatmeal again. I’d poured in just enough milk to make the mush stay away from the edges of the bowl, and it floated in the middle of it like a little island that I spun around with my spoon. Michèle left for school without even putting her coat on, so in a hurry was she to leave, throwing me a worried glance as she went.

Since then, I don’t speak of Baba to anyone. It’s better this way: he comes and visits me more often.

Today, in the field out front, the Sun seems to be playing everywhere, trying to nibble on the last remaining banks of dirty snow heaped by the snow blower over the winter; great big swaths of yellow grass are emerging by the hour. Brackish water splashes onto the sidewalks every time a car rolls down the street.

Dressed in their winter clothes, children about my age are climbing the ruins of an old fort built out of gray snow, letting themselves roll back down the other side once they reach the top. The warmth of spring makes their cheeks turn red. Sometimes, they drop their tuques as they shove each other around, and I can see their hair, all wet and

steaming. They try as best they can to put them back on, laughing at the fact that they can't see a thing since their tuques keep sliding back down over their eyes.

Resting my chin on folded hands, half concealed behind the folds of one of the living room's window curtains, I envy them.

The wardrobe doesn't appeal to me as much anymore. My mother found the Merry Widow's comic books and threw them in the garbage without making a scene. As if to expunge her action, she dug up, from a box she found in the shed out back, an old illustrated album of *The Holy Story* that smells of mold.

"Here, look at these images. They're better for you."

I pretended to flip through it. I didn't like it. It was in black and white and even more gruesome than Lizzie Borden's antics. It was full of bearded men with plates floating behind their heads being shot full of arrows or getting their hands chopped off. Or of long-haired women about to get their breasts burned off by bad men with huge, bulging eyes carrying swords heated in coal.

I didn't even try to amuse myself at being scared by imagining stories based on those images. It was more interesting to dream that I was flying in the arms of Superman or 'Ouander Ouomenn'.

Mother's resigned herself to leaving me on my own when she goes out to buy some groceries, but she never lingers long. She's afraid that I'll start playing with matches, or that I'll get it in my head to try some sort of shenanigan. She's hidden the matches in a metal box on the highest shelf of the cupboard, and turns the taps so tightly that even she has difficulty turning them back on again afterwards. For a woman who washes her hands all day long, this is hardly practical.

This morning, I am alone, or pretty much, since she spends as much time on the balcony out back than she does hanging clothes out to dry and washing them in the old washer boiler. She washes clothes every day, now.

Baba seizes the opportunity to come and visit me. I really love his presence, but I don't understand why he never speaks. He smiles a lot, and listens. Actually, it's like I can hear him talking to me in my head. He's nice. He approves everything I say.

For example, when I ask him: "*You'd* let me go outside and play with the other kids, wouldn't you Baba?", I know he answers 'yes'. So I have all kinds of long conversations with him, relating the latest news about everyone and telling him confidences that I know he loves to hear.

This morning, I explain that Tonon won't be able to talk anymore since the spring that made his jaw open got broken. I tell him all about the stories of the guys with plates floating behind their heads that bore me so, and how I'd much rather be getting more comics from the Merry Widow; that I broke one of the wheels of the little khaki colored toy car I used to roll around the balcony when we sat together; that my sister Michèle no longer has time to read me any of *Mouchette's* adventures anymore because she and her friend Ghislaine Couture spend most of their time locked together in her bedroom, giggling and whispering; that Mother and Father rarely speak to each other anymore; that these days, Father usually comes home after supper, smelling strongly of grape-flavored *Kik* cola...

I look at Baba. He smiles. If only he'd answer me...



“You’re drinking this family’s money away, you damn drunk!”

“I’m the one earning it!”

“Aren’t you ashamed? If this goes on for much longer, I won’t be able to make ends meet anymore!”

“Then ask the priest for charity! If he’s okay with interfering in our personal lives, maybe he can help us make a living too!”

Once again, my parents’ quarrel awakens me, even if they are trying to maintain their shouting to a minimum. My parent’s bed being located in what should have been the dining room, I’m separated from the living room only by a hung drapery, fashioned by my mother from old curtains of fake brocade donated by the aunts.

“Who’re you chasin’ yer nights way with, hunh? That Chouinard woman, I suppose?”

“With no one, I’ll let ya know. I work late, that’s all.”

“Funny how we don’t often get to see the color of that money.”

“No one’s ever lacked for anything in this house.”

“Before, maybe. But now, I can’t make ends meet. Once we’ve paid the rent and the electricity bill, I hardly have anythin’ left over for food. You’re not a kid anymore, Pierre Lussier. You can’t keep drinkin’ your money away. You have to think about your family.”

A moment of silence.

Visibly scared by the nocturnal feuding, I hear my sister’s tearful voice cry out, muffled by the closed door of her bedroom:

“Stop fighting! I’m sick and tired of hearing you guys fighting all the time!”

I hear her sobbing. In the darkness of night, the effect is rather unsettling. I start trembling.

My mother lets out a long sigh of resignation. In a less aggressive tone, I hear her say:

“See? Now you’re even scaring Michèle...”

“I’ll go console her...”

Hesitant steps echo on the living room floor.

“Don’t you dare touch her, you damn drunk!”

“She’s my daughter...”

“And that’s exactly why I don’t want you gettin’ anywhere near her anymore!”

“What are you talkin’ about? Are you accusing me of somethin’?”

“You think I don’t see Sin in your eyes every time you look at her? That I don’t see how you’re always looking for an excuse to pet her somewhere? To touch her anywhere you want? She’s a child, Pierre Lussier. Your daughter’s not a *tramp*. If I ever, ever see you roaming around her with that sick look in your eyes *ever* again, you’ll have to answer to me. Now go to bed. And try not to puke in your sleep, will ya?!”

“My bed? MY bed? It should be OUR bed, if you weren’t such a prissy little prude...”

“I already said I don’t wanna talk about *that* anymore. Go on, go wallow in your room...”

The conversation ends. I hear my father’s heavy footsteps in the kitchen next to the bedroom, then the sound of a body sinking into bed in the room next door as it makes little groaning sounds.

My mother goes to the bathroom to undress; she never does it in front of me. The sound of the toilet flushing fills the apartment, becalmed at last. When she finally comes into the bedroom through the door that gives out onto the kitchen, she’s donned a long flannel nightgown under Baba’s bathrobe; she decided to keep it

on the pretext that it would be ‘a waste to throw away such a nice piece of clothing that’s almost never been worn.’

Through half-closed eyelids, I watch her come into the room. The flame of the little blue prayer candle she lit in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary lets me briefly see her anguished face when she bends over to blow it out. She turns away to remove her bathrobe, no doubt noticing my eyes gleaming in the dark.

She reprimands me, whispering:

“How come you’re not sleepin’ yet, you little pest?”

Without waiting for my reply, she sits on the other side of the bed, lifts the covers, and lies down with her back to me.

She lets out long sighs, trying to catch her breath. Then, whispering to me in a somewhat more subdued tone, she says:

“Julien, honey, could you make your fingers walk along mama’s back for a while?”

So I stretch out my arm and, with the tip of my fingers, I start outlining some cats, clouds and trees against the fabric of her nightgown, along the length of her shoulders and around her shoulder blades. When I’ve finished a sketch, I erase it, telling her:

“That’s the wall of the house on the other side of the street.”

And I start drawing on her shoulders again, trees, clouds, or cats...

After a few minutes, I stop. Her shoulders shudder as she tries to hold back quiet little sobs. Without turning over, she whispers to me in a faltering voice:

“That’ll do, honey... You can go to sleep, now...”

From the other bedroom, we can already make out my father’s loud snoring.



*'Tis the month of our Moo-ther,
Blessed and beautiful days
When our lips and our spi-rits,
Glow with love and praise.*

"You sure you've got it?"

"Mamaaaaa! You've made me rehearse this darned carol three hundred times already! I'm sick of it. You know I'll remember it."

"I don't want you makin' an ass outta yourself when singing your solo in front of everyone else and the priest. 'The Month of Mary' is an important event. Did you see the reposit'ry? It's so nice, with all the beautiful flowers and the little prayer candles... Where you goin'?"

"Well, Ghislaine Couture's waitin' for me so we can take a walk..."

"I don't want you goin' too far from the house before supertime. If she wants to see you, all she has to do is come over here and talk to you in the backyard."

"But there's nothin' to *do* in the backyard!"

"There's the swings. You can go and swing yerselves... And for once, take Julien with you, will ya? It's high time he started getting some fresh air."

I remain speechless. My heart leaps in my chest. What's happening to my mother? Why would she, without warning, suddenly consent to me going outside of the apartment after having kept me prisoner here all these years?

Michèle does not seem to share my joy. But she knows it's useless to argue. If my sister wants to get away from the kitchen, where Mother's already started banging her

pots and pans to prepare the evening meal, and, most of all, if she wants to avoid her constant reprimands that can be dispensed at any moment, she knows she must obey.

Her long and loud sigh of resignation speaks volumes about the level of enthusiasm she shares at the idea of being encumbered with me. But her lack of eagerness doesn't even make a dent in my spirit. And when, finally resigned to the idea, she says to me: "Come along, you little pest...", I'm already at the back door where, from a worn cardboard box that serves as my toy box in the apartment, I grab a small metal bucket decorated with a colorful clown, a tiny little metal shovel painted red (both brand new, of course), and my little khaki car with the broken wheel.

At the bottom of the staircase waits Ghislaine Couture who, upon seeing me follow Michèle down the steps, adopts a rather dour attitude. And while my sister tries to explain the situation to her, I fly off into the backyard behind our apartment bloc, where the landlord has generously spread numerous layers of clinker to save on the cost of gravel.

I don't know how to have fun in the outside world. I've observed other children through the bedroom window on numerous occasions. They would argue, burst out laughing, then tighten their lips together to mimic the noise of an engine rumbling as they rolled little toy cars around... But I am not gifted with the instinct of mimicry. Standing in the middle of the empty yard, I feel somewhat disconcerted.

I start to kneel, but straighten right back up: as it turns out, clinker is complete torture on bare knees.

"Go play in the sand pit, you nitwit!" shouts Michèle from afar.

At the back of the yard, next to a long flat hangar made of rusted, corrugated iron that serves as closed storage space reserved only for tenants, a heap of sand, abandoned there when the building was being completed, now serves as a children's playground. Remnants of little roads for toy cars and ruined parapets erected using upturned buckets are still discernable in the damp sand.

I make my way there hesitatingly. I really have no idea how to comport myself. I simply don't know how to play. It's never been a problem before: Baba, my comic books and Tonon, along with the universe held within my wardrobe, had always sufficed before. I would just like it if someone showed me how it's supposed to be done. I peruse the backyard. Michèle and her friend seem too absorbed by their confidences to preoccupy themselves with me.

"Michèle! Michèle! Come show me how!"

"Deal with it, you pest. I don't know, build some sand castles. Roll your car around."

Deal with it! I'd sure like to, but I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to be doing. My little bucket in my left hand, my tiny shovel and my toy car in the other, I try and scoop some of the damp sand. The toy car gets in my way. I put it on the ground. The first shovelful is already easier to scoop up. Instinctively, I squat. That's more like it; it seems much easier now. What do you know, playing's not as hard as it looks...

I begin digging a hole. I'm already devising a tunnel through which I'll be able to roll my little khaki car with the broken wheel. No, better yet: I'll dig a great trench and use a few sticks of wood to build a bridge. I'll go into the kitchen and fill my bucket with water, then come back out and create a great river in the trench. Then, I'll build

mountains in the sand and make my little car climb them all the way up to the top.

Michèle and Ghislaine finally decide to go and sit on the nearby swing set. Fearlessly swinging themselves, they start singing in unison:

Ah! If I were, a beautiful gray lark-e
Ah! If I were, a beautiful gray lark-e
I would go fly, on the mast of a ship
Go, go, my tiny little Jeaa-a-nette
Go, go, good weather will retur-ur-ur-ur-urn!

I get on my knees. The cool sand no longer prickles my skin. In this mild late afternoon of May, I let myself drift into a sense of well-being, basking under the last rays of the Sun as it begins to disappear behind the neighboring houses.

The excitement of being outside, left to my own devices and master of a sand empire, reaches its apogee. I work tirelessly at building a hilly landscape, fascinated by how, under ambient air, the peaks of my dirt mountains are already starting to whiten as soon as the dampness of the sand evaporates.

I grumble orders, imitate the backfiring of truck engines, hold an open dialogue in which I both consult with myself and contest my findings. I grow emboldened: I destroy my mountains, fill in my trenches, rip my stick bridges apart. Here and there, I delineate rows of trees with handfuls of ripped-out dandelions. My little car rolls around along trails I perceive as giant boulevards... A town comes into being.

In my excitement, I didn't notice Ghislaine Couture leaving. When I turn around to look at Michèle, she's

stopped swinging herself and stares at me, laughing silently.

“Why you laughin’?”

“You guys are so weird, with all of your engine noises...”

“Am I doing it wrong?”

“No, that’s not it. I mean... it just seems to come more naturally to you guys...”

She said ‘you guys’. As if I’ve just become a member of some sort of secret society that already welcomes me as an equal. For the first time in my life, I discover the warmth of pride. Under the watchful eye of my sister that I love so much, I go back to my project with renewed fervor...

The squealing of the swing chains stops.

“Well I’ll be damned. Julien actually playing outside!”

My father’s standing in the middle of the backyard, amused, his face made ruddy by the heat. He holds his jacket over one arm. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up above his elbows. His eyes sparkle.

Slowly, he walks towards us, still smiling.

Michèle freezes up, lowers her head, and starts sketching circles in the dirt with the tip of her shoe.

Father goes to her.

“What about you, my little gazelle? How are you?”

“Fine.”

“School’s almost over, eh?”

“Still a month to go.”

“You ready for the ceremony at church?”

“Have to.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. Pretty soon, you won’t have to do that kinda stuff anymore...”

I more or less follow the conversation. Silence falls.

Father looks at the time on his watch, then glances at the windows of our apartment. Seemingly reassured, he says to my sister, softly:

“I need your help to find a box in the shed. Won’t take long.”

“Ah, poppa, I hate that shed. It stinks.”

“I know. It’s just that I’m a little tipsy right now. I took a couple a’ beers with my neighbor, the barber, and I don’t wanna make all a’ the boxes fall on top of me. Oh, come on. It won’t take a minute. It’s somethin’ really important.”

Michèle sighs loudly. She gets up, grumbling, and follows him to the reviled shed. Father unlocks the padlock with a key strung up with a few others at the end of a little bathtub plug chain. Michèle gives me an odd look of diffidence before preceding my father inside the shed. The door remains barely open.

I hear them mumbling, moving some objects around. I lose interest.

I go back to the town I’ve built for myself. To help my little car roll along the ground better, I fashion streets by patting the sand down with my little shovel. I strengthen the hillside overlooking my roads. Exalted at being able to enjoy this first time out on my own far from any maternal oversight, using my bucket, I feverishly start building towers. I trace squares in the sand. In my mind, I imagine these buildings to look like those I saw during my famous escapade with my father. Here, I create a garage for my car. There, a fire station. Next to it, a great big grocery store so Mother can do her errands. For a moment, I think about drawing a church as well, but the memory of ‘the priest man’ drinking wine on the fly in the sacristy suddenly curbs my enthusiasm.

Sometimes squatting, sometimes on all fours, sometimes lying down in the damp sand, but without ever stopping to make my little khaki toy car's imaginary engine purr, I make my town come alive. The only inhabitants so far seem to be the occasional ant and a long legged spider that instantly flee the minute I roll my vehicle their way. I head to the rear of the backyard, rip out a few shoots of weed, and run back to line the sides of my 'streets' with drooping 'trees'.

But my pleasure is starting to wane. Imagining houses, that's one thing, even tall buildings. But to be able to actually see them would be much better. My father spoke of boxes he needed to move around in the shed. Wouldn't he have a few to spare to help me build my 'town'?

I'm already running towards the shed. Near the half-open door, I hear murmurs, bits of broken up sentences.

"I said no," complains Michèle. "I don't want to anymore."

"Come on, help your poppa out a little. Make your poppa happy, hmm?"

"I know it's wrong, dad. I don't wanna do those things anymore," cries Michèle tearfully.

"I'm your father, sweetheart. D'ya think I'd be asking you to do things that are wrong? Hmm?"

"I don't know... I guess not..."

"Come on," begs my father. "And afterwards, I'll even give you fifty cents, whadda ya say?"

Michèle's long sigh punctuates this last sentence.

"I don't *want* your fifty cents..."

"Then do it to make your poppa happy then, 'kay...?"

A long silence follows. Then, brief, halting sighs.

This whispered conversation gives me a strange impression. As if I'd stumbled upon a secret without fully understanding what it's all about. Why do daddy and

Michèle need to talk to each other like that simply to moves boxes around? I need to know.

I open the door suddenly.

The light of day filtering inside the shed reveals a surprising spectacle. Michèle and my father are standing up, facing each other. In her hand, she holds his ‘wee-wee’; it looks so big and long that at first, I mistake it for a branch of some sort.

I cry out:

“What are you guys playin’?”

They stare at me, aghast. My father takes his hands off of Michèle’s shoulders and quickly puts his ‘wee-wee’ back in his pants.

My sister bursts out in long screaming sobs and flees.

My father’s ruddy face looks devastated.

I have time to say:

“I need boxes for my town.”

He roughly pushes me aside and comes out of the shed. Remembering the jacket he left on the floor of the dark cubbyhole, he immediately comes back and picks it up before exiting the shed.

Disoriented, he looks at me, muttering:

“Of course...”

Then, he slowly walks away towards the staircase where my sister is racing up as she sobs. Immediately, I hear the door to our apartment open and slam back shut. My mother’s voice interrogates him:

“What the heck is goin’ on? Did Michèle hurt herself?”

The aroma of shepherd’s pie floating in the air reminds me that it’s going to be supertime soon.

I gather my bucket, my tiny shovel, and my little khaki car. Slowly, so as to not lose a single moment of this

wonderful first day of utter freedom, I start making my way towards the staircase, accompanied by the vociferations of my mother that are starting to attract the neighbors out onto the balcony...

Chapter twelve

The bus arrived in Sherbrooke only an hour ago, and already I'm regretting having succumbed to aunt Imelda's supplications.

Upon seeing each other again, Michèle and I didn't even hug. Just a weak handshake, an embarrassed smile.

Wearing a stylish suit that makes her look every bit like the kind of modern woman who usually intimidates me, she coolly took me to the noisy lunch counter at the local Woolworth store. Since then, all while trying to polish off a tomato sandwich, she hasn't stopped saluting strangers that keep hailing her on the fly.

Elvis Presley is belting out *Lawdy Miss Clawdy* on the jukebox.

Hesitantly, I sip a lukewarm 'soupe du jour' served straight from the can.

I try to revive the conversation my sister and I can't seem to be able to have.

"Aunt Imelda was telling me how your job as a television announcer is going rather well?"

"Verrry well! I've made my mark here. I can be called upon to go to Montreal at *any* moment. They also want to give me a trial run as a possible interviewer for a public affairs show."

A new silence falls, imposed by yet another attempt at trying to eat a bite without getting interrupted. We both

feel the weight of a meeting that destiny has been imposing on us for a long time.

“You’ve never seen me on the air before?”

“No. It’s too far from where I live.”

“Don’t you get cable?”

“No... To be honest, I don’t even own a television set...”

Her face, carefully made-up but without excess, shows all the signs of astonishment. She bursts out laughing.

“You’re still living your life as a recluse, cut off from the rest of the world, eh, Julien? Just like you did in your wardrobe when you were a kid, with your comic books and your fox! Remember him? What was its name again? Pompom? Pontoon? No, wait! It was Poupon! Right? Am I right?”

Her irony wounds me. She has no right to ridicule those childhood memories. She has no right to debase my identity.

The gracious waitress bringing a hot chicken sandwich to the guy sitting on the stool next to us interrupts me just as I was about to put my sister back in her place.

“That your bro’, Miss Labrecque?”

“Yes. But I think he’s a little too young for you, unfortunately.”

The complicit laughter of the woman wearing too much make-up rings in my ears.

“The younger they are, the more fun it is to teach them a thing or two!”

The waitress is already elsewhere. My sister’s already forgotten about my mummified fox. I seize on the moment to launch a counter-attack.

“You’re using Mother’s last name?”

“My name is Michèle Labrecque now. A private bill is expensive, but it’s all perfectly legit. I didn’t want to use a

name that'd keep reminding me of bad memories my whole life. And in fact, it's actually *because* of my name that 'they' contacted me. Because 'they'd' seen me on television during a broadcast."

I push away my soup, which has become bland as it cools. My sister calmly chews a last piece of her sandwich without a care for the tomato pip that's gotten stuck in the corner of her mouth. The Mamas and the Papas are now singing full blast on the jukebox:

*All the leaves are brown
And the sky is grey...*

"Did 'they' tell you what this was all about?"

Michèle chows down the last bite of her sandwich, takes a swig of Orange Crush, and gets up, saying:

"They only told me that it was something important that concerned me. Let's hurry. I still have a lot of work to do this afternoon."

She throws a few coins on the counter as tip, grabs both bills, and plows through the crowd of clients towards the cash register.



Her navy blue Falcon rolls briskly towards King East hill under the uniformly gray sky of late September. I dare not try and talk to her. I watch the building facades as they fly by, forever alien to me. At one point, I think I recognize the storefront of the barber shop where my childhood was altered forever.

"Everything's changed..."

She shoots me a quick glance.

“Not really. It’s because you grew up...”

Every attempt at an exchange between the both of us stops short. How can a brother and a sister seemingly feel no compulsion to talk to each other after having spent so many years apart?

When we hit a red light, I try a different tact:

“How’d you find me?”

“I always knew aunt Imelda had taken care of you, after... you know...”

“Why didn’t you ever make an effort to try and contact me?”

“Julien, listen. Time flew by so fast, I... After Sudbury, I attended a boarding school in Montreal. I took some broadcasting courses, then had to work in small radio stations all over the place in a bunch of remote little towns, before finally coming back to Sherbrooke...”

“I’m not criticizing you. I’m just surprised that neither of us tried to stay in touch. I mean, here we are, both speaking ‘prahperly’, like aunt Maxi used to say, trying to make conversation, and yet, we can’t seem to find anything to say to each other. I just find it odd that...”

Michèle’s voice cuts in dryly:

“The day of the last... assault, in the shed... it’s like I’d lost all love for our family. I had only one desire: to flee as far as possible. I saw the place aunt Imelda found for me in the convent of her community in Sudbury as my last hope. A lifeline, if you will.”

“While I wished so many times that you’d just come back and get me, protect me, take back your role as my big sister. I so needed to tell you about my fear of the other kids at the orphanage...”

The car comes to a halt at an intersection. She glances at me sideways, trying to pay attention to the red light at the same time.

“All right, well, I didn’t want to play at being anybody’s mommy, okay? Anyways, it’s not like we used to talk all that much when we were kids...”

“That’s not the way I remember it. You used to tell me stories, do you remember that? You used to play with me...”

“Did I? I’d forgotten all about that...”

“I’m starting to feel like *you’re* the one whose been living in an enclosed universe all this time, sheltered from your memories...”

“Julien... Each time I’d think of you, I’d picture you opening that damned door... I’ve never been able to live with the idea of trying to get back in touch with you. I was told to consult a specialist, to get some help. But why should I? I simply don’t feel like getting entangled in family affairs anymore. Memories tend to clutter life. And you, you were... you were a part of those memories that I don’t wish to confront anymore. That’s all.”

The car takes off again. A few more street corners and we’ll be back on the site of our childhood. I am both moved and irritated all at once, as if I hadn’t had proper time to prepare myself for a big event. I ask her point-blank:

“So why make me come here this time in particular?”

“First, because I couldn’t resist the temptation of finding out what this was all about. The woman I spoke to mentioned something about a diary... Well, something like that; she wasn’t sure how to describe it. You see, I still retain a sliver of interest for family memories after all. Also, I called you here because I didn’t want to have to confront this... how can I say... this ‘exhumation of the past’ on my own.”

“How did you know where to find aunt Imelda?”

“Oh, Julien! You never stop asking questions, like a little five-year-old boy! I asked a religion columnist who works at the *Soleil* newspaper, a man I’d met at a journalism conference in Montreal, to help me find her. He made a few calls to some convents and tracked down sister Saint Mary of the Transfiguration of the Christ, our dear aunt Imelda. Satisfied now?”

I let a few seconds go by. There’s another question I’ve been dying to ask. I must ask it.

“Have you ever gone and visited... *her*?”

“Mother? At Saint Michel-Archange? Me, in a psychiatric hospital? Never. You?”

“No, me neither. I was too scared. Aunt Imelda told me she’d become dangerous. I refused to attend the funeral service.”

We talk about our mother the same way Mother used to talk about her father, with the same detachment, the same aggravation, as if she had been nothing but a stranger to us. Is it possible that there remains nothing of the family unit we once formed?

The car rolls down a narrow street and immediately comes to a halt.

“This is the place,” announces Michèle in a suddenly raucous voice that takes me aback.

Before the opportunity passes by, I hurriedly tell her:

“I got some news from him once, you know. A Christmas card, written in English and addressed to aunt Imelda. It had been posted from Manitoba. He was asking for your address...”

Finishing her backward maneuver to park the car, Michèle mutters:

“Then I’m glad I *didn’t* keep in touch with you. That way, you weren’t able to give it to him...”

We close the doors. Over the roof of the car, I ask her:
“You ever forgave him?”

She throws me a dark look as she locks her door.

“Never! Why should I?”

I don’t know what to answer to that. Have I myself ever considered forgiving my parents for having been what they were?

Michèle goes around the car and comes to stand on my right. Together, we lift our heads to look up at the long balcony, still holding up after all these years. The old apartment, the first one beyond the bend of the exterior staircase, still bears the same civic address, seven, on the same faded navy blue and white enamel plaque.

Michèle lets out a long sigh.

“All right, let’s do this...”

We slowly make our way up the staircase that once was the stage for my first hesitant steps into rebellion.

The heavy humidity of the weather makes me sweat a little. I shouldn’t have worn a jacket and tie. But do young classical college professors ever go out without wearing a tie?

Michèle knocks on the door with purpose, without taking the time to ask me if I’m ready for what’s to come. I suddenly glance around, looking for the olive pit I’d imbedded between two boards of the balcony, just before our hasty departure from this apartment, in June of 1946. Did I really believe for even a second that it would still be there? How ridiculous am I...

The rapidity with which the door is answered shows that we were expected.

A cheerful young woman in her late twenties appears in the doorway, holding a baby in her arms.

“Come in, Miss Labrecque, come in.”

“Hello. Are you Mrs. Côté? I hope we’re not disturbing you too much,” says my sister in a false tone of sympathy that sounds nothing like the one she’s used with me since my arrival.

“Not a bit. Come and sit down.”

“My brother,” Michèle briskly informs the woman, who seems delighted by our presence.

“Hi. Give us a bit of room, will you honey?”

Behind her, a young boy of three or four is tightly gripping his mother’s dress, trying to hide from us. I smile at him. He looks at me with a blank face, not bothering to return my smile.

“My husband’s at work,” explains the woman, as if to excuse herself for somehow gravely lacking in some unknown form of etiquette. “Care for a drink?”

“No thank you,” answers Michèle for the both of us. “We’ve just had lunch, and I’m in a bit of a hurry. I have to prepare my six o’clock broadcast.”

“Of course, I understand. I must say, I think you’re doing such a wonderful job. I never miss the news anymore because of you. And you look so pretty on the ‘teevee’. But, if I may, I find you even prettier in person!”

“That’s very kind of you,” replies my sister with a smile that betrays her pleasure at being recognized. “Have you been living here long?”

“Since my wedding. Five years ago.”

‘Barely five years and already two children,’ cannot I help myself from thinking. ‘How can anyone look so happy with the life they lead when their future prospects look so glum?’

I surreptitiously look around, looking for remnants of my past. But, just as the olive pit has vanished, nothing really evokes any hint of our passing anymore. The room

that was my parents' bedroom has been turned back into a dining room. The plywood walls of the living room have been turned into plasterboard and painted pale blue. The wood floors have all been sanded and re-varnished, relieved of those horrendous linoleum strips my mother used to be so fond of. Down the corridor, I can see the kitchen, where green tiles shine under the light coming in through the windows.

"Julien?"

I look back at my sister, surprised to hear her call out to me.

"You daydreaming or something? Mrs. Côté was just explaining that she found some sort of notebook."

"Behind the bathtub with legs, when we took it out to install a more modern one. Ernest isn't really a fan of old-fashioned things. He asked the landlord to put in a new one, a brand new, *gorgeous* recessed bathtub. Also, it's quite practical, what with washin' the kids and all."

"What kind of notebook?" do I ask, trying to appear interested.

"A school notebook. Double-ruled, manuscript style, like back in the day, with glossy paper. I'll go and get it for you."

She quickly slips away, still clutching her baby in her arms. The other child seems to have vanished without us even noticing.

Michèle casts an impatient look down at her watch. I blame myself for coming here. What is all this about a double-ruled notebook? Probably one of Michèle's that fell behind the bathtub in the hours preceding our hasty departure. It's certainly not one of mine; I hadn't even started going to school back then. What a waste of a day! I came here to reunite with my sister, hoping to share a

sacred moment that would enable us to somehow bond, to get back into each other's lives, to understand the rationalization behind this long silence between us, and I end up in this apartment that smells of cabbage soup and shepherd's pie, without an ounce of interest for anything that's going on.

“Here ya go!”

To Michèle, Mrs. Côté hands over a notebook that, over the years, has taken on the shape of a rolled papyrus scroll. On its cover, beneath a color picture of a policeman from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police standing in full regalia in front of a typical backdrop of the Rockies, I discern words written by an uncertain, unpracticed hand:

Simone Labrecque

1940 - 19...

PURSONAL

“Old lady Blanchette, who's with me in the Ladies of Sainte-Anne, told me that this was probably your mother's. She still remembers you two, you know.”

Michèle quickly flips through a few pages, reading passages at random. For the first time since my arrival, her face seems to convey a certain emotion. Then, she hands over the notebook with the dusty, moss-covered spine.

I carefully flip through a few pages, which, all in all, contain relatively few passages of my mother's rather bad penmanship. With terrible spelling, she's lined out, over the years, a few of her personal reflections, a brief and heavy-handed history of the episodes that made-up our everyday communal life. I stop to read bits and pieces here and there:

Julien cut too teeths the same day that the jermans bombed London hevilee... Poor litle man. He cryd so much. Becos of that, I was able to rock him at nite, and I didnt have to sleep in the bed. Pierre didnt like that. Too bad.

Michèle looks so pretty in her blue dress. Pierre also thinks she looks ‘sharp’.

If only my head akes would stop hurting.

I would have like to go to scool longer. I think it wood do me some good to reed some scolarly books. But, I realy love Jean Narrache’s poams. Theyr like consolations.

Winter is finaly over. Some times, in the morning, it smells like spring. On the redio, they said that the War is goin to be over soon. I cant wait. Some times, I dream that peeple who died during the war come and visit me durin the nite. I get scarred. Thank God I have my litle Julien. That sweet litle angel. How I love him. Life is borin, but the love of a child makes us fourget about evrythin else.

Like a complaint heard in the night, my mother’s naïve reflections pierce through me like a drill. I close the yellowed notebook, careful not to unroll it too much so the pages won’t fall apart, so old have they become.

In a blur, I notice Michèle hand over a twenty dollar bill that Mrs. Côté at first politely refuses, before finally tucking it away in her apron pocket

Following my sister’s lead, I stammer a few vague thank-you’s in a voice I barely recognize. Mrs. Côté doesn’t let me finish:

“Oh, it was nothin’, really. My pleasure. It was an honor for me to receive such a television celebrity in our home. It’s a rather exciting change of pace for a stay-at-home mom with two young children.”

Suddenly, she seems to realize that her eldest son is no longer standing behind her.

“Jean-François? Where you hidin’, you li’l rascal?”

Then, turning back to us, she says with a laugh:

“He must have gone and hidden himself in the wardrobe again. I swear, I don’t know *what* that kid finds so amusing about wardrobes, but he spends most of his days in there...”

I start violently. The wardrobe... The word triggers a tide of emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. Pushing my stunned sister aside, I head straight for the favorite hiding spot of my childhood.

Through the half-open doorway, I notice two beady eyes in the middle of a small white face, buried in the fluffy fur of a shapeless plush toy, staring at me intensely.

This is too much. I rush outside and run down the stairs as fast as I can. Standing next to my sister’s car, I start hyperventilating as if my survival depended on it.

My sister suddenly appears, her face worried. I cut her off the moment she’s about to speak, stammering:

“T-Take... take me back...”

Epilog

After the obligatory twenty minute layover at a seedy little restaurant that stinks of old cooking grease, the bus taking me back to Quebec City finally departs Victoriaville.

Through the rain and mud splattered windows, fleeting lights scattered in the distance hint at the presence of farms in the fields. Night has fallen. A fringe of trees is barely distinguishable on the horizon.

Michèle and I never managed to have our little moment of reconciliation. She's not the kind of person who gets very emotional anymore. I can still hear her telling me, while we were waiting at the bus terminal:

"Julien, listen... I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think it'd be better if we didn't see each other for a while. My lifestyle these days doesn't leave much room for family squabbles, nor for any kind of old-timers' league where folk get to share memories with each other..."

That's when I understood why she'd never deemed it necessary to do everything in her power to get in touch with me over the years: she had simply moved on with her life. I'd always assumed she had remained my protective big sister, while all the time, she was simply trying to live her life without any attachments, intent on following through with her destiny. Freely.

As we parted company at the bus door, she only had these few words for me:

“Keep Mother’s notebook. You need it more than I do. For me, the past was over and done with the moment our family split apart. But you, you’ve still got some maturing to do, Julien... Beyond that, who knows. Maybe we’ll see each other again, some day...

I turn on the little reading lamp above my head. I delicately take out the notebook from the big envelope bearing the effigy of the television station Michèle put it in, and re-read the reflection my mother put down on paper after Baba’s death, the last thought of hers that makes any sense, all of the ensuing ones showing progressive signs of an aberration.

Its funny, daddy’s dead now, and I’m not sure if I’m feelin sad or not. I think I didnt love him enuf. I think life is reely worped if we dont lurn how to love other peeple. For me, its too late now. I have nothin but regrets. Specially about havin let others tell me what to do with my life. Befour its too late for my children, Im gonna try and tell them that they should beleeeve in demselves, and to go for it, watever they wanna do. If only I new how to talk to them. I’d tell them to never look back. Memorees are one thing, but it should never prevent you from livin your life...

After Michèle, it now seems it’s Mother’s turn to tell me that we should never remain chained to the past, to our memories, to the invisible bonds that hold us prisoners...

I carefully slip the notebook back inside the big envelope. It’ll be an hour before we arrive in Quebec City. I recline the backrest and let myself sink into the uncomfortable narrow seat, trying to ignore the presence of the passenger next to me who smells of old sweat.

I close my eyes. I first picture my sister's face, determined, bearing no ill-will towards me, but cold. Then, my apartment, my protective lair. This time, however, I remember it only as a deserted cell.

Have I lost the desire, the need to seek shelter there, to flee the presence of others, to wait for a 'Merry Widow' to come by and, by chance, offer me new images of escapism?

I vaguely feel that I no longer have the same assurance at having made the right decision in building myself an imaginary fortress.

What if life were more than about retreating into solitude? More than dealing with the angst of living?

Does that angst only take on its true meaning if it spurs us to flee away from it, straight into the bright light?



The arrival at the bus terminal takes me by surprise. I've slept like a bloc of lead and hold no memory of the trip.

The passenger next to me hands over the envelope containing the notebook.

"Here; it fell on the floor while you were sleeping."

His face weary, he gives me a weak smile.

"Thanks. Thank you very much," do I reply, surprised at the fact that I'm actually talking to a stranger.

"It kinda looked important; you were clutching it really tight when you fell asleep."

Awkwardly, I venture forth:

"It is, it's very important... It's... my mother's legacy."

"Ah... Well, you're right, that is important. I mean, we only get one mother, right?"

He turns away and heads back up the aisle between the seats without even saluting me.

I am the last one to disembark, leaving the bus amidst suffocating diesel emanations.

For the first time in my life, the hustle and bustle of a public place does not trigger any panic attack.

I step out into the street; it's stopped raining. With a shake of my head, I indicate 'no' to the taxi driver slowing down near the curb.

I slowly make my way towards the Côte d'Abraham.

I shall never be in a hurry to hide myself again...

THE END

HUMOUR

Maurice Nadeau *Dictionnaire humoristique d'un libre penseur*
 Dictionnaire humoristique d'un libre penseur, 2^e éd.
 Dictionnaire humoristique d'un libre penseur, tome 2

MÉMOIRES

Henri Beaudout *Les tribulations de Bob Brumas*

NOVELLA

Dominique Girard *Bon anniversaire, Murielle !*

POÉSIE

Armande Millaire *Si l'on s'arrêtait*
 Au fil des jours
 Au gré du vent
 S'écoule le temps... En trois temps

RÉCIT

Lina Savignac *Gens du voyage, une expérience de caravanning*

ROMAN

Claude Daigneault *Le culte des déesses, tome 1*
 Le courage du mouton, tome 2
 Petite vengeance deviendra grande
 Une fille, ça ne pleure pas
 Les Frincekanoks
 The child who dreamt of becoming a tree

Marc Fleury *Le Spleen du carré St-Louis*
 Shaktis

Sylvain Goulet *L'ermite millionnaire*
 Bleu-vert d'été

Monique Michaud *Le dernier regard*
 Voisines de cœur

ROMAN

- Lina Savignac *Éva, Eugénie et Marguerite, Tome 1*
Lili, Tome 2
Charles, Tome 3
La maison sur la grève
L'Irlandais, Elwin, Tome 1
L'Irlandais, Martin, Tome 2
L'Irlandais, Les descendants, Tome 3

TÉMOIGNAGE

- Sylvain Goulet *Susciter une réflexion qui t'appartienne, 2^e éd.*
- Francyne Nadeau *Le cancer a donné un sens à ma vie*
- Lise Ste-Marie *Permission d'écrire la vie*

SUPENSE

- Sylvain Goulet *Disparition suspicieuse*
- Yvan Savignac *Le projet Panatium*
La piste maudite
- Alain Trudeau *Protocole*

Collection jeunesse

La petite caboché

Album + de 5 ans

- Claude Daigneault *Une amitié explosive* *An explosive friendship*
Le grand projet *The big project*
Pyro fugue *Pyro runs away*

Album + 6 ans

- Lina Savignac *Les petits souliers roses et La chatte de Jeanne*
Fridolin. l'homme de paille et Rutina l'ânesse



Photo : Jean-Pierre Rivest

Over the years, Claude Daigneault has worked as copywriter, journalist, movie critic, script editor for both television and cinema, and is now a blogger. 'The Child who Dreamt of Becoming a Tree' is the second of five novels he has published so far.



'The novelist manages to skillfully alternate his narrative between the reflections of an adult and the musings of a child, resulting in a very entertaining back-and-forth. 'The Child Who Dreamt of Becoming a Tree' offers a wonderful glimpse inside the imagination of a sensitive little boy whom we, as readers, quickly grow attached to. Hats off to the author!' (Jean-Denis Côté, 'Québec français'.)

In the weeks following the end of World War II, we follow the adventures of a five-year-old boy as he lives secluded in his home, shut off from the rest of the world by his mother, who's developed an irrepressible fear of him getting hurt should she ever let him go outside and play with other children.

Helped along by his wheelchair-bound grandfather, a man who's lost the use of his voice after a stroke and who never stops encouraging him to dream, the cloistered Julien is nonetheless determined to discover all of the secrets life has to offer.

Peering through the doorway of his wardrobe, his favorite hiding place, Julien observes the adults evolving all around him, using the power of his imagination to try and understand their odd behavior. Spending long moments sitting in front of the window, he longs for freedom, dreaming of what it would be like to be tree, as his mother would always know that he's never far from home and that he's always safe.

But over the course of his young life, Julien will become an involuntary witness to family dramas that will shake him to his very foundations for years to come.

ISBN 978-2-924187-26-5



9 782924 187265