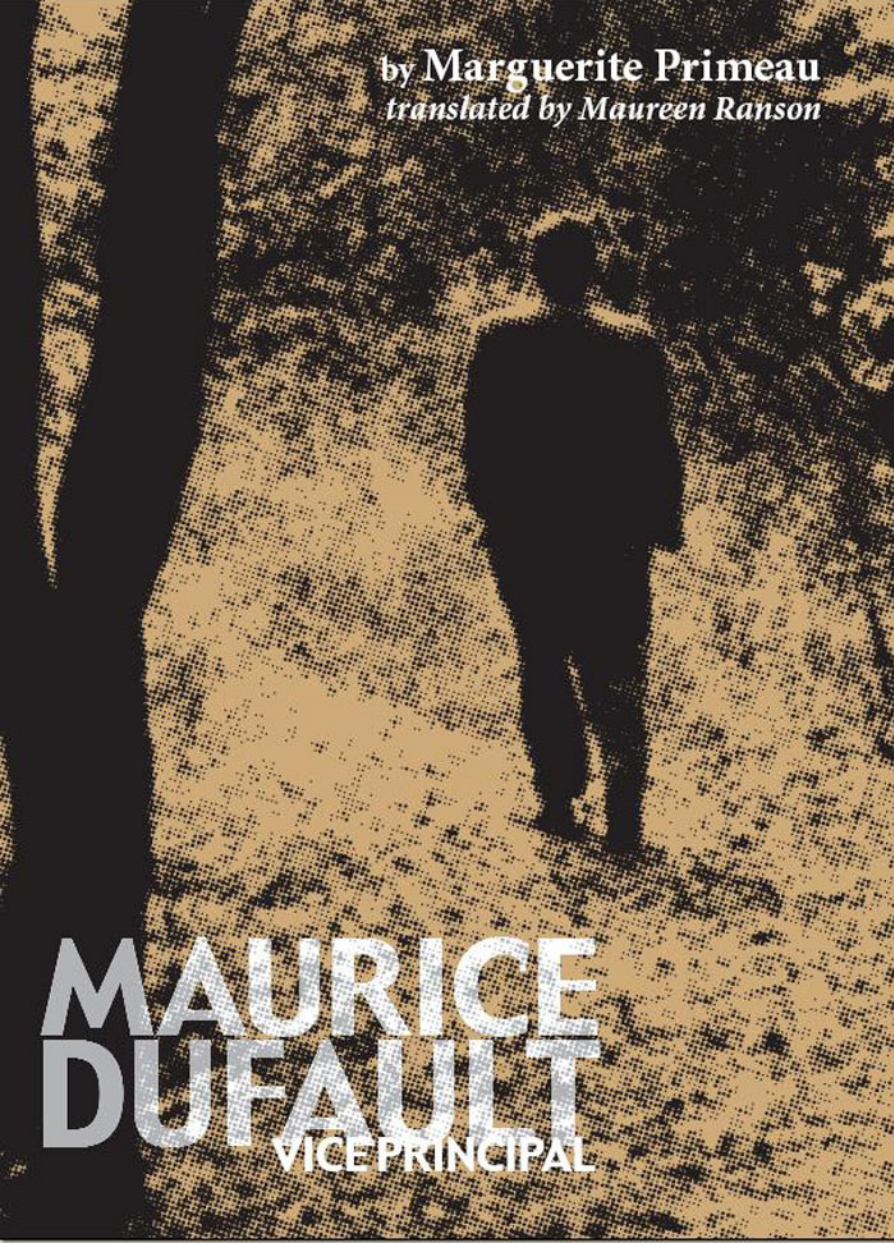
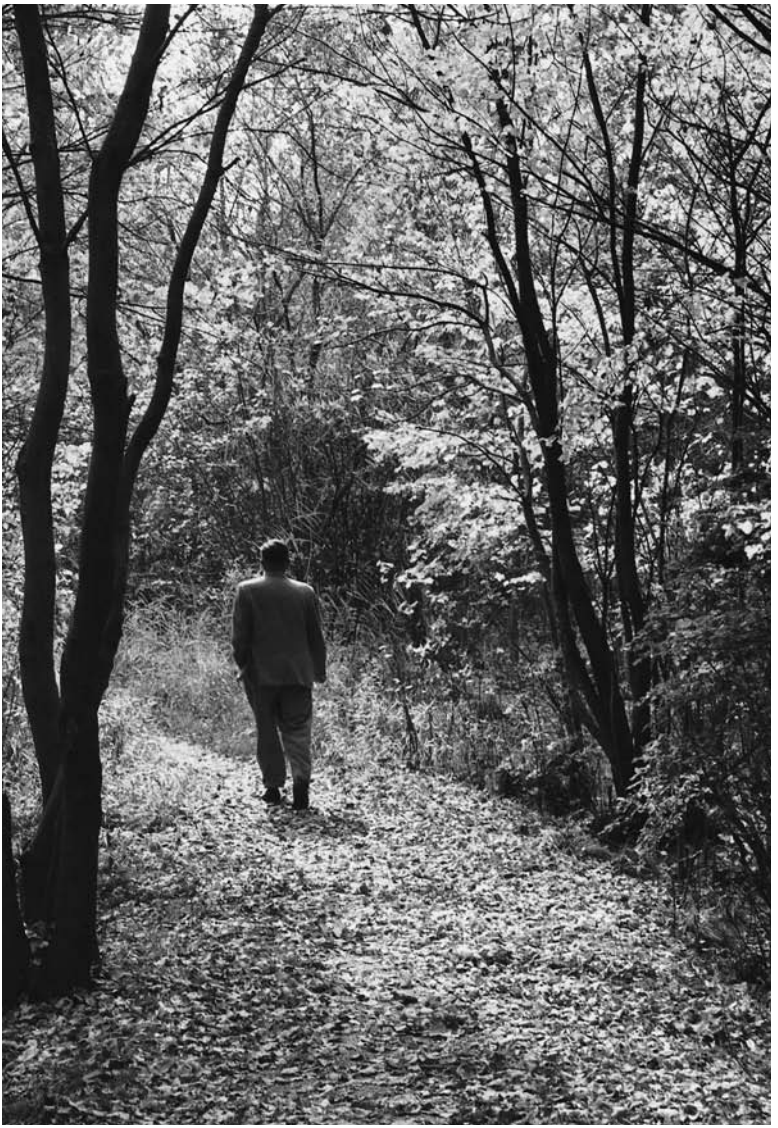

by Marguerite Primeau
translated by Maureen Ranson
MAURICE DUFAULT
VICE PRINCIPAL

Maurice Dufault, Vice-principal



Maurice Dufault, Vice-principal

MARGUERITE-A. PRIMEAU

Translated from French by
Maureen Ranson

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to Fern

Introduction

Many years ago, when I was invited to write a preface to the French edition of this novel (see the following English translation of the preface to the original), I was somewhat taken aback. So I began by posing the question, "Who is Marguerite Primeau?" For many reasons the question can still be asked. I am sure she still remains relatively unknown to a primarily English-speaking audience. One might also ask whether she should be known. Rather than answer that question immediately, let me say that she was born and grew up in Saint Paul, Alberta, the town which in this novel is known as Lyonsville and which has other names in other books. In certain respects it can be compared to Margaret Laurence's Neepawa or Alice Munro's Wingham. It is part of the eternal small town of Canada from which so many characters have come who define

and give shape to the literatures of Canada. In reality, it is closer to Sinclair Ross's Horizon: it is everywhere and nowhere, around us but intangible, and most alive as it becomes fiction. Like Laurence and Munro, Primeau could not live in it; it could only live in her. Yet even there, its presence is difficult to bear, and she prefers to perceive herself as a "francophone de l'Ouest," rather than a "Franco-Albertaine."[1] Most of her life, in fact, she has lived in Vancouver, and she is now professor emeritus of French, having retired from a career at the University of British Columbia.

I have mentioned Laurence to provide some notion of the complexities of Canadian regionalism. Laurence easily represents Western Canada in a way that Primeau cannot. This is because the region understands itself as predominantly Anglophone. Ethnic minorities there may be, but they can only be heard through English. This has meant that the singular French writer, Georges Bugnet, is hardly known, except for a few translations. It also meant that to retain her French was a long struggle for Primeau. It is hard for Francophones born in the West to struggle against the pressures of assimilation. Gabrielle Roy is known so widely in English translation that the noted critic Eli Mandel, like many others, easily assimilated

1 Pamela V. Sing. "Écrire l'absence : Montréal et Alberta chez Marguerite-A. Primeau et Nancy Huston." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 737–51.

her by being convinced that her last name rhymed with "toy." Furthermore, the texts of Roy that are set in the West are so nostalgic compared to her Montreal novels that one has the distinct impression that the Francophone presence in the West is for the most part a thing of the past. Nancy Huston, an Anglophone writing in French, has become the only successful living Canadian writer in that language from the West by living in Paris, occasionally publishing her novels in both languages and making it evident that she does not belong to an ethnic minority.

The choice to use the language of a minority is a decision fraught with many consequences. The first is to remain unknown in the dominant culture. The second carries other risks. To be translated is to enter another cultural community with other horizons of expectation. To put it in another way, it means to be read with Laurence in mind, for example, or Robert Kroetsch or Aritha Van Herk, to mention only two celebrated Alberta writers. Read in such a way, a writer like Primeau will be misunderstood because all literary texts are grounded in a particular cultural context and reading community. That of Primeau is small, it is continually eroded by the use of English and always being tempted to overcome what appear to be the limitations of a community that responds to a past – and, consequently, a sense of the future – that is often at odds with that of the dominant culture. A sense of quiet despair, moreover, does not translate easily. It does not fit with the enterprising

spirit of contemporary Western Canada, or that of contemporary Quebec, it should be added. Of course, not all is despair. Vigilance and valour abound. Radio-Canada provides excellent regional coverage, and major centres have a theatre season. Yet publishing is difficult. Quebec is crowded with authors, and there are only two publishers for Francophone writing in the West, both in Manitoba. Ironically, the Francophone is often pressed to write in English and hope for translation into French and, above all, recognition in Quebec.

So it is that the rare author, such as Primeau, who manages to publish – and to continue to publish – in French is a phenomenon indeed. Yet, it is a phenomenon that has to be understood in its context, which is that of a minority within a minority and surrounded everywhere by another and, by all appearances, more vital culture. To speak honestly and soberly for such a culture, without any illusions that you will be read in Montreal or Paris, not to speak of Winnipeg or Calgary, requires great depths of courage. One can only guess at what was endured between Primeau's first novel, published in 1960, and this one which appeared twenty-three years later. In a certain sense, that endurance was recast into the figure of Maurice Dufault, who carries with him some of the questioning of the value of life made popular by Albert Camus. Despite Dufault's psychological resignation, he is drawn outside himself in his natural identification with the victim. An outsider himself, his inclination is to protect whatever is foreign, misunderstood,

and contrary to the norm. Paradoxically, it turns out to be a self-preserving gesture: protecting Piotr, a Polish immigrant, and Piotr's carefree and careless sister, he preserves himself. His resignation transforms into a kind of self-giving. In every sense, Dufault is a minor hero, who learns and accepts that his life will not change, that his demise is only months away, but that even in death he would somehow survive in a child about whose birth the reader is told nothing.

The drama of ethnic effacement is developed in a perfectly convincing fashion in the novel, and nothing leads so well to this end as the orderly, classical form of the novel, a style that had long retired from the significant Canadian and Québécois writing of the 1980s. Yet the novel echoes a form and tone that derives from seventeenth-century France, marking it as traditional and, nevertheless, rooted in a minority Canadian culture. It is, therefore, deceptively easy to read, especially because in English it appears tidy and well-ordered. In a word, it knows its place. But that is a knowledge which the English Canadian should not lose sight of, for to do so allows the Western French Canadian to disappear, as Dufault and countless others do without leaving a trace in the process of assimilation. This novel *is* the trace, among others, and while it should be read, it should be remembered that the smoothness of the surface is a mask beneath which the figure of Dufault, one of the many guises of the Western French Canadian, struggles to be recognized. The struggle is never signalled as ethnic, except insofar

as Dufault's deepest sympathies are with members of an ethnic minority who are treated as outsiders and victims. Although no fault of the translations, the understated effect is more apparent in French and more perceptible to the Francophone reader. The theme of *survivance* emerges more clearly, especially as articulated in the sober, evenly balanced conclusion. The lack of sensationalism, the lack of colourful language, the lack of qualities found in the Anglophone writers who are Primeau's regional contemporaries is not perceived as a lack. Indeed, to suggest them as a lack would be to falsify the situation.

To assume, however, that the novel is merely an example of psychological realism would also be false. Dufault is so much a part of an agenda that reading him as a "reflection" of a harsh situation would cause him to disappear again. It is fairer, I think, to read him as a low-key challenge to the world around him which, with rare exceptions, he manages to expose by having his adversaries expose themselves. He seems merely to come and go, but in his movement mocks the hypocrisy and assertions of power around him, just by being in the right place at the right time. He is otherwise easily forgotten, but forgetting him would elide from the Western Canadian canon one of its more significant novels. He endures simply by tending toward disappearance, and by doing so invites favourable comparison with figures from any number of novels by Laurence, Kroetsch, and Rudy Wiebe. Unlike them, however, it happens without heroics and nostalgia. He is simply the sign of a world

fully conscious of its slipping away without resistance, but also with the same kind of hope that is intimated in Gabrielle Roy's exquisite *Fragiles lumières de la terre* in which outsiders in general share a common cause that makes them the sign of the future coming out of difficult pasts, yet unheroic and unacclaimed.

E.D. Blodgett
Faculté Saint-Jean
University of Alberta
September 30, 2004

Preface

translated from French by Maureen Ranson

Who is Marguerite Primeau? I have asked myself more than once. And where does she come from? I have asked myself those questions because the presence of a French-language writer in the West is extremely rare. The exceptions are Georges Bugnet, whose last book appeared in 1938; Gabrielle Roy, who, despite settling in Quebec, continued to mine the rich vein of her Manitoba youth; and Constantin-Weyer, if he is still remembered. However, there are very few Francophone writers who know the West. Marguerite Primeau is among them, among the best. She was already known for her novel *Dans le muskeg*, followed by *Maurice Dufault, sous-directeur* – fairly modest titles that conceal a power both fragile and tenacious.

This second novel has only one goal and asks only one question, to which all others are subordinate. What is the

meaning of human life? Or, as Albert Camus framed the question, "whether or not life is worth living." That is the classical and even universal stamp of the novel.

It is also tempting to think of Dufault as an extension of Joseph Lormier, also a teacher and the main character in the novel *Dans le muskeg*, in which Marguerite Primeau contrasts Lormier and his pure, separatist dreams with the Irishman O'Malley, whose business sense saves the village of Avenir from the effects of the economic crisis. He is the one with experience of the real world, while Lormier lives in the past, in a dream world. However, the two are linked by their sense of community, the theme that pervades *Maurice Dufault, sous-directeur*. The tragedy in this new novel is that no one has that real-world experience, and the men who could put it into practice do so only rarely. It is both a tragic and a classic novel.

E.D. Blodgett, University of Alberta

Maurice Dufault, Vice-principal

PART ONE

Chapter One

Maurice Dufault stopped to contemplate the small town spread out at his feet. Each time he came back, he liked to identify the changes that had taken place over the summer holidays. The rest of the year he was part of it, which meant he took no notice or pretended not to see the town and its inhabitants.

Encircled by ripe sheaves of grain already falling under the reaper, the town flaunted its upstart opulence at that hour of the day. Night would restore its true nature. The school stood guard on the east side, its exterior younger and more beautiful in the setting sun, so the young man had to force himself to correct the image he had taken away with him in his memory, a memory of uneven bricks with cracks criss-crossing the front roof line, where, in June, what was left of a long-abandoned bird

nest still hung from the peak. To the west stood the modern hospital, resplendent in antiseptic white.

Maurice Dufault counted three stores, one drugstore, two hotels and three garages on either side of the main street before turning toward the hospital hill, where the cream and green Lyonsville School Division building rose among other recently constructed buildings.

He smiled mockingly. Like the white structure at the top of the hill to the west, the building attested to the importance of the village that had become a small town since the discovery of oil.

He amused himself momentarily passing in review the new roofs that had invaded the hillside in his absence. Soon, however, something made him turn toward the school at the end of the main street to the east, something that had entered his field of vision without his conscious awareness.

"Well, well, well," he said to himself with a mocking laugh. "Dear Matthews is finally going to have his typing room this year, well-lit, well-ventilated, just the way he wanted it. Long live business! May it do him a lot of good!" And he shrugged his shoulders, more in a gesture of cynicism than resignation.

He immediately went back to examining what he could see of a new building, all right angles and glass, attached to the old school by a corridor of windows. Higher up as he was at the railway station, he could easily see the part of the addition facing him.

The addition had been planned before his departure and had become a reality during the two months of his absence; it was a fairly imposing piece of architecture with pylons on which the main body of the building rested. Maurice Dufault frowned as if he didn't like what he was seeing at all. "A block of concrete on stilts, a short skirt and high heels, like an old prostitute trying to look younger," he mocked, before starting down the slope that led to the main street.

Below him, the small town hummed, lazy and sleepy. He could hear the sound of cars, tractors and reapers, but muted, as if life was slowing down in anticipation of coming repose. Intoxicated with light and dancing drunkenly, insects buzzed softly. Rich scents rose into the evening, the aroma of life and hope, thought the young man, the perfume of grain that had fulfilled its destiny. He forgot about the black smoke from the oil wells that polluted the countryside.

Seven years ago, four American engineers had arrived at the beginning of the fall, too, to assess claims of substantial oilfields in the area surrounding the modest hamlet. Maurice Dufault remembered the suspicious stares that had greeted the first drilling crews, the natural distrust landowners had for people who earn their living wherever the promise of fortune leads. Their suspicions suddenly disappeared the day the precious liquid spurted in Nick Bovaritch's field with such force that it burst into flames, destroying most of the crop. Less than

six months later, Nick Bovaritch had become Mr. Bovaritch, drove a magnificent Buick and was having a new house built.

Businessmen, labourers and opportunists came from every direction, all with the same desire, pursuing the same goal, digging with both hands into the modern goldmine. To handle the ensuing housing crisis, trailers were set up on an abandoned field, which was immediately dubbed a campground.

By the end of the winter, two hastily built hotels were competing with the old boarding house, which had quickly been modernized. Bathrooms, bars and neon signs brought the era of advertising and progress to the previously forgotten village. The Coca-Cola machine and the jukebox in the diner, in turn, marked the beginning of the reign of youth in Lyonsville. Three car dealerships, each with its own garage, competed for the business of the newly rich as well as those impatiently waiting to get rich. From Monday morning to Saturday night, trucks loaded with oil derricks hauled hell-bent across the countryside, where they were awaited by anxious farmers and by the American crews in charge.

By early the next year, somewhat wiser from the many problems created by the town's sudden prosperity, the people of Lyonsville were tired of the noise and disorder and would have been happy to turn back the clock. However, youth demanded its due. Cars, Coca-Cola and chewing gum confirmed the arrival of a new spirit, and the hill on the west side was soon spiked with television antennas.

Since that time, a mass of increasingly luxurious villas had stretched out all around the hospital, hemming it in, so that by 1954, it stood out on the horizon like a medieval cathedral, its stone foundation disappearing among the tile roofs of the faithful. Below, along the streets bordering the business district, lived other townspeople, many others. Finally, to the east, shops and modest-looking cottages were sparsely scattered along a thin line stretched across the small bridge to the old brick school which, Maurice Dufault muttered resentfully, looked ridiculous in its brand new skirt.

He walked slowly, too slowly, actually, for a man not yet forty years old. It wasn't so much that there was no spring to his step as that each step never had quite enough momentum to carry him to the next, so he led first with one foot then the other, the way a convalescent or an old man walks.

He passed grain elevators waiting with open doors for the year's harvest, turned left toward two oil tanks and, still half-blinded by the metallic glare, found himself in the middle of a residential district. He enjoyed wandering aimlessly, had nothing better to do and was curious, too, so he amused himself by mentally calculating the number of houses that had been given a coat or two of paint to liven them up, counting at least a dozen in a quarter of an hour.

He slowed his pace to see better and also because he was feeling the same vague pain squeezing his chest again but refused to pay any attention, immediately dismissing it as passing discomfort.

Despite the pots of geraniums blooming by their doors, the houses seemed closed in on themselves behind their nylon curtains. The similarity of the square lawns, with their petunia or aster borders, reinforced the impression of an inward focus and served to discourage indiscreet passers-by. Maurice Dufault noted that, above all, his fellow townspeople were afraid of anything whatsoever that might bring discord into their cozy interiors – suffering, misfortune, failure. They had to be wary of such things and never allow them to find a place at the family table or even to settle in the darkest corner of the living room, if there were any dark corners in those bright rooms where half-transparent lampshades cast almost no shadow.

In his eleven years as a teacher at the high school in Lyonsville, Maurice Dufault had had time to form an opinion of the people whose town he had ended up adopting.

He had to acknowledge, however unwillingly, that he too had become a typical Lyonsville inhabitant, selfishly closed to anything from outside, fond of his comfort and quiet; the difference was he did so out of laziness and indifference and, knowing that, refused to take himself seriously. What did it matter how little satisfaction he took in his work, as long as he could find refuge every evening among his books and records?

Since he had to earn a living, he might as well do it teaching, as others did in business. The main thing was to avoid creating too many problems or getting deeply involved in any sensitive situations. Nothing in the world was worth torturing himself over. So why worry about people who would forget him tomorrow, people he himself was hardly interested in any more? In a word, he preferred to live his own life, no matter how narrow, and his teaching job gave him the leisure to escape from the present in his library with his record player.

That's why, returning to Lyonsville at the beginning of another school year, he felt neither joy nor regret, just a little tired.

Maurice Dufault took a silver case out of his vest pocket and was about to light a cigarette when a violent fit of coughing shook him. "This dreadful cough won't go away," he noted with a surge of irritation. The thought came to him that he should probably quit smoking; all things considered, it would do him nothing but good. However, once his cough was finally under control, he hurriedly lit up.

He felt vaguely uneasy. The unpredictable, non-specific pain that obstructed his breathing might be due to something other than the overuse of cigarettes. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that, for some time, the choking sensation

had brought on coughing fits and was triggered by the slightest thing, but almost always after any sustained effort.

"Walking, just walking without hurrying, doesn't require any effort, though. It's not as if I'm in a hurry to get somewhere," he added, in an attempt at a joke.

He glanced around, looking for a distraction, an antidote to the ridiculous fear he felt rising in him. His glance chanced on the black leather suitcase he had just put down on the sidewalk. He pushed it with his foot in irritation. "That suitcase is too heavy, as well. I should have had it delivered instead of thinking I was some modern-day Hercules."

To forget his annoyance and also in the hope of loosening the painful tightness in his chest, he made himself take a long, deep breath of the warm, scented air around him. However, the intoxicating scent of the harvest made him dizzy, so he had to lean on the half-open gate in the school fence, which groaned immediately under his weight.

In fact, it tilted like a sinking ship. At least that's what Maurice Dufault thought as he contemplated the familiar landscape, which he knew too well for it to give him any of the unexpected joy of seeing the innermost reaches of new terrain for the first time or even to reawaken his interest.

Yellowish blades of grass grew in the cracks of the sidewalk in front of the entrance. To the right stretched the playground, meagre and monotonous. The young man's gaze scanned the schoolyard all the way to the edge, getting lost beyond that

point among the wild oats, before turning to the reinforced concrete and pylons of the new wing.

With its stark, unvarying surface, the addition was a good image of the new age. It was utilitarian, practical throughout. "And no one thought about the absurdity of attaching an oblong box on pillars, truly a monument to mediocrity, to the vertical rise of the old school," Maurice Dufault thought, turning his back on it with finality. However, he took one last look at the façade of the old building, riddled with cracks, the speckled face of a wrinkled grandfather, unpretentious despite the front roof line, where a stonemason with the soul of an artist had fashioned the obligatory decorative buds and buttercups. The quaint poetry of the rudimentary sculpture along the roof line evoked a smile. However, Maurice Dufault saw in it the soul of an entire generation that seemed to believe in the close affinity between nature's new sprouts and young people in search of knowledge.

The discovery of oil had ended all that. Since then, young people counted the hours that kept them from the corner café and the pool hall or the car waiting for them in front of the school entrance. Well-supplied with pocket money, they took full advantage of the present, as if life owed it to them to be generous. Parents retreated before the pleasure-seeking, rebellious young people, so sure of themselves, so different in every way from the young people they themselves were in 1930. Sons left the farm, sometimes even quit school, to work on the

drilling rigs and headed for the big city, avidly seeking creature comforts or simply independence. Families dispersed, their guidance disdained, which shook the hierarchy of traditional values still more, values all of them had based their lives on up to then and reverted to when times were tough. Some, not very many – and Maurice Dufault knew them all – continued to live modestly, but none of the farmers or townspeople at that time – as he had many opportunities to observe – had been able to avoid the negative effects of progress in Lyonsville.

He had watched all the innovations. A disinterested spectator, Maurice Dufault had seen the pace pick up and snowball, creating a longing for the early days before the village had become a bustling small town where large financial transactions were handled and businessmen were replacing farmers. Enrolment at the school had doubled, even tripled. So what if the teachers had had to be satisfied for a long time now with classrooms overflowing, so to speak, into the corridors. This year they would finally have the modern, well-lit addition they had been requesting for five years, although it was supposed to be, first and foremost, the domain of typing and home economics courses. Mr. Legerton's office would be in there, naturally.

It wasn't particularly pleasant to be reminded of the principal, so Maurice Dufault made an effort to think about something else. Unfortunately, the first face that came to mind was even more unpleasant, the sly face of Larry Ross with his calculating expression, always on the lookout for questionable entertainment.

This time, Maurice Dufault frankly made a face. "I'll have enough problems this year without remembering past problems, especially since Larry Ross won't be among those who show the greatest joy at seeing me back in Lyonsville." He started to laugh, a short humourless laugh. "I'll have to find something more enjoyable to convince me that, in spite of everything, I'm glad to be back in town."

Useless words, because, even saying it quietly, Larry Ross's name was enough to remind him of the unusual loyalty some showed that sad character. Regret, no, more like remorse, came over him, as if he didn't have a clear conscience. What did he have to reproach himself for? What was he guilty of, after all? Despite his efforts to search his memory for the unbidden shadow, it escaped him, resurfacing immediately from a new angle, just as worrisome as the first.

He forgot about feeling ill. Leaning on the gate, he no longer saw anything, absorbed as he was in going back over years gone by. He looked back at the road he had travelled, where his footsteps had left little trace, at the flat, monotonous, too-smooth surface of the early days. He had been complicit in that monotony, a welcome soporific for him. He was simply a French teacher at that time; he even got along with Mr. Legerton, although he already found him deceitfully compliant. Things only turned sour gradually. The requirements of the new era made him vice-principal of the high school; he had never understood why he was appointed and not someone else. At first, he had shaken off his indolence and tried to recreate a purpose for himself, or

even illusions, but that would have meant standing up to Mr. Legerton, battling him. It was too much to ask. Although he still rebelled against the awkward and devious directives of his boss and spoke out as he had at the last staff meeting in June, most of the time, he merely despised the man in silence. Having established that, he had no choice but to admit, not without shame, that he was increasingly losing interest in his work and now did it only out of habit.

"Who would dare to cast the first stone? Certainly not Mr. Legerton."

Lost in thought, Maurice Dufault did not notice a young boy coming up the cross street to the high school from the Ukrainian district, hurrying at a headlong pace despite a limp that made him hop on his right leg like a wounded bird.

"Hello, Mr. Dufault."

The young voice called the vice-principal from the meditation in which he had plunged.

Left foot striking the ground heavily, right foot barely brushing the rough surface of the rocky ground, the young boy advanced, his whole body jerking up and down.

Maurice Dufault watched his approach, his expression rather irritated.

"Hello, sir. You just arrived, didn't you?" A smile barely tugged at the corner of the boy's lips, a tight, vulnerable smile that took away none of the seriousness of his expression.

"Hello, Peter." The vice-principal nodded vaguely in the direction of the train station where a bit of white smoke still floated, before answering mechanically, "Yes, I just arrived."

The silence was punctuated by the slow buzz of insects. Teacher and student, suddenly ill at ease, searched for a way to start a conversation.

"Did you have a good holiday?" asked Maurice Dufault at last. Admittedly it was more an observation than a question, thought the vice-principal. What child would admit he was bored during the summer holidays? He had spoken the first words that came to him, nonchalantly, as if an answer mattered little to him. However, the boy hastily seized the opening offered.

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

Maurice Dufault was looking at him distractedly, without really seeing him, just because he was there; the young boy's volatile voice, which was just about to change, was suddenly silenced with a sigh.

Embarrassed and confused by his teacher's lack of interest, realizing he was unwelcome, Peter started to flatten his hair, ruffled from running, with a nervous hand. "I wanted to come and meet you, sir … But my grandmother needed me to run

errands … When I got to the station, the train was leaving, and you weren't there any more."

"It was nice of you to think of surprising me." As pleasant as his words were, the half-indifferent, half-ironic tone in which he spoke showed how little he cared whether anyone extended him such courtesy. Maurice Dufault valued his solitude and rejected any attempt to draw him out. His co-workers called him a misanthropist and said he lived like a wolf. Mr. Legerton accused him of being haughty.

He was about to head off on his way when it suddenly seemed urgent to add something. "If I'd known you were coming to meet me, I would have waited for you, my dear boy. You understand, I could hardly have anticipated such an honour." Suddenly he looked intrigued. "Why didn't I see you on the road?"

Peter leaned heavily on his good leg, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The motionless foot dangling from his other leg made him look more than ever like a bird maimed by a faulty trap. "I took a shortcut to get here faster …" The young boy's weary voice and serious face, on which not very clean hands had left moist fingerprints, moved something in the vice-principal's soul that had been dormant.

What made the boy come to meet him? He hardly knew him any better than the other pupils in his French classes, except that Peter came to talk to him sometimes during recess when Maurice Dufault was on supervision.

The boy's small size and slight shoulders belied his fifteen or sixteen years. He was serious for his age, never heard laughing with his classmates and never taking part in their games. He had arrived from Poland two years ago at most and lived with his grandmother and his older sister who, from all appearances, had a very different take on life. His name was Peter, or rather Piotr Lupaniuk, however, on Larry Ross's lips, despite the teachers' scolding, his foreign family name had quickly become a nickname, and he was known at school only as Pete Panic.

Maurice Dufault made a slight gesture toward the child. "Don't be so disappointed, Piotr. I assure you I'm deeply touched by this mark of your affection." His Polish first name, gentle as a caress, brought a smile so new and fresh to Peter's tense features that his face was transformed for a second. The vice-principal barely had time to see the ray of joy reach his china-blue eyes before it disappeared.

"You called me by my real name … the name my grandmother always uses … the name that used to be my father's …"

Maurice Dufault suddenly felt extremely ill at ease with this child, his hair uncombed, his shoes too heavy for his crippled leg. "If you want, Piotr, you can come with me to my house, otherwise I'll never manage to carry this suitcase so far alone. What do you say?"

While he was still talking, Peter had already bent to take the suitcase. Maurice Dufault picked it up at the same time, telling

himself that, with Peter limping along beside him, it would take a lot longer to cross town and climb the steep hill leading to the neighbourhoods to the right of the hospital. So he had more or less resigned himself to that by the time he started off with Peter, the black suitcase banging back and forth against their legs, and headed slowly toward the little bridge over the bed of a stream that was dry in this season. From there, a cement sidewalk led up the hill to the hospital.

PART ONE

Chapter Two

Maurice Dufault tossed and turned in bed and pounded his pillow with his fists. It did no good; he couldn't sleep. He had barely fallen into a slight doze, where objects lost their identity and thoughts lost some of their sharpness, when a new flurry of thoughts brought him abruptly back to attention. He listened to the wind whistle in the maple tree near his window and thought, with vague regret, that winter would soon replace the sunny days of fall. On the train ride back to Lyonsville, he had plenty of time to notice the leaves turning yellow in open country and, along the railroad track, the bushes were already scarlet-clad.

Eyes wide open in the darkness, he let his thoughts wander. For a second, he saw Peter's serious face again and his eyes, blue as a spring sky, though an unsmiling sky. A tiny ray of sunshine

had shone between his blond eyelashes when Maurice Dufault, who was not too sure why, had called him by his Polish name. What secret did his joyless expression hide? What monster, real or imaginary, held him in its grip and prevented him from laughing, which was natural for children and teenagers? And his hair, his rebellious hair borrowed its colour from the country's wheat, vertical spikes sprouting up so straight and stiff that any effort to comb the twisted strands of hair and make them lie down obediently only aggravated the disaster. Even soaked down, his hair still resisted.

As a child, Maurice Dufault had also had the kind of hair that is a mother's despair. At least his had been the despair of the carefully groomed young woman who had cherished and pampered him but hadn't wanted to oppose his decision to go away for college. After that, he didn't remember very clearly. He just remembered his mother's astonishment and pride when she saw a tall young man open his arms to hug her as he got off the train that brought him home for the holidays the first time. My goodness, he looked rather distinguished!

How long ago that was! And yet, a stormy night of insomnia was enough for faces and events buried in the past to come floating back to the surface of his awareness, precious flotsam that, despite his efforts, he couldn't hold on to, that slipped in, mingled and dispersed before he had time to properly grasp the memories. All except one, his last night in northern Alberta, where he had grown up. How could he forget?

He had attended his mother's funeral in early October on a warm day that was a consolation for the first frost. The birds had already flown away. The insects had disappeared. Alone at the gate to the silent garden, where traces of her beloved hands could still be seen, hands that had not hesitated to trim, clip, pinch and prune, he had seen a marvellous sight that morning that lightened his pain. At seven o'clock, the sun appeared above the surrounding woods, enormous, insolent, flouting the threat of winter. Waves of light cleared the night haze from pines moist with dew. Topped with gold and purple, birch trees with white trunks advanced like an army of young knights, and light golden aspen leaves danced a moment in the cool air. The fields offered one last bouquet of tall brown grasses shining with gossamer and a scarlet ribbon of bushes. There was not the slightest noise, not the slightest breath of wind as if, dazzled by so much splendour, nature was lost in silent self-adoration. It had seemed the right way for Maurice Dufault to celebrate his mother's alliance with the land of the North she loved so much.

From her, he had inherited a deep love of the landscape, any landscape, as long as it was unaltered by human intervention, which explained the anger he felt when he saw his fellow townspeople torture and deform the sparse shrubs in their gardens in the name of false art. It also explained the ironic compliments he gave on carefully cut squares of lawn with symmetrical borders.

He loved the fall. Its opulence was all the more precious because it lasted only an instant, a horn of plenty offered to any passer-by, his mother used to say, but so much more generously far from the cities.

The same evening, the first strong wind of autumn had howled in the nearby forest; the pines and birch were bent by the gusts. Struck with fear as he had been when he was small and his mother had to come and comfort him, the young man then twenty had buried his head in his pillow without succeeding in silencing the forest's groans or erasing the image of a brand new grave whipped by the wind.

In the darkness of his room, Maurice Dufault relived his entire past, a past he had believed gone forever, while the maple tree bent in the gusts and tendrils of Virginia creeper beat against the window panes. Fatigue made his ideas so muddled, he scarcely had time to rediscover the past before it became confused with the present.

His thoughts had wandered aimlessly for quite a while when, with an abrupt shift, he saw in the darkness the worn façade of the high school as he had seen it late that afternoon. Battered by the storm, eroded by rain and snow for forty years, a bit more was worn away every year. The brick was crumbling and, on days when a strong wind blew, white and red dust penetrated the classrooms.

"Soon nothing will be left but a bit of skirt and high heels." The sound of his muted voice, separated from any bodily form by the surrounding darkness, suddenly startled him wide

awake. “I’m losing my mind,” he murmured, more intrigued than disturbed by the turn his thoughts had taken, and immediately went back to them as if he couldn’t wait to know where they might lead. “Really, next I’ll be attributing a soul to things, to our old school – but surely not to the ugly structure they just grafted onto it –” he interrupted himself to say bitterly, “one of those devoted, good-hearted souls who never gets discouraged, who can be asked to do anything, without even needing a thank you.”

He halted his monologue suddenly to examine another aspect of the problem that immediately demanded all his attention. “Have I become a pantheist? Has Spinoza made another disciple for himself, unbeknownst to me?” The question launched into the shadows where an object on his desk vibrated. Then there was silence. All that was left was the anguished complaint of the wind against his window. “Certainly not,” he began again more softly. “I still haven’t gone so far as to identify God with the world, but …” Again, he had the impression the words he heard himself say weren’t coming from him; they were an invention, a creation of shadows and insomnia, and therefore existed apart from him. They had their own life, independent of his. “How can we be sure, poor creatures that we are, that things don’t have a soul? Maybe a much better soul than the souls of men?”

This time, the silhouette of Mr. Legerton appeared to Maurice Dufault. If the principal had a soul, which, at times, the vice-principal had reached the point of doubting, it was

undoubtedly a poor twisted soul, an obscure maze of Machiavellian reversals that must have escaped the Creator's plan. How else could anyone explain the enjoyment Mr. Legerton took in playing a muddle-headed, capricious tyrant? The principal's small eyes, narrowed in uncertainty at times, had glints of cruelty as blind as it was senseless. Maurice Dufault knew from experience he had to hide any chink in his armour as best he could; otherwise, a wounding gibe would quickly find a centimetre of flesh to stab.

Miss Romaniuk knew something about that, too. The young man pictured in his mind for a second the shapeless figure of the music and singing teacher before his thoughts returned to Mr. Legerton. The high school principal was a much more interesting character.

Was the despotism he practised so haphazardly merely designed to hide the truth from himself, or did conscious treachery play some role? It was a question that had to go unanswered, Maurice Dufault thought. How could he penetrate the motives of others when he was incapable of solving the enigma he was to himself? "No matter what, you never succeed in piercing your own mystery," he sighed.

He had scarcely had time to admit his ignorance in that regard when an expression he had read or heard somewhere drummed in his ears, "the self is defined in opposition … in opposition …" and a new question arose. What woman could once have made the universe complete for this man, who was

barely respected by those who called themselves his friends? To fight insomnia, Maurice Dufault tried to imagine in detail the features of a woman who might have existed, but of all the female faces floating languorously in the night, only the profile of Mrs. Legerton appeared against the black background of his room. The vice-principal suddenly reminded himself that his boss's wife surrounded herself with young men to console herself for her husband's indifference.

But why talk about love? He himself was not above reproach and, on one side of the eternal scale, the aridness of his heart would clearly weigh more heavily than Mrs. Legerton's naive indiscretions. As for the Lyonsville high school principal, no torment in the next world could redeem his cruelty on earth.

Whereupon Maurice Dufault fell into a deep sleep, followed almost immediately by the image of his mother mingled with the image of a crippled boy who helped him carry his suitcase in the wind and storm and Mr. Legerton urging them to go faster, always faster. With a heavy head and dark circles under his eyes, he went to school in the morning to start another year.

In the large room that served as both a gymnasium and an auditorium, where parallel bars, pommel horses and rings – all the equipment needed for a modern gymnasium – could

be seen pushed back against the walls, Mr. Legerton raised his hand for silence, "Children!"

He coughed to clear his voice before starting again with a half-smile, "Today is … uh … the first day back at school … uh … school …" Sniggering could soon be heard. "As if you didn't … uh … didn't know …"

Maurice Dufault turned in the direction of the noise. There they all were in front of him, blond and brunette, returning and new students. The boisterous ones wriggled on their chairs like fish out of water. His feet clearly visible in the aisle, Larry Ross was casually chewing gum, while his neighbour on the right was laughing idiotically. Larry said, "Hey, old man! You haven't gotten one bit more interesting than you were last year. Can't say you're making any progress."

Heads moved in the immediate vicinity of the young man, confirming the vice-principal's suspicions. Cheeks bulging with gum, Larry Ross was still managing to chat with George Berthaut, his neighbour on the right.

Outraged by the insolence, for a second Maurice Dufault considered interrupting Mr. Legerton to take the offending schoolboy aside. However, the principal continued his exhortations as if nothing had been said, contenting himself with a threatening look at the boorish youth, who responded with his most engaging smile, sure nothing could be done to him for the moment.

The principal was making sweeping motions with his forearms, like the conductor of an orchestra trying to get the instruments to play in unison. But no one was listening.

Girls were discreetly taking out pocket mirrors, boys were ogling girls and elbowing one another, heads were turning right and left, and a wave of whispers soon flooded the room as if carried by the wind from the open seas.

"There is also … uh … the problem of chewing gum … chewing gum…." The hesitation typical of Mr. Legerton's slow, awkward delivery and the many pauses that interrupted his instructions were in no way redeemed by abundant gesturing. He beat at the air with his arms and signalled with a light hand to play *pianissimo*, all in vain. The pleading went on for a long time. Mr. Legerton definitely argued a case every time he spoke to the students. What might be taken for good intentions Maurice Dufault was increasingly inclined to consider pretence, a skilful act designed to fool everyone. No doubt the principal continued in a leadership position because he created general confusion with apparent good will, listening to the teachers' suggestions and recommendations only to betray or emasculate their ideas subsequently for purposes known only to himself, or so it seemed. His colleagues quickly understood that it was useless to argue. On the contrary, their advancement and, consequently, the salary they were paid depended on strict adherence to his views, however unexpected or obscure.

The students realized that Mr. Legerton's exhortations were usually not dangerous; they didn't have to fear paying a high price for their bad behaviour: a few detentions, lines to write once or twice a week and they were paid up. When things really went wrong, which happened every month like clockwork, the teacher or student who was weakest or least able to defend himself was accused of all the sins and made to pay for the others, as scapegoats have always done. Peace reigned anew at Lyonsville high school. The members of the school board congratulated themselves on having a principal who never hesitated to take harsh measures, the principal believed justice had been served, and the real guilty parties waited for an opportunity to start again.

Maurice Dufault was only half-listening. Fortunately, his boss's harangue was coming to a close.

"We must recognize," he said, "that it is … it is a bad … habit. It's not a pretty sight and … it's not polite." He interrupted himself to laugh at his accidental rhyme, then started again. "Gum is … uh … a treat, a treat … nonetheless … uh … chew it a bit less, this year, all right?"

Maurice Dufault said to himself quietly, "Yet we decided at the last staff meeting in June to formally ban chewing gum at school when classes started again in September."

With a smirk on his face, Larry Ross immediately snapped his gum then proceeded to look over the teaching staff Mr. Legerton was introducing to the new students.

Maurice Dufault waited with poorly disguised impatience for the principal to complete his introductions. So did the students. Silence reigned from the moment the question of chewing gum was raised; the newcomers were all ears, and the returning students had a few moments of anxiety. Everyone's apprehension disappeared with Mr. Legerton's last words, and, after that, the parade of teachers on the stage barely succeeded in holding their attention.

However, there were a few whispers when the principal announced that Miss Romaniuk would act as assistant librarian this year, while continuing to teach some music and singing courses. Since she had been there for years, it was surprising how Mr. Legerton stumbled over the foreign syllables of the teacher's last name, as if he could no longer clearly remember it. The principal added that Mr. Matthews, the typing and bookkeeping teacher, whose name he did not trip over, would, in turn, help her in her efforts to make the high-school choir one of the best in the region. Walter Matthews was appointed assistant music teacher.

"What an odd arrangement," muttered Maurice Dufault between his teeth. "Accounting married to music. That's all we need."

However, the proposed misalliance drew nothing more than an ironic smile from him and an inquiring look at Miss

Romaniuk and her new assistant, who was nodding his big round head with good humour and satisfaction. She turned pale.

Maurice Dufault closed his eyes for a second with weariness. The year was starting out well! What was the principal thinking, shaking up the ranks on the first day back? Mary Romaniuk had led the choir for years. It was her domain, her kingdom, the only one she had ever known. She had been trying to introduce a little spark of appreciation for beauty into rough-hewn brains for a long time. She never got discouraged, and the results she obtained were fairly astonishing, considering the raw material she had to work with. A vestal virgin passed over by beauty, the antithesis of feminine grace with her thick waist and flat heels, she humbly fed the sacred fire in the hope that, one day, the mythical bird of genius would be born from the still-burning ashes of the mediocre and the mundane.

She had confided that hope to him during a long, exhausting practice, when he asked her whether it was all worth it. On the verge of mocking so much naive fervour, he had abruptly done an about-face, murmuring that he envied her faith. She had looked at him curiously, as if she didn't really understand what he'd just said.

Although there was a reason to mock so much trust and useless devotion, because human beings ultimately fall back into their day-to-day routine swiftly and the young people who required so much effort would soon forget, at least no attempt

at sabotage should have been allowed. There would be unpleasant surprises if Walter Matthews interfered in teaching music. He was ambitious, but not worth a cent as a musician. It would be better for the high school choir's future if he stuck to typing courses. With him involved, the cult of beauty would produce some strange hymns of praise, Maurice Dufault thought smiling.

He was about to decline any responsibility for the matter when a feeling of anger tinged with compassion roused him. He felt sudden indignation toward Mr. Legerton, who was sowing discord once again, and irritation and pity for Mary Romaniuk, the perfect victim, who would never think of defending her rights. It was nothing but a skilful tactic on the part of the principal, a subtle manoeuvre to lull others into trusting him while the position was taken over. Maurice Dufault was not duped; neither was Miss Romaniuk, judging by her distress.

What was Mr. Legerton up to, preparing for action so soon? What did he have to gain by having Walter Matthews supplant Mary Romaniuk? And why make her some kind of stopgap librarian? The principal could care less about the library as anyone would know who remembered his response to Mr. Dunn's requests in June.

His eyes on Mr. Legerton, Maurice Dufault tried to figure out what had motivated him to redistribute the courses. The principal continued his introductions, his face impassive, without any thought for the woman he had just stripped of her rights.

Maurice Dufault thought about the pleasure it would give him to openly challenge the principal's judgment, force him to give an explanation and make him admit he had a hidden agenda. However, on the heels of that thought, it came to him that it was not his responsibility; his obligations as vice-principal stopped short of that and, all things considered, he had little taste for the role of lawman. He resolved to quit thinking about what was both painful and laughable in the new state of affairs but still couldn't help casting one final glance at Miss Romaniuk.

Head bowed, hands dropped to her lap in a gesture of painful resignation, she looked like a pieta – the flesh of her flesh was being torn from her and she didn't believe in resurrection. Maurice Dufault noted quietly, "The blow she has just been dealt makes her even uglier." The vice-principal had little time to feel sorry for her before his name was called, which made him turn back to Mr. Legerton.

"Mr. Dufault! … As you know … Mr. Dufault is the school vice-principal … uh … my assistant. He will be your French teacher … But this year … I have another position for him as well, another position … He will be … uh … in charge of discipline."

Maurice Dufault immediately thought back to the last staff meeting in June. To understand a change as radical as this one, he had to go back to the source and reconsider the origin of all

that had happened to find the grain of pollen that had germinated so unfortunately in Mr. Legerton's mind. The new duties were not a whim, even less a promotion, more like a punishment inflicted on him, as if he was being disciplined for some violation of the long-established order. He was undoubtedly guilty of something, but what, exactly?

First, there had been the year-end formalities – forms to fill out, statements to sign, all the paperwork so effectively used to mask the truth, especially when the naked truth is not very attractive. Maurice Dufault had the impression all the documents and forms were meant to hide a decaying cadaver. He had wondered whether his colleagues sitting in a semi-circle in front of the principal's desk had the same feeling of unreality, whether they recognized the duplicity that reigned over their deliberations, whether they too had admitted to themselves that the year just ending had been a failure in more ways than one. But seeing their smiling faces, their obvious hurry to be finished, he had convinced himself his imagination was probably too vivid and had quickly turned his thoughts elsewhere.

The good humour had been universal. An affable and avuncular Mr. Legerton was describing the new addition that would be built during the summer, including a much more spacious typing room made necessary by the anticipated number of enrolments. The new typewriters had already been ordered.

Mr. Matthews had assented to it all, his round head with greying temples nodding at each of the principal's statements and comments as if pulled by a string. The typing and bookkeeping

courses were assigned to him, which meant an annual bonus of three hundred dollars. Maurice Dufault never knew how Mr. Legerton did it, only that he must have convinced the school board that a typing teacher needed special technical training.

There was the matter of the extra gymnastics equipment that had to be added because the large room in the addition would be used as both a gymnasium and an auditorium. There was a discussion about the appliances needed for the home economics courses and, finally, the possibility of improving the facilities in the science laboratory. A lively discussion ensued on the acquisition of a television set, but Mr. Legerton had cut it short, saying there were surely more urgent problems. He didn't know how right he was.

Maurice Dufault had remained on the sidelines and hadn't taken part in the discussion, so all his colleagues were surprised to hear him launch into a harsh denunciation. Following up on Mr. Legerton's words, he had said, "We all know about the acts of vandalism that have taken place at the school and in town. We all know that students who refuse to get involved are the butt of hazing, and others are subjected to insults and persecution of all kinds. Yet none of the teachers at this last meeting before the holidays has spoken out about what seems to me to be the most serious problem we face – Larry Ross and his gang of rebels, Georges Berthaut, Maurice Leroy, Teddy Edwards and John Mandruchak, to name only the most notorious. I'm asking for action to be taken immediately to get the infamous

gang under control so that this year's unfortunate incidents are not repeated."

His colleagues had rallied to his cause. The entire teaching staff knew the guilty parties who had started the fire that destroyed the upholstery in the pharmacist's car; everyone knew who had thrown firecrackers onto a bunch of papers on the car seat. Everyone also knew who was responsible for the graffiti, more vulgar than obscene, that appeared from time to time on the walls of the school, and no one had forgotten that Peter Lupaniuk had been beaten up twice on his way home. It was the first time, however, that names were named out loud; up to then, discreet allusions had merely been made in asides, carefully spoken in hushed tones.

Mr. Dunn, the English teacher and an absentminded poet for whom nothing outside his vocation usually existed, had given his wholehearted support. "A serious warning should be followed immediately by severe sanctions if need be."

"We've delayed too long," someone else had agreed.

Walter Matthews had glanced at his boss before nodding his head gravely, slightly but perceptibly uneasy.

But it was the reaction from Miss Romaniuk, who was always silent in her corner, that had struck the vice-principal most. Aged more by worries than by her years, she counted little in school life, outside music. Her colleagues readily forgot her presence. Mr. Legerton acted as if he didn't see her and never listened to her. At meetings, she never said a word, for fear of

drawing attention to her presence when maybe she shouldn't be there. She must have decided to speak the way she did from firm conviction. "The youngest children and newcomers are the victims, the victims of a cruel boy who takes pleasure in the suffering of people who can't defend themselves." The words had rushed from her as if she was afraid she would be forced to take them back or would see them vanish before she had a chance to speak. "It's completely useless to question the victims," she had added. "I know from experience. Their silence is matched only by the veiled terror in their eyes when they hear Larry Ross's name."

Maurice Dufault was touched by compassion for the woman, who had been treated with disdain so often she undoubtedly understood better than anyone what it was like to be scorned, despised and ridiculed.

With her dark complexion and the thin locks of ash-blond hair too fine to hold a permanent framing a face that was no longer young, her only attractive feature was her eyes. So great was her timidity or humility, however, that rarely did anyone who spoke to her notice that, between two fringes of long black eyelashes, her eyes were so blue they were unsettling.

"We are not here to wax sentimental, Miss." The principal's hiss had brought the lambs back into the fold. Back they all came, one after another, almost jostling each other in their desire to fall back in line behind their boss. One had hurriedly said that not all the infractions of the rules could be attributed

to Larry Ross; another said it was really too easy to blame the same boy all the time. Mr. Matthews had spoken of childish behaviour that would soon disappear; the young people would quickly tire of their mischief. Miss Romaniuk had withdrawn into her shell, and Maurice Dufault had found himself alone in enemy territory.

He had made one last effort, however. Fixing Mr. Matthews with an angry stare, he had said, "I find it impossible to believe that making Peter Lupaniuk a whipping boy is nothing but childish behaviour, a joke without any consequences. There is good reason to take action," he had added, seeing his adversary's face redden, "if only out of fairness to a foreigner."

Mr. Legerton had made an irritated gesture. "You leap immediately to … uh … rhetoric, Mr. Dufault, rhetoric." Behind his thick glasses, his eyes had seemed empty of any expression as he added in a conciliatory tone, "Admittedly … uh … you're not entirely wrong. The conduct of some … some … sometimes leaves something to be desired. However, to go from there to talking about whipping boys … uh … Still, we shouldn't exaggerate, should we, Maurice?"

He hadn't deigned to answer. What more could he say? He had given up the fight. Why continue to wage battle if everyone except him was satisfied with the status quo? The Peter Lupaniuks of this world would just have to learn to defend themselves.

"First, let's settle the matter of chewing gum … which … has caused problems for quite some time now. Then, we'll get to …

disciplinary measures … if it turns out … uh … that they prove necessary."

Nothing had been resolved, however, except that chewing gum would be formally banned starting in September. Maurice Dufault sheepishly had to admit two months later, to his regret, that Mr. Legerton was most ingenious when it came to offloading the unpleasant duties of his administration onto others.

Maurice Dufault could not repress a start of surprise on hearing he was appointed disciplinarian, out of the blue. The entire teaching staff turned toward him at the same time. Even Miss Romaniuk overcame her dejection to question him with eyes open wide in astonishment. His smile overly obliging, Mr. Legerton calmly went back to his speech as if nothing had happened, or rather, as if he modestly preferred to avoid the thanks he had every right to expect.

It took quite an effort for the vice-principal not to betray his feelings, particularly because surprise, anger and disappointment were making his heart beat faster, which made the heavy, stifling pain come back. It stretched lazily in his chest, stronger with each breath. At the same time, a harsh cough left him drenched in perspiration. Not in the least surprised by the effect his words had had, Mr. Legerton smiled maliciously.

Every member of the teaching staff knew from experience that it was nearly impossible to ensure the rules were followed now that Larry Ross was the gang leader, because Mr. Ross was rich enough to pay for his son's whims and influential enough as a member of the board of the Lyonsville School Division to make it seem preferable, if not obligatory, to overlook the pranks of his offspring. Unfortunately, what had seemed at first to be just fairly innocent mischief, for the most part, had quickly turned into sadistic brutality dominated by the pleasure of making others suffer who were weaker than him. Under those conditions, the disciplinarian role was most undesirable.

His fit of coughing finally subsided, Maurice Dufault was curious to find out the effect the sudden decision had had on the high school students. The news had evidently triggered their curiosity. Intrigued and serious, they turned to face him. The new disciplinarian could read a hint of sympathy in the faces of a few, fear in more and deliberate insolence in some.

In the front row, Peter Lupaniuk watched him gravely. Farther back, Larry Ross slowly chewed gum and smiled.

PART ONE

Chapter Three

Maurice Dufault glanced at the letter still open on the table. The pearl-grey vellum was covered with a woman's handwriting; the evident preference for curves and the carefree capital letters would have intrigued him had he been a handwriting expert. A light perfume, the scent of violets Mary Ann was particularly fond of, wafted up from the page.

With an indulgent, almost affectionate smile, he remembered the contents of the letter he had received from the young woman that morning.

"Mrs. Mary Ann Forsythe is honoured to invite Mr. Maurice Dufault for coffee at her home, Saturday, September 30, from nine o'clock in the evening until such time as he sees fit to leave …"

That Mary Ann! She sent him the invitation as a mocking reminder, to show him she was well aware that this Saturday evening was reserved for the Legertons who were fulfilling their annual duty to Lyonsville high society. She was not part of the clique, which amounted to saying she was excluded for reasons she had never wished to confide in him – obscure reasons, she said, that a poor devil of a man would not understand and she need not reveal. Moreover, Mary Ann valued her independence too much to belong to a clique. Maurice Dufault started to laugh imagining the commotion her frankness would produce among the members of the clique – the doctors at the hospital, the chief nurse, the pharmacist, the two lawyers, the American engineers and the board members of the Lyonsville School Division – who kept their claws sheathed. Following an unspoken rule it would have been imprudent to ignore, the high school teachers complied with the tradition.

As he held the young woman's letter, Maurice Dufault thought he would prefer to go to her house even if it meant a final falling out with his boss. Mary Ann's characteristic lack of artifice was restful, a diversion he valued and was reluctant to sacrifice for the simpering chatter of Mrs. Legerton's friends and her cloying friendliness. On the other hand, he didn't feel up to facing the principal's wrath, which wouldn't fail to descend on him one way or another – he could be sure he would pay dearly for his act of independence, just as he was paying now for speaking freely about Larry Ross at the June meeting.

And he was really too tired, or apathetic, to want to provoke the principal without a valid reason. The easiest way out would be to subject himself once again to a meaningless ceremony that required nothing from him other than his presence. He looked at his watch; however, he would go later, much later.

He went searching through his records, chose Mozart without too much thought, turned on the record player and sat down again. Youthful music, optimistic and pure, filled the room, and a content and relaxed Maurice Dufault let his head fall back against the armchair and closed his eyes.

"What a chore! At least Dr. Lord will be there." Maurice Dufault was adjusting his tie in front of the mirror and sighed at the thought that he would soon be assailed by noise and fashionable small talk. He regained his composure at the thought of the doctor, whom he had barely seen since classes started and who would probably be at the Legertons. Mary Ann and the general practitioner were the only ones he cared about. He was quick to tell them that, at times, in a teasing tone, however, as if mocking himself for a choice that brought two such different characters together in his thoughts.

The electric light made him look even paler; the image he saw reflected in the polished surface of glass took him by surprise. He began to examine the white face, the drawn features

that were his own. “Huh! I could be taken for a Greco figure,” he said finally. “A bit more mystical ardour in the eyes, and there you have it.”

In fact, the shadow of his cheekbones carved into his face, lengthened it, made him look like an ascetic, a contemplative for whom reality is found elsewhere. Tiny criss-crossing lines extended to his temples, where a few grey hairs could be seen. A wrinkle lined his forehead, the sign of a thinker, according to Mary Ann. “You think too much, my dear,” she had told him one day. “At your age, you need distractions even more than you did at twenty,” she assured him. “However, that lonely wrinkle – those impertinent little lines at the corners of your eyes don’t count – as I was saying, that wrinkle gives your appearance something quite special. You might say,” and she looked at him with all the gravity she could muster, “yes, you might say a philosopher or a sage who lives somewhere up there and only deigns to visit humble mortals like me from time to time.”

“Who lives where?”

She pointed her finger at interplanetary space. “Somewhere up there, far from this world! … Don’t play dumb; you know very well what I mean.”

He burst out laughing. “My poor dear, as you can plainly see, I’m made of the same raw material you are, and human clay for human clay …”

She didn’t let him finish. “Ah, for that, no, thank God, you’re not like the others; otherwise I would have grown tired of you

long ago. Like poor Annunzio! As if it isn't enough to drag his long drink of a body through life without decking it up the way he does. Annunzio Mario Forsythe of Forsythe and McGillivray Inc., Funeral Directors. Burials conducted with big-city decorum."

Embarrassed by the untimely allusion to the husband she betrayed shamelessly, who, with his black gloves and commiserating air, was a fitting representative of his profession, Maurice Dufault would have liked to make her stop, but she was laughing so merrily that he had to forgive her lack of restraint.

At forty years old, Mary Ann Forsythe was still unconcerned about propriety of any kind and comfortable that way. Small, blonde and plump, she lived on a single level, eating well, fond of beer and steak, petit fours and love. A good companion, she didn't worry too much when a lover left her for a younger woman. All the time he had been seeing her, she had treated him like a beloved child, scolded him if need be and watched that he wore rubber boots and a raincoat in the rain and woollens in winter. Not in the least ambitious and even less jealous, she respected her neighbours' behaviour. She found only one person disagreeable – Mrs. Legerton.

She got along well with her husband, who didn't look too closely where his wife's friends were involved. The women of Lyonsville were less indulgent. Maurice Dufault liked her for her self-integrity, for her good spirits and because she did not have a grain of malice. "There's enough unhappiness in life

without causing still more" was her way of explaining her sudden reserve when anyone commented on another person's behaviour in her presence. The name Muriel Legerton produced barely a blink.

The vice-principal glanced one last time at his watch and told himself that, if he continued to daydream, the Legertons' party would end without him. So he put on his overcoat, lingered five more minutes adjusting his scarf and left. A quarter of an hour later, he rang the doorbell at the principal's house.

"It's finally you, Maurice. I almost thought … you'd forgotten us." Mr. Legerton smiled broadly while he shook his hand, but Maurice Dufault noted that, although the smile seemed to be for him, his boss's gaze went beyond him and focussed on a point somewhere behind him. He immediately felt resentful.

"On the contrary," he said, with a hint of irony. "On the contrary, I couldn't pass up the pleasure of attending one of your parties, Mr. Legerton. It's always a great honour to be Mrs. Legerton's and your guest," he concluded, bowing slightly.

Mr. Legerton's wandering gaze stopped for a second on the vice-principal's smiling face. "So you say, yet … you never come to see us. Sometimes … uh … I get the impression you're avoiding us."

"On the contrary, sir. Please believe me."

Behind the thick glasses the principal never removed, his gaze moved slowly away, as if sucked back inside him. Maurice Dufault caught a glimpse of a small flash in the depths of his eyes. When it had completely disappeared, all that was left was a disconcertingly vacuous stare, which sent a cold shiver up the younger man's back.

"In any case, here you are. That's the main thing. Young people shouldn't be expected to be punctual. That would be asking the impossible, wouldn't it, Maurice?"

Maurice merely smiled, so Mr. Legerton opened the door of the living room, where quite a gathering was assembled.

"You know everyone," said the principal. "I'll leave you to find your friends."

The guests had formed small groups, one around the piano where Dr. Thomas was accompanying a group who liked to sing, another in the corner by the fireplace where Mrs. Legerton was visiting with two young American fellows and the last group near the door leading to the dining room. In the angle of the bow window, Miss Romaniuk was chatting with Mrs. Murphy, the head nurse at the hospital.

Maurice Dufault made his way to his hostess's armchair.

She had not failed to notice the vice-principal's arrival. She had seen him come in with her husband, who immediately

slipped away, and stop for a few seconds to examine the gathering.

Tall and thin, he walked with a bit of a stoop. His reserved demeanour heightened his natural distinction, and his impeccable attire was in sharp contrast to the casual dress preferred by most people in Lyonsville. Mrs. Legerton took her time, appreciating the elegance of the dark suit he wore, noting that his tie was exactly the right half-shade of red and blue, before turning to her neighbour on the left to resume the conversation she had briefly interrupted.

Maurice Dufault waited until she was ready to pay attention to him. Then, bowing, he said, "My humble respects, *Madame*," and kissed her hand.

She blushed with pleasure at the unexpected show of courtesy. "Ah! There's French gallantry for you! Something a woman can always count on, isn't it, Mr. Dufault?" With a pout like a little girl waiting to be spoiled to make her forget some unjust punishment, she added, "You arrived very late, Maurice. I would have thought you'd be in a hurry to come and tell us about your vacation. How mean of you to make us wait, dear Maurice. What excuse do you have for your annoying tardiness? It's already past eleven o'clock, you rascal."

"*Madame* looks ravishing tonight," replied Maurice Dufault instead. "I daresay black velvet particularly enhances your blonde colouring." He continued in a slightly mocking tone, "A man would have to be blind not to be dazzled."

Mr. Legerton, who was stirring up the fire in the fireplace, stopped, poker in hand. Now really, his wife, a beauty? Either Maurice Dufault was making fun at their expense or he was short-sighted. He saw no reason to be dazzled by the woman who had borne his name all these years.

He looked at the young man, whose back was half-turned, then at his wife whose bleached hair barely concealed the fact that she had turned forty long ago. She was talking and gesturing to keep the vice-principal's attention, not noticing his mocking smile.

Mr. Legerton went back to rebuilding the pyramid of logs licked immediately by the flames. What did it matter to him if his wife took pleasure in what were mere social courtesies and therefore of no importance, or if she believed them? Too bad for her if she was still naive enough at her age to believe young men's lines. The important thing was that she was always there at his side when he needed her support. After living together for twenty years, how could they still admire one another? The main thing was to be able to count on her where his career as high school principal was involved. As for the rest, he couldn't care less. And if he himself, at times, still took an interest in feminine beauty and charm, well, there were younger, prettier women than his wife. There was Zosia Lupaniuk, for example, who was busy in the kitchen right now.

"If you will excuse me, I'd like to have a word with Dr. Lord. I see him right over there."

Mrs. Legerton adopted a pained expression. “Surely not before you have a whisky, Maurice. Come on, Tom,” she scolded. “Offer Mr. Dufault a drink.”

“You’ve got a bad cough, young man. You’d better come by my office.”

The coughing fit that gripped Maurice Dufault prevented him from answering. Dr. Lord continued, brandishing an old black pipe, “You’re poisoning yourself with those damned cigarettes. I suppose that cigarette you’re holding is neither the first nor the last you’ll smoke tonight.” He drew on his pipe, which was about to go out. “Death can’t come fast enough for young people nowadays. If they don’t crash at the first turn with their crazy speeding, they can always count on poisoning their lungs with cigarettes. What an absurd need for destruction!” he concluded, shaking his head gravely.

The older man’s gruff tone and harsh attack didn’t bother the vice-principal in the least. When he finally had his cough under control, he said in a voice entirely free of mockery, “I’m happy to see you again, Doctor, but not because of a harmless little cold. You’re right, I smoke too much. What can I say? It’s just another way of dealing with boredom. God knows how much I hate these parties,” he ended in a low voice.

"You are blasé, young man, which is most unsuitable at your age." Pleased to have another subject to raise, the doctor continued, punctuating each word emphatically with his index finger. "Before forty, you're not allowed to try and explain why every rose has its thorn."

"Excuse me, my dear friend, but I'm not as far from forty as you seem to think. As for the thorn in every rose, as you say, I've known that for a long time. Perhaps I've always known it," he added pensively.

The doctor continued to look at him without saying anything, so Maurice Dufault kept on. "Allow me to tell you something in confidence, although the timing seems inappropriate." After a look around the room that took in the whole gathering, he said, "If you look at the faces around us, however, maybe the timing is not so inappropriate. In any case, here it is. I've always had the impression, and I have it more often at parties like this one, behind the face each person displays so innocently, which lies so brazenly, is hidden another face not covered up with the make-up of everyday life, a totally naked face that seems infinitely sad to me. Why is it sad? Because life itself is sad, I suppose. Look at the hilarity in those faces, the false sparkle in their eyes, as much from alcohol as from the excitement of the moment, the smile on their lips a lie in itself. Isn't it all a grimacing caricature of an even uglier reality?" He murmured so quietly Dr. Lord had to move closer to hear his next words.

"Yet, there must be something else, there has to be something else, otherwise …"

"Otherwise …?" repeated the doctor.

Maurice Dufault made a weary gesture. "Otherwise, life is hardly worth living, is it?"

The older man shook his white head so energetically two curls abruptly dropped alongside his round cheeks, giving him an affable look, more reminiscent of an indulgent grandfather than the learned man he really was, able to decipher the secrets of the human body. "Life is always worth living, as you well know, Maurice."

The doctor took a moment to fill his pipe and relight it, then said, "Although it's true. People all fool themselves and other people; they lie to themselves then lie to others. We have to admit that's true. A human being isn't much, a package of flesh and bones. We wonder why the package doesn't fall apart, with nerves shaken by the slightest wind, a poor little motor not always up to the task. A strange mechanism, so weak, so vulnerable, always so ready to lie, yet also with a seed of power, a potential that never fails to astonish me."

He stopped as if to reflect on what he had just said or on what he was about to say. Maurice Dufault never took his eyes off him as he waited patiently for the doctor to pick up the thread.

"For lack of a better term, I'm reduced to calling it the soul or, if you like, the spirit of man, an indefinable something that works miracles. Oh! I know what I'm saying seems old-

fashioned, maybe even reprehensible to some of my colleagues, especially the very young ones. Nowadays, science wants an answer for everything. We should be talking about metaphysical phenomena, life forces … After all, what do I know? What is for sure is that more than once practitioners of the art of medicine have had to admit defeat before nothing more than a tiny flame that refuses to go out. That is what is important, Maurice; the rest is nothing but deceptive appearances, a protective cover or mask we hide behind to avoid getting hurt." Dr. Lord drew on his pipe, his expression serene.

"And that's the flame you look for in the bodies of people afflicted by illness, maybe marked by death, who insist you save them?"

The doctor corrected him gently. "That's the flame I try to rekindle in anyone who turns to me; nature or God does the rest."

Maurice Dufault sighed. "You're lucky, Doctor, to have kept your faith in your fellow man. Unfortunately, I lost that faith long ago."

"You're trying to convince yourself you've lost your faith. It's not the same thing." Dr. Lord smiled. He caressed the stem of his pipe. Under his thick, nearly white eyebrows, the doctor's searching eyes tried to discover what might lie behind the bitterness and weariness. Although his lips continued to smile, his gaze grew increasingly serious, as if he was afraid to find out the answer to a question he hardly dared voice.

The young man abruptly interrupted his train of thought to ask one last question. "Don't you ever get discouraged? Don't you get tired of trying to cure people who probably aren't worth the trouble?"

The doctor didn't react to his companion's last words. He merely explained, "I have bad days, as everyone does. Especially when I'm almost sure a patient is going to get better and I suddenly see him slip through my fingers without being able to do a thing to save him. By the way, let me tell you, a doctor never gets used to those tragic shifts in the wind." He continued on a happier note, "Fortunately, other patients suddenly get better in a jiffy, without us doctors knowing why. Unless some psychology buff goes to great lengths to explain the miracle," he concluded, laughing merrily.

He suddenly stopped laughing to add point blank, "You should get married, Maurice. I'm not joking," he scolded, seeing the vice-principal's ironic smile. "Man is not made to live alone. A home is a sort of harbour where you gather strength before facing the high seas again."

"And what happens when the water in the harbour gets churned up as rough as in the middle of the ocean? Tell me, my dear mentor, what becomes of the port of refuge under the assault of waves and storms? No, thank you, I prefer not to risk the only life I've been given."

"You're incorrigible, Maurice," said the doctor, who laughed in spite of himself at the vehemence of the vice-principal's

defence. "Still, your scepticism doesn't make you right. Believe me, in my experience as a doctor, a family of your own is better than the four walls of a room, no matter how luxurious. It's more comforting, more human, when you get right down to it. And don't contradict me."

Maurice Dufault was spared from answering by the arrival of a young girl in a black dress and white apron.

"Excuse me, Doctor. You're wanted on the telephone. It's the hospital," she added, with a smile and a quick jerk of her head like a young colt not yet subdued by the bit. She headed off in the direction of the kitchen, her blond curls dancing under a tiny black lace-trimmed cap.

"Poor butterfly," murmured the doctor, shaking his head, "another one who'll burn her wings."

He held out his hand to his companion in farewell. "Goodbye, Maurice. Think about what I just told you and, above all, don't forget to come to the office and see me. I'll give you something for your cough. See you soon."

Left alone, Maurice Dufault let his thoughts wander to the young girl for a minute. She was Peter's sister, Zosia Lupaniuk.

Pretty, barely eighteen years old, intoxicated with life and pleasure, she was said to be flippant and frivolous. Women weren't kind to her; perhaps they envied her a little. Whereas

every man, from the youngest intern to the newest arrival among the American engineers, rushed to take her to the dance on Saturday night or the movies or for a car ride. Although the vice-principal hadn't allowed himself to be seduced by her winning charms, it was as much out of laziness as out of some kind of fidelity to Mary Ann. However, he hadn't remained completely impervious to her impulsive vivaciousness any more than the others.

"Neither has Mr. Legerton," he murmured to himself, seeing the principal come out of the kitchen, red-faced and roaring with laughter. A furious look from Mrs. Legerton had no effect, and Maurice Dufault deduced that it was probably the last time she would require the services of Zosia Lupaniuk. The young Polish girl's carefree flirting had made her another enemy.

Maurice Dufault was about to rejoin the group of guests crowded around the buffet, when he saw his colleague Matthews coming toward him. He took a minute to accept a whisky before initiating a conversation that had little chance of being scintillating, because the relationship between them was polite but lacking in warmth. "Well, Walter, what's new? Are the typing and music courses running smoothly?" The vice-principal's ironic tone was not intended to put his listener at ease.

"Fine, fine," answered Matthews with a smile he would have liked to make more engaging, but the fear of being used as a plaything for the French teacher's sparkling wit and mockery froze the smile at the corner of his lips. To hide his nervousness, he quickly emptied his glass.

An astonished Maurice Dufault watched the sherry in his colleague's glass disappear. The suspicion that came to him as he watched Matthews down the glass in one gulp was confirmed when he saw him accept a second sherry. Matthews was a man who did not approve of drinking alcohol. He never allowed himself more than a finger of wine, then drank it awkwardly in small sips, to salve his conscience. Walter Matthews was definitely not himself.

Meanwhile, the vice-principal calmly savoured his whisky and waited for his colleague to say whatever had brought him over. Walter Matthews usually stayed in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Legerton, so Maurice Dufault hardly ever associated with him. Matthews didn't attempt to spend time with him either.

They had just exchanged the usual small talk about the weather and class work, when Matthews suddenly stopped chatting, which did not come naturally to him anyway. "Maurice," he said, without any transition, "I have something important to tell you. May I?"

He motioned for the vice-principal to follow him to the corner of the living room where a mahogany pedestal table stood topped with an enormous fern and flanked by two armchairs unoccupied for the moment.

They sat down. With a somewhat worried expression, the vice-principal started to light a cigarette to give the impression of composure. What important confidential information could Walter Matthews have to share in the middle of a party?

The typing teacher leaned toward him and whispered quickly, "Larry Ross has to be watched. He's planning something."

In his surprise, Maurice Dufault forgot about the match he had just struck, which burned his fingers. "It seems to me your news is really nothing out of the ordinary and could well have waited until Monday. I don't like to have my weekend spoiled by that idiot's escapades. If that's all you have to tell me …" He threw the charred match into the closest ashtray.

Mr. Matthews' face turned bright red. "It's also about the Polish boy, Pete Pani …" The insulting nickname had almost slipped out in his nervousness; he hurried to correct the error before he made it. "I mean Peter … uh … Peter, Piotr Lupaniuk."

"What have they done to Peter now?" The sharp tone revealed an underlying anxiety.

"Nothing yet. But I thought it was a good idea to warn you …"

"Warn me of what? Go on, speak."

The pointed questions and the ill-humoured acceptance of his explanations were enough to make Walter Matthews feel totally out of his depth. But he made one last effort, with the gestures of a drowning man struggling uselessly, "I may be mistaken … After all, I didn't hear much."

Maurice Dufault's eyes were on the group of guests moving slowly in front of the buffet and around the piano. Mr. Legerton was talking to the wife of the chairman of the Lyonsville School

Division, and young Dr. Thomas was introducing the intricate moves of a new dance to Muriel Legerton.

"Mr. Ross couldn't come tonight," explained Walter Matthews, in response to his companion's inquiring look. "He's in Calgary on business." He hesitated and added, "I also spoke to Mr. Legerton …"

"And what did he say?"

"That it was your responsibility, since you're in charge of discipline."

Maurice Dufault made an angry gesture. "Well," he answered, "I'm not in charge of discipline on the weekend. Tell me all about it on Monday." He abruptly stood up and headed for the buffet, where he was served another whisky.

"You're alone? We shouldn't abandon you that way. Come with me." It was Mrs. Legerton. She took him by the arm and led him to a love seat. He was still there half an hour later, docilely listening to his hostess's words with a vacant look on his face, as though his thoughts were elsewhere.

PART ONE

Chapter Four

After parties where he never failed to smoke one cigarette after another and down drink after drink to make the time go faster, Maurice Dufault was left with nothing but the aftertaste of tobacco and alcohol. Although the party had been like so many others, he was to remember two things, his hostess's enthusiastic expression of liking for him and the troubling presence of Zosia Lupaniuk at the Legertons' home.

Several times he had noticed the hungry looks the young Polish girl gave the noisy gathering; he watched her tap her foot nervously to the beat of the music while offering a tray of petit fours to the guests. In her black dress and white apron, her waist looked even smaller and her undulating walk attracted looks. Some of the men tried to pull her into the dancing, but she extricated herself nimbly leaving them with nothing

but her carefree laughter. By the end of the evening, some of the guests – Mr. Legerton among them – had joined her in the kitchen, and the young girl's light-hearted laugh could be heard again, this time mingled with the mysterious accents of a foreign language. Mrs. Legerton had a severe look on her face and the women of Lyonsville high society wore the contemptuous smile they reserved for women who dare to openly break with convention.

Among the elegant and snobbish crowd of young people, all looking prosperous, Maurice Dufault thought, not one would come to Zosia Lupaniuk's aid if one day she needed protection or assistance. To the pretty women, made more desirable by the muted light from the torchères, she was still a foreigner, an enemy whose youth and mystery were unpardonable. Men saw in her a fascinating reflection of a different world, an exotic world that any one of them would consider it his duty to reject the day he felt his world, the cozy little universe of his well-lined nest, was threatened.

Maurice Dufault suddenly remembered Dr. Lord's words of wisdom, how he had nodded his head with compassion. When it came to penetrating the secrets of the human conscience, the aging doctor had extraordinarily sharp antennae.

Perhaps it was pride that made Muriel Legerton insist on a tête-à-tête with him right then, so that others didn't pity her too much for her husband's indifference. If that was the case, and it was highly likely, that didn't explain why she had her eye

on him, and Maurice Dufault suddenly found the idea of playing comforter to his boss's wife particularly amusing.

Before long he gave no further thought to what Walter Matthews had been confiding to him when he interrupted him so pitilessly. There was no further discussion; his colleague avoided him completely. In the days that followed, Larry Ross's conduct was exemplary.

The term continued quietly. Nothing interrupted the routine, except football replaced softball at recess and, with the fall coming, business was booming in town.

The days flew by until Christmas, in contrast with the languid wave of students flowing through classrooms from morning until night. They came in chewing gum, their cheeks bulging, convinced the good things in life rightfully belonged to them, and left an hour later almost as indifferent as when they came in, except for a small minority, so small that it didn't seem worth sacrificing his health for. That was what Maurice Dufault thought on days when coughing fits, more frequent as the weather got colder, left him exhausted.

His condition was becoming a serious concern. Had anyone asked, he couldn't have said why he still hadn't gone to see Dr. Lord. Something was holding him back, something indefinable he didn't dare call a premonition, something he was careful not to examine too closely, so the days passed in the hope that a cure would appear on its own and the cough and chest pain would soon disappear without anyone's intervention. Since the

nights brought him almost no rest, he increasingly came into the classroom looking haggard, his nerves raw.

That morning, Larry Ross was the centre of a noisy group. When Maurice Dufault came in, he saw his long black hair, glistening with hair cream, among the blond and brunette brush cuts of most of his classmates.

His odd hairstyle with a deep wave, sideburns that made his face look older and two short tufts of hair meeting in the middle of the nape of his neck in a ducktail, went with his black leather jacket, tight pants and gaudy shirt, the get-up he and his friends had been sporting for a few months. Although George Berthaut, Maurice Leroy, Teddy Edwards and John Mandruchak considered it a duty and an honour to wear the odd outfit, as far as anyone could tell, it was Larry alone who decided when to let them grow long hair. People claimed the gang leader didn't tolerate any deviation from the pattern established over the summer.

Of course, both parents and teachers protested against the black leather jackets and made fun of the ducktail, but the young men were deaf to both pleading and teasing. The parents gave in and the teachers shut their eyes, not wanting to cause a ruckus with unpleasant repercussions.

"They'll get over it," said Mr. Legerton.

"Like everything else, like everything else," added Matthews imperturbably.

Maurice Dufault refused to make trouble over something so insignificant and pretended not to notice that the initiates appeared one after another sporting the hairstyle of the complacent young rebel without a cause. He closed his eyes, too, to the fact that black leather jackets outnumbered any other style of clothing. To anyone who expressed surprise, he responded curtly that the disciplinarian's role was not to introduce new regulations but to ensure compliance with existing regulations, which didn't ban either the get-up or the hairdo. Since the task of imposing new rules of conduct was the principal's alone, he didn't have to worry, Maurice Dufault thought; Mr. Legerton avoided any dispute with the Larry Ross gang like the plague.

Maurice Dufault was, of course, concerned at times by the extent of the movement that divided the high school students into what definitely appeared to be two distinct camps, which he referred to accurately enough as the "wolves" and the "sheep." Since Larry Ross didn't seem to care how the "sheep," for whom he did not hide his contempt, dressed or did their hair, the vice-principal was reassured and told himself Mr. Legerton might be right and this too would pass, like everything else.

That is why the spectacle that suddenly greeted him when he entered the classroom seemed like a nightmare. He even

wondered for a second whether he was still in the throes of fighting the monsters of the night.

Held down by three or four hellions whose cruel, stupid laughter turned them into monsters, Peter Lupaniuk was vainly struggling to escape the electric clippers Larry Ross brandished above his bushy head of hair. Plugged into the outlet used for the record player, the wire uncurled in black spirals. A sudden movement by the gang leader and the snake retracted, twisted, and the momentarily constricted spirals started to uncurl. Tears mixed with the blond hair falling from the clippers onto the boy's pale cheeks. His hair, bristling from the struggle, was bisected by two lines of pink skin with red streaks in the shape of a cross.

Tense with the effort to escape his attackers, Peter didn't say a word. When the vice-principal arrived, he had just bitten the arm of one of the culprits, who let out an ear-splitting scream of outrage.

The frightened girls had formed a circle apart. The boys who were not part of the gang bunched together wide-eyed, huddling fearfully, like a herd of sheep when a wolf is nearby.

Maurice Dufault gave them hardly a thought, his contempt mixed with a feeling of disgust he had never before experienced. With one leap, he was in the middle of the group of boys, who immediately let their victim go, appalled at the unexpected appearance of the vice-principal. Their cruel game had made them forget everything, even the time. Before they recovered

from their surprise, the vice-principal sent Larry Ross flying against the back wall, then, while the others withdrew, terrified, making way for him, he advanced on the guilty boy. Larry was afraid, probably for the first time in his life. He jumped to escape out the window that had deliberately been left open in case they were taken by surprise, but his foot tripped on the wire. Maurice Dufault merely had to grab him by the collar of his jacket.

In total silence, the vice-principal took the clippers Larry was still holding, which had been partially responsible for his fall. Slowly, deliberately, without saying a word, Maurice Dufault ran them twice through the wavy, perfumed hair of the young hoodlum.

A moment later, he was at his desk, and class had begun.

Justice had been done.

Despite everyone's astonishment, or maybe because of it, the news spread from corridor to corridor, classroom to classroom, so that by morning recess at ten thirty, there wasn't a student or teacher who was unaware of the incident. Going home at the end of the afternoon, Maurice Dufault had to pretend he had errands to run to avoid the questions of the people loitering in front of the pool hall. He discouraged the curious at school and in town; he had no intention of blowing the incident out

of proportion. Although he recognized the seriousness of the matter, he wanted it viewed as nothing more than adolescent behaviour. Most of all, he didn't want to think too much about Peter Lupaniuk.

That morning, seeing the boy with his clothing in disarray and his hair plastered to his forehead in sweaty strands and standing straight up at the back, fighting in the middle of the gang of wolves, with none of his classmates making the slightest effort to help him, Maurice Dufault had imagined for a minute how easy it would be to squash the odious Larry Ross like a repulsive bug. He had to resist the urge to knock the gang leader out. Never had anger made his pulse pound so violently in his temples. He resisted the urge by reflex, from a kind of instinctive control he owed, in part, to years of teaching and, in part, to an unconscious desire to limit his involvement.

The fact that he had clearly taken a stand troubled him, even though he had acted against the tyranny of a wrong-doer on behalf of a student treated with contempt because he was a foreigner and had a lame leg. He was almost angry with himself for intervening so dramatically. However, there was something tragic about Peter's life, at least at school. The vice-principal knew almost nothing of his other life, his life with his grandmother and sister, except what he had gleaned from the few snatches of conversation he had overheard here and there, scarcely paying attention.

Maurice Dufault would have preferred to forget the incident and act as if nothing troubling had happened, as if the mask of indifference he had deliberately created over the years had not suddenly been shattered into so many pieces it could never be reconstructed. But how could he ignore the situation when the Polish youngster was always right there to remind him?

Since the day of the attack, when events had taken a dramatic turn, Peter no longer left his side, motionless, silent, like a reflection of the vice-principal's conscience, the troubling mirror in which he saw what he had become, disinterested and detached, but with just enough remorse to be disturbed by it.

"Why don't you go play with your classmates, Peter? You'll get bored." Maurice Dufault was supervising the fifteen-minute recess. Nearby, not too close though to avoid annoying the vice-principal, Peter Lupaniuk was absentmindedly watching his classmates frolic in the freshly fallen snow.

The laughter grew louder, the shouts and commotion, too, as snowballs smashed against their target. Snowballs criss-crossed overhead, above the jubilant students in colourful scarves, who looked like a flock of multi-coloured birds flapping their wings in a white pond.

Maurice Dufault spotted them all. Even big Godelaine was there, red and out of breath, hard put to supply the projectiles needed to take the opposing fort, despite valiant efforts. George Berthaut, Maurice Leroy, John Mandruchak and Teddy

Edwards were defending their position behind hastily erected walls of snow. Enemy fire was useless against them.

Larry Ross was absent. He hadn't come back to class since the electric clippers episode.

Peter Lupaniuk was the only one not enjoying the unexpected entertainment of new snow.

"Go on, Peter," the vice-principal said again. A new sharpness in his voice showed irritation and a certain amount of impatience with the constant presence at his side. "Go on and play with the others. It'll be more interesting than standing around doing nothing."

The Polish boy had started to move toward the teacher, a movement brought to a halt when he heard his last words. A shadow of a smile barely begun was erased before it reached his china-blue eyes. Dragging his crippled leg, the boy slowly moved away in the direction indicated. He stopped near the fort where André Godelaine was working so hard, out of the line of fire, and began his solitary watch again.

Awkward, his thin body swimming in his clothes, a too-large cap pulled down over his ears against the cold, either jumping on his one good foot the way he did when he was cleaning the blackboard or standing still as he was now with his crippled leg hanging useless, he looked like a sad clown with big eyes and a white face, no longer amused by the show. Maurice Dufault regretted his momentary impatience as he watched Peter go away unwillingly, not daring to insist on staying for fear of

giving offence. But it was too late to revoke the order. Peter had obeyed immediately, at least partially. Although he didn't go so far as to join in his classmates' game, at least he had moved away to comply with the wish expressed to him. The vice-principal remained alone with his regrets for adding to the solitude of a child dropped suddenly by a strange fate in the midst of a world that wanted nothing to do with him.

Behind the desk stacked with books and papers, which blocked off a whole corner of the office occupied by the principal in the new addition, Mr. Legerton was smoking a cigar. Maurice Dufault inhaled the luxurious smell of tobacco that welcomed him from the doorway, trying to associate the aroma with someone he knew. It came to him when Mr. Legerton asked the question he had been expecting for over a week.

"What's this I hear about a hair-shaving incident?"

Maurice Dufault smiled. It was the first time the high school principal had asked a question point blank. What courage, what assurance he found in the thin layers rolled into an expensive cigar! Who would have thought the alchemy of dried tobacco could cast just the spell needed to turn the poor muddleheaded principal into the decisive-sounding leader he thought he was at that moment?

"Please explain your role in the affair." Mr. Legerton was enjoying himself. Paul Ross, Larry's father and a member of the board of the Lyonsville School Division, had given him a cigar and it gave him a directness, a firmer voice, an air of authority. Head held high, his look stern, he awaited the explanation he had demanded.

Maurice Dufault had seen worse, however. Amused by the transformation taking place before his eyes, he answered without hesitation, "You mean Larry Ross's latest brutality, Mr. Legerton?"

The principal eyed him coldly without answering. Behind the cigar, his eyes narrowed like a blade being sharpened.

"Well, sir, you put me in charge of discipline last September, so I permitted myself to punish that sorry excuse for a human being right there on the spot, using his own methods. He takes pleasure in brutalizing defenceless victims."

The direct and precise response, without pretence or excuse, was spoken with enough heat to alert the principal, as his words showed. "You are speaking … in a rather cavalier manner … a cavalier manner about the son of one of the … uh … the most … shall we say … respected families."

Maurice Dufault shrugged indifferently.

"It would be better to … uh … choose your words with greater discretion."

"I'd rather look at things head on, Mr. Legerton. And I must admit that, when I saw that crude kid mistreating a foreigner

with a crippled leg, and the other idiots laughing and urging him on, well, sir, I let myself get carried away by anger."

The half-smoked cigar was forgotten on the edge of the ashtray, its smell soon mingling with the more pungent odour of hot ashes. "That Polish kid again! He's caused nothing but trouble since he arrived. Why can't he do what the others do, participate … uh … in a word, co-operate?"

The key words had been uttered. *Participate, co-operate*, blend in with the herd or perish. That was really the point. Everyone had to be the same as the others. In this world, Maurice Dufault thought ironically, there is no room for anyone who stands out, who interferes with the operation of the machine. You have to submit or disappear. He knew something about that, because he had chosen to live on the sidelines. Up to then, no one had succeeded in getting rid of him, although not from lack of desire. Deep down he thought, without worrying about it too much, an opportunity like this would be just what Mr. Legerton needed to achieve his goal, to replace him with the faithful Matthews. To him, there were no problems and no exceptions. People like Peter Lupaniuk would have to learn to run with the herd.

"You might say he is deliberately disagreeable," said Mr. Legerton, in conclusion.

Peter, disagreeable? The principal was joking. How could he be disagreeable, a kid with a crippled leg who hardly ever spoke and never laughed? To whom? To brutes like Larry Ross for

whom the words "disability" and "foreigner" meant "persecution" and "suppression"? Really! You'd have to be an idiot to think Peter Lupaniuk was disagreeable. Couldn't people accept the simple fact that he was different? "You forget, Mr. Legerton, that the boy is a foreigner and cannot be expected to adjust overnight to our way of life, as superior as it may be," added Maurice Dufault mockingly.

He continued in a tone devoid of mockery. "He has experienced the horrors of the recent war, sir. He was barely five years old when his father was killed under fairly unusual circumstances. It seems to me that should be enough for us to want to make his life easier here."

Mr. Legerton was no longer listening. The words bounced off him without affecting the expression on his face, which had turned icy behind the thick glasses. Only his eyes continued to show life, a life devoid of warmth, his pupils the blue-grey of icebergs.

He had picked up his cigar and was smoking slowly again; the rising smoke hid his thoughts. Suddenly, he crushed out the stub of the cigar in the ashtray; turning back, he said in a scathing voice, "Peter Lupaniuk is the one responsible for this affair, and you are encouraging him. The others react in their own way, which may be ill-advised but typical of their age, after all." In the silence that followed, he repeated, "Ill-advised … but typical of their age. It's time … uh … the Polish boy understood that, here … it's the group … the group that counts, not

the individual who thinks he's superior to others and treats them with contempt."

Going about it in a roundabout way, at which he was a past master, Mr. Legerton had just killed two birds with one stone. It was his way of announcing not only that he blamed Peter for the disorderly conduct that had taken place but of reminding his assistant that he wouldn't forgive him for the role he had played either. They would both pay.

Maurice Dufault merely smiled contemptuously. "You find it typical to terrorize a boy who has a lame leg and can't defend himself? Do you also consider it right for a brainless kid to control even his classmates' hairstyle? Are we going to abdicate in the face of injustice again, Mr. Legerton, yes or no?"

His voice was so angry and the attack so direct that Mr. Legerton thought it wise to retreat, if only to create a diversion. "Always the grand words, eh, Maurice? If you were to be believed, the poor folk in Lyonsville are the target of bloody reprisals by gangsters still too young to shave," he continued half-smiling.

"You have just accurately described Larry Ross and his gang of troublemakers," Maurice Dufault replied dryly. "They are budding gangsters."

"Really, now, that little … uh … that penniless youngster has you completely blinded. Anyone would think … you've completely … uh … completely lost your mind. I put you in charge of discipline because I had confidence in you. It seemed to me

… you were … uh … just the man for the job. I would never have thought you'd resort to such childish behaviour."

It was Maurice Dufault's turn to listen only distractedly. What did it matter to him what his boss said, because his words were nothing but lies, pure fabrication? The principal had appointed him to handle disciplinary matters out of pique, to punish him for speaking out against Larry Ross's actions and for daring to question Mr. Legerton's leadership. And now he was accusing him of childish behaviour.

He suddenly felt weary of the whole business. What use would it be to discuss the matter any further? He and Mr. Legerton did not speak the same language. Who was right, in the end? The deliberately blind boss or his indifferent assistant who rarely tried to redress injustice? He told himself he was too tired to fight; he had almost managed to convince himself again. When you get right down to it, neither he nor anyone else can change anything in life. There would always be people like Larry Ross and Peter Lupaniuk; they were everywhere. Animals will continue to tear apart a sick animal that falls by the wayside and nothing can be done to stop them. The strongest always win. He might just as well resign himself to it.

Maurice Dufault was about to abandon the fight when the memory of the brutal scene made him feel ashamed. Young men from so-called good families had ganged up on a crippled boy solely for the pleasure of making him suffer. During the discussion, the pain had come back to overwhelm him. With an

effort, he turned to his boss, who was leaning back in his armchair watching him. The vice-principal said softly, "The punishment wasn't childish behaviour, Mr. Legerton. Although I admit I acted on the inspiration of the moment without taking time to reflect, I must also admit that I don't regret my actions. I'm convinced it was the only appropriate punishment for a brute like Larry Ross."

Astonished and irritated to see his subordinate rally, Mr. Legerton snickered and replied, "So you're acting on inspiration now? Well, I hope you're still inspired, especially when you offer Mr. Ross the apology he's entitled to expect from you."

"Apology! You're joking, sir." The look Maurice Dufault gave his boss was so searching and disturbing at the same time that the principal hesitated.

"Mr. Ross gave me to understand … uh … that he expected an explanation … an apology. It would be preferable … not to disappoint him," he added lamely.

"And if I refuse?"

Wicked joy flamed for a second in the depths of his pitiless eyes. "You'll have to find another position for next year. I would advise you not to keep Mr. Ross waiting. He's an impatient man."

The conversation was over. Maurice Dufault took a step toward the door then abruptly turned around. He said, "I was just doing my duty. In fact, I only regret one thing, and that's not raising my hand to Larry Ross sooner."

PART TWO

Chapter One

Maurice Dufault was waiting for the young woman to call him for his turn. The magazine he had just flipped through absentmindedly lay forgotten on his lap. The blonde pin-up decorating the cover had a tan that was out of place among the drawn features and pallid faces in the doctor's waiting room. Her appearance and the flagrant injustice of the fate of the people in the waiting room did not distract him but, instead, intensified the feeling of being cut off from life, a feeling that the sheer curtains and brightly coloured armchairs did nothing to dispel.

Maurice Dufault had finally come to see Dr. Lord. After many delays, many hours of depressing anguish that extinguished the glimmers of hope when he was sure for a moment

that he was getting better and would soon be cured, he had come looking for reassurance as much as medicine.

Suddenly, however, as if by enchantment, his fears had disappeared; the siege of ever-watchful fear that had been his constant companion for months had finally been lifted. He'd been there barely ten minutes and was already willing to admit he was wrong; all the symptoms he thought he'd discovered were just his imagination. He had invented them from start to finish. He forgot the nights of insomnia when a painful, stubborn cough refused to allow him any rest. He was sure, in those moments, that his life was ebbing away bit by bit, that each coughing fit accelerated the flow and nothing in the world could stop the fatal outpouring. He forgot all that. Only the fear of looking ridiculous prevented him from leaving the waiting room, where destiny had marked more than one face, as he could plainly see.

He smiled to himself, completely reassured. Why had he tormented himself about a harmless little cold? He just had to quit smoking as recommended. That's what he should have done, in fact, instead of poisoning his life with baseless fears. That's what Dr. Lord would tell him; he knew better than anyone where unbridled anxiety could lead.

Maurice Dufault thought he could already hear the older man scolding him the way you scold a child who's making himself miserable by idleness.

"A little less reading, young man, and more socializing. Go out, see your friends, have some fun and, for God's sake, throw those damned cigarettes in the garbage!"

He had earned all those reprimands. Didn't he have anything better to do than wallow in hypochondria? He'd been so afraid of tuberculosis. The thought of being condemned to put his life on hold in a sanatorium, even the most comfortable one in the world, to no longer be able to come and go at will, chilled him. What an idiot he'd been! He smiled remembering the hours he had spent at night questioning his memories, searching for tuberculosis patients in his family. All that was over. He just had to start again from scratch, to pick up the thread of his days where he had let it drop. "If the doctor insists, I'll never smoke again."

Calmer, he started watching the movements of others as they went behind the glass partition when the young woman called them.

After answering the nurse's questions, each in turn disappeared through the door at the back. Until the next one was called, nothing more was heard in the waiting room, where they were already separated from the living by an invisible curtain woven of suffering and hope, only the muted echo of an aria from an opera on a local radio station. Everything else seemed distant and insignificant in a doctor's waiting room, where so much misery was shamelessly on display. Mr. Legerton's

dishonesty, Larry Ross's cynicism and cruel jokes, and even Peter, poor Piotr, the perfect victim – not only did they not count; they were erased. Everything was diluted, absorbed by the miracle that would make him the vigorous, healthy man he used to be.

"Mr. Dufault?"

The nurse's call echoed in the silence. Maurice Dufault shivered. At that moment, the forgotten pain woke up again deep in his chest; it cost him an effort to get up from the armchair.

The doctor signalled the new arrival to take a seat without looking up from the sheet he was covering with tiny handwriting.

Maurice Dufault glanced around him.

On the pale grey wall was an oil painting of a tree bent over the calm waters of a lake; at the back of the room, behind the mahogany desk, blinds filtered the bright late-afternoon light of October. Two red leather armchairs and a shelf of medical reference books completed the furnishings.

His eyes came to rest on the face of the man in front of him. The doctor was already straightening up. He swiftly slid the sheet of paper, dark with black ink, into a heavy envelope and, with the same economy of movement, took off the glasses he wore low on his nose and rubbed his eyes before leaning back in his armchair, his hands resting in his lap.

"Not feeling well, Maurice?"

With renewed anxiety, Maurice Dufault indicated he wasn't.

"You should've come a month ago. Well, come on, I'll examine you." Dr. Lord was standing up, stethoscope in hand.

Taken aback by the speed of events, one thing leading to another without his being able to do a thing to slow them down or even try to change the relentless advance toward the outcome he both desired and feared, Maurice Dufault barely managed to ask the question that was tormenting him. "It's just a cold, a nasty cold, of course, nothing more, right?"

The doctor half-shrugged. Seeing the young man's face darken, he took a step toward him and giving his arm a strong, hard squeeze, said softly, "We'll soon know. Come on, let's go, my friend."

Lying on the narrow examining table, Maurice Dufault watched the doctor's hand move the stethoscope while he listened to his chest. At first, he tried to catch a reflection, an indication of the doctor's thoughts on the face bent over him. He tried to joke and burst out laughing abruptly, out of nervousness, but also to rid himself of the anguish gripping his throat. A coughing fit pushed him back onto the pillow breathless.

The examination finished, Dr. Lord put his stethoscope away in the pocket of his smock and pulled the only chair in the

room toward him. He said nothing for a moment, his eyes on the young man who was getting up.

The doctor's silence unnerved Maurice Dufault completely. To avoid hearing the words that had echoed in his head for weeks, he made himself say them out loud, as if giving them life and substance would exorcise them once and for all. "I have lung disease, don't I? It's tuberculosis, isn't it?"

The doctor shook his head so slightly in denial that it would have escaped anyone less observant than Maurice Dufault was at that moment.

"It's not tuberculosis!" The cry wrenched from deep inside him revealed the extent of the nightmare he had been fighting for so long. "There's never been any tuberculosis in my family. So why would I get it? That's exactly what I told myself. But the fear still exists, doesn't it? Without intending to, you let the fear settle in. I'd reached the point where I saw myself condemned to a sanatorium for the rest of my life. Now there's a fertile imagination for you!" He started to laugh softly, as if he didn't dare fully believe the miracle.

Dr. Lord didn't seem to share the joy made even more poignant by the younger man's volubility. He continued to observe him carefully and seemed reluctant to interrupt the flow of words. Wrapped up in his happiness, Maurice Dufault talked and talked, not noticing the doctor's strange silence or his increasingly serious look.

The doctor was picturing a long funeral procession of men and women of all ages from all walks of life. They had nothing in common, except that they had all clung for weeks to the smallest hope, the slightest shred of hope that could free them from the hallucination, the maze of fear, for a moment. It was a vain illusion and made the return to reality all the more brutal.

He questioned himself. Wasn't it better to allow a young life like the one before him to flourish in the sun, rather than toss it trembling into the dreaded labyrinth? What did it matter if, instead of drinking deeply, he tasted only a decidedly relative happiness, for such a short time, after all? What did it matter, now that it had become acceptable to denigrate the years we have left, to disdain them as if they were a blessing we could easily do without? What did it matter if Maurice Dufault himself succumbed to the temptation of the century? Faced with illness, he was reacting the way everyone does. His elation was all the more moving because he seemed to attach so little value to the simple fact of being alive, thinking humble, everyday joys counted for nothing. Dr. Lord was willing to admit it was natural to scorn what we have when we are sure we'll have it for a long time. To convince himself, he just had to remember the times he had given up hope, yet patients refused to die. Sooner or later, unfortunately sometimes too late, man always recognized that life is worth living, in spite of its inexplicable

tragedies, in spite of the thirst for the infinite that life delighted in intensifying.

Dr. Lord forced himself back to the problem at hand. As a doctor, his role was not to philosophize, even less to judge. However, when no cure was possible, did a man's dignity not lie in accepting his incomprehensible destiny, the destiny of all human beings, with full awareness? It would be disloyal to his fellow man to abuse his trust, even if it meant he would soon be struggling with the anguish of discovering, all of a sudden, that he had been deceived, that the death he thought had been vanquished was advancing day by day, closer and more threatening. The question had been asked so many times and always remained unanswered. He had faced that dilemma so often and never resolved it without being torn apart himself. Every man fears sickness, thought the older man, not so much because he fears suffering but because he instinctively recognizes that the first breach will be followed by another and another until the day when, tired of defending territory already conquered, he finally accepts defeat. Before that day comes, however, what suffering and despair!

Dr. Lord felt weary. On a late afternoon streaming with sunshine and well-being, he would have liked to say the magic words to this man not yet forty years old, the words that would chase away his ghosts forever. He would have liked to laugh with him about his past fears, then send him out into the light and warmth outside the hospital's white walls with a friendly

slap on the back. But the words wouldn't come and, instead of the expected incantatory formula, an immense pity for condemned youth rose from the depths of his being and prevented him from speaking.

"So, doctor, are you going to write me a prescription for my cold? I can't drag it along to the end of my days like cast-off old clothes – too much of a hindrance."

The doctor forced a smile. "Come on, Maurice, don't be in such a rush. A cough like yours can't be cured with pills."

"With what then? Don't antibiotics destroy any germs in no time at all, as they say? Come on, doctor, you aren't going to make me believe I need some special remedy? That would be too great an honour."

He was in a hurry to get out of the room; the antiseptic smell was starting to bother him. He was in a hurry to get out the hospital door, to get away from a world where suffering was a birthright. He was indifferent to the rustle of white uniforms; he couldn't care less about the light shadows gliding silently through the corridors. He needed fresh air and sunshine. Even the school and the smell of chalk and old books were preferable to this building; its immaculate whiteness didn't disguise the fact that people here were reduced to their common denominator. "Remember, man, that thou art dust …" He couldn't breathe in this room.

"I'd be a lot less worried if what you have was just a bad cold," the doctor suddenly said. After a moment, he continued, "Tell

me, Maurice, did you by any chance ever have a severe case of rheumatic fever when you were young?"

"Yes, when I was fourteen years old. In fact, that's what prevented me from enlisting in 1940, during the war. But what does that have to …" Leaving the question hanging, he waited smiling for the doctor to explain.

"You don't have tuberculosis," Dr. Lord explained again. "Maybe you would be better off if you did. Nowadays, people recover from tuberculosis." The vice-principal was looking at him without understanding, so he added in a lower voice, "It's your heart that has stopped working properly."

Maurice Dufault turned pale. "And people don't recover from that. That's what you mean."

The doctor let his hands drop in a gesture of powerlessness. I'm getting old, he thought. Out loud, he said, "I'm sorry, Maurice, I didn't express myself clearly. What I meant was, nowadays its fairly easy to cure tuberculosis or at least keep the disease in check.… Unfortunately, in your case, it's not just your lungs that are affected; at least, if they are, it's caused by something else …"

"Something more serious?" The words Maurice Dufault spoke to his doctor and friend were an admission as much as a question; saying them, he finally acknowledged out loud what he had been trying to push away for months, the secret conviction that his life was, in fact, slipping away and he was

powerless to hold onto it. He wasn't expecting an answer, so he was astonished to hear Dr. Lord's voice again.

"Yes," he answered simply. "The rheumatic fever you had when you were young profoundly affected your heart, which remained the weak point in your body. Over the years, the condition has worsened and now . . ."

"Can't the heart be treated the way everything else is?"

The older man got up. "A doctor can't replace a human heart, Maurice. However, you have to remember that medication can extend life for a good number of years, particularly if the patient limits his activities and avoids overwork."

"Yes, I know," interrupted the young man. He had a bitter taste in his mouth. "You recommend the poor devil put his life on hold, just let himself survive, vegetate. Well, I, for one, do not want to live like a vegetable."

For the next quarter of an hour, Maurice Dufault used all the resources of his imagination to tear himself free of the chain of events in which he felt irrevocably caught. The doctor's every word suggested he make an effort, try a treatment, and he was exhausted trying to find an invisible exit. Although he rejected the unavoidable aspect and refused to agree that Dr. Lord was right, he didn't succeed in silencing the inner voice that clearly acknowledged that illness had, in fact, taken root in his life. Silent at first, it would become increasingly demanding until it completely took over his life, and no one in the world could

do anything for him. He closed his eyes against the weight of despair that made him forget even his physical pain. "And if I refuse to live in slow motion, how much time do I have?"

The silence grew so heavy between the two men that the nurse's quiet steps on the other side of the partition startled them. Turning away from the feverish stare fixed on him, Dr. Lord said in a low voice, "Maybe a year and a half."

"No more?"

"No."

"Maybe less?"

"Maybe."

To cut short the monosyllabic conversation that was equally painful for both of them, the doctor went to the door. His hand on the glass doorknob, he turned back slowly. "Get dressed, Maurice. I'll be back in a minute."

The vice-principal went back down the road from the hospital, head lowered, arms dangling, unaware of anything except the words he had heard in the doctor's office. He walked with no other objective than to flee the hateful refrain, yet every breath from his labouring lungs marked the rhythm, chanted the lines, "You're going to die … You're going to die. You have barely a year … maybe less, maybe less." In the cool wind that announced the coming night, the sentence stuck to him; he felt

enveloped by it, as if wrapped in cold, sticky material, so cold his teeth chattered. He continued on, blind and determined, among the bustling people going back home at dinner time.

He had been kept nearly an hour at the hospital by the time a cardiogram and lung X-ray were taken, even though Dr. Lord had said, "It'll just take a second." However, he had to wait for the return of the radiologist who'd been called away. He let it be done, because he was in a state of lack of awareness. Nothing mattered. Other people's reasons, their actions slipped by without touching him. Someone brought him coffee, to make the time seem less long. Dr. Lord gave him a prescription for digitalis and recommended he not miss a pill morning and evening. He had immediately forgotten the name of a second prescription, for a sleeping pill. "When you sleep better, Maurice, you'll feel better," the doctor added to encourage him.

The last rays of sun had disappeared and the rising tide of dusk was flooding the streets when Maurice Dufault reached the small wooden bridge at the east end of town. He started across. The noise of his footsteps rang out for a second on the narrow boards, and then there was silence. He was on the other side.

At that precise moment, a truck with powerful lights surged from the side street that came out at the end of the bridge, a few metres from the school. The beam of light from the truck's headlights and the roar of the motor amplified in the calm that bathed the neighbourhood in the evening would have been

enough to alert the most distracted pedestrian. Not looking, listening only to what was going on inside him, Maurice Dufault hurried painfully, like a wounded animal toward his abandoned lair. The truck driver didn't see the moving shadow.

The squealing brakes of a vehicle stopping abruptly and a man's scolding voice rang out in the dark, "Hey, what's the matter with you? Can't you see?"

Maurice Dufault lifted his head, murmured something unintelligible and continued walking. He staggered like a drunk. A crazy desire to flee was followed by a feeling of extreme fatigue, and he swayed right and left, dragging his feet.

Seeing the haggard face and hearing the lifeless voice murmur words that made no sense, the man in the truck felt a surge of anger. "You lousy drunk, go sleep off your wine at home. At least there you won't bother anyone." He waited grumbling for the vice-principal to reach the sidewalk leading to the school before driving off as fast as he could.

A few seconds later, Maurice Dufault entered the classroom he had left just over an hour ago, full of hope.

Slumped over his desk, he appeared to be asleep. Through the door left ajar, a thin shaft of red light reached him from the electric light bulb in the corridor. The rest of the room was enveloped in darkness, the angles rounded, objects unidentifiable.

What was Maurice Dufault doing in the dark, silent classroom on a Friday evening, the start of an impatiently awaited weekend, when he could have gone home to his records and books, to his private life, without fear of interruption? What brought the indifferent, blasé man back to his workplace, the desire to be alone or the need for the illusion of still being close to young people who know nothing about sickness and death and don't pay either the slightest attention? He could not have said, even if he had been able to formulate a thought. Does anyone know why an injured bird huddles deep in the underbrush? Weren't the need for distancing and withdrawing a need for privacy, to hide the hurt and not be subjected to pity? It was important for someone suffering to forge armour in solitude as protection from the happiness and awkward sympathy of others. Where do we find words to apply the balm needed for pain? Like an animal, man is helpless when faced with suffering; he's afraid and flees after a few inept words that embarrass him. No sooner does he leave the sickroom than he immerses himself among the living to quickly forget what he has just seen.

Maurice Dufault made no attempt to understand what had brought him back to the school. He was not sleeping either. His head buried in his arms, he was quietly talking to himself, the way a child talks to himself when hurt. At times, a twitch of his hand or a sudden movement of his shoulders interrupted the strange monologue. He raised his head and looked around him without fully recognizing the objects in the classroom, familiar

as they were. At times, a breath that was almost a sob made his lips tremble, too. "No, no, I don't want to, I don't want to, my God!" His heavy head fell back on his arms, and the monologue continued in an unintelligible monotone. Time passed and the vice-principal was still sunk in the depths of the armchair.

Suddenly, a door slammed. After a few seconds of silence came the sound of light, uneven footsteps, the wood floor creaking and a rustling along the wall in the corridor. At the far end of the corridor appeared the silhouette of a young boy hopping as he approached. He had a flashlight in his hands but the light it projected was so weak that the darkness barely retreated in front of him. Once he stood beneath the red lamp in the corridor, he flicked off the flashlight before turning right, pushing the door open with the palm of his hand.

He stood there dumbfounded. It really was Mr. Dufault he could make out behind the teacher's desk. It really was his teacher, the body hunched in the armchair. A red stream of light from the corridor shone on the man collapsed there, in a scene like a bad movie.

The boy didn't waste time on details. Without a word, without even another glance at the vice-principal, he went straight to his desk and took out a metal cup, which he wiped mechanically and went out. A tap groaned nearby, water trickled into the bottom of the sink, and the young boy was back.

Without turning on the lights, as if he understood that darkness was a relief to someone unhappy, he approached his

teacher who had not moved. "Here, sir, drink this; it'll do you good."

Maurice Dufault looked at him blankly, but he took the glass of water held out to him and drank it in one gulp. Only then did he seem to notice where he was. He looked around at the desks, barely visible in the dark, the windows marbled with red from the light in the corridor and finally back at the thin face bent over him. "What're you doing here, Peter? It's Friday evening, my little friend."

Peter took the empty cup from the vice-principal's trembling hands before answering as naturally as can be, "I came to get my grammar workbook, sir. I forgot it."

Maurice Dufault's eyes followed him back to his desk. He watched him dig in the desk drawer. Without hurrying, as if to give his teacher time to pull himself together, Peter carefully examined each book he pulled out. Finding what he was looking for just as he saw Maurice Dufault standing waiting for him, he shoved the books and scribblers back into the bottom of the drawer and hurried to join him.

A few minutes later, in the street that was deserted at that hour, teacher and student slowly climbed back up the steep slope to the highest part of town. The windows of the houses cast patches of light on the sidewalk. A fine rain was falling, which would turn to snow by morning.

Maurice Dufault and Peter walked without speaking, the man's hand leaning heavily on his companion's shoulder.

PART TWO

Chapter Two

Maurice Dufault went to Mary Ann's increasingly often. For a few, too-brief hours, he almost managed to forget the sentence hanging over him. Although it was not gone, at least it seemed more distant, less irrevocable and, most of all, less immediate. Unfortunately, the intoxicating feeling always ended up dissipating, and bitterness and resentment took over again.

For the first few days, a temporary paralysis of his intelligence and awareness made him act like a sleepwalker. He went to and from class as if nothing had changed in his everyday life, as if his life was not threatened by a sudden and permanent end. His actions and even his thoughts did not belong to him, as if they were outside and only affected him indirectly. Even less talkative than usual, he remained at his desk for lengthy

periods, staring into space, his mind blank. No one seemed to notice the change in him. If any of his colleagues suddenly noticed his coldness or silence, he merely murmured, "Say, Dufault doesn't seem himself today" and immediately thought about something else. The children were much too taken with their games and plans to worry about their teacher. When they found him absentminded at times, they laughed quietly about it and hurried to take advantage of the opportunity. Only Peter Lupaniuk was really aware that some misfortune had occurred, but he didn't dare get too close for fear of embarrassing or annoying his teacher. However, he was never far away, and it was his thin face under hair that grew thick and straight like blond spikes Maurice Dufault noticed when he reconnected with his environment.

The torpor disappeared, and he was conscious of life starting to flow in his veins again. With the reawakening of his faculties, however, came suffering and rebellion. What had he done to be punished? Why was he being relentlessly hounded? How could God, if there was a God, take pleasure in torturing His creatures? The randomness of it, a roll of the dice where human life was at stake, was too unfair. A yank on the string and the puppet moved, first one way then the other. Life, death, that was it. Was that all?

Suffering made him nasty, not so much the physical pain, although the coughing fits were painful and depressing, but the clear awareness always on his mind that he had been picked

arbitrarily, the die was cast, it was useless to rebel. He would disappear. Not a trace would be left of him, not the slightest furrow in the sand. Once again destiny was making a clean sweep. He had always detested cruelty in any form, yet now he lashed out indiscriminately with biting mockery and sharp barbs, sparing no one. He could not control himself, as if by making others suffer, he could alleviate his own suffering a little. No longer the blasé and indifferent man who took refuge every evening among his books and records, he was bad-tempered and nasty, losing his temper over the least little thing.

Mary Ann didn't understand the change at all. She questioned herself frankly to no avail; she could not find any clue as to what she might have done wrong. But she laughed less and was quick to stop talking, a bitter line at the corner of her lips, whenever she saw him lose touch with what was going on around him.

One evening when he was even more harsh and impenetrable than usual, she suggested he go see the doctor. "You haven't been yourself for some time, my dear," she said with an attempt at a smile. "Something must be wrong. Maybe you should see the doctor, he …"

He didn't let her finish. With one stride, he was in the vestibule, where he put on his overcoat without a word and left, slamming the door.

Mary Ann was completely taken aback. "Try to understand something about men," she sighed with tears in her eyes.

Half an hour later he was back, without a word of excuse, looking so unhappy that Mary Ann, who was ready to shut the door in his face, let him come in. She didn't succeed in bringing joy to his pallid face that evening.

He started drinking. He went to the bar at the hotel, always alone. He sat apart, emptied glass after glass until the fumes from the alcohol, mixed with the smoke from the cigarette he always had burning, made him cough. Then he left again, walking hesitantly, without speaking to anyone. He went down one street after another until fatigue and cold finally made him go home, where he fell into a leaden sleep.

During those long weeks, he realized that, in all his thirty-seven years of living, he had learned nothing about dying. Quite the contrary! He had allowed himself to live as if he owed life nothing. In reading, he made the choices of a dilettante who is passionate about the beauty of language and the gymnastics of ideas but refuses to take a position. He knew the classics; he had read Pascal, Baudelaire, Nietzsche and many others. Naturally eclectic in his tastes, admittedly he had flitted from one flower to the next gathering precious pollen, like a bee making honey. Yet he had the impression he was bankrupt. His creditor was waiting for him at the turn in the road, and he didn't have what he needed to pay his debt.

He had chosen to live outside the arena, not ally himself with any cause, for fear of the obligation to choose and get

involved. Now, he found himself alone, without any family or real friends. In all of Lyonsville, he had only Mary Ann and Dr. Lord. He avoided the doctor and was loath to confide in Mary Ann, out of a sense of privacy and perhaps also because he was afraid to see her detach herself from him. How could he ask a woman, even the most loving, to nurse a dying man?

At times, after a night of deep sleep, he felt revived. Hope was reborn, timid and tenacious, and he rediscovered the desire to live. Or perhaps it was more like a passion for life took over, a firm decision not to submit, a desire so intense not to give up that he imagined he was feeling better and the doctor had made a mistake. The best doctor was not infallible; Dr. Lord had said so himself, more than once. The air seemed more pure, the sun brighter, the snow covered the ground with changing glints of opal. He walked to class with a light step. Until the first coughing fit, the first shooting pain in his chest, he thought he had won the battle.

The winter holidays were approaching. Multi-coloured lights outlined the shape of Santa Claus on roofs white with snow. Window displays overflowing with toys, jewellery and an array of shining, sparkling objects from Santa's sack caught every eye. Crowds hurried from one shop to the next, from one store

to the next, but the hurried pace did not stop people from telling each other the latest news. Two names were on everyone's lips, the vice-principal's and Zosia Lupaniuk.

Maurice Dufault had been seen too often at the bar in the hotel not to conclude he'd become a regular. However, it wasn't so much his going to the bar regularly that caused criticism. That was suspect to say the least, although maybe no more suspect than his frequent visits to the Forsythes, even when Annunzio's work kept him away from home, which aroused some people's curiosity. It was the fact that he always drank alone, without talking to a single soul. Only an alcoholic would do that. His surprising behaviour was the explanation for the strange punishment inflicted on Larry Ross. Most people said Maurice Dufault would pay dearly for it come spring, because Mr. Ross had filed a complaint with the school board.

The young Polish girl's popularity had increased over the winter; however, her reputation was suffering. Men smiled when they heard her name; women pursed their lips with contempt. It was time her grandmother intervened, in everyone's opinion; sooner or later the girl would bring dishonour to her family.

Peter had gradually made himself his teacher's keeper. He followed him like a shadow. For some weeks now, however, the shadow had no longer been walking behind but beside the vice-principal, even talking to him at times.

On December 24, Maurice Dufault went to Edmonton for a holiday until New Year's Day. He walked the streets all day, following the crowd to department stores where he stood for a long time in front of the window displays. The sight of so many presents made him smile in spite of himself, taking him back suddenly to his childhood. By the end of the evening, lighthearted, his head full of childhood images, he decided to attend Midnight Mass, something he hadn't done for a long time.

The celebrant, in a white chasuble with a large gold cross, was reciting the *Confiteor, mea culpa, mea culpa.*... Maurice Dufault struck his chest.

"Let's get you to bed quickly," his mother used to say as soon as the evening meal was finished and the dishes put away in the walnut buffet. In his memory, he could still see its shining polished surface against the pale yellow wall of the kitchen. "Go on, get to bed. You have to get to sleep right away if you want to go to Midnight Mass. I'll wake you at eleven o'clock."

Her soft hand had smoothed his hair, which was never combed and, my goodness, it looked like Peter Lupaniuk's. Poor Piotr, Maurice Dufault thought at once. What a childhood he must have had in a country fired and bloodied by war! The thought of the Polish boy disappeared almost immediately in a sudden resurgence of memories.

Voices had risen from the shroud of years. Faces had surfaced, taking him back to the past, in young Maurice's shoes. The priest's movements at the altar were the same. The prayers he had whispered as a child, sometimes fervently, sometimes absentmindedly, watching wondrous worlds rise through the smoke of the incense, came from his lips word for word, clearly, exactly as he had always recited them.

Gloria in excelsis Deo, the song of joy rose to the vaulted ceiling and lingered there. The majestic chords of the gigantic organ still floated above the seven- or nine-year-old little boy Maurice Dufault had once been, searching for a harmony only he knew – the chimes of the single bell of a village church that had bestowed generous gifts on him, the trembling candlelight around a crèche, the scent of pine from trees felled in the nearby forest to shelter the God Child, the troubling smoke of incense, the songs and chimes. All that beauty, all that music long asleep rose again from the depths of his being, threatening to burst out in front of the whole world. How well he remembered! "Isn't the child the adult once was still there, however deformed or distorted?" he murmured, deeply moved. "All it takes is a chance line from a song or a prayer to bring back the past and overwhelm him?" Filled with tenderness, he coughed to hide his emotion.

His mother was again at his side. They were walking hand in hand toward a brightly lit window, following the call of the bell pealing above, not far from the stars. Muffled against the

cold, the child was trotting through the snow and the darkness, eager to arrive at the awaited party, his mother's impatient hand pulling, pulling for fear of arriving late, for fear there would be no more room for them at the inn.

How long ago it all was! How little he had changed after all! He saw himself again at twelve and fifteen years of age, his eyes bright, enlivened by the desire to possess all the knowledge in the world. Like all teenagers of his generation, the generation before the atomic bomb, who still believed in something, he had created what he and his schoolmates called the novel of their life, with intrepid action, devotion, sacrifice, all leading to great things. The big book of the years to come was dominated by action, by the extent and wealth of achievements, the pages of happiness the greatest in number. Other pages marked by lack of success or unhappiness were merely a spur, if you could imagine ever needing to be urged to act for justice and honour. He had to acknowledge that the priests had had a gift for inflaming the souls in their charge; they had known how to prepare them for face-to-face combat in the bright light of day. However, they had glossed too quickly over the stings of daily life, the compromises and the cowardice. Armed with a degree and the medal of excellence awarded to the most promising student, Maurice Dufault had left college at twenty years old with the certainty that everything was clear and unique, black or white, no shades of grey.

Two years later he had met Jacqueline.

A colourful crowd was gliding over the ice. Skates scraped, carving strange arabesques underfoot as couples waltzed to the melody from the overhead loudspeaker.

Maurice Dufault had stopped to watch the skaters come and go, calling to one another. He enjoyed their laughter, because he had worked so hard. He smiled at the thought that he was young, life was beautiful, he had nothing to fear, and he had done the right thing to come to the village in the south.

In 1938, Alberta had been in the throes of a full-fledged economic crisis. There was little money, little work and still less to harvest, which had made him postpone studying medicine until later in spite of his mother's objections.

"In three years, four at most, I'll have enough saved to start medical school. It's just postponed; you'll see."

His mother had insisted however, "You should never put off your career until later, son. Too many things happen in life. In the end, you get bogged down or forget about it."

He had not agreed to his mother selling her property to pay for his future plans, so he had become a teacher. Enthusiastic and zealous, he had never counted the hours he devoted to his students. He felt relaxed at the brand new skating rink. He had been the first one to suggest and encourage its construction, and it had become a meeting place for young people. He was also the one who had had the idea for a masked ball to celebrate

Carnival, to help the village forget its troubles even though it lacked the necessities, at times.

With his tall fur hat, red jacket and baggy pants, the young schoolteacher looked like a conquering Cossack. A black mask concealed the upper part of his face, adding a note of mystery somewhat unsettling to feminine hearts. He put on his skates, headed onto the ice, took a few turns on the rink and, feeling in shape, glided into the turbulent crowd of skaters. When the music ended and the crowd dispersed, he stopped to catch his breath. He saw a tiny ballerina still dancing on the rink, on the arm of a young man in black tights.

They were expert skaters. The young girl, in particular, held his attention. Tiny in her white tutu, a tiara holding back her full hair, she was so light, a breath would have been enough to carry her away. At least, that's what Maurice Dufault thought as he watched her glide, turn and spin as if she had never done anything else in her life. Her graceful movements and liveliness made the young man's inexperienced heart leap more than once. By the end of the evening, he had fallen desperately in love with a ballet dancer from the *Opéra* whose identity was only revealed at the last waltz, when everyone had to take off their masks. She was the new operator at the telephone exchange in the village.

The calm, orderly life Maurice Dufault had known until then was completely transformed. He had a taste of happiness so big it immediately replaced all his other little everyday joys, or

maybe increased them all until there was just one immense, unthinking, almost ridiculous joy. That did not prevent him from being tormented by the thought that happiness like his couldn't last; it already carried its own death sentence and was bound to disappear sooner or later. He shared his apprehension with Jacqueline, who mocked him and refused to think about tomorrow.

He was right. Three months later, Jacqueline said she was pregnant. That was the end of the cloudless days of youth. Neither one of them wanted to believe the new reality that was there, so close. They had to come to grips with it. Neither one of them was ready.

Maurice immediately acknowledged responsibility; he hadn't been able to protect her from himself. They would get married without delay and leave the village as soon as classes ended. The decision was not made without bitterness, because he had to renounce his future plans and resign himself to remaining a teacher all his life. He didn't dare think about the disappointment he would cause his mother.

The strange thing was, Jacqueline had turned down his offer of marriage. It was better to wait, she told him.

He saw her less and less. She began to spend the weekends in the city whenever her work allowed. She was even away during the week, and Maurice Dufault found out she was often seen with the young man who had been her partner the evening of the Carnival, the son of the owner of a major store. Jealous of

the new person sharing her life, disappointed and hurt because she no longer gave him more than a tiny share, he decided to ask for an explanation.

His timing was poor. Pale, with shadows under her eyes, Jacqueline had replied bitterly. "What does it have to do with you? I'm free to act as I choose, am I not? Besides, I didn't agree to be your wife yet; until I do, I intend to keep my freedom."

He talked to her in vain about the child who would be born in a few months and needed a father. He told her again he loved her and reminded her of their past happiness, which they could win back if they both made a little effort, but it was no use. Nothing was any use. She didn't even look at him; she was preoccupied and kept turning a gold bracelet with a shiny emerald around on her wrist. Wounded, humiliated, he then spoke words he would regret. "If I'm willing to give up my future plans, which by the way will break my mother's heart, well, it seems to me you could sacrifice a few outings in return, even if they are more pleasant than the rare moments you spend with me. It's not my fault I can't offer you jewels the way papa's boy does."

Jacqueline flushed with anger. "I'm free. Do you understand? Free! I have no intention of giving up my freedom to become a cook and cleaning woman for a penniless little schoolteacher. Go on, go back to your mother, while there's still time."

With that, she left him, before he had recovered from his stupefaction or found a word or gesture to keep her, to make

the gay and affectionate Jacqueline he loved reappear and chase away this other strange and sullen Jacqueline forever. A week later, he found out she had just married the young man from the city and finally understood what he had refused to believe until then – his child would have another father.

The ghosts of a past Maurice Dufault no longer thought about had tricked him by finding a way through his memories, through layers of indifference and dislike that had allowed no light to penetrate for a long time. He examined each image he rediscovered, thought about each event, tried to solve the puzzle of each of the moments that had made him the man he was today.

When the war came along, he had wanted to enlist, out of a sense of duty, of course, but also to run away and, by running away, to forget. The months following Jacqueline's marriage were terrible. Not a word from her, not a sign of life. "Madame is out," the maid replied to his telephone calls and attempts to see her. His letters remained unanswered. One day, however, he received a letter signed by her young husband, threatening to take legal action for blackmail if he continued to harass her. Maurice Dufault wondered what she had said to dupe him.

He had seen her again one more time, at the wheel of a car. Looking sprightly in a tiny yellow boater, she was chatting and

laughing with a friend, the emerald on the gold bracelet sparkling on her bare arm. She passed him with no more expression in her glance than she would have given a passing stranger. He called her a few days later, ready to promise anything if he could see her alone for a moment, but a stranger's voice at the other end of the line announced that the young couple had left Edmonton without leaving a forwarding address. He was never to see her again. All he had left of her was the memory of a smiling young woman happy to be spoiled by life, her little boater with its ribbon and the flash of an emerald in the sunlight. He no longer remembered her features very clearly; time had swept them away, along with the remains of their love. Even thoughts of the son he would never know had been erased. Ultimately everyone grows tired of suffering. Everything gets used up, he had concluded, pain and love.

The recruiting unit had refused him for health reasons. He was told he had a heart condition as a result of acute rheumatic fever. He had burst out laughing, greatly scandalizing all those present. How could the gentlemen with the gold stripes understand that he wasn't a heart patient, but he did have a broken heart? Couldn't a person die of that, too?

Something really had died in him. A spring was broken; he never again had dreams or felt ecstasy or even warmth. He kept on living out of habit, without enthusiasm and without rebellion. Ersatz dilettantism replaced his youthful convictions; the demanding voices gradually fell silent. The years had flowed

smoothly after that, without worries or commitments. His plans to study never materialized. With his mother's death, his desire to become a doctor had subsided.

He was hired as a high school teacher in Lyonsville. With postwar prosperity carrying right through to teaching, he lived well, alone and independent, asking nothing from anyone and carefully ignoring the advances of the rare colleague his coldness didn't deter. He remained attached to Mary Ann because each of them maintained absolute freedom – no reproaches, no demands. He knew only what the young woman wanted to tell him about her life, and she never asked him any questions. Their only link was a kind of affectionate camaraderie, without ups and downs, without waves – a smooth road, a calm sea, pleasing to the blasé man he had become. And he thought he was happy, at least as happy as anyone can hope to be on this earth.

One word from Dr. Lord had been enough to shatter his world. The debris lay all around him in that downtown church, lifeless fragments of a bad painting he refused to recognize as his. He took them in his hands, one after another, weighed them cautiously, examined the pattern and tried to account for the years that had disappeared and to persuade himself he hadn't totally wasted his life. "Haven't I been a conscientious teacher?" he asked himself. "Of course," was the answer, but it hadn't cost him anything, because he liked work well done. Just last October, he hadn't hesitated to incur the wrath of Larry

Ross's father to protect a crippled child. All that was true. But didn't the pleasure of confounding Mr. Legerton have something to do with it? Wasn't that satisfaction worth his position as vice-principal?

The dialogue continued. There was an answer for every question, but the answer was never exactly what he expected. Something was missing. He had never laboured anywhere, never forced himself to do anything. In short, he had never taken any trouble for anyone. He had let himself live without a thought for anything whatsoever that didn't directly affect him. A few hours of conscientious work and the rare occasions when he had stood firm against injustice weighed little in comparison with weeks and months of living apart, behind the wall he had erected between himself and his fellow humans. That was the closing balance, images that had no definition or dimension because they had never been chiselled by suffering or effort, colourless days that were all the same, with a glimmer of light here and there capable of heralding a new dawn.

The dialogue stopped abruptly. The monologue started up again, insistent and exhausting. A human being is irreplaceable. On went Maurice Dufault's soliloquy, while the Elevation followed the Offertory and the prayers of the *Agnus Dei* mingled with the smoke rising from the incense. No one will come after me, another me, with the same faculties and aptitudes, the same hunger and thirst. There will never be another me. I'm unique, and, as a result, irreplaceable. Yet nothing will remain

of my passage on this earth. I'm going to leave with empty hands, desperately empty, and it's too late to start over.

Maurice Dufault understood that if he didn't leave the church soon, he would howl like a crazy man and be locked up with other lunatics. He was angry at himself for wasting his life, but also, more importantly, he was angry at whoever held the strings for making him dance such a futile, ridiculous dance.

Why had he come here on Christmas Eve? To rediscover the faith of his childhood, to seek comfort? Well, he had rediscovered the years gone by, but they only served to measure the extent of his despair. The rest was swallowed forever.

Maurice Dufault shivered in the cold air. He hurried to a bus stop, arriving just in time to rush onto the warm, humid vehicle that smelled like coal and wet wool. A quarter of an hour later, he got off in front of his hotel.

He was about to go in when the thought of being alone in his room pushed him back outside. He passed people out walking late at night and had to make his way through a laughing group of young people. With no other objective than to escape the hallucinatory ghosts of madness he felt hovering nearby, with grimacing faces he thought he could see already, he headed for the large doors of a dance hall that opened onto the street.

Pushed and elbowed, he found himself dragged right out onto the dance floor.

"Hey there, baby," a low, disturbing voice suddenly said, immediately reminding him of a Marlene Dietrich movie. "You don't dance alone on Christmas Eve. Come on, come and dance with me; it'll be a lot more fun."

The voice came from a tall, shapely blonde in a red velvet evening dress, with a silver cigarette holder in her hand. The young man noticed her fingernails, red like her dress, the polish chipped. He was about to leave her standing there when a movement in the crowd pushed him against her.

"That's right, baby," the attractive voice continued. "Let's dance."

Maurice Dufault let himself go, willing to do anything to avoid his solitude and his ghosts. The blonde chatted tirelessly about anything and everything. All he had to do was listen; no answer was required.

"That's better now, isn't it?" she said after they had gone around the room twice. "You dance better than the others. You dance like a gentleman," she added, with an air of complicity.

His only answer was a smile.

"And you're a nice guy, too, because you didn't want to dance with me. I could see it in your face. The others didn't want to dance with me, either. Yet, I'm a woman like any other. It's sad for a woman to be alone on Christmas Eve," she ended with a sigh.

"For a man, too."

The hoarse voice, still with a trace of anguish, didn't seem to surprise the blonde. "Do you know what you need, baby? A glass of whisky to celebrate Christmas and someone to drink with you. My apartment isn't far from here. We'd be more comfortable there than in this dance hall. Come on, let's go." She took him by the arm, collected their coats from the cloakroom and left with him.

They turned left at the first street and went down toward the river. They followed the avenue around the hill for a minute, then took a narrow street that led to the districts below. Ten minutes after leaving the dance hall, Maurice Dufault was sunk deep in a soft couch drinking whisky, with the blonde beside him smoking, drinking and staring off into space. "We aren't very gay for a holiday night," she said suddenly.

She got up abruptly and her dress flipped up, revealing shapely ankles. "We need another drink and some music." She disappeared into a tiny kitchen, its doorway hidden by a screen, and came back at once carrying two glasses filled to the brim. She held one out to Maurice who hurriedly accepted it and, putting hers down on a low table nearby, she turned on a radio the same pale pink colour as the room before coming back to sit with her guest.

Silence enveloped them again, heavy and sad, like the room; its walls and thick, dark red drapes made the fanciful hopes of

the senses even more poignant. A trace of perfume floated in the air.

Maurice Dufault turned to his companion. "What's your name?"

"Barbara Saint-Clair."

"Is that your real name?"

The young woman shook her head. "Of course not, I used to be called Marie-Claire, before … before the war … Marie-Claire Anjou." She started to laugh nervously. Moving closer, she took his hands in a gesture more timid than assured. "But you didn't come here to ask me about my past, baby. It isn't very pretty, you know, my past … Yet, in my own way, I'm a good girl, better than many."

The haughty tone of her words made him smile. "You're probably right," he said, taking her hands in turn and holding them in his, so he couldn't see the chipped red fingernails. "Yes, you're undoubtedly right," he repeated. "My God, who would dare to criticize you? Isn't a person who judges just as guilty in his way as the person charged? In any case, you're every bit as good as me. Come here, come here so I can kiss you."

Anxious about the downturn in the conversation, however, the blonde nimbly evaded him. "Not before we have another drink," she called out to him as she disappeared behind the screen.

The third glass of whisky downed in one swallow finally warmed their hearts and minds. They started to dance in the

cramped room. Half-drunk, they bumped into furniture and got tangled up in the little throw rugs on the worn wood floor. Each time, they burst out laughing as if someone had played a good joke on them.

Without knowing how, they suddenly found themselves with their heads buried in the cushions of a sofa bed in a corner of the room. Maurice Dufault straightened up laughing heartily. Barbara made an unsuccessful effort to regain her balance, stretched out on the silky bedspread and closed her eyes.

Maurice came closer. "Why not?" he asked himself. It was one way, like any other, of celebrating Christmas. Marie-Claire Anjou, or rather Barbara Saint-Clair, hadn't brought him here just to chat like old friends meeting again after many years. What did they have to say to one another? What memories could they share? They were strangers and would stay strangers. An hour, two hours together, then each of them would go their own way again in their own solitude. What painful thoughts surfaced at that very moment on the woman's face open to him in unconscious nakedness?

Barbara was asleep, an arm folded under her head. A strand of blond hair shadowed her forehead. Bending over her, Maurice Dufault noticed that the gold colour disappeared before reaching the greying roots of her hair visible against an ashy background. The young man turned away quickly, ashamed at having discovered the deception. Two wrinkles furrowed the young woman's almost transparent temples. Relaxed in sleep,

the skin on her cheeks above her jaw looked slack, but her mouth was still young, made for smiling.

"She must not smile often now," murmured her guest.

Her figure was young as well. Maurice Dufault enjoyed imagining the young girl Marie-Claire Anjou had been before she became Barbara Saint-Clair. Gay probably, with a touch of languor, the husky timbre of her voice must have troubled more than one young man's heart. There was undoubtedly a time when she was as clear and limpid as her name. What had happened to her, too, that made her a woman whose name and actions were lies?

He contemplated the defenceless feminine face revealed in sleep a minute longer, then gently pulled up the eiderdown quilt folded in a fan at the foot of the sofa bed and covered her the way he would tuck in a child. He had lost all desire. He left the apartment on tiptoe and went back to his hotel. It was three o'clock in the morning.

PART TWO

Chapter Three

The only result of the ten-day holiday was to confirm Maurice Dufault's opinion, a feeling he examined in the hours of leisure that had taken him back in time, the certainty that his thirty-seven years would not leave the least sign on the shifting sand of the century. He had come into this world on a January morning and would soon leave it, his hands as empty as when he came. A whole life had slipped between his fingers, foolishly, effortlessly, and he had only grasped the foam on the surface of the waves for a second. He had never gone to the heart of the turbulent whirlpool, although he had approached the edge, at times, as he had with Peter Lupaniuk, always with both feet planted firmly on land, a cautious voyager bending over the precipice for only a second.

He had plenty of time to realize that his tragedy was not just forgetting the need for suffering and labouring to win the

slightest hope, but refusing to believe in anything. Yet he did his work conscientiously, out of basic decency and out of habit, too. In the final analysis, it cost him less to be a good teacher and keep a firm hand on the helm than to let the vessel drift with the current. It was less painful. He had always refused to openly take a position, even about Peter who, he had to admit, played an increasingly important part in his life. His personal concerns, the rising tide of despair that threatened to drown him in bitterness at times, had not completely erased the memory of the Polish youngster. More than once, he had asked himself whether some gift, a good meal, had lit the depths of the boy's eyes with a bit of joy. In lucid moments, he couldn't easily forgive himself for being away from Lyonsville on Christmas Eve, with nothing more than a handshake and a distracted thank you for his new guardian angel, who had insisted on going with him to the train station.

Peter had insisted on carrying his light travel bag. His too-large rubber boots gaped with each step, making him trip in the soft snow, but he refused to abandon his burden. Maurice Dufault let him carry it more from mental laziness than physical fatigue.

They had left one another with a not very convincing "Merry Christmas" on either side and, through the curtain of his compartment, the vice-principal had watched Peter, in his threadbare coat, turn and disappear between the buildings at the station.

He saw him again ten days later performing like a clown in front of the blackboard. It was a quarter to nine in the morning, and the grade ten classroom was already full. Stopped in his tracks in the doorway by bursts of laughter from the boys and the shrill voices of the girls, it took the vice-principal a minute to figure out the cause of the uproar. He finally managed to pick out Peter's tousled head among the group of children clapping their hands and stamping their feet. Willow branches from a flower pot forgotten on a shelf at the back of the classroom were stuck in his hair.

In the centre of a semi-circle that kept shrinking as more youngsters joined the audience, Peter Lupaniuk was jumping and spinning on his one good leg. With the teacher's ruler pressed against his shoulder for a rifle, he pretended to take aim at an invisible enemy. Each time the barrel of his gun pointed at one or another of his classmates, a strident noise like a machine gun burst from his lips and the enemy fell heavily.

Suddenly Peter let his rifle fall and started to crawl, listening for a sound he alone heard. His hands pushed away imaginary bushes on either side to make his way across what appeared to be a field invaded by tall grass, thorn bushes and brambles. He advanced slowly, cautiously, stopping to listen and scan his surroundings. His breathing was choppy, his eyes too wide, like a lookout on watch for the enemy. He jumped forward abruptly, grabbed something in his hands, stuffed it under his jacket and fled as fast as his lame leg allowed. He pantomimed lighting

a fire and roasting a chicken over the coals, a stolen chicken apparently. Dinner was ready. The look of a starving man who has finally found something to satisfy his hunger came over the child's face. He tore the bird apart and gave pieces to three invisible companions, then bit into the tender flesh himself. He had just brought the piece of chicken to his mouth when he suddenly jumped back. His clenched fingers opened slowly, without resistance, and he raised his arms, centimetre by centimetre, straight above his head. At the same time, an involuntary pallor covered his face. A dry click of his tongue like a gunshot sent a shiver through the audience, and he fell to the ground. His head fell back on his right arm and his body grew still. An instant later, he was standing, without a shadow of a smile.

"That was my most memorable Christmas," he whispered.

Only that afternoon did Maurice Dufault understand the meaning of the pantomime, which had moved him. He'd been trying to associate it with some memory, too vague to link to Peter's actions, strange as they were. His memory shied from every attempt, so the vice-principal decided to question the students.

Since Christmas Eve, when he had seen for the first time what had become of the deserted expanse of years and their promise

of success and happiness, and the Midnight Mass he had fled like a madman, a need for human warmth, a barely perceptible desire to make up for lost time, had brought him closer to the people who shared his days, at least in his thoughts. Not that he had made a resolution to start over again; he hadn't gone that far. In fact, he wasn't fully aware of what was happening inside him. He only recognized that he had to think about something else at any cost, forget himself if possible and think about someone else, to avoid sinking into despair that would lead inexorably to suicide. Naturally, perhaps because he too would lose in the game that was life, would pick a short straw, Maurice Dufault turned to Peter.

"We were talking about the holidays that just ended," explained Bobby Tomkins, whose joyful face displayed uncomplicated gaiety. "We were saying how we spent Christmas, what we got for presents and then …"

His friend and confidante, Jacques Pradeau, interrupted, "Then we started talking about our best Christmas ever, sir, the one that left the best memories."

"And you asked Peter how Christmas is celebrated in Poland?"

"Not exactly, sir."

Bobby had no time to say more, because Jacques started talking again and didn't stop. "That is, it was Larry Ross who asked him. No, not really asked him but laughed and said to him, 'Hey, you, Pete Panic, did you know what Christmas Day was before you came here?'"

"That idiot," Maurice Dufault said, annoyed, then asked curiously, "What did Peter say?"

It was Bobby's turn to answer. "At first, he didn't say anything. He stared at us, one after another, with a strange look, then he said, 'Do you want me to act it out, in pantomime? The title could be 'Christmas Day in Poland.'"

"He went to get the ruler from the teacher's desk and the willow branches from the flower pot," interrupted Jacques Pradeau. "He stuck them in his hair, then started that strange dance."

"Say, sir, they're really savage, aren't they … Polish people, to kill each other the way he showed us, and on Christmas Day, too?" Bobby asked innocently.

"Why did Peter put the branches in his hair? What did that mean? He sometimes has strange ideas, Peter does. We don't always understand them."

One question had led to another then another. While he tried to answer, Maurice Dufault was digging in his memory in the hope of finding an explanation for the pantomime, which was bizarre to say the least.

"What was he eating, and why did he drop dead all of a sudden?"

Bobby's last question cracked open the mystery. Ashamed when he realized he had almost deliberately forgotten, Maurice Dufault suddenly remembered something Peter had confided in him one evening when he had lingered in the classroom for

whatever reason. His father, a member of a partisan unit, had been killed by an enemy soldier near the end of the war, during a visit with his family on Christmas Day to share a chicken he had stolen from a farm.

In response to Larry Ross's teasing, the Polish boy had re-enacted the tragedy of an unforgettable Christmas for his classmates, who didn't understand. They had laughed and applauded the poor clown in front of the blackboard.

"And what about me?" Maurice Dufault asked himself. "I promptly forgot all about it, as if it was of no importance."

With the holidays over, school life took its normal course again, and life in town returned to a less hectic pace, more in harmony with January cold and storms. The children amused themselves with other games and thought no more about the pantomime. The same could not be said for Maurice Dufault.

Was it just the sympathy a condemned man feels for someone else who is unhappy that drew him to the Polish youngster? Was he searching Peter's serious eyes for other eyes, blue or brown, young, probably laughing like Jacqueline's, eyes he would never know? Was it a need for tenderness that was coming to him late? It seemed completely natural for a foreign child to be the beneficiary, a child who gave his affection unstintingly.

Maurice Dufault was surprised by the gentleness that sometimes came over him, making his words and actions, at least for a few minutes, the words and actions of a big brother who feels responsible for a younger brother. It was true that he mocked himself quietly for what he called his "vague paternal desires." However, the sarcasm he heaped on himself had no effect on the new feeling. He continued to be surprised and to mock himself, but he accepted the feeling without question, without analysis even, and was sincerely grateful in the evening to have succeeded in forgetting the doctor's prognosis for a while.

That is how, with the encouragement of his teacher, Peter came to be a member of the high school curling team.

When school started again in January, the little town of Lyonsville started seriously training, both at school and in town, for the bonspiel that coincided each year with Hospital Week.

Scottish ancestors could be proud of the generations that came after them in the country they came to more or less by chance themselves, because history made them soldiers of Her British Majesty at an opportune moment. Maurice Dufault thought they could be proud of the good people of Lyonsville where, although there were precisely three Scottish families – the Campbells, the Mackenzies, and the McGregors – curling was the winter sport par excellence.

The vice-principal had always considered the fever everyone caught in curling season ridiculous. Not only had he refused to

take part, but he grumbled about the hours devoted to it and never hesitated to punish a student who had not done his homework on the pretext that he'd been at a curling match almost all evening. He was never seen at the finals, although a number of times the school team had been on the verge of winning the trophy. The day after the bonspiel, the news that the cup was again going to another school didn't trigger any compassion in him at all. On the contrary, he almost rejoiced, if only because it gave him the opportunity to tease his colleagues and remind them that a high school had other goals than teaching students to slide rocks down a lane of ice.

By some miracle, this year he would have liked to be one of the players, if only to breathe in the good health that could be seen in eyes shining and cheeks rosy with cold and exercise. Maybe it was that desire, as much as the desire to prove to himself that there had been a mistake and he wasn't condemned, that led him to attend more than one of the games where students were trying out for the high school team. During one of the games he was watching, with Peter at his side as usual, one of the players had to leave and a volunteer was needed to finish the match.

"Why don't you go play, Peter?" the vice-principal suddenly suggested. "You might enjoy it and you'd be helping out your classmates. It's not hard, you know."

Peter hesitated, but he was dying to try. Surprised, Maurice Dufault watched him hopping on his good leg and flapping his

arms, probably because of the cold; still, it made him look like a young bird waiting for the word to fly away with the others.

"Come on, Pete Pani … uh, Peter, come on, we need you." Jacques Pradeau was waving his curling broom in a welcoming gesture.

The others chimed in. "Come on, we won't hurt you," shouted big Godelaine between breaths.

"Come on and play. Don't make us waste time waiting," cried another.

Peter still hesitated, his face red.

"Go ahead," Maurice Dufault said suddenly. "Go on, Piotr … it would give me pleasure to watch you play …"

Peter let himself be persuaded. Quick and agile in spite of his bad leg, he quickly learned how to give the rock enough of a push to get it into the circle at the other end of the ice, use the broom to sweep a rock farther down the ice, and even take out an opponent's rock. The others had accepted him. No one thought it was strange for a boy with a crippled leg to be a member of the school team in the 1954 bonspiel.

It was the last night of the bonspiel. Two teams, the hospital team of two doctors and two nurses and the high school team, were to play each other in the last match for the coveted cup awarded to the winning team.

It had been agreed that the revenue from the feverish week of activities would go toward the purchase of an iron lung. Posters in the front windows of stores and shops, at town hall and the post office, even in the school, put everyone on notice that it was their civic duty to encourage the teams by their presence and to support the hospital's work by paying two dollars to attend the matches.

Anyone who gave it any thought would have been struck by the contrast between a sport that required health, strength and flexibility and a reminder of illness and the costly care required by its victims and found it disturbing and ironic, in the midst of the festivities, to be reminded of the fragility of the human condition and its unavoidable fate. However, people who thought about things were rare in Lyonsville on bonspiel night. Swept along by the game, it was easy to forget the dark side of things, except Maurice Dufault, who had just made that observation.

Well-muffled with a scarf around his neck, he absentmindedly watched the crowd finding a spot to sit on the bleachers. The flowered babushkas of the older Ukrainian women added a gay note to the dark fur coats.

The ice shone as if it had just been polished. Frost covered the whole interior of the building, but the spectators paid no attention to the cold, with their feet warm under plaid blankets. In fur-lined boots and ski pants, a Scottish tam over their ears, the players waited for the signal to start. Cigarette smoke

rose to the electric light bulbs and remained suspended in a blue cloud.

Maurice Dufault wouldn't have missed the last match for anything in the world. Two reasons were enough to keep him in the bleachers, his eyes riveted on the rock sliding slowly down the ice. The first was a strong desire to see the high school team win the cup, a new loyalty that surprised him a little. He explained to himself that fate owed it to Peter to put him on the winning side at least once in his life. Maurice Dufault sent a smile of encouragement to the Polish youngster, going to take his place among his team, broom in hand. The other reason was more tenuous, but no less real – part of the fragile scaffolding of plans and tasks he had built for himself to live out the time he had left. Despair had been succeeded, not by resignation – he wasn't there yet – and even less by the expectation of a miracle – he no longer believed in miracles – but by the firm intention not to think any more about what awaited him at the fast-approaching turn in the road that would soon be here and now. He had to let the monsters sleep at any cost; it was the only way to preserve the fragile balance that allowed him to continue. The match wasn't won, as was proven by the gloomy despondency in which he floundered some days, indifferent to everything and everyone, including Peter. Then he had to start again from scratch, reassemble the materials and painfully, stubbornly, step by step build a framework for his thoughts. It became increasingly difficult to start again and the effort

required in the process of summoning the will to do so was more painful and uncertain each time, so it seemed preferable to avoid any reflection. The slightest jolt could tip the balance. He refused to fight for the moment. Hunkered down in retreat, all exits blocked, he turned his back on the enemy and stood guard over his mind alone, keeping it so busy no untimely thoughts could enter.

Attentive silence had replaced the noise of voices, interrupted only by orders from the team captain and the hiss of horsehair brushes sweeping the ice. It was a close match. All bets were off.

The high school team was in action, sweeping with short, fast strokes in front of the rock the first player had just thrown. The rock advanced slowly on the shining ice and stopped on the blue line outside the house. With a sigh of satisfaction, the sweepers abandoned it to return to the other end of the ice, where one of the nurses on the opposing team was about to throw her first rock. She succeeded in placing it without difficulty at the very centre of the rings, and her second just outside the bull's-eye. The hospital team scored two points.

Peter's turn came. The high school's two rocks were inside the circle, one fairly far from the button and the second touching the opponent's rock in the centre. By properly calculating the distance and giving his rock the thrust needed, Peter could ricochet off the hospital's rock, pushing it out of the house and replacing it with his own. It required skill and a great deal of

composure, because a wrong move on his part could send his team's rock out of the house along with his adversary's.

All eyes were on Peter. His good leg firm on the ice, his crippled leg stretched out behind him as a rudder and his broom in his left hand, he lined up his shot. Unfortunately, a noisy group made its entrance right when he was about to throw the rock and took their place, laughing and gesturing, next to him. Totally distracted, Peter looked up at the group disturbing the game. In the middle of the group was his sister. With Zosia were three young men, a young woman and, a bit behind, Mr. Legerton.

Maurice Dufault saw Peter move as if he was about to stand up. He saw his face flush. The impatient crowd started to murmur.

Peter lined up his shot again. His right knee glided over the ice, and he let the rock go with a final push. The manoeuvre wasn't sufficiently controlled and, thrown with a nervous hand, the rock hit the back wall after pushing the high school team's rock out of the house in its impetuous path. He tried again, but his second rock, held too long, slid slowly on the ice without reaching the hog line. The sweepers' efforts proved futile, and the rock was declared out.

Peter bit his lips in disappointment. Mr. Legerton had moved forward to see better and started to laugh.

"Don't worry, Piotr," Zosia cried, with an effort to appear serious. "Don't worry, little brother."

"Don't worry, little buddy," repeated her companions. "It was just an accident; you'll do better on your next turn." They burst out laughing, Mr. Legerton along with them.

Maurice Dufault frowned. He made a move to get up, but sat right back down, telling himself there was nothing to be done for the moment; it would be better to wait and see what happened.

Peter, very pale, took a step toward his sister, his right hand gesturing her to be quiet. Seeing her turn away to answer the young man near her, then roar with laughter, he went back to join his team members.

One of them tried to repair the damage, but he had caught Peter's nervousness. He missed his first shot, and his second rock barely reached the outer ring. They had to stop the game to be sure it was in. Things were going decidedly badly.

The hospital team took advantage of the lack of assurance that seemed to afflict their young rivals to shoot accurately and clear the rocks already in the house one after another. The score was three to three. The last end, about to start, would determine the winner of the cup.

"If that pretty scatterbrain of a Zosia wasn't there, Peter would regain his composure," grumbled Maurice Dufault quietly. Even as he made the comment, he couldn't help wondering at the increasingly large part Peter had in his life; he couldn't endure seeing him ashamed and disappointed. He didn't have far to look for the explanation. It was plain to see, clearly visible

on his young friend's upset face, in the blond strands of hair hanging below the Scottish tam. Maurice Dufault felt something stir deep inside him, where selfish indifference had left mounds of dust in tight rows like sand dunes in a desert. The sensation resonated, followed by another a second later, and the vice-principal realized his throat was tight. "I truly am yearning to be a father," he said to himself with an effort.

He shrugged his shoulders, half-resigned, and got up and went to the young woman. "Would you like to come and have coffee while we wait for the match to end, Miss Lupaniuk? We could take the opportunity to chat for a minute."

Surprised and flattered by the completely unexpected invitation, Zosia barely took the time to excuse herself from her companions. Paying no attention to the match, they headed for the only café that had stayed open.

When the crowd invaded the deserted café half an hour later, Maurice Dufault found out that the cup would take its place of honour in the school hall. Peter had worked so hard that the entire team's courage had been restored. With renewed ardour, they had cleared their opponents' rocks one after another to win the championship.

Carried on the shoulders of classmates brandishing their brooms to announce the victory, Peter appeared, pale and tired, at the door of the café, and Maurice Dufault noticed a smile newly born lifting the corner of his lips slightly. Proudly he clutched the coveted cup to his chest.

Maurice Dufault congratulated the team warmly, shaking everyone's hand. For a minute, he thought Peter squeezed the hand extended to him a bit hard, which he attributed to the pleasure of seeing the trophy finally go to the school.

Peter was the first to empty the cup, which had at once been filled with Coca-Cola. He did so silently, barely smiling, astounded by the students' boisterous joy. Nearly all the high school kids were there; they had taken over any free tables and were making a hellish racket. Slaps on the back and praise seemed to surprise him; he looked like a spaniel coming out of the water, shaking off his classmates' rough pats on his long mane of hair.

The café owner had taken refuge behind the counter, rinsing glasses, opening bottles of Coca-Cola and waiting patiently for closing time. Seated at a table off to one side, opposite the vice-principal, Zosia was smiling at everyone and chattering carelessly, a little canary out of her cage, intoxicated by freedom.

A little before midnight, Peter left his companions who were starting to disperse and went over to his sister and Maurice Dufault. They spoke for a few minutes. Then, taking Zosia's arm, he announced they had to go home. The vice-principal did not resist, but Zosia scowled like a spoiled child someone had dared to thwart.

"Are you coming, Zosia?"

"It's too early. The evening has just begun. What do you want me to do at home anyway?"

"Why, go to bed, for goodness sake!"

"Go to bed! Go to bed!" she repeated, exasperated. "I go to bed when there's nothing else to do." She smiled at the vice-principal, inviting him to take her side. He acted as if he didn't understand, merely responding to her smile with a smile, wondering how Peter would convince his sister that it really was time to go home. He was tired himself and, with nothing more to do in the café, he was ready to leave. He was just curious enough to want to find out how Peter would make out.

Peter didn't appear to have any doubts about the outcome. He started again, seriously, with a touch of irony in his voice, "You won't be as beautiful tomorrow. You already have dark circles under your eyes."

Incredulous, yet wanting to be reassured, Zosia immediately started digging in her purse, pulling out a whole assortment of objects of feminine coquetry, among them a tiny pocket mirror. Looking in the mirror, she gently rubbed her lower eyelid. Her appearance was no less dazzling, but her brother's remark had the anticipated effect. She replaced the mirror in her purse, closed it and said to Maurice Dufault with a sigh, "It's true. It's getting late. It might be better if I went home. Please excuse me …" Turning to her waiting brother, she asked, "Are you ready to go?"

Peter got up at once and Maurice Dufault did the same. The young Polish boy took his sister's arm and, after exchanging a friendly "good night," the three set off, Peter and Zosia to lower town, while the vice-principal turned right toward the hospital hill.

No mention was made by teacher or student of the teacher's timely intervention, any more than there had been about what happened in the classroom one fall evening when the adult needed help. The two incidents remained their secret, kept in a corner of their memory, set aside out of tact and a sense of propriety.

Maurice Dufault felt content, despite the steep slope that made his heart pound against the inner wall of his chest.

It was a beautiful night. A star-covered sky watched over the world. It seemed so close to the earth that, when one of the stars suddenly freed itself and ploughed a furrow of light in space, Maurice Dufault had the impression he had only to reach out his hand to grasp its luminescence. He thought of Prometheus, who had stolen fire. The Greek gods had not been gentle with him, when he claimed the right to give mankind a little divine warmth, the spark needed to warm the human heart once and

for all, to make human beings forget their misery and solitude, so that neither sickness nor death could ever touch them again. Prometheus paid dearly for his desire to raise mankind to the ranks of the gods. Ever since, the vulture devouring his liver has sowed the same seed in the hearts of every individual so that they too are fed by his illusions and dreams. What a thirst man has for eternity, sighed the vice-principal, and what a temptation to make himself master, whatever the cost.

Maurice Dufault remembered that, when he was a child, he had been sure the heaven referred to in the *Petit Catéchisme* was just on the other side of the blue vault and the trajectory of a shooting star was only one of the doors that had just opened to the outside world. He smiled at the memory of his disappointment at the explanations in books about meteorites and astral phenomena.

As he went back up the silent street that led home, he thought he would like to go back to the beliefs of his childhood. Everything was so simple and clear then. Why did the years have to destroy his certainty? Why did life have to undermine, one after another, not so much the dreams of a sleeping soul as the prescience of a young person for whom nature has no secrets? Children who live very close to nature are neither afraid nor in the least surprised by its contradictions. With no prior study, they establish their own system of cause and effect; they have their own explanations that have nothing to do with incredulous adult explanations. And it may be, Maurice Dufault thought

suddenly, that they aren't completely wrong. Much more than older human beings, they are in daily friendly familiar contact with everything around them, spiritual and natural.

Unfortunately, once lost, that assurance and childlike trust are never found again; the adult only has memories of believing in someone or something with all the strength of mind and energy of a young body, but that someone, that something has neither form nor name. "Wordsworth was right," murmured Maurice Dufault. "Only a child knows immortality." However, that thought did not bring in its wake the usual dejection. There was a lull in the storm. Maurice Dufault didn't know why he had been granted a respite, but he savoured the moment of peace and was grateful to someone or something that no longer had a name.

Putting one foot in front of the other, slowly, painfully, taking care not to get out of breath, he continued his nocturnal reverie, which was pleasurable and salutary. From his own childhood, he moved naturally on to the youth of today, whom he knew so well. He asked himself questions. How could the young people in Lyonsville who, in the rare moments when something serious overcame the need to amuse themselves, talked about jet planes, thermonuclear bombs and travel to the moon, how could they have the certainty of the eternal that he once had? If his faith hadn't been able to resist the attacks of time, how would their slim spiritual baggage hold up against the spectacular discoveries of their generation, its procession of

doubts and anxieties and progress toward annihilation? What use was interplanetary travel in a world without faith and therefore without hope? As long as they didn't come to live like a placid herd of sheep docile to the shepherd's orders, because of his stick and his dog. Maurice Dufault didn't feel up to betting on their future.

Only one, it seemed to him, had kept his identity and that was Peter, who was crippled, a foreigner, too often tormented by morons. The only thing Peter had in common with other kids his age was a flexible body and lively alert mind. The earlier scene, when he was being carried in triumph, his slightly strained half-smile, ready to disappear at the slightest sharp word, under an ash-blonde mane that no hair cream could smooth down, had all the pathos of a Pierrot no longer amused by the celebration. Initiated too soon into adult life, with responsibilities inappropriate for his age, he had barely anything left of a child. He had to watch over Zosia; his grandmother was too old and Zosia too flighty, too carefree, a tiny fleeting flame, a flimsy firecracker. It must not be easy, especially for a too-serious younger brother, to suppress her exuberance. Maurice Dufault started to smile at how the younger brother had known what argument would convince Zosia to act more moderately, as he had just proven.

Zosia Lupaniuk wasn't unkind or inclined to evil. She wasn't a bad girl, Maurice Dufault thought. It was more as if she didn't have all her wits about her where pleasures and outings were

involved. Scatterbrained and flighty, it was impossible for her to refuse an invitation or a get-together; she couldn't imagine being alone and forced to think. The feverish impatience to be on the move all the time, the almost unhealthy need for excitement and noise was like a challenge to the males in Lyonsville. Young men, even older men, felt obliged to pick up the gauntlet she so carelessly tossed them, so she was never alone for long. As soon as she appeared on a street corner, her blonde hair flying in the wind, it was as if a flock of birds swooped down to her side. She was surrounded and escorted to her destination, stopping on the way for a Coca-Cola, or accompanied to a car that started off in an explosion of laughter.

None of that was very serious. However, for some time, her youth had been attracting the attention of certain gentlemen in the public eye, which had raised eyebrows among the female population. Some of the gentlemen had not hesitated to offer her ice cream or a coffee or a ride to the hospital where she had been working in the laundry since January. More than one husband had been called a "balding Don Juan" by his wife. Disdainful of masculine weakness yet reassured by the thought that no middle-aged Romeo would dare compromise his situation for any Polish Juliet, no matter how young and pretty, the ladies reserved their animosity for the young woman who posed a threat to the sleep-inducing boredom of their home life.

Zosia seemed to enjoy the coldness shown her by her own sex. In fact, she was all the more beautiful. Full of joy, knowing

she was young and pretty, she continued on her way, carefree and happy, without a serious thought in her head.

"Who can blame her?" Maurice Dufault asked the starry sky. Life is short and youth fleeting; we think we can hold on to it and it has already disappeared. Why shouldn't Zosia gather the few roses life offered? Tomorrow it will be too late. The storm will have scattered petals and desires. Like him, she will have nothing left but the bare stem and the dry wood of memories frozen in winter. Maurice Dufault shivered suddenly in the cold night air.

PART THREE

Chapter One

There were signs of spring in Lyonsville. Nature stretched lazily in the mild air after its long sleep. Overhead, the sun laughed, as if mocking the few traces of winter that still remained, making it clear to man that snow and wind would soon give way to the opening reign of the sun.

It seemed to Maurice Dufault that he was better. His step was recovering some of its spring and, although the choking and pain in his chest were never far away, at least they were held at bay for the moment. A flood of hope undermined the stone walls he had built around his thoughts, threatening to carry away all his resolutions. He was well aware the feeling had no rational basis – it was just a reprieve – and it would have been better to extinguish the vain hope before its insidious stream

infiltrated his whole being. However, he watched the transformation powerlessly and allowed the sombre thoughts of winter to fly away like so many black butterflies chased by the brightness of morning.

He walked with a lively step and whistled quietly. He had spent a weekend resting with Shakespeare's comedies and Mozart's graceful, gay music, tempered by more serious Bach. He felt full of energy, especially with a light scented breeze coming from who knows where murmuring softly in his ear.

He responded cheerfully to greetings from other people. He even lingered in front of the Williamson Travel Agency window, where bright-coloured posters advised taking off, by plane or on board ship, to every corner of the world.

Fascinated, captivated by the increasingly seductive sights, he started to calculate the price of a trip to Europe. He had thought about it often over the years without following through, first because of lack of money, then lethargy. Well, why not make the necessary effort this time and take a plane to London, Paris, Rome, Florence? A change of environment, new faces and, above all, a different perspective were precisely what he needed in order to recover.

In that expectant and euphoric frame of mind, where black thoughts had no hold on him, he finally, regretfully, reached the school steps. The air was so pleasant, the sky so blue and, most important, he felt so young that morning, it seemed inconceivable to him not to play hooky. It wouldn't have taken

much to make him turn and flee into the woods starting to turn green.

With a sigh that, fortunately, did not affect his good mood, he closed the front door and went down the corridor leading to his classroom. At that moment, he saw Miss Romaniuk. He pitied her morose expression and the way she was walking with her head pulled back between her shoulders, as if to stave off a blow. Intending to pass by without giving his colleague more than a half-smile and a distracted "Hello," he asked her, in complete sincerity, "What's wrong, Miss Romaniuk? You look very sad this morning."

Miss Romaniuk tried to smile, but the sad grimace that twisted her lips only accentuated her tearful expression. She seemed to be on the verge of bursting out sobbing. In an effort to control herself, she straightened for a second, her eyes shining with tears, before returning to her natural collapsed posture, as if she was shrinking to avoid being seen after many years of humiliation.

The poor woman, thought Maurice Dufault, the poor grey mouse has never known anything but being pushed around and despised, old before her time, at the mercy of a cowardly boss, haunted by anxiety day and night over losing her job. She has scurried all her life, here, there and everywhere at the slightest sign, the slightest raised voice, always afraid of being dismissed like a servant. "Come on, tell me about it," he said out loud.

They stopped at the end of the corridor. Maurice Dufault leaned casually on the window ledge; Miss Romaniuk, stood stiff and still in front of him. "It's about Mr. Legerton, isn't it?"

She nodded yes, and the vice-principal saw her bite her lips to hold back tears.

"Oh, my, what has he done to you now?" His hand brushed her fingers, dried out, almost burned by chalk from so many years of teaching; the flesh looked like limestone landscapes of powdery roads and petrified earth.

Miss Romaniuk reddened at the unexpected touch. "Oh, nothing out of the ordinary, really," she answered. "That is, I was expecting it … In the end, you acquire a kind of instinct. You always expect the worst, which doesn't prevent you from being sad anyway." Her voice trembled.

"What is it this time?"

"It's about the festival …"

"Oh my God! I wasn't thinking about that any more," said Maurice Dufault rather ashamed. "I have to admit my mind was occupied by something else," he added to excuse himself. "Please, Miss Romaniuk, tell me what has happened."

The poor woman made a resigned gesture. "He's taken the festival choir away from me and assigned it to Mr. Matthews."

"Matthews! He's lost his mind. Is that why he appointed him assistant music teacher? I should have thought of that. And when did our beloved principal make that decision?"

"Fairly recently, I think," she continued bitterly. "It seems it's better if a man directs the choir this year. Mr. Legerton talked

about certain students whose conduct might leave something to be desired the day of the festival, which would reflect adversely on the school. As if Walter Matthews is known for strict discipline. Quite the opposite, for heaven's sake!" She started to laugh, a mirthless, mostly discouraged laugh.

Maurice Dufault hurriedly agreed.

"Didn't he consult you?" asked Mary Romaniuk, surprised.

"You'd have to think not, since I just found out from you," he replied ironically. "Is that the only reason Mr. Legerton could find to explain this unfortunate innovation?"

"Not exactly. He mumbled something about a change in leadership being advisable from time to time, because it allows for testing new methods and assessing a new viewpoint. When I didn't look convinced, he said that, to perform well, a choir as large and diverse as ours needs a man with a firm hand, and he didn't see how a weak woman could bring that about. He talked as if it was enough to have muscles and know how to read a score to conduct a choir."

"You didn't raise any objection?"

"Oh, yes, I reminded him that we've already won an honourable mention twice and might very well win a prize this year. I also told him about the summers I've spent at the university on professional development."

"Did he listen to you?"

"More or less … But it didn't change anything. He said I had no business questioning his orders, that it was up to him to decide who was best suited for a particular position. He could

at least have told me his decision two months ago. I wouldn't have worked quite so hard."

"So, are you giving up completely on working with the choir?"

"How could you think that? No, the roles are reversed; Walter Matthews becomes director and I am his assistant. I continue to take care of the rehearsals and, the day of the festival, he simply replaces me. Do you think that's fair?"

"We can't talk about fairness at Lyonsville High School, Miss Romaniuk. In spite of the lack of fairness, from a practical viewpoint, I have the impression our older kids pretty much mock our colleague Matthews' knowledge of the musical arts."

Miss Romaniuk burst out laughing, a young laugh this time, which made the vice-principal smile and a group of girls going by turn their heads. "I know even more than you do on that point, my dear friend. But we should draw public attention to the heir apparent, the crown prince. He'll do anything to get what he wants. Oh, pardon me, Maurice, for talking that way. I let myself get carried away …"

"Oh! You're not telling me anything I don't already know. Our dear principal has wanted to replace me with his favourite disciple for a long time now. If you knew how fine that is with me. I may even give him the opportunity this year."

"What are you saying, Maurice? You're not thinking of leaving? I hardly dare imagine what would become of some of us without you, including me." She smiled timidly. He didn't say

anything, so she continued warmly, "It's not because of the incident last fall you want to leave, is it? I assure you it had its good side. Not only did Larry Ross lose prestige, but apparently the gang is not getting along too well. There's been more than one defection."

"Yes, that was bound to happen. No kid wants a leader who was humiliated and mortified the way Larry Ross was that morning," said Maurice Dufault. Then, suddenly, "What do you plan to do now?" he asked.

"Nothing. What do you think I should do?"

"What if you refuse to give up your position?"

Miss Romaniuk started to crumple her handkerchief. "I have no choice," she murmured. "As Mr. Legerton well knows …"

Maurice Dufault made an impatient gesture. "You ought to refuse outright," he said in a gruff voice. "Saying no won't kill you." He was in a bad mood now, primarily because of Mr. Legerton's pettiness, but also because of all the Mary Romaniuks who quickly bow their heads under blows. Injustice feeds on consenting victims who are partially responsible because of their humble submission, their too-easy resignation. "It won't kill you," he repeated stubbornly. Seeing his companion's features tense with emotion, he said in a softer voice, "I know you have your aging mother. Another community and new habits wouldn't be easy at her age, but still, you must learn to defend your interests." He smiled and continued, "I bet if one day you told the principal you've had enough of bowing to other

people's demands, of being the pinch-hitter, he would be so surprised you'd win immediately. It would be enough to stand up to him once, just once, Mary."

Mary Romaniuk smiled back; the pathetic smile lighting up her morose features for a second moved the vice-principal deeply. Maybe if he'd insisted in the first place, while there was still time, Mary Romaniuk wouldn't have become an ageless woman scurrying around like a frightened mouse. Maybe if he'd been less selfish, less indifferent, he could have made Mr. Legerton listen to reason, despite the pleasure the principal took in sowing disquiet and discord. That was how the principal exercised his authority; it was his way of preventing factions from forming. He didn't hesitate to trample on the heart of anyone in his way, crushing their legitimate aspirations and hopes. He had risen and could reign without too much opposition; in doing so, he had smothered the soul of more than one colleague.

Maurice Dufault could pardon him everything – the ambition, the falseness, even his servility to Paul Ross and his ilk – except what he had done to this woman, who accepted all the humiliations and affronts as long as she could keep her position, and what a position, my God! No man spared a glance for the woman, yet she managed to awaken a little love of beauty among young people in Lyonsville. You had to see her, in her poorly fitting dress and flat heels, conducting the school choir. Her sad expression flew away with the first note. Her

movements were light, sylphlike, as if the being held prisoner in a shapeless body was suddenly freed to emerge, blossoming on the surface of human awareness. For a few seconds, Miss Romaniuk possessed what she was entitled to possess. No one had the right to take that away from her, Mr. Legerton perhaps less than anyone else. He knew very well how much music meant to Mary Romaniuk.

Suddenly, as if spring had come, Maurice Dufault felt almost happy himself and decided to make the effort to bring his colleague a little joy. "Don't worry about it too much. Things may still get sorted out," he said to her gently.

When she made a vague gesture indicating lack of faith, he continued seriously, "You can count on me, Mary. Although I can't promise you anything, at least I can assure you I'm going to do everything possible to get the principal to reverse his decision."

Seeing his companion's eyes fill with tears, he squeezed her hand firmly and headed for Mr. Legerton's office with long strides.

The principal was leafing through a magazine; Maurice Dufault had time to recognize a men's magazine with a pin-up on the cover.

"Hello, Maurice. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this morning? I hope it's not bad news," he added with an odd laugh.

"Of course not, Mr. Legerton, I just came to ask you about the festival."

Mr. Legerton gave him a piercing glance, before his heavy eyelids fell again, almost immediately, covering the silent question in his eyes. "It's still too early to have or give any specific information. The festival isn't until May 20, as you know."

"But it's not too soon to talk about the choir singing at it, because practices have started."

Mr. Legerton frowned when he heard his assistant's response. He cast another quick, sharp glance at him then his usual impassive look was back, sucking any sign of life inward, leaving an inert mass of hard forehead and full cheeks joined by a chin with a childlike dimple. Maurice Dufault suddenly had a wild urge to strike that expressionless face. How do you fight an adversary who is blind and deaf? Up to now, the rare occasions when they confronted one another had always involved a series of feints and ducks, shifting and sidestepping. Maurice Dufault had the impression the game played out in the next few seconds would be decisive. One or the other would be left on the mat. And he recognized with satisfaction that it was only fair for the subject of the conflict to be someone who had suffered from Mr. Legerton's whims and unfairness for so many years.

The principal, who understood only too well what it was about, told himself it was time to subdue the rebel. They took each other's measure for a second. Mr. Legerton let a quick glance escape from behind his glasses, barely alive, while the vice-principal stood and observed him, openly contemptuous.

It was the younger man who attacked first, elegantly and politely. "You're right, Mr. Legerton, it's only the beginning of April. But we have to start early if we want to be ready on time. You'll have to forgive me; I'm from the turtle family."

Mr. Legerton barely moved his lips in an attempt at a smile. "I don't share your view, Maurice. It seems to me that … uh … you have more of the impatience of young people who want … to know everything at once … uh … who don't know how to wait and who … naturally act hastily without taking the time to think…." Mr. Legerton was half-laughing, yet his eyes had not lost their fixed stare.

Maurice Dufault could only see the black centre of his pupils surrounded by watery blue. He knew his superior was mocking him and felt indignant, but he understood that first and foremost it was a way of distracting him from the goal he had set out to achieve, inducing him to get lost in side issues. He merely smiled, "Unfortunately, at thirty-seven years old, I don't consider myself young anymore, especially with the hair on my temples starting to turn grey. But I didn't come here to talk about whether I'm still in my prime, which I strongly doubt.

What's more, Mr. Legerton, knowing you are busy, I wouldn't want to encroach on your time, which is no doubt precious to you," he concluded with a stab of irony.

Mr. Legerton moved hastily to conceal among the files and paperwork littering his desk the magazine he had been flipping through when the vice-principal came in, a move Maurice Dufault didn't miss.

However, the principal caught the ball on the rebound. Since his subordinate was talking about the value of time, fine, that would be his excuse for terminating a conversation that could get tedious. "It's true," he admitted dolefully, "I have a great deal to do this morning. Apart from having a look at the journals arriving for the library, which it is my duty to peruse, of course, to make sure that … uh … they're appropriate for our young people … Oh, I know full well that Miss … uh … Romaniuk … uh … can be relied upon completely, however, just the same … all the same, as principal, I must make sure nothing immoral or subversive falls into their hands, isn't that so?"

"Liar!" Maurice Dufault said to himself. "Triple liar! The magazine you were flipping through is not the kind found on library shelves."

But Mr. Legerton wasn't quite finished. "Apart from that little task, which, as I was saying, takes … a fair bit of time … there is also all the correspondence, not to mention the forms we're flooded with by the board. There's less and less time to think," he said, shaking his head. While he was talking, he

moved the papers and files around, rearranging them, piling them up, shifting them. With that innocent little manoeuvre he soon managed to get the magazine completely buried in the pile. That accomplished, Mr. Legerton lifted his head and looked at the vice-principal, his expression totally blameless.

Maurice Dufault was too indignant to say a single word. When he finally decided to speak, Mr. Legerton vaguely understood that, for one reason or another, he had just lost ground. His assistant straightened, his features darkened; he was ready to wage battle. "You mentioned Miss Romaniuk. She's exactly the person I came to see you about."

Mr. Legerton frowned again; his pupils contracted and a film of moisture masked his eyes. "Ah!" he said simply.

The young man's voice rose, cutting like a scalpel. "I just heard Miss Romaniuk was to be replaced as director of the choir for the festival. It's a rumour without foundation, isn't it, Mr. Legerton?"

When the principal hesitated, the voice went on pitilessly, "One of those idiotic rumours that spreads without rhyme or reason. Is that your view, sir?"

The principal openly pouted. He asked, "And what if it's true? If it's true that I'm thinking of giving the position to … uh … to someone else … what would you think?"

"I would say not only is it as unfair as can be, but it's monumental stupidity a high school principal cannot permit himself."

Mr. Legerton paled. "I advise you to weigh your words, Maurice."

"You asked me my opinion, sir. I gave it to you in all sincerity."

The principal snickered quietly, almost imperceptibly.

Maurice Dufault added, "Mary Romaniuk has had excellent results up to now, particularly when you consider the raw material she has to work with."

"Look here, I don't disagree!"

"So?"

"So? So, I decided it's time to give someone else some experience with that type of work. There's no harm in that, as far as I'm aware."

"No, not in principle. But where a music teacher like Mary Romaniuk is concerned, who succeeds in spite of everything in inspiring a little love of beauty in young people whose whole life is nothing but material pleasures, well, Mr. Legerton, permit me to say that you're doing them, as well as her, a great injustice."

The principal's right cheek trembled slightly, a nervous tic that went right up to his temple, where a vein started to pulse jerkily. A few drops of sweat formed on his forehead. Although devoid of any expression, Mr. Legerton's stare was not without threat. Maurice Dufault knew the power of that deliberately blind inertia. It took the edge off any weapon, an inner retrenching that disrupted attack, since it was impossible to

know whether the blows had struck. By falling back to regroup, the adversary exposed himself to the fatal arrow.

The younger man saw Mr. Legerton straighten slowly, blink his eyes and open his mouth to answer. Maurice Dufault swiftly returned to the charge. "There's one more thing, Mr. Legerton. If you appoint Walter Matthews choir director, with one blow you destroy everything that's been accomplished in music in Lyonsville in fifteen years. More than that, you condemn us to being the laughing stock of everyone in town."

Mr. Legerton stood up heavily and took a step toward the window. He found himself bathed in light for a second; his grey head bowed mechanically as if to defend himself, then he turned to the man waiting for him. "My decision has been made," he said. "Starting today, Walter Matthews will direct the choir and Mary Romaniuk becomes his assistant. I do not wish to reconsider the matter," he said. "As to becoming the laughing stock of everyone in town, I don't believe that for two reasons. First, Matthews will quickly adapt to his role and, second, the board and the public will readily accept my explanation."

"What is your explanation, Mr. Legerton?"

The principal hesitated for a second, then said in a sharp tone, "It seems to me, Maurice, that I don't have to account to you for my actions. And now, if you will please excuse me, I have work to do. Classes are about to start anyway." He pushed a button; the strident sound of an electric bell could be heard.

Maurice Dufault shrugged his shoulders. "I fear you'll regret your decision, Mr. Legerton. The students are capable of going on strike."

A flash of anger enlivened the principal's face. "Is that a threat?"

Maurice Dufault made a vague gesture of weariness. "Not at all, sir, simply an observation." He fixed his eyes on his superior and said casually, "I thought I heard talk of it." It was his turn to lie. But when you run with the wolves, you howl.

"Who keeps you so well-informed? Your protégé, Pete Panic?"

Maurice Dufault started to laugh. "No, sir, Peter is much too busy trying to moderate his sister's natural exuberance to waste time with gossip."

"What do you mean?" The words, spoken in a low, barely audible voice, so different from the sharp tone of a few seconds ago, awoke the vice-principal's suspicions. What foul secrets were hidden behind that stubborn brow? What forbidden images had just appeared in the eyes that stared at him in terror? The low, plaintive voice began again, "I don't see what Zosia Lupaniuk has to do with this."

Taken aback by the turn in the conversation, Maurice Dufault didn't understand for a minute. Suddenly the light came on, exposing in a flash the guilty-little-boy look on Mr. Legerton's face at that moment. He had been seen in the company of

the young Polish girl too often of late not to fear what people might say.

Maurice Dufault came back and stood in front of his boss. The match was not lost. He had been offered a new weapon. Well, he would use it, and poor Mary Romaniuk would never know she owed the recovery of her lost position to pretty scatterbrained Zosia. "I was joking, Mr. Legerton," he explained lightly.

However, the principal was too frightened to accept the straightforward explanation, which was what Maurice Dufault was counting on. "You don't joke about things like that," the principal went on grumbling. "Zosia is a nice little girl, not a mean bone in her body," he added with a smile that disappeared at once under his assistant's mocking gaze. "My God, what harm is there in feeling young and liking the company of young people?"

"None, Mr. Legerton, none," Maurice Dufault answered hurriedly, starting to find the conversation amusing. "On the contrary, I admire your ability to adapt constantly. It's just …"

"Just what?" Worry was again perceptible in his words, the worry of a cowardly man willing to do anything for reassurance.

"It's just that, in a small town like ours, it's sometimes better to beware of gossip."

"People are talking … Is that what you're saying?" stammered Mr. Legerton, devastated.

Maurice Dufault almost burst out laughing. Not only had the principal taken the bait, but he was in the process of swallowing it whole like a greedy fish. Men are stupid when it comes to women, especially if the woman is young and beautiful, Maurice Dufault thought. For the slightest smile, the tiniest sign of affection, they're ready to forget everything else, at least for a while. The result is always the same, however – disillusionment, an inability to understand and be understood and, finally, separation, after which they bear a wound in the side that never completely heals. He had been right to turn away from the ephemeral flower that draws its substance from the human heart. As if someone like Zosia Lupaniuk could be anything but a pretty butterfly flitting from one heart to the next in the sunshine of her youth.

He had to answer Mr. Legerton. "Oh, gossip, you know, I'm not one to listen to it," he said with an evasive gesture.

"In other words, you know something you don't want to tell me." The principal's voice betrayed his irritation and nervousness.

"All the better!" Maurice Dufault said to himself, "He'll be unaware of my bluff and oblivious to the goal I have in mind." With deliberate hesitation, he continued, "Not exactly, Mr. Legerton, not exactly. But you know Lyonsville, and you're aware of how far people here in Lyonsville can let their imaginations go when they put their minds to it. You also know how gullible they are."

"But they can't … uh … surely they can not … surely not attribute immoral motives to me for … for offering an ice cream cone … uh … or a cup of coffee to a young girl." He had taken off his glasses and was rubbing his eyes with a nervous hand.

His usually indecisive look appeared even more awash; his grey-blue irises, dilated with fear, seemed to extend from one side of his eyelids to the other. The effect was strangely moving, as if the person who had always hidden behind his thick glasses was bared, vulnerable in his nakedness. Maurice Dufault suddenly felt extremely uneasy, as if he was on the point of discovering a secret it would perhaps be better not to know.

To rid himself of that inopportune thought, which threatened the advantage he had just scored over his adversary, he decided to strike the final blow. "Mr. Legerton, wouldn't you like to reconsider your decision about Miss Romaniuk?"

The principal blinked, gave the younger man a look like someone just rescued from a nightmare and, to Maurice Dufault's great surprise, said, "I thought I was acting in the high school's interests, that it was for the best, but I don't know any more … I don't know any more …"

Maurice Dufault didn't try to press him, still less to interrupt.

"Maybe it's better not to attract too much attention to myself at this time," continued the principal in a low voice, as if to himself. "No, people shouldn't think about me at all …"

"What a strange idea and strange words!" murmured the vice-principal, in turn. The thought came to him that the words he saw trembling on his boss's lips could never be undone; they would completely change the course of his life, and he began to wish they wouldn't be said. To prevent the confession he felt was imminent, he said abruptly, "So you think it will be possible for you to reconsider your decision?"

"What were you saying, Maurice?" Mr. Legerton had regained his self-control. Any rough edge had disappeared from his voice; only a slight hint of anxiety could be heard. "Oh, yes, about Mary Romaniuk … Well!" he continued, moving like an old man as he sat down. "Do as you wish. If you think it best to keep the woman as choir director, I accept your opinion." His voice suddenly became unpleasant, "However, you're the one who will go and announce the news to Matthews. I wash my hands of the whole affair."

PART THREE

Chapter Two

Maurice Dufault felt the need to talk to someone about his conversation with Mr. Legerton and the strange way it ended. He was astonished at how easy it had been to get the principal to retreat and finally give up. He had even seemed happy to wash his hands of the whole affair. There was also the secret Mr. Legerton had been on the verge of divulging, which he had held in check out of a sense of propriety bordering on fear.

Tired of asking himself questions that remained unanswered, that evening Maurice Dufault thought maybe Mary Ann would help him understand, since she'd known Mr. Legerton for a number of years.

Mr. Matthews had taken the news of his lost opportunity rather badly; the vice-principal's arguments did not convince

him and he accused Maurice Dufault of bad faith and questionable machinations. They parted with somewhat strong words. Miss Romaniuk's joy restored Maurice Dufault's good mood, but he didn't have the courage to tell her that she'd kept her job because of the bizarre effect the name Zosia Lupaniuk had on the principal. He had just emphasized that it was preferable not to bother thanking Mr. Legerton; on the contrary, it would be better to continue her work with the choir as if nothing had happened.

Touched by the slightest sign that someone remembered her, gave some recognition to her professional value, she would have reached the principal's office in a single bound to express her gratitude. That had to be avoided at all costs, Maurice Dufault thought; Mr. Legerton was fully capable of a second reversal.

He arrived at Mary Ann's around nine o'clock; it was unusual for her husband to be home. He was a tall, thin man, much older than her, with a constantly tired look, no doubt from having to drag around his long body and its poorly connected parts that did not seem to go together. His head was bent forward and his torso heavy; his legs, stiffened by age, tried vainly to hurry. Seeing him move, tripping, his long arms dangling, barely able to keep his balance, you couldn't help but think the devil must have skipped part of the Creator's plans and replaced them with others of his own devising. Taken together, the result was lamentable. To top off his misfortune,

he was given the name Annunzio Mario by a mother with no Italian background.

He was stretched out in his armchair, tranquilly smoking, his legs disappearing under a low table and reappearing on the other side. Mary Ann was flipping through a fashion magazine. Sitting side by side, faces serene, they looked like two chums the years and intimacy had made indulgent, who had learned to tolerate one another and not be surprised by any actions or desires they didn't understand. Annunzio Mario Forsythe shut his eyes to the visits his wife received when he wasn't there; in turn, fair-haired Mary Ann said nothing when her husband lost a bit too much money gambling.

Maurice Dufault was embarrassed to see Annunzio, who came forward smiling. "Hello, Mr. Dufault," he said, extending his long, fine hand. "It's been a long time since we've seen you. Mary Ann was just saying that you seem to have forgotten her. She never sees you anymore."

Confused at being welcomed so affably by someone who could consider him a rival, Maurice Dufault barely succeeded in making a few trite remarks. Annunzio Forsythe didn't appear to notice and had him come into the living room with a friendly smile.

Turning to his wife as if continuing a conversation interrupted for a second he said, "You see, Mary Ann, Mr. Dufault has not forgotten you. Here he is." He was about to add something

when the telephone rang. "I'll get it," he said, and disappeared behind the door of the room he used as an office.

Maurice Dufault just had time to settle into an armchair facing the couch where Mary Ann sat before Annunzio returned. He said courteously, "Would you kindly excuse me for leaving like this, Mr. Dufault? I have to go out … which is no loss for you. I'm sure Mary Ann will entertain you, and you'll spend a pleasant evening. I rely on her."

He went over to his wife and kissed her forehead. She smiled at him, adjusted the knot of his tie and said, "Don't forget your sweater. The evenings are still cool, and you know how easily you catch a cold." She didn't ask any questions about the reason for his sudden departure, however, and he offered no explanation.

Maurice Dufault shivered hearing Annunzio take leave of them so suddenly, as if he couldn't wait to leave them alone together. He searched for any trace of irony or appearance of reproach in the farewell words spoken to him, but Mary Ann's husband's thin face was calm and peaceful, and the two deep vertical lines down his lean cheeks gave a certain nobility to his features as a whole. The rest of his body, ridiculous as it was, was forgotten. Maurice Dufault lowered his eyes, ashamed in front of the betrayed spouse.

With a serene look and maternal gesture, Mary Ann brushed a bit of cigarette ash off the back of her husband's jacket with the palm of her hand. There was nothing in her appearance

to suggest the slightest secret, the slightest dissimulation. The most alert observer would have seen only crystal transparency. What an act they were putting on for each other!

"What hypocrisy!" Maurice Dufault said to himself. Everything was fine as long as appearances were maintained and each person retained at least a semblance of dignity. That was why Annunzio chose to flee. Mary Ann was acting like a devoted wife, and he had opted for the role of friend and companion in the eyes of the betrayed spouse. Lies had woven a web in the life of the *ménage à trois*, a monstrous web they would end up caught in themselves, Maurice Dufault realized. The way the heart works, it can devour itself with shame and disgust, if life doesn't. The poet who said, "I am the wound and the knife" could have said, "I am the spider and the fly, and I weave the web that will be my tomb," a web of hypocrisy and lies.

After complying with his wife's suggestion to put on a sweater, Annunzio Forsythe bid them good evening and went out. His footsteps could be heard on the sidewalk for a minute; they could hear him whistling a popular tune until he turned the street corner. Silence reigned once more.

Maurice Dufault turned to Mary Ann. "I hope it's not my presence here this evening that has chased Annunzio from his own

home," he said, embarrassed. "I would hate to be the cause of him leaving."

"Not likely!" Mary Ann burst into a laugh so candid that Maurice Dufault couldn't help but smile, despite his embarrassment at Annunzio's sudden departure and his feeling of confusion that threatened to turn into remorse. Serious once again, the young woman continued, "My dear friend, I assure you that Annunzio doesn't worry too much about home when it comes to playing poker. He won't be home now before two a.m." With an indifferent gesture, she said, "What can you do? That's the way it is." Sticking out her lower lip like a child about to pout, she added, "But you didn't come to see me after all these weeks to talk about my husband. That would really be too annoying!"

Maurice Dufault had to force his thoughts back to Mary Ann. He was picturing Annunzio again, sitting with his wife like an ordinary husband, loving and loved. The falseness of the situation suddenly seemed so flagrant he, too, would have liked to flee, the way Annunzio just did.

"Yes, well, that's life; we have to accept it," Mary Ann continued. "All in all, life is worth the struggle; we might as well enjoy it. It's my intention to avoid trouble and live as pleasantly and as long as possible," she concluded, laughing gaily. The neckline of her bodice revealed the swell of her breasts, like ripe fruit.

Averting his gaze, he said, "Listen, I have something to confide in you, something that has been bothering me since this morning. You may be able to help me see it more clearly."

Mary Ann immediately straightened, her expression serious, ready to understand, to comfort, even to reprimand this big kid who thought he was strong, who called himself a man, like all the other big kids she had known.

Frowning with the effort to focus his thoughts, he reminded her of someone, a vague profile, half-remembered features confused with others that had retained a completely singular expression she couldn't quite identify . . . Who was it? It seemed to have something to do with fairly painful circumstances. For her alone or for both of them? How could she know? The fleeting image escaped her just when she thought she had it, leaving only the memory of an effort to concentrate, a furrow between the eyes, a look she couldn't quite make out. She had an obscure sense that the vague lines of that face had marked a turning point in her life, but which one? That was the question. Like every human life, hers had changed direction more than once.

The vice-principal's serious tone dragged her from her reverie. "I went to see Mr. Legerton this morning about the festival. For some reason or another, the boss has decided to take the choir director's job away from Mary Romaniuk and assign it to Matthews."

"To Matthews?"

"Yes, you heard me correctly. To Matthews."

"But Mary Romaniuk must be heartbroken?"

"She was in tears." Maurice Dufault shrugged his shoulders. "It's probably her distress that made me intercede for her. In any case, whatever the motive, I went to see him in his office in the hope he would change his mind. Before I explain to you what is still a mystery to me, let me tell you how he spends his time. I swear I couldn't believe my eyes. He was leafing through a men's magazine!"

"With a suggestive cover?"

"Very! But that's not what revolted me so much."

The young woman started to laugh. "You scandalize easily, my love."

Maurice Dufault shook his head. "No, on the contrary. There's not much that shocks me. What I feel is more disgust or indignation. This morning, I felt both when I heard our high school principal claim he was acting as a censor. I assure you, the magazine was not the type you find in school libraries."

Mary Ann was heartily amused, as much by the vehemence of her lover, who was ordinarily little given to violence, as by what he was recounting. "Did you tell him you don't like pin-ups?"

"Don't make fun of me, please. He even had the audacity to say it was his duty to ensure that nothing immoral or subversive

falls into the hands of children. Can you believe it? Nothing immoral or subversive!"

He had flushed a red so deep, it verged on purple. To create a diversion, because she was worried about that crimson colour, and give him time to recover his composure, she said out loud, "He wasn't like that before. When I knew him, and God knows I knew him well, he was all candour. He didn't know how to hide his feelings."

"He's learned his lesson since then. He's become a past master."

Mary Ann continued as if she hadn't heard the comment, "When he was in a tough spot, he didn't think of making excuses and, even less, of lying to get out of it."

"What did he do then?" Maurice Dufault asked mockingly.

"He just stood there, frowning, his face grave; seeing him so miserable, you ended up laughing and willing to forgive him anything."

"Who is the 'you' you're talking about, Mary Ann? You or Muriel Legerton?"

The young woman laughed sarcastically, "Not Muriel Legerton, certainly not. She only came after and spoiled everything." Like a two-edged sword, Mary Ann Forsythe's voice cut and sliced right and left, savagely, tirelessly. She was no longer the gentle and good-natured companion speaking, even less the loving, maternal woman; she was the ousted rival whose

love had served no purpose. Words poured from her lips in a sad, bitter flood. Maurice Dufault understood many things he hadn't been able to explain up to now: Mary Ann's silent dislike of Mrs. Legerton, what a mismatched couple the Forsythes were and, most of all, Mr. Legerton's unsettling swings and reversals. Finally, everything was explained.

Mary Ann rediscovered in the youthful Legerton she had known and loved the silhouette lost in the depths of her memory. His features came clear, a stubborn forehead, but a fearful expression that short-sightedness made even less forceful, a mind easy to influence if you knew how to go about it, one particularly vulnerable to feminine wiles. A fairly good pianist, he had decided to devote himself to music and formed a small band that wasn't bad at all. She encouraged him in that direction. The concerts they gave here and there didn't earn the Legerton band much money, so she was resigned to the prospect of a long engagement. But then Muriel Donahue arrived on the scene. Elegant, ambitious, a few years older than Mary Ann and more sophisticated about life, she had set her cap for the young band leader. A ruthless struggle ensued between the two young women, neither willing to yield the too-precious prize.

"It wasn't just that he was a desirable husband," explained Mary Ann. "It was a confrontation between two irreconcilable, categorically opposed approaches to life. On the one hand, a modest but happy little life in an occupation compatible with

his abilities and tastes; on the other hand, success, provided he betrayed his own nature. Even I, who knew next to nothing about life, understood that if Tommy married the elegant Muriel, that was the end of the Legerton band. Muriel would never be satisfied with a little village musician. You understand, Tommy was no Mozart; he wouldn't have been famous, but he adored music, and his enthusiasm was contagious."

She burst into laughter that was abruptly silenced. "When I think how I studied Beethoven sonatas and Chopin preludes, instead of going out with my friends, so I could discuss them with him. And the hours we spent talking about a polonaise, a mazurka, a symphony, chamber music … Who knows what else? I had studied piano in the years I was at the convent. Well, in the end, I became quite an expert, at least in theory."

"And was the young man involved aware of all that devotion?"

Mary Ann smiled sadly. "Can you call it devotion when you're in love? I suppose what I was doing was as much for myself as for him. It was a way of keeping him close to me, even making him want to be with me. I shared his thoughts. In a way, I lived his life. And time went by so fast, especially when he was playing pieces for me that we had discussed. At that time, I preferred Beethoven; I should have known why his *Appassionata* broke my heart. She concluded with a sigh, "When you're young, you don't think love can ever die, much less that part of yourself dies at the same time."

"What about Muriel Donahue?"

The young woman's face clouded over. "With Muriel Donahue, his future was assured. She was the only daughter of a real estate broker who'd made a fortune. Her father was a widower who refused her nothing; he even bought her a husband."

"How's that?"

"The band income wasn't enough for Tommy to pay the musicians. Muriel knew that and offered him financial help through her father who signed for the necessary funds. I didn't want him to accept, but I had nothing other than my love to offer. It wasn't enough. We quarrelled. He accused me of being jealous, which was true! I was jealous, with reason. I knew Tommy well enough to understand that Muriel and her father were too strong adversaries and, in the end, he would find himself caught in their nets. That's what happened. A year later, he was so deeply in debt he had to break up the band. He became a teacher to pay back his creditor. Then came the economic crisis. You can guess the rest. In the end, he broke off our engagement and married Muriel."

"You couldn't defend what was yours better?"

"Defend it with what?" She continued softly, "I remember the last evening. There he was in front of me, like you are at this moment, frowning, looking unhappy. He was stammering, poor thing, no words would come out. I don't know if I took pity on him or suddenly felt contempt for his weakness, but

when I heard his bewildered explanations – he was like a child caught misbehaving – well, I took my engagement ring off my finger and gave it back to him without a word. I couldn't speak; I would have burst out sobbing. He took it, looked at it for a moment, then left with his head down."

"And you?"

"Me, I stood there, not moving, listening to the sound of his footsteps getting farther away." She burst into loud laughter. "Six months later, I became Mrs. Annunzio Mario Forsythe, who admits she cheated on her husband from the first year of marriage. But, you know, Tommy Legerton's cowardice didn't pay either. When he married Muriel, she made him marry a career, and she kept watch to be sure he didn't forget. Thanks to his wife's father, he became the high school principal, but there was never again any question of a band or even music. It's true that, shortly after their marriage, Muriel gave him a grand piano, which is still in their living room, but apparently he's never touched it. That was my revenge, and Muriel Legerton knows it." Looking back on the past, Mary Ann Forsythe measured the road she had travelled. What she saw was a long rutted road dried out over time; from it arose a smell of dust that choked her, grey dust, a fine, light dust carried by the slightest breeze.

When she looked at her companion, he saw that she was crying. "My poor woman," he murmured, taking her hand in his.

She made an effort to smile. "There you have it," she said. "A high school principal who wanted to be a musician at any cost and a woman's life reduced to a fistful of dust at the bottom of a rut, a life devoid of meaning, scattered by the wind in every direction. And I don't even have the consolation of having given poor Annunzio a little of what he deserves."

Silence enveloped the two of them, a deep and final silence, the end of all the evenings they had shared, all the moments spent together over the years. Mary Ann had stopped talking, and Maurice Dufault found nothing to say to console her. His own baggage was even lighter. Mary Ann had so much love to give that when her gift had been refused, she had felt obliged to give it away, left and right, wildly, until not the slightest particle remained. She had believed she was freeing herself of excess love, the need to be at once lover, wife and mother, the need life denied her. Although the years gone by represented nothing more for her than a bit of dust in a rutted road, at least the dust was iridescent in the sun of human tenderness. For his part, he had only the shifting sands of a desert. He was no longer even tormented by thirst, or so little that he had come to terms with it.

The young woman was standing. Maurice Dufault stood up, too. He held out his hand to her. She took it, squeezed it gently between both of her hands and let it drop. "*Au revoir*, Mary Ann."

"Good-bye, Maurice."

Their farewell had something final about it, which made Maurice Dufault immediately aware that he wouldn't be coming to Mary Ann's any more. Another chapter was closed.

It was only after he got home that he suddenly remembered the purpose of his visit. "What do Tom Legerton's actions or Zosia Lupaniuk's indiscretions matter to me?" he asked himself wearily.

PART THREE

Chapter Three

Maurice Dufault settled back in his armchair.

"Well, then, gentlemen," he announced, "You won't have to fire me. I'm aware of the efforts of my distinguished boss to replace me with his favourite disciple. Because I obviously have no intention of saying *mea culpa* for the Larry Ross incident, I expect to lose my position. However, since nothing matters to me in this world, I thought I'd spare you the trouble. I'm therefore pleased to announce that I'll be leaving Lyonsville for good on June 30, and I don't give a damn what anyone says about me …"

The thought came to him that his tirade would have had much more effect if the members of the board had been there to hear it. Fortunately, the letter he had just written to them to announce his resignation as teacher and vice-principal was very

different in content, its wording brief and courteous. Dropping the letter in the mail, he cut his last ties to Lyonsville.

The memories Mary Ann confided had marked the end of their liaison yet with no harm to their friendship. To him, she would always be the cheerful companion, more mother than lover, whom he had loved as much as it was possible for him to love. Everything had been said between them. There was nothing left for him to do but slip away. Perhaps if he was no longer there, she would succeed in rebuilding her life with Annunzio; that was what he wished for both of them.

Since there was nothing to keep him in Lyonsville, he told himself it would be just as easy for him to go elsewhere to end his days. He was finally resigned. He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when he made peace with the idea, the instant of acceptance, but his last evening with Mary Ann had something to do with it. What did it matter if he only had six months, a year, two years? Despite what Mary Ann had said, life was not worth the struggle. They themselves were the most convincing proof of that. So much the better for Mr. Legerton if blinders prevented from seeing he too was a failure. Maurice Dufault didn't envy him; he didn't even despise him anymore. He pitied him.

He didn't think about Peter, or at least he tried not to think about him. If he happened to suddenly see the reflection of a serious expression under a tuft of blond hair, he hurriedly turned away to avoid having to excuse himself in his own eyes.

Spring flooded in through the open window. The scent from bursting buds penetrated the room of a solitary man, bringing an almost palpable presence, a hint of youth, something ardent that meant life, hope, love. A gentle warmth flowed over his back. A ray of sunshine, hardier than the rest, ventured all the way to his desk to frolic among the papers and books. A lark's song could be heard. Maurice Dufault saw the lark perched on the signpost at the end of the street, heralding the return of the sun after the night's downpour.

He smiled. He would like to have wings, too; he would like to float in the air, far from everyday life, and sing at the sight of the sun. Why had he been given heavy feet, heavier still with clay from the roads that made him a prisoner? It wasn't fair.

Man thirsted for space and his mind thirsted for the infinite, yet the sphere he was granted was a limited, closed world, where desires and resolutions alike barely had time to bud before life started eating away at them, one after another. His domain was a barnyard where, tamed and domesticated, he dragged unformed, useless wings and was grateful for any scrap of happiness he was thrown. No, it wasn't fair. Maybe more unfair was that he had gotten used to the debilitating regime so easily. Man's shame was to accept that feelings wane and aspirations weaken, in a word, to become resigned and peaceful fowl, beating their wings for just one more scrap. That was the real injustice.

Well, it had been said that Maurice Dufault would fly for the first and last time from this narrow world, from the barnyard with walls that hid the horizon. He would escape from his prison, and his swan song would be a hymn to freedom, the celebration of a man declaring his freedom without fear of the consequences. Farewell to Lyonsville, farewell to colleagues and students. He was finished wallowing in the dust.

In his enthusiasm, he started making unrealizable plans, forgetting everything in the new hope that bore him up, his thoughts leaping joyously from one to the next, coming back to the first, heading off at top speed toward a new objective then switching and going in the opposite direction. It was impossible to settle on only one. Finally, reason intervened in the childish game of leapfrog, and he found himself again with a plan that had partially formed when he stood in front of the Williamson Travel Agency posters a few weeks earlier.

That was it, he would flee to Europe, the historical Europe of his ancestors. It would be a pilgrimage, with stops in cities bearing magical names – Paris, Florence, Rome, Athens. Death could come. He would welcome it without lament, but first he would give himself one final pleasure.

The students were excited about the celebration the following Friday, the day of the school festival. Miss Romaniuk was

working wonders. Anyone who saw her, her face animated, her hands open, calling, cajoling, imploring, summoning the muse for the young people spread in a semi-circle in front of her, wouldn't have recognized her as the fearful woman always ready to scurry as soon as Mr. Legerton raised his voice. How could her colleagues know about her metamorphosis unless they attended the practices? They knew nothing of the extra hours she devoted to the task or, if some were aware of it, they quickly banished the inconvenient, insidious thought from their minds, resenting what they called "overzealousness," if only because it made them uneasy.

Peter was one of the soloists. Not only did he still have a boy soprano voice, a clear, true voice that showed natural talent, but he also had a good ear and learned quickly, sufficient reasons for Mary Romaniuk. Three times a week at the end of the afternoon, he took a side street to the left of the school, his music workbook under his arm, and hurried with his hopping gait to the singing teacher's house. He left there half an hour later, still so caught up in the music that he forgot to watch out for the street corners and storefronts where Larry Ross hung out with the few members of his gang who had remained loyal.

One day, without really knowing how, he suddenly found himself face to face with Larry Ross and George Berthaut who were leaning against the front of the shoe repair shop smoking. The owner, an older Ukrainian man whose English wasn't always up to the task, had already come out twice to chase them

away from the storefront; his shouts of "Go 'way! Go 'way! You no good!" were met with hoots of loud laughter. A knife with multiple blades pulled out of the gang leader's pocket convinced the storeowner to beat a hasty retreat. He made sure his door was locked and, sitting in the back of the small room, furiously stared at the two louts through his pince-nez over the shoe he was repairing. He would have liked to look even meaner. With the tip of his pocket knife, Larry Ross was carving figures in the white paint on the front of the building.

The older Ukrainian man didn't budge from his seat and, when nothing more happened, the young man soon tired of that diversion. He leaned against the shop window smoking and looking for something to do.

George Berthaut hurried to imitate his leader.

At precisely that moment, Peter Lupaniuk came out of a side street. Larry Ross gave a grin of satisfaction, as did his companion. With the same stupid laugh, they moved forward to block the newcomer's path.

"Hello, Caruso," Larry Ross blew smoke right in his face. Peter started to cough.

"Hello, Mozart." George Berthaut went him one better but, with his lack of musical knowledge, he mixed up voice virtuosos, composers and instrumentalists. He also drew on his cigarette with the intention of blowing smoke in Peter's face as his leader had done. Unfortunately, he didn't stop sniggering, so instead he inhaled by mistake and choked miserably.

"If you don't know how to smoke, don't smoke," said Larry contemptuously.

He turned to Peter. "Where've you been, Pete Panic?"

Peter leaned a little more heavily on his good leg, the tip of his left leg just brushing the ground, like a bird with one useless leg.

"Yeah, where're you coming from anyway?" repeated George Berthaut between sputters.

"From Miss Romaniuk's, as you know very well."

"Why do you go to that old spinster's? Come on, answer me." Larry Ross grabbed Peter by the sleeve of his sweater and pulled with obvious pleasure. When he finally let go, it hung from the young Polish boy's shoulder like a half-deflated balloon. "Answer me. If you've lost your tongue, little buddy, we can make you find it."

He took the knife out of his pocket and slowly, deliberately opened the blades one after another. George Berthaut watched him nervously and said suddenly, "You'd better answer, you know, Peter."

Peter clutched his music workbook against him. Trying to make his voice sound firm, he asked, "Why don't you leave me alone? What have I done to you that you're always after me?"

"Because you're an idiot, that's why, an idiot who puts on airs, not like the others. You don't know how to laugh, just sing, 'Do, re, mi, fa, sol' …" the young punk ended in a falsetto voice.

Suddenly he yanked the music workbook from Peter's hands, flipped through it leaving dirty thumbprints on the white margins of the pages, held it out to George and said, "Hold this for me so I can sing like Pete Panic."

He was about to start some more or less melodious singing exercises when he suddenly noticed Peter's sister coming toward them. Stopping at once, he took the music workbook back out of his companion's hands and let it fall at Peter's feet. "Well, if it isn't Caruso's sister coming!"

Peter hurriedly picked up his workbook, wiped it on the stretched sleeve of his sweater and took a step toward Zosia.

Larry Ross stopped him with a gesture and said, "Not so fast, little buddy. Seems like you're in a hurry to leave. Whereas, me, I'd like to talk to your sister. Any objections?"

Peter searched the young punk's face for a second trying to find what was hidden by his insolent smile and what insult he was planning behind half-closed eyes. He shook his head slightly and waited for his sister.

She looked worried. Her face cleared when she saw her brother, though, and she smiled at him, a smile that seemed a bit tense. At the same time, she held the small white plastic bag she had in her hand to her chest.

His back against the window, Larry Ross took another drag on his cigarette. Through smoke rings dissipating at eye level, he watched the young girl as she drew nearer. His insolent gaze lingered on every detail of her woman's body in a form-fitting

navy-blue suit, its wide collar of coarse white wool open like the petals of a flower. The narrow skirt made Zosia walk with small, quick steps, which gave the impression she was barely touching the ground with the tip of one toe before the second toe landed in its place. The effect was fascinating, especially since the movement of her tiny shoes, the same colour of blue as her suit, created the illusion of two blue butterflies chasing one another along the sidewalk.

As boorish as he was, Larry Ross couldn't remain insensitive to the sight of feminine grace, however new to him. In his confusion, a strange feeling of admiration mingled with a desire to please. An unfamiliar humility came over him and he started elbowing George Berthaut, laughing, barely moving his lips. George rolled his eyes in surprise at Larry Ross, not understanding why his face had suddenly turned red, then stared at the young Polish girl two steps away. Finally he turned toward Peter. Not knowing what was expected of him, he decided to follow his companion's example and started laughing stupidly.

Zosia stopped, glancing curiously at Larry Ross, who got even redder. As if it was impossible for him to stay still any longer, George Berthaut started balancing on one foot then the other. Peter didn't move, but a crease suddenly lined his forehead. Zosia lost her slight smile; new dark circles under her eyes cast a shadow on her satin cheeks. Her unaccustomed gravity accentuated her resemblance to her brother and, at the same time, added something touching to her delicate face that

seemed to evoke pity or appeal for mercy. Seeing Peter raise questioning eyes to her, looking for reassurance, she strove to recover her liveliness. Her gloved hand rested on the young boy's shoulder. With a gesture that revealed her affection for him, she started smoothing the sleeve of his sweater, where a thread had unravelled. "Good heavens, Peter," she said in a voice she attempted to make cheery. "What did you do to your sweater? It's all out of shape. Grandmother is going to scold you again."

"It wasn't my fault; it was an accident." He didn't offer any other explanation, despite the contempt that darkened his blue eyes, and he held out his hand to his sister. Zosia's white-gloved hand immediately disappeared in her brother's rough fingers. "We have to go home. Come on, Grandmother must be waiting for us," he said.

"What's the big hurry? We want to talk, don't we, George?" Larry Ross said suddenly. He abandoned his nonchalant pose to dig in his pants pocket and pull out a torn and dirty pack of cigarettes which he offered to the young girl. "Cigarette?"

Zosia shook her head.

"Yeah, that's right! You shouldn't smoke in front of your little brother," said the mocking voice. He stuffed the pack of cigarettes back into his pocket and took out a stick of gum, which he stuffed into his mouth, despite George's opened hand and expressive look. "Does Grandmother know you smoke with your friends at restaurants, at the movies, sometimes even in

the street?" he continued in a cocky tone. "What does she say about that, your grandmother with the babushka who smells like sauerkraut? She's not elegant like her granddaughter; she doesn't smell good like her either," he added mockingly.

He came closer, impudently sniffing the scent of perfume that rose every time the young girl moved. "Is that Chanel No. 5 your boyfriend gave you?" he asked. "Of course, there's more than one. Tell me, does your little brother keep track of your lovers? Does he file them in alphabetical order or by what they have to offer?"

Zosia lowered her eyes under his insolent stare; with a nervous hand, she moved the tiny white plastic bag in front of her, as if to protect herself.

Peter clenched his fists.

The pitiless voice continued, "What, no answer from either of you? You understand, George," he went on, giving him a rough slap on the back, "You understand that, since *Mademoiselle* has at least half a dozen boyfriends, she needs someone to keep track of her dates, otherwise, it could create some inconveniences. Isn't that right, *Mamzelle* Zosia?" He burst out laughing.

George joined in, trying to shine in his leader's eyes, and immediately added, "It could create some inconveniences for you, *Mamzelle*. Isn't that right, Pete Panic?"

Peter took his sister's hand again and said softly, "Don't listen to him. Come on, we're going to be late for supper."

The young girl let him take the lead, and they started down the road together under the mocking stare of Larry Ross, accompanied by George Berthaut's idiotic sniggering. They hurried away, anxious to flee the gibes and insults, two children, the one with the disability trying to protect the other weaker child. Before they disappeared around the street corner, their tormenters shouted one last insult.

The shoe repairman hadn't missed any of the scene that took place in front of his shop. Although he couldn't hear all the words, he could tell from Larry Ross's cocky voice and insolent stares at the young Polish girl that she was the object of rude mockery. He had heard enough to catch the meaning of the conversation, so he thought it was a good idea to tell Maurice Dufault.

The vice-principal promised himself he would ask Peter but didn't really have an opportunity to talk to him – Peter kept to himself for the next few days – and Maurice Dufault ended up forgetting. Since he'd sent in his letter of resignation to the school board, he'd been counting the days he had left in Lyonsville. Nothing held his attention anymore, but he kept up with his teaching duties somehow, if only because he couldn't do otherwise. The end of every afternoon found him wandering around the countryside.

He had never felt such a need to flee. By four o'clock, the itch was bad and he had no relief until he had left behind the active, busy little town Lyonsville was at seed time, forgotten for the moment. In no hurry, he went looking for lost trails and roads that led nowhere and didn't stop until his heart started to give him trouble. Leaning against the trunk of a tree, he waited patiently for the blood to flow more slowly in his veins, for his breathing to be less constricted, until finally everything was back in order. Then he started off again, with no other objective than to distance himself from other human beings with whom he no longer had anything in common.

He wasn't sad. He was just preparing himself. It wasn't farewell he was murmuring to the new buds overflowing with life-giving sap. Nor was the dazzling music that came to him from deep in the forest greenery a song of hope. No, it wasn't about life or death or hope or resignation. Those terrifying words are men's words, Maurice Dufault thought.

He also thought about how nature accepts everything without question, without quibbling. He repeated to himself that, although nature appears cold, detached, insensitive to both our poor desires and torments, it's because everything is simple in nature, unlike the complications we bring. Nature has no illusions, no despair. Those who come after follow in the footsteps of those who came before, as did their predecessors, until they too disappear to make way for their successors. The leaf that dries, the flower that withers in the wind, the bird that falls

don't cause any torment; there will be other flowers, other birds, on and on to the end of time. Why worry?

Isn't man a link in the chain of time, too, dust that shines in the sun for a moment? Maurice Dufault wondered. Other links replace a broken one, and the human chain continues from century to century. There is no lack of dust, glowing with the colours of the rainbow for a few seconds. Why rebel? Doesn't spring always follow winter and son, father?

During those sun-soaked late May days, Maurice Dufault learned the lesson of things, what he called "the great Whole." He spent hours filling himself with nature's truth, namely that each individual's reign is transitory, that we have to give up our place for the one who comes next. Only he had no one to give up his place for. He had a son somewhere, his and Jacqueline's son, but where was he? How could he hope that ties other than blood ties bound them to one other?

The tiniest violet he discovered hidden at the edge of the woods, savouring its modest scent, he found faded the next day, nearly lifeless. Its sickly sweet odour, the stench of decomposition, still held what remained of the sweetness that had enchanted him the day before. He stopped to examine the plant and noticed, at the very heart of the large leaves, a new shoot starting, a bud barely open on the end of a thin stalk, announcing that the chain continued and a new link would replace the broken one.

The life exploding all around him took no notice of the remains of winter. The dead leaves of fall disappeared under the assault of young plants nourished by their substance. Trees uprooted by the wind were covered with moss, and insects and birds hastened to take advantage of the moments granted them, without a thought for those who had disappeared. There was no lamentation, no *De Profundis*, nothing but a great restful calm floating to the surface.

At peace, clinging for the moment to the certainty that everything was just fine as it was, that he must disappear for a younger, stronger link to continue the human chain, he went back home. He ate his dinner calmly, read for an hour or two and went to bed to plunge immediately into a deep sleep that lasted for a few hours. Then the insomnia came back and, with it, his anguish. He retraced his walk the day before in his thoughts, imagined himself rocked in the greenery that had sheltered him, repeated the arguments gleaned from everything that grew, crawled or flew, all in vain. Only one fact remained. The violet had given its scent, the butterfly its striking colour, the bird its harmonious song. He had never given anything. Of course, he had been unstinting in his efforts on behalf of the students confided to his care, but he hadn't given the slightest particle of what was truly, deeply *himself*.

PART THREE

Chapter Four

Lyonsville was ready to welcome the children from the surrounding villages who were to converge on the town the next day. The corner café was stocked with chocolate bars, Coca-Cola and chewing gum, and the café owner was armed with patience at the thought of the noise and confusion he would have to endure. The car dealerships offered the latest model cars, Ford, Chevrolet, Oldsmobile; the gleaming chrome of sports cars attracted the eyes of the young and the not so young. A little farther down the road, the radio and television shop vied for attention with the shop for sports, fishing and football fans. Nothing was lacking to gratify the whims and satisfy the desires of one and all, men, women and children, big and little.

That was what Maurice Dufault was thinking as he went home after a day punctuated with interruptions, hustle and bustle and hubbub. He was quite obviously tired, so he savoured

the coming evening in advance. Finally alone, he could think about his travel plans, read or let himself be cradled by music without fear of interruption. He could rest and enjoy a few hours of peace, without worrying about tomorrow, because, thank God, Larry Ross had been routed.

It hadn't taken long that morning for Maurice Dufault to suspect something was afoot. He only needed to take one look at the gang leader's sneering face and watch him winking left and right to know that a nasty idea had germinated in his cunning mind, a trick Maurice Dufault would have to uncover before the afternoon ended. The plot was revealed to him by chance, at the very moment it was aborted; otherwise he would have had to intervene himself.

During afternoon recess, the conspirators themselves gave the vice-principal the key to the mystery he had sensed floating in the air since morning. Called in by Mr. Legerton to discuss the final preparations for the next day, Maurice Dufault had just sat back down at his desk when he heard voices through the open window. He immediately recognized Larry Ross's foolhardy complacency.

"Okay, guys, we're agreed for tomorrow? You know you can count on me. I've never disappointed you up to now, even though it hasn't always been easy. Well, what do you say?"

Maurice Dufault heard indistinct murmurs, but John Mandruchak's nasal twang and Maurice Leroy's high-pitched voice were clear.

The answer wasn't what the gang leader expected, because he immediately began again, "You trust me, don't you? What I'm suggesting is absolutely foolproof, for sure. I'm telling you. I've thought it all through. We're gonna laugh like crazy, I promise you that. After it's over, we disappear into the crowd. No one will be any the wiser. So, we're agreed for tomorrow? We get to school at nine o'clock as usual, make sure we're seen around, here, there and everywhere, by the teachers, then at nine thirty, we meet on the street to the left of the school. The car will be there. Dufault won't have time to notice we're gone before we're back."

"You're sure you'll have your father's car?" asked John Mandruchak.

"I told you, I've thought of everything. The old man is lending me the car to drive the performers," he said, laughing. "I told him they'd be too out of breath if they had to walk from town to the school auditorium. He gave me permission right away. Anyway, I'll come with him to the school, leave him with the big shots and split to park the car where I told you I'd wait for you."

It was Maurice Leroy's turn to hesitate. "But how are we gonna persuade Pete Panic? He's not stupid enough to trust us. Even if we manage to get him into the car, we can't stop him from telling after. Your plan is dangerous, Ross."

The gang leader's voice registered impatience, "Are you with us or not? If you are, say so right now. Let's get this over with.

If you're not, I'm not wasting my time with cowards like you. Anyway, George is with me, aren't you, George?"

George was undoubtedly going to hurriedly agree with a nod as usual, thought Maurice Dufault, who heard everything.

However, an idea must have suddenly come to him that interrupted that gesture, because, after a moment's silence, the vice-principal heard him ask, "What if your father needs the car?"

"Don't you understand, you dummy!" Larry Ross yelled angrily. "I already explained the plan, just for you, this morning." He grumbled, "I wonder why I take the trouble to find ways for you to have fun. You stand there staring at me, flabbergasted. What a bunch of idiots you are!" he ended, with evident bad temper.

"Well, if you're going to talk to us like that, buddy, you can take a hike." It was Teddy Edwards who spoke up.

"Well, well, now the general's staff is in revolt!" murmured Maurice Dufault.

"We can find ways to have fun ourselves without you, you know," continued Teddy Edwards. "Anyway, how do we know we won't get into trouble over it? You haven't forgotten the hair episode last fall? We haven't forgotten, I assure you."

John Mandruchak and Maurice Leroy started to snicker timidly at first, then burst out laughing, "He hasn't forgotten either. Look at him, he gets all red when we mention it."

Larry Ross must have choked back his anger and mortification, because he began again in a conciliatory tone, "Okay,

guys, don't get mad. You're good buddies, I know that. I'm asking you to play a trick on Pete Panic because you're good buddies and we have fun together. I'm sure we'll laugh our heads off tomorrow. So, it's a go?"

"Not so fast, not so fast! Before we commit to it, explain the plan in detail. After that, we'll see. Okay?"

Larry Ross was obliged to give in to Teddy Edwards' demand, which was immediately supported by the other two. He explained there was no way his father would need the car before they got back because he would be with Mr. Legerton all morning. He assured them that Peter Lupaniuk would fall head first into their trap because he had an irrefutable argument at his disposal – Zosia. George would go find the Polish kid and tell him Zosia had just had an accident and he had to go home right away; a car was ready to drive him. Teddy, John and Maurice would force him into the car if necessary. Once Peter was on the car seat, they would head for the country at top speed. No Peter, no solo! They'd drop him two or three miles from town, and he could come back on his own whenever he wanted. They'd be back in time to drive the guest students to the school auditorium. And no one would accuse them of anything, because no one would notice they were gone.

The accomplices hesitated, though. Could Larry Ross guarantee Peter wouldn't report them?

To deal with that eventuality, the gang leader had the same irrefutable argument. He had found out things about Zosia her brother surely didn't know. When he heard what Larry had

to say, he'd be willing to do anything to keep the news from spreading.

"What things?" George asked innocently.

"You're too young to understand, you baby," Larry snickered. "Let your elders take care of business; you just do as you're told."

The other three must have understood, because they didn't ask any questions. They didn't seem to be in a hurry to agree to the campaign plan suggested, however; something was bothering them.

"Peter will have to come back on foot," observed Maurice Leroy. "Three miles is a long way when you've only got one good leg."

"Maybe we could drop him on the highway a mile from town. Someone is sure to see him and bring him back," suggested John Mandruchak.

Larry refused. "There'll be too many people on the highway tomorrow; we'd be recognized." Suddenly, he said, "What's the matter with you? You're awfully worried about the Polish kid. You'd think he was your friend or something!"

"What you're talking about is blackmail, when you get right down to it," declared Teddy Edwards abruptly. "And I, for one, don't like it."

Maurice Dufault knew at that moment Larry Ross had lost; the plan he had prepared so carefully would come to nothing with no participants.

The young hoodlum must have got the same impression, because he immediately took out his frustration on George Berthaut. "Are you done wagging your tongue?" he yelled, totally irritated. "Do I have to teach you how to chew gum, too?"

"Leave George alone," said Maurice Leroy, firmly. "He's no dumber than anyone else!"

Not daring to believe his ears, Maurice Dufault was growing more intrigued by the minute. He tiptoed to the window, making sure not to reveal his presence.

George Berthaut's eyes were wide with astonishment at hearing someone take his part against the leader who always scoffed at him – which he'd always taken for affection until then. He was frowning with the effort to understand what was going on. He recognized it was something serious, but the meaning escaped him.

Maurice Dufault saw him raise his eyes and look at Larry, who had already forgotten him, then at the three others. He saw them take a step back, put their hands in their pockets, size up the kid who'd been their leader for over two years, then turn on their heels.

"Don't count us in," Teddy Edwards declared. "We've had enough of your big tricks. Blackmail is fine for people without any imagination. It's a traitor's trick, and we're not that low."

"Anyway, Pete Panic isn't a bad guy. He's different, that's all." With Maurice Leroy's last words, the vice-principal knew it was a total rout.

The three partners went off without another glance at Larry Ross, who stood there with his mouth hanging open, or at George Berthaut, who was totally befuddled, his eyes bugging out with surprise.

Maurice Dufault felt relieved. Without openly admitting it to himself, he couldn't help but realize that, with him gone, Peter would be the butt of even more mean tricks and harassment and become the school's whipping boy again. He hadn't thought Larry Ross's dictatorship could be overthrown in a single coup, with no more impact than a change in the weather. Evidently, the hair-shaving incident had gradually undermined the gang's cohesiveness so that sudden tension could split it down the middle, leaving the leader dethroned, his faithful but inept shadow on one side and the three friends who had been his henchmen on the other. By quitting the gang, they doomed it to annihilation. How could poor George, who wasn't very intelligent and so naive, rally the dispersed troops?

No fear now that tomorrow would bring further trouble, in particular no fear that Peter would find himself a prisoner of cruel peers who would make him take a forced march, just for a laugh. No, there was nothing more to fear on that score. As a precautionary measure, however, Maurice Dufault promised himself he would see that the defecting trio was kept occupied

for the day. Volunteers were needed for the information office and to park cars and control traffic in the schoolyard. Teddy Edwards, Maurice Leroy and John Mandruchak were just the candidates for the job. They would accept a job with pleasure where they could show authority and responsibility. He just had to keep an eye on the other two. Not daring to try anything with poor George as sole support, Larry Ross would probably spend the day wandering from one group to another, bored and unhappy, a dethroned king with no other courtier than a poor, simple buffoon.

Although Maurice Dufault was pleased at the thought that Larry Ross's reign had come to an end, he was tormented by the young man's words about Zosia. He tried in vain to convince himself it was just big talk, a way of reasserting toppling authority, but he couldn't forget what had been said. There was the talk of blackmail, which meant Larry Ross had discovered something, maybe nothing, but enough given the opportunity. Because Zosia was involved, he might as well expect the worst.

It had been several weeks since he'd last seen her. Her job in the hospital laundry gave her a fair amount of independence from her grandmother, an older Polish woman attached to her home and garden right at the edge of town, to the left of the school. Peter ran any errands, so the grandmother's flowered babushka was rarely seen in the streets. Maurice Dufault himself had only met her once or twice heading home at quite a clip, Peter hopping at her side. He knew she was fairly inflexible

in temperament, not readily forgiving breaches in the principles of honesty and morality of her generation from pre-war Europe. He had thought more than once that it would cost Zosia dearly if her scatterbrained behaviour ever became known to her grandmother. He was even surprised that the young girl had succeeded in keeping her outings secret until now and wondered what excuses she invented, how she strained the truth to outwit the older woman's vigilance. No doubt Peter had had to open the door for his sister more than once to avoid waking their grandmother. Maurice Dufault hadn't failed to notice the dark circles under the boy's eyes some mornings and had seen him conceal yawns that spoke volumes about lack of sleep. Peter even fell asleep with his head on his book one hot, heavy day. The vice-principal pretended not to notice until the sound of snoring caused an explosion of laughter. He himself had laughed at Peter's surprised face, with his hair sticking straight up and his eyes full of sleep. He even thought for a moment that it might be an act of charity on his part to make the grandmother aware of her granddaughter's behaviour. Maybe then the dark circles would disappear from under the boy's eyes. But he did nothing, because he had a horror of gossip and it was none of his business – his responsibility stopped at the school entrance.

In a bad mood, he turned on the radio impatiently, grabbed a book at random and plunged into it to chase away troublesome thoughts. What the hell! He wasn't a father with a family.

The music started out softly but had not provided the expected balm; nor had the book of collected poems offered the needed distraction. Maurice Dufault turned away from both of them and started dreaming about the trip he would soon take, his first and last, of that he was sure. Although he hadn't gone back to Dr. Lord, he realized he didn't have much longer. He didn't smoke any more and drank almost no alcohol, just one whisky when black thoughts threatened to overwhelm him. To be truthful, he asked only one thing of life, to leave Lyonsville in good-enough shape to enjoy his planned trip a little. What did it matter where his body was buried? It would return to the nothingness from which it came, like those who came before, like those to come. His only desire was to forget the years with their odour of dust, a fine powdery dust that had never shone in the sun of a well-used talent or virtue or a single unselfish act. Not only was it too late to start over, even his regrets were fruitless.

Of all the people he had known since he became a teacher, only two had ever kept his attention, moved him in any way. The first had been his lover with her too-maternal heart, the other a boy with a disability whose big, serious eyes held all the distress of a cruel, crazy world.

Mary Ann's gaiety had entertained him; with her, he had found distraction, rest and forgetfulness. To Peter he owed his

experience with the worries his profession could bring. It was even because of the boy, to a certain extent, that he was leaving Lyonsville, because of the hair-shaving incident he'd never regretted. Peter had brought him more concerns than consolations, yet he was the only person who made him regret leaving. Maybe he was also the only person for whom he regretted not having done more. It was better to close his eyes to what might have been. The first day of summer holidays would find him free, finally released from the barnyard. The rest no longer had any importance.

He was drowsy, and in his tired mind the still-recent past became jumbled with his plans for the near future; juxtaposed with past disappointments and problems, he saw his future plans through a filter of anticipated enchantments. They gradually became one whole, fragile, ill-assorted amalgam, dominated by the easily recognizable elements of Peter's serious expression with a shadow of a smile at the corner of his lips. Then Zosia appeared, all decked up and gay, and Maurice Dufault saw himself between the two. He saw himself smiling, too, filled by a new warmth that made him someone completely different than he had been before. For a second, Mr. Legerton's vague expression tried to come into focus in the background, but disappeared almost immediately. Next Maurice Dufault saw his mother's smiling features, young again. Her face gradually changed, without losing its smile, and he recognized Mary

Ann's open, laughing face. She vanished with a final wave of her hand, accompanied by a burst of good-natured laughter. Zosia, Peter and he were the only ones left in the picture, forming a consistent whole at its centre, its unchangeable nature emphasized by the others floating in and out.

Nearly asleep, Maurice Dufault contemplated the motionless, serene trio, their triple unity unaffected by bustle and change. He considered the strangeness of that combination, noted its unique characteristics and asked himself why he was part of it. He wanted to detach from it and even thought he had succeeded in withdrawing by force of will because, for a few seconds, only the young Polish girl and her brother were in the picture. He was about to congratulate himself on his manoeuvre, when he realized anxiously that Zosia was sobbing and Peter was unable to console her because he, too, was crying. Maurice Dufault had to go back to his place in the centre of the picture.

For some reason, the second shift couldn't be made in silence. In fact, the moment he was back in his position between Peter and Zosia, a staccato noise like a nervous fist on a door could be heard. At the same time came a hoarse voice, "Mr. Dufault! Mr. Dufault!"

With an effort, Maurice Dufault freed himself from the tangled threads of sleep or, at least, half-freed himself, because he opened the door to whoever was calling and wasn't surprised in the slightest to find it was Peter and he was crying.

Against the background of the white bed, Zosia's face appeared almost transparent, it was so pale. It took Maurice Dufault a minute to be sure a shallow breath was lifting the young girl's chest – she was breathing, it wasn't too late – before he raised his eyes to Dr. Lord and the nurse.

The doctor gently let Zosia's hand drop and went to Peter, who was barely standing, his face contorted. "She's doing better, she's going to be okay," he told him, adding in a gruff voice, "and you can go home and sleep. One sick person is enough for tonight."

Peter answered in a low voice that was still trembling, "I have to stay with Zosia. I don't want her to be alone tonight."

"She won't be alone. Mrs. Murphy will stay with her. Anyway, she's going to sleep, which is the best thing for her. She needs calm and tranquility. You're going to be reasonable and go home. Your grandmother must be wondering where you went since you haven't come home yet."

Peter's eyes opened wide with fear, "My God, what am I going to tell Grandmother? And what's going to happen to Zosia now?" The tears he'd been struggling to hold back overflowed and he started crying quietly. He didn't sob or sigh. The tears flowed without stopping, a bitter flood, swollen with all the unhappiness he had felt, all the misfortunes he had accepted

without complaining. The dam had broken. He wept for the disillusionment and disenchantment of his fifteen years of life.

Moved, Maurice Dufault searched for a word or gesture that could stop the silent outpouring. Dr. Lord remained motionless and silent but attentive, until Peter's sniffling told him the tidal wave was spent and the waves slowly retreating.

"You'll tell your grandmother Zosia ate something that made her sick and is in the hospital for a few days. I assure you there won't be any sign of it by the end of the week."

Peter raised eyes still wet with tears to the doctor. "But after that? What's going to happen afterwards?" A hiccup, almost a sob, prevented him from continuing.

"Afterwards, we'll see. I promise you I won't abandon Zosia, as long as you be good and go home to bed immediately." The doctor smiled as he spoke, and his hand rested naturally on Peter's shoulder.

"Do what the doctor says, Piotr. He knows what Zosia needs better than you do." Maurice Dufault ran his hand through the boy's messy hair, ruffling it more with his affectionate gesture, before adding seriously, "I won't abandon Zosia either, I promise, Piotr."

Peter smiled at him timidly and moved to the head of the bed. Although he hadn't made any noise, Zosia opened her eyes and murmured very quietly, "Peter! Oh, Peter!" She closed her eyes and a tear ran down her cheek. "If you knew …"

Peter bent immediately to kiss her. "Don't talk, Zosia. I know what you're going to say anyway. All that is nothing, you just have to get better quickly. Dr. Lord and Mr. Dufault are going to help us. There's nothing to be afraid of, understand?"

Zosia nodded her head slightly and turned to the two men who were waiting at the foot of the bed. She wanted to whisper something, but her eyes closed again and she let herself fall back against the pillow.

Dr. Lord came closer. "She's going to sleep, Peter; I gave her a shot. You come back tomorrow. Sleep well yourself."

Maurice Dufault took his hand, "Come on, Piotr, you have to sleep, too. We're counting on you tomorrow. You can't let us down."

They left after those words, after Peter took one last anxious look at Zosia who was asleep and Dr. Lord gave final instructions to the nurse.

Standing still at the foot of the bed, Maurice Dufault waited for them without a word, without any gesture that revealed his thoughts. The scene he had just witnessed had upset him deeply. He wasn't really surprised by what had happened to Zosia – her careless behaviour had led him to predict unhappiness some

day – but he was nonetheless devastated. Just as Peter had, he asked the inevitable question, "Afterwards? What is going to happen afterwards?" What would Zosia do in two months if she agreed to live that long? Her first attempt at suicide had been aborted, what about the second one? Or would she and Peter, in their innocence and naivety, trust their fate to some charlatan from the city? In either case, the outcome he foresaw was horrible. And if both of them chose life, what would become of two young foreigners facing a scandal in a hypocritically puritan community like Lyonsville? Exposed to the jokes of the likes of Larry Ross, a subject of gossip for respectable women, Zosia would gradually be abandoned by the same men who had called themselves her champions and been so unsparing in the tributes they paid her. Not one of them would want her for a wife. Peter would stand by helpless at the disapproval of so-called good people who had forgotten the meaning of the word "charity." Dr. Lord would certainly take care of her; Maurice Dufault himself was ready to help with his resources, but more was needed. A solution had to be found that made good people shut their eyes and simply accept what was irreparable and forget it right away.

PART THREE

Chapter Five

A month had passed since the day Peter came knocking at the vice-principal's door. Fortunately, with the immediate care she had been given by Dr. Lord, Zosia had been saved. A few days later, just as the doctor had said, nothing could be seen but a slight paleness that accentuated the serious expression replacing her customary animation. She was even more beautiful. There was no flirtatiousness in her expression, however, just a little sadness and incomprehension, too, as if she didn't really understand how she got there.

The next day, the day of the school festival, Maurice Dufault had escaped the busy crowd of students and parents to go visit her. Quite simply, without any flowery language, he had asked her to marry him. "You would do me a great honour, Zosia, if

you agreed to be my wife. You are young and beautiful, more than a man like me needs."

She started to cry, ready to turn him down. He didn't let her continue. "It's not the great love you dreamt of, Zosia, and are entitled to. But that's life; sometimes, we have to settle for someone less than perfect."

"It's not that, not that at all," she cried, in tears. "I don't deserve to have anyone take care of me. I don't deserve pity …"

"It's not pity I'm offering you, but friendship and affection. I have a great deal of affection for you and Peter. Your little brother would be pleased," he added with a smile.

She gave him a fleeting smile, too, and agreed to be his wife, perhaps more for Peter's sake than her own.

He had gone immediately to her grandmother's to officially ask for her hand. The older Polish woman's faded eyelids opened wide as she gave him a penetrating look. "You're a good man, Mr. Dufault."

He had wanted to wait until the end of the day to announce the news to Peter, but the boy found out from Zosia herself and came running as soon as his solo ended. He tried to thank Maurice Dufault, to express his gratitude, but the vice-principal promptly put an end to his thanks. "You have to understand, Peter, that what I'm doing is for me, too, so I don't have to live alone for the little time I have left. I love you and Zosia and prefer to end my days with you." It was the first time

he had made any allusion to the fall evening when Peter found him on the verge of despair in the empty classroom.

The Polish boy looked at him gravely. "Thank you, Mr. Dufault, thank you for Zosia and for me," he said finally, also simply.

He had had to speak to Dr. Lord, perhaps the part Maurice Dufault feared most, not because of Zosia or because he feared the doctor's objections but out of a sense of delicacy and also because he didn't want to discuss his state of health.

The aging doctor had not seemed surprised by the turn of events. His eyes rested on the vice-principal's pale face long enough to assess the impact of such a decision, but showed no surprise. He said, "I heartily approve, Maurice. Zosia will make you a fine little wife. I will be the one who gives her to you in marriage, on the condition, of course, that she wants me as a father," he added with a smile.

The marriage had been celebrated in Edmonton the following Saturday.

Although some people showed surprise and some women smiled reluctantly, their egos wounded to see a scatterbrain like Zosia succeed in getting someone worthwhile to marry her, and for still others, suspicious thoughts took root, the news of the marriage was accepted without reservation by most people. Order had been restored. Married, Zosia no longer attracted the same interest, which is what Maurice Dufault had

counted on. Mr. Legerton offered his congratulations sincerely, although with a certain amount of relief, it seemed to the vice-principal. Maurice Dufault refused to linger over that thought, convinced that the principal's natural faintheartedness had saved him; his indiscretions had been too naive to be of any consequence, and his agitation the day he reversed his decision about Mary Romaniuk was merely due to his fear of being mixed up in a scandal. For the first time, Maurice Dufault responded warmly to the principal's words, understanding all at once that everyone has his share of cowardice.

He didn't regret a thing. The travel plans that had helped him live through the spring vanished, and he didn't think about them any more. He didn't even notice that Zosia had to slow her step more and more to match it to his. At times, she would stop suddenly to give him time to catch his breath. At times, too, when she wanted him to rest, she said she wanted to sit down for a minute, as if she needed to rest.

She had adapted swiftly to her new life. She was naturally gay, and sorrow couldn't have a hold on her for long. Maurice Dufault got used to hearing her singing quietly to herself while she did housework in the little apartment he'd rented. He felt quite moved, which took him by surprise, when he saw her beautiful face suddenly serious, with a mysterious, enigmatic expression, her fingers smoothing the white sweater that would be worn by the baby to be born in a few months. He laughed outright when she announced at some ungodly hour that she

was hungry and had to have a sandwich or some cookies to appease her voracious appetite.

He gradually got used to his life as an expectant father and forgot he might not see the child that had become his.

That was unimportant, because everything had been taken care of for the baby and for Zosia and Peter, too. They wouldn't suffer for lack of material things and, since they were young, they would forget in time. That was as it should be. Others would fill their lives and enrich them. He was grateful for the months, weeks, days of peaceful joy granted him. He didn't ask for more.

Eight o'clock chimed on the pendulum clock, the sound fading slowly before the familiar tick tock began again. Maurice Dufault raised his eyes from the book he was reading. The sound of young voices came to him from the kitchen, where Zosia and Peter were washing dishes after dinner. The clatter of the dishes came to him, too, and the sound of running water and the clink of glasses. There was always a human counterpoint, a warm and reassuring medley of voices, comforting to him because it was his family.

Maurice Dufault listened for a moment to Zosia's joyful voice teasing her brother and his careful responses in which the desire to be firm vied with the desire not to distress his

sister. How strange it was that two such dissimilar people were brother and sister. Yet they were bonded by more than blood ties – shared memories, the need to protect themselves against the hostile and unpredictable unknowns of their childhood and, even more, the real affection of two young people who had grown up together and accepted each other loyally and fully. One would always be a frolicsome butterfly, a graceful sylph of airy spaces, a foolish grasshopper who nevertheless wanted to do the right thing in the incomprehensible fable that is life. Thank God, there would be the prudence of the other and his attentive vigilance and fraternal love to safeguard and support Zosia. Maurice Dufault didn't have to fear for those he had learned to love.

He had learned in the weeks just past what it was to have someone to love, someone he was responsible for, to have a family. When he had married Zosia, not only had he agreed to give mother and child his name and lavish affection on them, but he had also adopted Peter, and even their grandmother, in a way. In joyful moments, he congratulated himself on his ready-made family. Peter came by every day. Sometimes his grandmother came with him, and Maurice Dufault was astonished by the older Polish woman's knowledge. Her mind was uncultivated. Her knowledge did not come from books; it was the knowledge acquired by a peasant, based on intuition, shrewdness and cunning. It had ensured her survival and the survival

of the two orphans in post-war Europe and also in the new country, in the indifferent, fairly hostile world of Lyonsville and its surrounding area. Hers was a bygone era and, although she had succeeded in adapting to the physical conditions, she continued to worry helplessly about the new standards, added to her worries about the independent and carefree nature of youth. However, she dearly loved the two children she had raised and served, and she was ready to love and serve the baby who would be born in a few months' time.

Maurice Dufault was tranquil on that front. His child, for the baby would truly be his, would have a fearsome ally in her. Zosia acknowledged that fact, as flighty and carefree as she was, yet at the same time so loving. She willingly listened to her grandmother's advice and tried to be good and act like a serious, orderly homemaker. It amused him to see her work diligently at becoming a good wife and mother, recognizing that Zosia would always be Zosia, and he wouldn't want her any other way.

There had to be a Zosia to brighten life like a summer butterfly, just as there had to be a Peter to moderate her momentum and restore balance when her flight was unrestrained. Unfortunately, a butterfly attracted to flame may burn her wings and be reduced to ashes or continue to live awhile sadly mutilated in heart and body. Perhaps that was when a Maurice Dufault was needed to take in and nourish the injured butterfly until she

regained her strength and recovered the desire to live. When that was accomplished, Maurice Dufault had only to disappear.

Because of him, Zosia would rebuild her life and, with her, Peter and the baby and the grandmother would, too. The slightest good deed – his was unintentional, a mere reflex, costing nothing because he was about to die – created concentric circles that never stopped growing, expanding, spreading out of sight, like a rock thrown into the sea. Without knowing what would become of the baby, his son – it would be a son – and without wanting to assume what his son's life would be like, Maurice Dufault could tell that the ground was prepared and solid. Zosia, Peter and their grandmother would be there for those who followed. Dr. Lord had promised to be there as well. Zosia and Peter would have a richer life. The veil over the future prevented him from reading clearly there, too, but Maurice Dufault had confidence, and with it came contentment and peace.

Why had he tormented himself? Others would replace him as spring follows winter and the light of day follows night. All he had to do was give up his spot and disappear backstage, like an actor whose role has ended. Who knows? Maybe he could watch over his family from the wings.