

wildlives

a novel



translated by DAVID HOMEL
and FRED A. REED

wildlives

MONIQUE
PROULX



DOUGLAS & MCINTYRE

D&M PUBLISHERS INC.

Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley

Copyright © 2008 Éditions du Boréal, Montréal, Canada
Translation copyright © 2009 David Homel and Fred A. Reed

09 10 11 12 13 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For a copyright license, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Douglas & McIntyre
A division of D&M Publishers Inc.
2323 Quebec Street, Suite 201
Vancouver BC Canada V5T 4S7
www.dmpibooks.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloging in Publication

Proulx, Monique, 1952–

[Champagne. English]

Wildlives / Monique Proulx ; translated by David Homel and Fred A. Reed

Translation of: Champagne.

ISBN 978-1-55365-409-4

I. Homel, David II. Reed, Fred A., 1939– III. Title.

PS8581.R6883 C5213 2008 C843'.54 C2009-900356-2

Editing by Pam Robertson

Cover and text design by Jessica Sullivan

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Printed on acid-free paper that is forest friendly (100% post-consumer recycled paper) and has been processed chlorine free

Distributed in the U.S. by Publishers Group West

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the British Columbia Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia through the Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

*Though deserving,
man must live poetically
upon the earth.*

HÖLDERLIN

lila



the key

LILA SZACH liked uphill paths. In life so many things—and life itself, in fact—go only downhill. She liked sunlit uphill paths, yet this one did not go uphill. It was heading darkly into a wall of dense trees, plunging into devious vegetable entrails from which one would most likely emerge half digested. Even now, darting, humming insects were hurrying toward their meeting point.

The owner of the country house was waiting for them down below, at the bottom of the abyss. Around him swarmed squadrons of blackflies, but that did not seem to bother him. He was an old man. You have to be old to live in an abyss. From behind thick lenses, his raccoon eyes watched them draw near without a smile. All through their meeting, he did not smile except for one brief instant, when she mentioned that she had a cat.

She thought she had spotted a red rowboat next to him, lying on its side like a dying creature, and behind it an expanse of water, but she couldn't be sure, so opaque was the curtain of carnivorous insects between them and the world. Deeper and deeper into the thicket he led them, hopping

across slippery rocks, an aerialist dragging behind him two clumsy incompetents. Then he came to a stop with a ceremonial sweep of his arm. The lake lay before them, set among soft-topped mountains. A broad gray lake surrounded by green, everywhere green, uniform in its greenness. Yes, these were trees, but not the hospitable kind that lend shade and companionship to country luncheons. No. These were harsh, thin, long-necked things stretching greedily toward the light, so tightly knit that they surely concealed creatures driven mad by claustrophobia. *The lake*, he said. Then, raising his other arm: *the camp*, he said, and they saw the single cottage huddled there, at the far end of a bay, attempting to hide in the vegetation, as if frightened by its own audacity.

For thirty thousand dollars it was theirs: the exhausted rowboat, the kilometers of dense trees, the gray lake, the mosquitoes to be fed. And of course *the camp*, where they would finally wash ashore, all too happy to lick their war wounds—except him, who looked completely intact, and who brewed them black tea while they scratched their bites. The cottage smelled of field mice and moldy linoleum. What a pretty view they had, they could see the lake and the green on all sides—green, that most ecological color, which they say is restful for the eyes.

The man who was with her said: *okay*. She did not protest, for the money was not hers, and the suffocating summer heat had fallen upon them; they had to flee somewhere. But the summer would roar by like every other summer and they would sell again, everything is bought and sold, even the soul. The old man pulled a key from his pocket and asked, as he looked at her alone: *Do you really like it?* and his look had

never been so unsmiling, so hostile, and he who was with her answered: *Of course we like it.* The old man put the key down beside her without touching her, turned his hard eyes toward the lake without looking at the two of them, and suddenly she realized that he did not smile because of some sorrow.

The camp and the lake were far from the village, and the village was not a pretty place. It had a church and a store of course, a place where you could buy sliced white bread and hamburger meat, and sometimes you would see flower boxes hanging in front of faded wooden houses, but that was where the aesthetics ended. The two human specimens she met buying bread weren't pretty either. The first one asked the second, whom he had obviously known a long time: *Did you kill it?* and the other man shot back: *Hell no!* with a wealth of sad details, and before long she'd learned all about bear hunting as it was gloriously practiced in this neck of the woods. All you have to do to attract bears is put out some stinky things, and the bears, nasty beasts that like stinky things, come running to eat out of one hand and be killed by the other.

She didn't encounter that many bears on the first evening after they'd settled in, but bears were just about the only living species that made itself scarce. Their patch of lakefront was an open-air zoo in which insects were far from under-represented. They would punch in for their shifts at scrupulously established hours, with mosquitoes following the blackflies, which in turn took over from the horseflies in a relay where human flesh was the torch passed from hand to hand. Then there were the moths, great as bats, and enormous sightless June bugs whose overstuffed bodies continually collided with them, but at least they hadn't come for a meal. Later, they

discovered carpenter ants gnawing away at every single crossbeam in the cottage. But on their first night, the place seemed like a comforting refuge, a box seat from which they could observe, at little risk, the comings and goings of life in the wild. A family of skunks came to nose around in the bushes, trading grunts. Something amphibian made its way across the lake. Something winged let out a bloodcurdling cry just outside their window. Something bulky walked up to their door and knocked: a porcupine with a mangy pelt and an unwavering appetite for the glue that held their plywood together. She could not sleep. Her cat could not sleep either, excited by its thrilling safari among a colony of field mice. He who was with her snored on in the peaceful slumber of the guiltless. The night dragged on, ever more sleepless, and she could not close her eyes.

There was no place for her in all this writhing and swarming, she was an intruder cast into terminal insomnia, a disease beaten back by the antibodies of some monstrous organism.

The next morning she was on the dock, sprinkling herself with cool water, when the sun surprised her. It was June 10, and the sun was a flaming arrow, and the forest had caught fire, along with the lake and every living thing around. In the light of the blaze it was impossible not to see. She saw yellow-tailed butterflies, symphonic birds, coupling fireflies, hovering dragonflies; she saw fresh spruce buds gleaming like jeweled rings, and so many colors, so much rustling in every direction, an orgy of triumphant lives. In the light of the blaze it was impossible to ignore that this bush-choked, elemental place was in fact a paradise, a sacred garden to which she had been mercifully granted the key. Moved by the sun,

she stretched out on the dock on that June 10 and saw all that there was to see. She saw the track that, each morning, the moose followed to the shore to drink; the chanterelles and the boletuses mushrooming up through the moss, she saw the red rowboat that, each spring, they would surely patch up once more as if it were a part of themselves that leaked but stayed afloat, she saw all the cracks she might slip through to understand the world. She saw the old woman she would be one day, hopping light-footed from one slippery rock to another, surrounded by blackflies that did not touch her.

june



the forbidden forest

THE FORBIDDEN FOREST began on the other side of the hill, where his uncle grew his pot among the weeds. Jérémie recognized the plants immediately, since their skinny little hands could be found in every nook and cranny of his living room. At home, his father labored with a love he granted nothing else, shifting them from place to place under the best-quality halogens and, it goes without saying, smoking them when he thought Jérémie was sound enough asleep not to pick up their sweet rubbery scent. That was okay for his father, his immature father; you never knew whether he was going to laugh or cry. But sturdy Uncle Simon, the epitome of the perfect man? He never thought that Uncle Simon would be so weak as to lean on a crutch like that. Too bad, but it was their business, their depressing, dreary adult business.

The Forbidden Forest opened before him by way of a well-marked trail that quickly vanished into the shadows. With a delicious shiver of fright, Jérémie ventured forth, leaving the sun forever behind him.

Stay on the trail, his uncle had told him. The words enchanted him, for they were exactly what Harry Potter

would hear on the rare occasions he dared venture into the evil forest surrounding Hogwarts. *Don't go further than the wooden bridge*, he'd add, a startling prohibition that Jérémie was sure to violate. If he didn't, what was the point of this adventure, and anyway, what were the prohibitions of a pot-smoker worth?

It was like slipping into the dungeon of a mossy castle.

The great damp doors closed behind him, and soon he was engulfed in silence and smells. And greenery. An ambush of great green galleries and long twisted columns imprisoned giant rocks and ran in all directions, as far as the eye could see. The last traces of humanity hung now from the finest of threads, from the trail half claimed by the other world. The vegetable world. The aptly named vegetable world, for it was larger than life and alive, proliferating without restraint, as if cities did not exist.

He moved forward. Pungent smells floated like gases in the air. The foliage above his head swayed for no apparent reason. The impressive silence was no silence at all when you really listened: creatures of all kinds chattered and cackled, then fell still if you came too close. And not only the birds. He could have been scared, really scared. He could imagine what it would be like to really be scared right now, the only one of his species among the thousands of trees. But if you play with fear as you protect yourself against it, you can transform it into pleasure. That's what he'd done when the fire enveloped him in his previous life. Whoever has crossed through fire in a previous life can surely make his way through trees.

He felt the jackknife in his pocket. He felt the comforting weight of his backpack, filled with juice and supplies. What

was he thinking of? He needed a magic wand, and he needed one now, and luckily some lay along the path. He chose a slender but solid one from among the dead branches, and thanked the invisible seller by handing him an equally invisible gold doubloon. Now, he was ready.

It was a fascinating trail, inhabited by just enough monsters to keep you alert but not make you break into cold sweats, first as closed as a dark fist by bushy pines, then opening infinitely on generous meadows into which sunlight poured. At least twice Jérémie felt tempted to venture into those great shining playgrounds, but he was not so foolish; just because he was a city boy, he wasn't about to forget the Thestrals and Centaurs treacherously poised—no doubt about it—behind the tall thin trunks. He stayed on the winding path, his attention slackening slightly, his body content. Then something made him jump and stumble. Stretched out full length, he brandished his knife in front of him, but his assailant was just a thick root on which his foot had caught. *Just a root*, don't make me laugh. A root was a living thing because it was part of a tree, and many trees were bewitched and malevolent creatures. Jérémie followed the root with his eyes: it belonged to one pine or another, or maybe to that huge leafy tree straight ahead of him, or to this one. . . . how could he possibly tell? It wasn't the only one, the whole trail was built on roots covered by moss and pine needles like the taut skin of a drum. Jérémie felt a shiver of fear. EVERYTHING here was alive, how could he have let down his guard? He was surrounded by vegetative creatures saturated with poison and venomous sap, disguised as ferns, as bushes, as clumps of unknown flowers, as moss and TREES, TREES everywhere, whispering in an invisible

breeze before wrapping themselves around him to suffocate him. Then he spotted wild strawberries in a more open part of the trail, and he risked poisoning by swallowing a few barely ripe ones. Nothing happened except for a delicious bitterness in his mouth. He pretended to be poisoned for several minutes, rolling and writhing on the ground with gurgles of distress. All of a sudden, he saw it. A real animal. A slender, charming creature that stared at him with its large soft eyes for an eternity before disappearing noiselessly between the trees, the pom-pom of its white tail bouncing against its haunches. Jérémie had never seen a real deer and here one was. He sat on the ground for several minutes, a smile on his face, terribly happy without knowing why.

He began walking again, but it wasn't the same. A feeling of strange happiness floated somewhere in his head, inexplicable, making it impossible for him to spot potential enemies, or better yet keep them at a distance. He heard the bridge before he reached it, a low booming sound accompanied by a shower of crystalline notes, and suddenly a wooden structure that looked like an illustration on a calendar rose before him. It stretched over a waterfall, a miniature waterfall but a waterfall nonetheless, punctuated with rocks and white foam, shot through with quiet folds of water that were probably teeming with trout. He wanted nothing more than to sit atop the largest of the rocks and eat to regain his strength, as one must among wizards, and also for *it*. The feeling of strange happiness brought him back to *it*, to that moment last spring when he had been so happy that he now sought only to relive it each night before he went to sleep, far from his father's eyes. Here, far better than the night, better than his narrow bed,

here was where *it* would return stronger than ever and, who knows, maybe *it* would carry him away for good.

Last spring, he had been dead. Dead long enough to receive permanent knowledge that no school could ever give him. Now he *knew* how it was, to be dead.

It was extraordinary.

Just before, of course, it was horrible, his lungs gasping for air, his chest split in half, the heat driving him into a panic, but once you stopped being afraid and let yourself go, that was it. Gone was the pain, futile the gasping for air. All at once, you were somewhere else. The strangest thing was to be somewhere else and know that your body, crumpled on the ground, had not followed. But you quickly forgot your body and everything else that had been left behind because where you were now was welcoming on every side, suffused with light—no blinding beams like on a stage, nor one of those softly filtered haloes his mother liked to read by, no, warm light like a bath of golden caramel, or perhaps a sliver of sunlight that had reached down to him. And there they were, all of them, waiting for him. His grandmother Marie; his uncle Ti-Loup, his neck still decorated with snake tattoos; his pal Marc, who drowned a year ago last fall in the pool at school; even Gilles Potvin, his neighbor from Marquette Street, who wasn't even dead. There were other people too, who he didn't recognize, happy beings gathering close around him with love and laughter, yes, love; he'd never been welcomed anywhere with such love. And such lightness. He moved forward with a lightness that startled him, he was a feather, a puff of dust, he was an angel with neither wings nor magical broom, floating atop the love of all those present, he himself brimming

with love. There was no difference between them and him in that radiant lightness, together they made up a true family, the kind he realized he had never had. But someone—was it Granny or Auntie Réjane?—someone whose face drifted out of focus whenever he thought of her, warned him he couldn't stay, and in a flash it was over; before he could protest or say hi to Marc or give Granny a kiss, all his happiness vanished, and he was back in the suffocating shell of his body.

The first thing he saw was his father's face, wracked by worry; such worry must also be a kind of dejected love. How pitiful his father's face looked, as though he rather than Jérémie was the child. And he said nothing to him, neither then nor later on, because you can't tell a child about your journey into death.

Later he learned that their neighbor Gilles Potvin had died of a heart attack that same day. But no one told him why Gilles Potvin didn't have to come back from over there, lucky guy.

Every time he tried to go back over it in his mind, he would lose a fragment or two. Today, it was his aunt's dress that had lost its color, and the flash of their smiles had faded so badly that he couldn't tell whether Marc's teeth still wore in death the braces that had been fastened to them in life. Whole segments of the loving crowd that had welcomed him had simply dissolved, he no longer knew who had been with him and who had spoken and whether anyone had said anything at all. One by one the details dropped away, black hole victims. The details dropped away but the feeling of happiness returned intact, a solitary diamond that defied description.

Now the film playing in his mind had ended for good, no matter how hard he tried to screen it again. He found him-

self on top of the rock above the frothing water, startled to be munching on a plain carrot stick and half a cheese sandwich. His magic wand had fallen into the water. For a minute or two, he felt downcast. Then he remembered he was a wizard, nothing bad could get him down for long. First, he had to get his magic wand back, and turn his boring apple juice into melon juice (*Citrullus!*) and those tasteless raisins into choco-frogs (*Morniflus!*). Then he would cross the wooden bridge, since it was forbidden.

The trail veered left, squeezed between ferns that reached up to his armpits and beds of moss as wide as a living-room carpet. It was impossible not to venture among the ferns, just in case giants were hiding there, and roll in the velvety moss to cover his body with spider repellent. Every wizard, even the stupidest, knows that the Forbidden Forest is the dominion of the Monstrous Spiders, notorious for their zero tolerance of humans.

Jérémie moved forward easily among the trees, as if the forest was shrinking or he was growing, so that he seemed to occupy its territory and command its mysteries. He knew he must prepare for an imminent attack, and he struggled up a steep section of the trail with his nose to the ground, where insects, non-spiders, would occasionally try to cut across at a snail's pace or dart quickly, but never quickly enough to escape his vengeful heel. When he stopped, breathing heavily, he'd reached a plateau covered with great maples. Behind him, as through a skyscraper window, stretched a vast expanse of green suddenly broken by the broad, glistening puddle of the lake, dull silver like a skating rink. From up here, everything was beautiful, everything shined, the docks of the two

blue cottages, the island where the loons lived, and that huge rocky outcropping that looked like a village carved from marble. With a rush of emotion he squatted in the middle of the trail, then jumped when he discovered that a cat, seated quietly on a stump only a few steps away, was observing him. A gray cat splotted randomly with white, as though it had collided with a paint can along the way. A cat! But what was a house cat doing in the magical land of Dragons, Unicorns and Monstrous Spiders? Jérémie got to his feet and waved his wand, but the cat had already slipped away between the trees, eluding the deadly spell about to fall on it.

He'd been right to approach the cat, and most of all the stump it had used for a throne, for that's where they began their clandestine voyages. Not exactly spiders, to be truthful, and actually completely ants, but ants and spiders belonged to the same black, swarming species, those perpetual uninvited guests with their hated presence. Besides, who could say that those ants weren't spiders disguised as ants? Who?

For the moment, they were making their way forward, not paying him the slightest heed, a miniature sea swell of legs and metallic bodies penetrating the whorls of the stump, only to re-emerge without missing a step. Jérémie was amazed to see that they formed a continuous ribbon between the stump and the forest, a never-ending ribbon that was discouraging to follow, vanishing as it did into the impenetrable undergrowth. Along this four-lane expressway, where only toll-gates and traffic lights were missing, they came and went in a compact, disciplined mass, each in its lane, never passing the one ahead. There was the occasional collision, in which case the injured travelers simply rubbed antennae with one

another before continuing on their way. Those who arrived at the stump often carried twigs or bits of this or that in their mandibles; those traveling outward did so empty-jawed. Jérémie plunked his magic wand down in the middle of the highway. It took the ants only a fraction of a second to make it part of their route. Then he stood square in their path. There was a moment's hesitation among the nearest of the bugs whose progress he had interrupted, a cautious inspection by feet and antennae of his running shoes, but three seconds later, with no apparent compunction, they settled on an alternate route around the obstacles, soon imitated by their fellows. Jérémie crushed one of the ants to see what would happen. The crushed ant had no reaction, of course, while the others kept moving as if nothing had changed.

What were they waiting for? Why didn't they attack him? Didn't they see how huge he was? What could have been more threatening than him on the trail they trod like so many blind soldiers, like zombies? Jérémie sensed a complex universe running alongside his own without ever touching, a civilization with codes and motivations that totally excluded him. So you could be tiny and live just as fully as he did, maybe even better than he did, in a secret world? He felt stirrings of respect that slowly changed into irritation, then anger as he watched them go about their business with the determination of workers. Systematically, he started crushing every ant within reach. The information quickly reached the ants farthest down the trail, and soon they knew that war was upon them. Quickly they dispersed along both sides of the highway with Jérémie hot on their heels, pursuing them into their refuge of weeds and moss, leaving them half-crushed,

their legs feebly signaling sos. An insatiable hunger, a thirst for power swept over him. He did not spare the valiant ants who were carrying their wounded and their dead back to the stump to bury or to eat them, nor did he spare the kamikazes who clambered up his legs to bite him, nor would he have spared the women and children had he been able to recognize them. Soon, when his potential victims had disappeared from the trail, he attacked the stump itself. He disemboweled it with fierce blows of his magic wand, and when the wand broke he picked up a sturdier branch to continue his work, and the ants began to stream out of their ruined house by the dozens, the hundreds, in a clear state of panic, scurrying in all directions, carrying eggs in their mandibles, attacking him with pathetic nips that he swept aside with a swipe of the hand. He recognized their desperate stampede, he'd seen it in war movies on tv, and in the news from uncivilized countries. It was striking to see how much ants and humans resembled each other when it came to panic. Strange too, and a source of ferocious glee, to know he was the source of that panic, to know at last that he was recognized and feared. During the entire extermination, a powerful voice cried out inside him: *Here I am! See, here I am!* He stopped; nothing more stirred in the pile of pulverized wood that the stump had become, and his arms ached.

His excitement and pleasure stopped as well, leaving a tired hollowness in his body. He would have liked to lie down and sleep but the place—an ant graveyard—was hardly fit for it. Blackflies had started to work their way into his clothes and hair. Looking for encouragement, he summoned up Jerry Potter, but Jerry Potter was part of a game that wasn't keen

on being played. He tried to revive the graceful image of the deer he had seen earlier on, which had vanished too quickly. Something light had been lost and did not want to be found. He thought of the boys and girls in his class, Tania, Jérôme, Pedro, Ying, Ahmad, in school now, studying for year-end exams, and for the first time since the fire he wished he could be with them in the noisy solidarity of the city. He looked up at the sun, still blinding in the sky and resolutely motionless. He remembered he was still recovering, and maybe even exhausted. It was time to go home.

He spied the cat again. The same gray and white cat had crept up on him unawares, even bigger than before, or so it seemed, and was observing him with its accusing yellow eyes. It had seen everything, and no doubt intended to avenge the massacre of its allies, the ants. Jérémie found a burst of energy and set out in hot pursuit before being pursued himself, yelling more out of fright than anger. He hadn't chased the cat for more than a moment when a voice hailed him, not a cat's voice but a human voice, strong enough that he had no choice but to stop. It was a woman squatting a few paces from him, on an embankment. She unfolded her limbs slowly, interminably, the way a tree trunk would if tree trunks were allowed to bend and stretch, until at last she was standing. Behind her, Jérémie caught a glimpse of a white house barricaded behind flowers in the center of a clearing, and he knew at once that he was exactly where he shouldn't be, at Mrs. Szach's, who owned two-thirds of the lake.

"Come here," said the great tree trunk.

It was the kind of voice that *petrifies* you, turns you to stone before you even have a chance. He approached her,

though unwillingly. He saw the gray and white cat circling her and then saw it crouch on a rock a little further off, and he understood when he saw the same cat lying in the wild grass that the cat was really several cats, all of them splashed with the same ill-defined tints, all twins or triplets from one bastard tribe. One of them, maybe even the one he'd been chasing, made a move to rub against his leg, and Jérémie insincerely bent over to pet it.

"What are you doing here?" asked the woman.

"I'm staying with my uncle."

For three seconds she said nothing.

"You're Jérémie," she stated.

He ventured a look at her. Tufts of blond and white hair stuck out from beneath her workman's cap. She was wearing an old yellow shirt tucked into a pair of dirty cotton trousers, all too big for her, and at her waist hung a basket from which the heads of two large mushrooms protruded. Jérémie thought she looked a mess, but thought again when he met her penetrating gray eyes, the eyes of a witch. She'd even guessed his name just by looking at him.

"You must be Mrs. Szach," he said respectfully.

She surely had a witch's name that she would reveal to him in due time, when they became closer. For now, because he wanted those gray eyes to fall upon him in admiration, he opened with a confession.

"I just killed one thousand three hundred ants."

The total was excessive, even counting the nameless bugs he'd stomped on along the path, but whatever the case, revealing his achievement didn't have the desired effect. Mrs. Szach kept looking at him, but with a different kind of light in her eye.

“Well, how about that! And why did you do it?”

Jérémie frowned, trying to find approval in her few reluctant words. Then she added a few more.

“How are you going to make amends?”

And since she was expecting an answer he didn’t have, she drove home the point even further, to make sure he understood.

“You’ve just committed one thousand three hundred murders? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“They’re only bugs!” Jérémie protested. “It’s not murder to kill bugs.”

“It isn’t? And how do you know for sure?”

He stared at her; instead of a powerful ally, here was an enemy. Everybody knew bugs were bugs, insignificant little things that had a life, if you insist, but a minimal, noxious life. Why was she pretending not to know that? But he pictured the ants scattering in all directions, and remembered their fright that did resemble a kind of pain, and kept a troubled silence.

“Maybe I only killed three hundred,” he ended up pleading. “Or maybe less. I didn’t count.”

But it was over between them. There could be no possible reconciliation, and the witch’s frosty eyes said as much.

“What are you going to do? You have to do something to make amends.”

She held him in the grip of her gaze, waiting for his plea for forgiveness, his tears, suggestions for punishment. Jérémie squared his shoulders to fend off the weakness that flowed through his legs. Her severity couldn’t possibly be due to a simple anthill, there had to be another reason, and there was, she read his mind and discovered his other crime,

his true crime. Szach the sorceress. He wanted to turn and run, but instead he drew closer to her, more dead than alive, for something in her gray eyes was ordering him to do so.

“Here’s what I have in mind,” she said, her voice now tinged with suspicious sweetness.

the celestial rodent

THE LITTLE BOY had to die.
It would happen on the cliff at day's end, in the twilight of day's end, the perfect time for crime and illicit love. The man who would kill the boy would wear an old red lumberjack shirt, and even his hair would be red in the rays of the setting sun.

Claire could imagine the baker in the murderer's role. Yes, a face like the baker's, moon-shaped and amiable, would make a great impact when, just after the murder, he'd turn to us, face streaked by the fiery twilight. Those who commit crimes have sinister-looking faces and crazed looks until proven innocent, and the baker, with his kind and peaceful face, would unleash a wave of confusion. Then, while the viewers were still mystified, the opening credits would roll.

Claire looked out of the window and saw the squirrel wallowing in the bird feeder again, and she put aside her script and left her work table.

She knew that squirrel all too well. And it recognized her, too, even in the woods, where it would greet her occasional appearance with excited vibratos. It was a female, with a light

patch on her head that stood out against her bright red coat, her recently emptied belly hanging like a useless little sack. Every summer the squirrel would prow around Claire's feeding stations with her new-mother's appetite, and Claire saw nothing to complain about, quite the opposite. Everybody was welcome at the feeders, winged or four-legged creatures going about their tasks day and night. The whole famished woodland brood was welcome providing they respected the pact. For there was a pact between them, and this particular squirrel was constantly violating it.

The deer would get their apples on the sloping path to the lake, and since they were so well behaved they were also allowed to gobble up the flowers that grew on the rocks and sow their hard little pellets everywhere.

The hummingbirds also enjoyed special status, with sugar-water dispensers of their own, and they would grudgingly concede a few drops of liquid to the ants and bees at season's end.

The squirrels had nothing to complain about. Baskets of sunflower seeds had been hung from the cedars at just the right height for everybody, and Claire would fill them first thing in the morning for the red squirrels like this one, for their black counterparts that were as plump as they were easily spooked, for the chipmunks with their bottomless cheeks, and she would top them up again for the night feeders: the flying squirrels, the raccoons, the house mice and the field mice.

Thank goodness the rats hadn't yet discovered the cache.

Higher up in the branches of a birch tree, a perforated metal tube held unsalted peanuts that only the beaks of woodpeckers and jays could extract.

There was something for everyone, and everyone at the inn had their own personalized table from which food was never missing. It was understood that the large central feeding station in the middle, the one that offered the same three-star sunflower seeds as the smaller baskets, was reserved for the multitude of birds.

Understood by one and all, except for this particular squirrel.

From the beginning, she had made it clear that she wanted everything: the contents of the baskets and the feeder, and why not some exotic munchies gleaned from the cottage, when she would sneak in through the half-open door. But the feeder was what she liked best, as if to taunt Claire, and there she would set up shop from first light, tolerating no one else—an egotist and a thief, and a perfect ingrate to boot, with her multiple offspring grown plump on the house over the years.

The struggle had taken many shapes and forms. The first and most physical consisted of Claire turning the hose on her whenever she was caught in the act. Though the assault first seemed to disturb her, the squirrel quickly learned to scramble over to the far edge of the feeder to dodge the spray, executing ballet steps with playful ease, her shiny, phlegmatic eye fixed on Claire as she waited out the storm. After that, Claire modified the feeder, outfitting it first with a metal roof, and a cylinder instead of a rope, then with a sheet-metal sleeve around the trunk of the tree from which it hung. The feeder became a dreadful fortress while the squirrel surfed along the metallic surfaces, slid down the sleeve like a firefighter, leaped from the neighboring tree and landed gracefully in the middle of the sacred sunflower seeds. Then Claire

chopped down the neighboring tree. The squirrel kept right on leaping, from where Claire did not know. Fresh out of strategies, she bought a new feeder at a prohibitive price, an armor-plated model made of indestructible polymer that no squirrel could touch, or so the specialist assured her—in most cases, he added, as an afterthought.

And now, Claire observed the animal with resignation, a tiny machine-like body jerking back and forth, clinging to the impenetrable mesh of the new feeder, paws reaching through the closely guarded interstices and successfully extracting the seeds. This squirrel clearly belonged to a modified species with the capacity to understand and act, a rare regressive gene she was busily transmitting to a whole flock of offspring, and before long an armada of *Ecureuillus Faber* would invade the Laurentians, challenging humans' monopoly of the use of tools.

"I'll have to kill you," Claire said calmly.

She placed a small stone in her slingshot, took aim and missed by a whisker. The squirrel took flight with a strident squeal that Claire took as goodbye.

But the damage had been done; she might as well put her work on hold for the time being. She went down to the dock, the altar dedicated to the adoration of the sun. The day was already too fine to spend at a desk inside—for on the dock, looking out over the lake that was as smooth as skin, you were inside the very marrow of the universe.

Across the lake, Loon Island thrust its tiny green fortress up from the water. Everything was moving in slow motion, the clouds, the sun on the trees, the loon itself, that patient patroller ever ready to vanish in hot pursuit of a black bass.

Only two cottages could be seen against the mountain: the Parson's, dark blue, nestled at the far end of a deep bay, and Lila Szach's log cottage that she rented out to tourists every summer. The rest was nothing but gleaming white birches and tall cedars with convoluted trunks, and the gilded expanse of water abruptly broken by the granite cliff from which one could dive if one were not terrified by the thought of death. Lila Szach's boathouse, also blue, could barely be seen among the rocks, with its minuscule dock better designed for herons than for humans.

In this primitive ordering of sky and water, of rocks and trees touched by the sun, lay a startling beauty, the kind that can strike you dumb with happiness. Claire lay on the dock and forgot about thinking for minutes that could have been hours. She had returned home, to the country that was truly hers. She would merge with the wildness for four months and she would work, yes, but the way a spider weaves its web, like the whirligigs of a maple, organically, without the anguish of impeccability, or speed.

It was best at the beginning, when the summer seemed to be eternal. From thicket to thicket the birds would utter invitations and insults, the humming of insects would weave an incessant drone. She turned her head and came face to face with the mauve of the lupines and the kitschy pink of the creeping phlox that cascaded down the rocks, furrowed by swallowtails, those incredible black and yellow butterflies with a hidden touch of blue beneath the indentation of their wings, enough to give any opium eater hallucinations. *All this is mine*, Claire said to herself, dulled by beatitude, *mine until I no longer am*. And when she would no longer be, she could

see quite clearly where she would be, buried at the foot of the lupines and the phlox, her ashes mingling with the humus and remaining here, infinitely here, the only acceptable place to no longer be.

But in the meantime the little boy had to die. Claire's portable trade, that could be plied anywhere, consisted of causing people to die in stories broadcast by a television network late at night, to keep the viewers watching as long as possible before letting them sink into their nightmares and their insomnia. Claire handed over three scripts per year, and that was enough to live on. Her stories were horrifying because they began with sweetness and light, which disarmed you until souls stood revealed in their corruption, prisoners of implacable fate. Claire had no idea where her professional fascination with the shadows came from, she who so loved the sunlight. In her personal life she was quiet and kind, with the odd bout of voluptuousness and a propensity to be taken advantage of.

She had no idea where she had gotten the idea to use her green paradise as the background of her next story, to draw, unbeknownst to them, on the villagers, all of them seemingly above reproach. Seemingly. But when you peeped over their shoulders, you could see the wild cards in their hands. The grocer also owned a motel where nude dancers writhed in whipped cream every weekend. The cashier at the savings and loan had rammed a moose out on the highway, bidding farewell forever to her spine and her model's legs. The mayor's best friend had shot him while hunting bear. The baker baked cakes that sometimes tasted of hashish. And why was a black man from New York who was built like Charles Atlas

living year-round in the nowhere village of Mount Diamond, selling potted shrubs and sacks of manure?

Every time she came back from the village, Claire jotted down notes. At the general store she chatted with a former Montreal policeman, his head shaven except for a long ponytail, a pockmarked face and a sweet, girlish smile, disgusted with the system, disgusted with love, an ex-dope dealer who now raised goats in his hovel on the other side of Goose Lake. She spotted a Korean, the only one of his species in this part of the world, doing tai chi on the municipal tennis court. At the grocery store, she overheard an argument between the owner and his two sons, big softies he'd outfitted with shotguns in an effort to make men out of them. All of that was just waiting to be used. And the nurseryman, the black guy with the actor's build: how could he survive in this close-knit village, married to a local girl, an unremarkable brunette who put on five kilos a year? Every time Claire bought flowers or herbs, the girl would look after her, chatting about the weather, while Claire could see the buff black guy watching her from the back of the lot. And when he wasn't watching her she was watching him, his easygoing gait, his dancer's body waltzing with bags of potting soil or compost. Whatever he had fled in his previous life must have been sufficiently traumatizing to cast him ashore here. He would surely play a role in Claire's movie—and maybe in her life too.

He exuded brute sexuality. Yesterday, when she'd stopped off at the nursery to see if the new basil plants had arrived, he'd come up to her, stepping out of the greenhouse bare-armed. They stared at each other openly, both aware of the pheromones that enveloped them more insistently than the

scent of basil, both knowing that it would happen between them, it didn't matter where or when, but it would happen. She walked off without paying for the basil, and would have to return.

But in the meantime, there was the little boy.

He'd been a gift from her neighbor, the Parson.

The Parson—Simon was his real name—had been the first to buy a blue cottage from Lila Szach a good twenty years ago. He was an amiable man who had taken early retirement—often alone because his wife worked as a nurse in Montreal and his grown-up children were bored silly in the woods—always floating aimlessly in his canoe like a piece of dead wood. All of a sudden, the week before, she'd spotted him with a little boy she'd never seen before, and when the Parson had spotted her he'd quickly paddled over since he liked to chat as much as he liked to drift. The little boy was his nephew, the son of his younger brother Marco who never came to the lake, that much Claire found out, followed by something unexpected about the child: there had been *a serious injury an accident a fire* last spring the Parson had explained without going into detail but in a clear and forceful voice, so that the child could hear every word and understand that nothing was being hidden from him. That's how the Parson was. He had an upright kind of frankness that he applied to everyone and everything. But what did it matter? The little boy, besides the ugly burn covering part of his face, had immense bottomless black eyes that he turned upon Claire as upon an object whose use is unknown, and he had neither smiled nor spoken. *Eyes like that command sacrifice*, Claire thought after they'd left, *not to mention fire, noth-*

ing is more visual than fire. Now she had her main character and her corpse, the basis of her professional life. When she had her corpse, she had her story.

She went back to work. For the next three hours, the sunlit universe disappeared, giving way to a troubled, imaginary landscape made soulless to resemble life. Once the beginning was sketched out—a sacrificial murder—and the scenery in place—woods, lake, village—all that remained was to invent the rest of the movie, perhaps in the form of a long flashback in which we work back to the source of the crime, to the bush, the humus, back to the planet that produced this black flower, this burst of violence. One after another, hypothetical characters flickered across Claire's inner screen, lining up for their auditions, the cashier in her wheelchair, the ex-cop astride his motorcycle, the baker sweating over his dough, the black guy kneeling in compost, all carrying out the little rituals of their daily lives, revealing now and again beneath faces polished by country air the signs of inner decay. She thought of her neighbor Lila Szach. Lila Szach was a mystery unto herself, an inspiration to break through realism to reach the truth of fantasy. What choice role might Lila Szach play? An ageless appeal, a gleam of eternity in her jaunty step and intimidating eyes, of Polish birth and an enigmatic present, surrounded by a colony of cats wreaking havoc, and the owner of more land than she could possibly ever need. Sometimes Claire would venture onto her property to pick wild strawberries or raspberries. Lila Szach never chased her away, and would even greet her cordially, but never responded to her invitations, and never invited her over for a cup of tea or—why not?—a shot of vodka. Nothing whatsoever; for the last twelve

years not a single sign of closer acquaintance that might have revealed the entrails of her large white house. Perhaps she was hiding the mummified corpses of her past lovers in her basement. When she sold the cottage to them twelve years earlier, Lila Szach felt impelled to add, with the slightly guttural accent she had not been able to lose after an entire lifetime here, *this is the last piece of land I'm going to sell, don't ever ask me if you can buy any other. Never.*

Never. You had to be pretty presumptuous to use that word, as if death was not for her, as if Claire would not survive her and nibble away from her, sooner or later, the fragments of rock and beach that were the natural extension of her land.

Then something stepped between Claire and her cogitations again: a commotion, a charivari of furious chattering and red fur zigzagging through the tall cedars that surrounded the feeder. Claire swore she wouldn't look. The riot, for that was what it was, became more violent and noisy, destroying any hope of concentration. The Celestial Rodent, her tireless harasser, must have been in the thick of the action, but Claire whipped out her binoculars to verify with her own eyes exactly what was going on, who was being made mincemeat of by whom. The same old routine: three squirrels were pursuing one another. On second glance, no. One squirrel was chasing two squirrels clinging to one another like bunk beds. When they all came to a halt for a few seconds, Claire recognized in the lower bunk *her* squirrel, forehead marked with that immediately recognizable spot. Good Lord, it was a case of public copulation, or an attempt thereof, or maybe even a gang rape, for the lone squirrel seemed to be anxious

to leap onto the female and dispatch the ruddy little creature who was there already, hanging on for dear life to his mount, passionately gnawing at her neck. These virile nips and nibbles got on Celestial Rodent's nerves. She was more omnivorous than nymphomaniac, after all, and now she twisted right and left to free herself from the embrace, then bent back upon herself, shrieking and hissing, before scooting off with her cumbersome cavalier still perched on her back. The second squirrel, the dismissed pretender, sat there, prick in hand, and began to nibble some bark to save face.

Claire thought of Luc, who would be arriving that evening.

Just like every summer Thursday for the last twelve years, around seven o'clock, Claire would hear the roar of his Jeep as it slid to a stop on the gravel driveway, and like every summer Thursday she would drop everything to rush out and greet him. A stranger with a tired look would step out of the Jeep, but very quickly she would see in him a part of herself, a piece of their joint puzzle that would often go missing but would return each time to put itself in just the right place. With smiles and sweet nothings they would embrace. Luc would take a few steps across the gravel parking area, breathing deeply, absorbing the landscape, the heady scent of dampness, the mantra of the thrushes and the boundless sky. His face would be half exhausted, half delighted, then totally delighted. That was the moment she waited for each time, when Luc stepped out of the Jeep and let his tired city-dweller's skin fall to the ground, when he rediscovered the enchantment of the place and sent it back to her through osmosis.

Their relationship, like any couple, depended on shared enchantment. At the start, when they could have traded their appetite for one another for children or a good cause, they came upon this portion of Goose Lake, this fragment of pre-history that civilization had left almost intact and preserved for them. It dealt them a powerful blow, like a revelation that paradise did exist. Deep down, the two of them were savages, forced to live in the city, who found in the true earth beneath their feet the answers to most of their questions. For the three days that Luc would spend at the cottage each week, Claire saw him only at meals and at the end of the day. They were each busy in their own realms. His was that of rocks. He would venture into the woods and seek out large flat rocks that he would roll to the cottage, then arrange in the form of paths, stairs and sculptures. Rocks and water, in which he could swim for hours. A mineral is what he was.

They made their way down from the parking area arm in arm, quickly exhausting their subjects of conversation. He in town, juggling financial statements and budgets, she immersed for an entire week in ritual sacrifice and squirrels: not many subjects for debate. They said little. In the harmonious coexistence of the mineral and the vegetable, there is little to be said.

They were good together. They would eat something tasty that Claire had cooked up, they would drink wine, they would watch the spectacle of sunset scattering its violent shards of orange across the lake. They would spend a good part of the evening outside, stoking a big fire of spruce boughs. They would discuss the visitors who would be dropping in this Saturday or the next.

Things were gentle, barely sexual between them. Nothing to do with the powerful emotions you expect from love; nothing to do with love at all, perhaps. Yet things were so uncomplicated, so healthy, so real that it must have been love in some unexplored form, love as among the loons who mate for life, or among the rocks.

True, there would sometimes be a curious moment at the end of the evening meal, a recurrent image that would bring Claire a brief sense of unease. In the broad window that had now fallen dark, she would sometimes discover their double reflection shimmering on the lake like an emanation of defeat, two forms paralyzed by routine, seated unspeaking at the table, who had just finished the cheese and who now abandoned themselves to emptiness: he lost in thought, clenching his fists in secret tension, she softened in her chair, waiting for something. Suddenly she saw two silent, lonely worlds, side by side perhaps for eternity, and she wondered in terror: why? To what end? Two parallel beings, alone and yet unable to be alone, two universes brought together by force—why? But that did not happen every evening, and when it did, it didn't last; the image dissolved when Luc got up or turned to kiss her, or she separated herself from the image and began to speak.

SILENCE RETURNED. But there is no such thing as silence in the June woods. What had returned was a naked space crossed by sound, an area of calm through which tumbled a diversity of comets, thrumming, distant stridencies, rushing air and shrill cracklings, as the little creatures of the forest yawned and stretched and dashed among their thickets led by

birds, from all the hollows and crevices of space where the birds were going about their noisy bird business. From the din Claire picked out the call of the white-throated sparrow, her favorite, a persistent little warbler in pauper's dress, a brownish speckled coat, but what a voice! What a charmer's voice, she thought each time she heard it, it could melt your heart and carry you back to childhood if you weren't careful. Three times the sparrow whistled its plangent call, *Old-Sam-Peabody*, and immediately another sparrow, a touchy one perhaps, picked up the melody, and just then a shape that belonged to neither bird nor squirrel loomed up suddenly in Claire's field of vision and stopped on her patio, this time forcing her to stand up and go outside.

It was a man. A black man, jet-black against the bright light off the lake, with several flats of white petunias in his arms.

It was him all right.

He of the muscular build.

He smiled at Claire, adding a slash of white to the black-board, but Claire did not smile back.

"Hi! I'm coming from Mrs. Szach's place," he said.

She waited for the rest.

"This is for you." And he held out the flats of flowers.

"From Mrs. Szach?"

She was irritated and disoriented; irritated to look up and find him on her property, and disoriented by her irritation. Where did he get her address? Not to mention that she loathed petunias, especially the white ones that reminded her of crumpled Kleenex.

He quickly sized up her hostility and set the flowers down.

“Sorry,” he said, not smiling now. “Mrs. Szach had some extra flowers, too many. So I thought, she thought. . . Well, sorry. *Désolé*.”

He retreated without further explanation and strode off toward the parking area.

“Wait!” she called out. “Jim!”

She remembered she owed him twelve seventy-five for the basil. She remembered something else as well, a diffuse kind of pain that began to throb again as she watched him move off as though he were dancing.

He turned around and stood motionless on the slope, only half motionless, really, his muscles ready to begin another movement, whatever it might be, to whirl around like a dervish or fly through the air—or rope her with a lasso, she stupidly thought, and drag her to the ground before he leaped on her and devoured her.

“How come you know my name?” he asked.

He didn’t move, and didn’t look as though he would come back down the hill for her, at least not now.

the destroying angel

WHEN THE SPARROW'S warbled *Old-Sam-Peabody* came at dawn, it always awakened the same dream in Lila Szach's sleepy mind. She dreamed the sparrow was singing and that she was listening to it completely naked, leaning against a tree, legs stretched out on the moss. Her feet were touching Jan's and Fiona's. All three of them were there in her dream of paradise, four including the cat, lying languidly against the trees and enclosed by a meadow that protected them against everything. She alone was nude except for the cat, and she was neither embarrassed nor startled. The dream held them there, while all else hung still, alone in deep harmony, listening to the bird's limpid modulations. The sparrow warbled on, a hymn of the chosen, a hymn to the joy of being chosen. The two others, three counting the cat, were the people she loved most in the world, and by whom she knew she was most loved.

Dead, all of them. First the cat, a big stripy cat of exceptional intelligence that would follow her like a dog into the woods and could recognize the shaggy ink caps and golden chanterelles. Dead of old age and buried near the boathouse.

Not like her mother Fiona, blown to pieces in her early sixties by a gas explosion in Wrocław just before she was to move to Montreal for good, her poor remains forever exiled from Lila in a Polish cemetery as featureless as war. And Jan, the man of her life. With Jan's death came rage, a blot that Lila could not banish from her mind. Only a handful of his ashes, pried with the greatest effort from his family, were buried on the hill, but Jan in his entirety lived on in the smallest plants that sprung from the soil with the coming of spring.

The fine dream would get the day off to a good start, or so it seemed, and from it she would awake with a smile of weakness. But afterward, she had to live in the company of ghosts, and with her rage, and that she could not do. Now, in the midst of her dream, she could order her alter ego, wallowing in its misty paradise, *Enough! Let it go! Let it go!* It didn't always work, but sometimes it did. She would awake in the middle of a sparrow's trill, her paradise in shreds, dumbfounded at being alone, a bit downcast, a bit more lucid. Something vital would break loose from her and fall, yet she would not hurry to gather it up, a tiny drop extracted from a sea of attachments, the beginnings of freedom.

That morning the dream had aborted, chased away perhaps by a cat that had padded across her legs, or stillborn because the sparrow's song lacked conviction. Lila got up in fine form. The sun was already creeping across the hardwood floor and it was not even six o'clock; the day would last forever. She stepped onto the patio without taking the time to dress, the cats hurrying along behind her, and sniffed the smells of nascent warmth. Every June, a wind of amnesia blew across the black and bushy past. Every June, all that was

still young or could recall youth was resurrected. She sat in the sun, naked, as she had yesterday, for the last forty years.

On Mount Diamond, in certain specific places, to be naked was the sensible, even advisable thing to do. In certain specific places—on her patio in the morning, in the cool water of the lake, in the wild grass of the broad field or on the moss around the boathouse—Lila heard an imperious voice telling her she must cast aside whatever could be taken off, and rub her true skin against the true skin of the lake, the moss, the grass, to establish direct contact with reality. It had nothing to do with nudism—all those hip clubs and so-called secret beaches where people exhibited their sexual appendages in a flock like so many penguins, disgusting!—it was an intimate, almost hygienic affair between Mount Diamond, Goose Lake and her, which confounded most people, Jan included. Most people, Jan included, saw the nude body as no more than a call to copulation. When he saw her outside, systematically discarding her clothing, Jan would briefly mock her, but only briefly, since he would soon join her to make love with her in the grass. And then there was Simon. Lila could still recall the burning look in her neighbor Simon's eyes when he'd discovered her near the boathouse rolling like a dog in the moss—one Monday in June thirty years ago—in other words, yesterday.

Like every other time, she looked with amusement over her suntanned belly and legs—a fine suntan for such a wrinkled, sagging old envelope. Nothing had happened the way she'd planned. You think you'll grow old gracefully, so slowly that you'll hardly notice it; instead, it leaps on you and reduces you to rubble. Take her face. The tiny wrinkles that

had appeared around her eyes in her twenties pointed to a future mask that had never come. Those wrinkles remained tiny, but her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets, as if trying to reach some inner space that they alone saw. But at least they'd stayed sharp, those sunken eyes of hers, sharp enough to spot the tawny coat of the wild mushrooms hidden in the pine grove. Not like her memory, an ancient barge taking on water from all sides. And the knees that failed her on the way back from the lake, even though she heaped insults on them so they would hold firm until she reached the first turnoff that led to the log cottage. She was falling apart, too bad. If you didn't want to fall apart, you might as well die. *You want to die, Lila?* she'd ask herself from time to time, just to feel the shiver of horror crawl up her spine with juvenile enthusiasm. One day she would be ready, but not now, especially not this month, the most triumphant month of all, and not this summer either, if you please.

So many things still to be done. Even today the list was substantial: convince fat Mr. Laramée to keep clearing the underbrush in spite of the blackflies, keep close watch on Bruno Mahone while he repairs the sump pump, have the week's groceries delivered, put a final touch on the cottage before giving the keys to the nymphet who's rented it for the summer, double check each grocery item because invariably there's an error, you can't trust anybody in the village, even after decades of putting bread on everyone's table. . . . With a little luck she'd have enough energy to water the petunias that the big black fellow, who played nurseryman in the village when he should have been driving a taxi in town, had brought too many of and then planted every which way.

Let it go, let it go! If she didn't stop it right now, the bile would rise and drown her. She was surprised at how lively her capacity for hatred was, and how the fountain of negativity had not run dry with the passing years, like so many other liquids. At least one form of youth persisted, even if it wasn't the most honorable.

Nothing had happened the way she planned. Jan had driven her to come here, into this formless universe where there were trees to be trimmed, roads to grade, pits to empty, cottages to build, rot to be fought, fortifications to be defended against termites and landslides, and pumps, innumerable pumps that all forms of sanitary existence depended on and that never stopped rusting, breaking, giving up. Jan had looked after everything, for the time it took to fit her snugly into this place, and when she finally succumbed to its seduction, reduced to a handful of submissive crumbs, totally dependent on wild oxygen, *wham*, he was dead. She could have sold. Every year people were after her to sell, just yesterday she sent packing a real-estate agent who'd been clinging to her like a tick. But there you are, what's done is done: she was hooked. She would leave this place feet first, and even then, centuries after her death, they would have to call in an exorcist to drive away her ghost.

The list of things that must be learned when you're a woman alone is disgusting in its complexity. She knew men who would have been more than willing to act as foremen if she'd been ready to cohabit with them, which meant listening to them belch and curse, and feeding their bottomless appetites, and whiffing the fustiness of their armpits after sweat-producing exertion. After Jan—impossible. As for the prissy

intellectuals her work in Montreal had brought her into contact with, they needed an instruction manual to handle a hatchet, they were allergic to mosquitoes, to country life itself, in other words. So she became her own foreman. In the village, where people still looked on her as a tourist—a tourist who clung to the rocks, infatuated with nature and living creatures, the worst kind there was—she could rely on an abundant though punctilious workforce, reluctant to touch certain tools that might dirty the hands, whom she had to pin down outside the trout and Jet Ski season, between bow-hunting, moose and bear seasons, who had to be placated with liberal tips and under-the-table payments, preferably at month's end when the welfare check had run dry. Luckily there was Simon. Simon had been helping her for years now, ever since Jan died.

Simon. Simon was on the list of today's tasks.

She resolved to begin with him. If she waited till the end of the day, her determination would decline with the sun. All she had to do was make her way down to the boathouse, sit down on the dock facing the lake and wait until she saw the flash of his paddle in the sunlight. Sooner or later, she would see him floating on the water. She would see him before he saw her. Her eyes, though deeply sunken and older, were better than his—a short-lived satisfaction.

She filled the cats' bowls, stroked each one's back, then put them out to pursue their feline marauding. She went down the path, bundled up to her neck to fend off the blackflies, a basket on her arm in case an early boletus or a late gyromitra caught her eye, not to mention the wild lupines that made such lovely bouquets. Treasures were everywhere, discreetly

concealed in the undergrowth, demanding nothing more than a youthful remnant of vision to be spotted: wild strawberries, hobblebush, foamflower roots that can cure the most gravely damaged liver, a hare with half a winter coat scampering toward the thicket, bullfrogs puffing and preening on the marshy bank, pink lady's slippers that might better have been called gentleman's galoshes considering their paunchy bulge, perhaps even a thrush's nest full of tiny baby-blue eggs imprudently deposited right on the ground between two clumps of grass . . . Jan had laid out the path so it would wind its way slowly between the Eastern hemlocks, the stands of maple, the moss, flat stones, the clover field, without exhaustion nor seeking any particular conclusion, like a walk in the country that sufficed unto itself but that stuns you, as you round a curve, with a dazzling reward, that of the entire lake captured in full light. For Lila the most important thing about that familiar stroll was the certainty that she would encounter no one, that for a moment she could forget that other human beings existed on the earth. At this early morning hour she certainly would not meet her neighbor Claire, who was always sneaking onto her land to steal her strawberries and raspberries, and not the Little Boy, the *Maty*, Simon's nephew, who would take ten years to digest the encyclopedia of insects she'd instructed him to learn by heart before daring to show up at her doorstep again. Almost in peace, she walked alone. But are we ever truly alone? As she walked, she saw Jan's muscular arms pulling up the stumps from the trail ahead of her, saw him down by the lake laying the boathouse roof, onto which he'd climbed like a monkey, nails between his lips in the form of a smile, the red shell of the rowboat behind him.

Almost every day she went to the boathouse, a pilgrimage to the first structure they'd built together, and later for all that grafted itself onto the pilgrimage, that explosion of devouring life that Jan would have approved of, but that had now become repetitive, timeworn, almost a pilgrimage of another kind. *Enough is enough*, she muttered as she walked along, *it doesn't mean anything any more, it's grotesque, ridiculous at your age, you old loony, at your age*. It worked when she insulted herself; she became as cutting and acerbic as a hatchet ready to hack through anything that might get in its way.

Something moved in the thicket to her right, a porcupine maybe, frightened by her looming human bulk, but no, it was a cat, Vieux Minou, fur standing on end as if he didn't recognize her, and when she called out to him, Mama and Picasso emerged from the bushes. The three little scoundrels had followed her, and now they acted surprised to find her there. They were just dying to run to her but they took their sweet time, pausing now and again to sniff out invisible smells with that distant you'll-never-get-me-to-say-I-love-you look. Really, she'd never wanted for companionship here, her life could be divided into segments according to the cats that had honored her with their suave affection, each in turn, strays for the most part except for the first one, the intelligent Tiger who died before Jan, taking with him fifteen years of youth. Then there had been the twins, Blanchon and Titnoir, gone after fifteen more years, and now this bunch, Vieux Minou closing in on ten years and Mama and Picasso who probably had ten good years ahead of them—just like her, or maybe more than her—and that would be the last slice, served well-done, of a totally squandered life. Lila looked down at the cats rolling at

her feet in utter surrender, she smelled the odors rising from the lake, but she could not move, weighed down with nostalgia, suddenly stabbed by the brevity of the whole adventure. How cruel it is; we barely have time to master three steps of the immense cosmic choreography before we're yanked from the ballet. What a lousy deal. Then, on the ground, half hidden by the cats, she spied two mushrooms, two funnel-shaped clitocybes whose mild-flavored flesh made them so good in soups, and as she bent over to pick them, the earth began to carry her with more grace.

Simon was in his kayak, close to the island, motionless. The hours he would spend out on the water mystified Lila. She liked the lake, but from a distance, like a hyper-realist watercolor on a living-room wall. She insisted that Jan build their house perched high on the hill with an unimpeded view of everything, including the aquatic world, to which humans had ceased to belong ever since they lost their prehistoric gills. How could you trust an environment that chokes off your breath as soon as you immerse your head in it? Of course, the smells of the lake, the ducks, the otters, the beavers, the water lilies, all of it had a certain charm, but what was the point of sticking your nose in it? The boathouse had been her compromise with Jan who, strong swimmer that he was, would stroke his way to the island and back to tone his breathing and his muscles. Simon lived in their first cottage. He bought it after having rented it for several years, and after begging Lila, and promising to sign a most unlikely contract that forbade him to resell it or even leave it to his heirs. Probably the contract wasn't legal and would be declared invalid at the first challenge, but for the moment, for twenty-five years, it had held firm.

When the breeze swung his craft toward the little dock where she stood, Simon spotted her and lifted his paddle in recognition. From a distance, as he headed straight for her with deep, competitive strokes, you couldn't be sure of anything, his age or even hers, and the reasons for that joyous haste that drove him toward the shore. You could make up any story and believe it. Without thinking, Lila undid the top buttons of her men's shirt and threw back her shoulders, and when she caught herself running her fingers through her hair she went stiff, furious with herself. *Let it go, let it go!*

If she did nothing, if she let inertia have its way, what had been happening for thirty years would happen again. With one hand Simon Delisle would tie up his kayak, previously his canoe, to the metal mooring post. With the other, he would reach out to steady himself on the dock and then lift himself with some difficulty from the kayak, laughing as natural as can be, improvising the joyful preliminaries. Five minutes later—time is precious after all—the two of them would be naked, rubbing against one another like sanding blocks, their increasingly timeworn skins against each other on the built-in bed on the upstairs floor of the boathouse. Lovers, yes, in the language of romance novels, since there's no more fitting term, seasonal lovers for thirty years, ever since Jan's death, and, more to the point, two years after Jan's death, for Simon had his principles and a certain sense of decorum, he would not approach too visibly married or too recently widowed a woman. But it had begun in his head well before, when he came upon her rolling in the moss like a bitch, it had begun with that first image forever burned on young Simon's retina, and from that moment on he waited for his time to come,

patiently, like a dog that longs for the bitch after catching the scent of her passage . . . That image still shone between them. Lila saw it in Simon's closed eyes as he bore into her on the built-in bed of the boathouse, it was that image he had been making love to for all these years, not the decrepit old woman twenty years his senior he was holding in his arms.

And what about her?

My Lord. She hadn't asked for anything, but since he happened to be there, maritally unencumbered, without suffering for anyone, a kind of Nautilus machine to strengthen the thighs and the libido, and since it didn't take bread out of anyone's mouth, as her mother would have put it. The question was this: for how much longer? The old machine still worked, all the parts meshed smoothly, responding when the starter buttons were properly pushed. But did she have to be totally worn through, her and her ancient machine, did she have to wait for her eighties, her vivacious nineties before someone rolled back her gown and discovered her incontinence diapers? In her innermost sarcasms, Lila saw herself on her deathbed, breathing her last, and she imagined Simon, in between two teary guests, feeling her up beneath the bedcovers, even extracting from her time-trained body a trace of moisture between two groans of expiry . . .

Obscene.

That was the word. She would say, Simon, I'm seventy-six, this is getting obscene.

She could also say, though it would take some courage, Simon, help me be an old woman. Help me finally dump the beauty in me whose scattered remains catch fire whenever the lights are low or your masculine hand awakens them, help

me dump the exasperating beauty still in me, the mummy wrapped in shrouds of decrepitude who suddenly cries out for air and assaults me with recriminations—*damn you god-damned passing time for what've you done to me, help me, deliver me, I'm still in here* . . . Yes, even at seventy-six, why not at seventy-six, even at one hundred and beyond if there is such a thing, there'll be no end to it unless you help me eradicate her completely, strangle her at the root . . . What a curse, to have been a beautiful woman.

No. All things considered, one word would do: *obscene*.

Just as Simon's kayak nudged up against the dock with the soft squeak of experience, they heard an explosion, like an echo gone mad, that sent the loon lofting from the lake waters and reverberated in Lila's chest. A gunshot, maybe, something out of line and very close. The loon skimmed low over their heads, its heavy breathless body slicing through the air with difficulty.

"It came from the channel," said Lila.

"I'll go have a look," said Simon, picking up his paddle.

He turned the small boat back to the lake, his head still toward her.

"I saw a Princecraft this morning. One hundred fifty horsepower, don't ask me how they got it in here."

Lila stared at him, incredulous. There were no motorboats on Goose Lake, the prohibition was formal and implicit.

"I think it's the Clémont kid," he added.

"Who?"

"Clémont. You know, the contractor. He had a kid."

He turned around and paddled off vigorously, leaving his promising smile behind. She caught a few anesthetizing

words, *don't worry about it . . . back soon . . . won't be long*, then only the liltng lap of the water in his wake, before it vanished along with him.

If any motorboat dared venture this way, Simon would chase it off. She felt almost calm; the echo of the detonation faded in her memory to the point of nonexistence. She really did like Simon. She told herself how much she liked him as she sat on the damp planks of the dock. His husky, hairy torso, his soft belly, his comforting body. His perpetual wry smile, as if nothing could ever truly be outrageous. How transparent he was! You immediately understood his language, even the nonverbal kind, all his inner codes were visible. His generosity. He turned spontaneously toward strangers, particularly the most manifestly wretched of them. He knew all the owners on all the nearby lakes from floating becalmed in front of their cottages and dragging conversation out of them. She really did like him, which didn't mean he wasn't a little suspect. Why go out of your way to help just anybody? Why get involved with perfect strangers and extract their stories like teeth if it wasn't out of some unhealthy need for other people, out of self-deprecation, lack of dignity when you get right down to it? A sheep in wolf's clothing, that was Simon. And a compulsive talker, the kind whose logorrheic attacks you had to interrupt if you didn't want night to fall before day even began.

And now, without warning, the floodgates opened and bitter gall swamped her, splashing Simon too, throwing her into darkness at noon. She touched her chest: what was that sick feeling there, already ponderous and clawing? An attack of angina? Heartburn? Or some preposterous psychosomatic

weakness at the thought of facing down motorboats and illegal weapons, despite all she'd seen of poachers and other examples of human depravity?

It was a word. A name. A name prowling blindly inside her, stumbling and stirring up emotions, a name her body recognized before the rest of her did, moving in on her memory, slowly sidling up, it was terrifying and abruptly there he was. Right in her heart, where the pain was.

Clémont.

No sooner identified than he expanded and took on features. Pale eyes of indefinable color, a hint of blond in his hair, a prominent nose. An expressive mouth that smiled easily, superficially, like thin spring ice through which frigid water percolates. The head of a Viking or a barbarian, eyes that tear apart. *Little Lila.*

Gilles Clémont.

Little Lila, be reasonable.

A brand new red pickup parked across the road, her road. *I've got the right of way.* The female moose fallen at the base of a tree, emaciated, panting, eyes full of pain, unable to eat since the fall, her jaw smashed by a bullet. *It's my fault if I'm a man?* The disemboweled bear in the field, her field, in a blizzard of flies and blood. *The gallbladder's worth its weight in gold.* The pheasants she'd tamed, cut down by gunfire. The trout stream blocked by a net. *You've got too much land, Lila.*

Gilles Clémont, the exterminator.

Lila stood up. Too troubled, too many images, too much pain in her stomach to get over alone. She climbed up to her boathouse hideaway, shocked by the injustice of the dead persecuting the living.

How can you escape a story you've invented yourself, a story brought back by night after sleepless night, then finally cast into oblivion for decades, only to return, summoned by the same capricious memory that had obliterated it in the first place? You can't escape. The story unfolded as fresh as the month of October, thirty years ago, when it was invented. Gilles Clémont driving down the road in his brand new red pickup. (You can see him perfectly, Lila.) He stops on the shoulder of the 117 just before Lac-Saguay. Opens his thermos. Drinks the cream of mushroom soup to the last drop, wishing he had bread to wipe up what's left. He pisses into the ditch, and since he had it out anyway, he jerks off a little. (Stop, Lila.) Maybe he doesn't jerk off, maybe he'll wait till Prince's topless bar where for five bucks some girl will do it for him. A few beers and a few shot wads later, he heads to Mont-Laurier where his brother-in-law (Mario, Manuel, Ménélas?) is expecting him, an old pal (Pierre, Paul, Philippe?) and the floatplane (Bombardier, Simons?) that would drop them off at the Windigo Game Preserve, happy drinking buddies who get together for one short week in paradise once a year, where the clay pigeons fall easily on the shooting range, where alcohol flows fearlessly and shotguns spit with impunity, free of the civilization that makes parties so insipid. Maybe before getting into the floatplane he calls his wife (Martine, Marie?) for permission to forget all about her. *I'll be thinking of you, dearest*, maybe he adds a few affectionate words for his son (Jean-Marie, Jean-Pierre?): *Who's going to bring his little guy a fine set of antlers?* so he can become a little kid himself with nothing to tie him down, and off he soars into paradise—and inescapably to the death that

always precedes paradise in natural law so conveniently forgotten. (Hold onto yourself, Lila.)

The first two days with his buddies, in the dark yellow light of the autumn Laurentian woods, he does it all. Drinks like a fish, eats like a pig, sleeps like a sloth. Happy as a clam. The symptoms appear on the third day. Dry constricted throat. Pale complexion. Nerves buzzing in his temples and quivering in his legs.

You ain't lookin' all that great, Gilles.

It's nothing. Ate too much last night.

He wolfs down a half-pack of bacon out of bravado, but it takes all his self-control not to puke, so he takes his Winchester and goes off to wait near the little stream where he spotted hoofprints. Sure, he has his defects, but he's no sissy, Gilles Clémont.

The hours go by but it doesn't get better. So dizzy he has to lie down. Even lying down there's this weight crushing his chest; he can't breathe. He clutches his shotgun, focuses all his attention on the edge of the forest to outsmart the pain. He sees a shadow moving between the spruce needles, but when he tries to lift his gun to take aim, everything shakes and goes limp, his wrists, his hands, his eyes. *Holy fuck.*

His whole body is burning like a brushfire, cramps tear at his muscles, disappear, then blaze up somewhere else. *What's the matter with me, fuck?* He manages to stand up and wobbles off like a burning man, zigzagging with each bolt of pain. Just before the cabin, nausea gets the better of him, wrenching his guts, bending him in two, he vomits and he's almost relieved. So, it was just stomach flu; now he's gotten rid of all that crap, he'll be back on his feet, as good as new.

Poor Gilles. (Yes, Lila. Poor Gilles.)

Brother-in-law and good buddy get back late that afternoon according to plan, empty-handed because their prospective targets have proven reticent. They find Gilles face down on the ground by the outhouse in the stink of all the fluids that have drained from his body. While they carry him inside and clean him up as best they can, he manages a heroic grin: *It's that shit-paste of a stew of yours I can't keep down, Phil* (Pierre, Pascal?), but right after, he grabs his belly with both hands and, shrieking with pain, vomits up bile and curses, puking all over the covers, *I'm thirsty, thirsty, fuck*, crying out for water even if he can't keep it down. His clothes are soaked through, sweat is pouring down his pallid face carved out like a kid's Halloween mask, *water, gotta have water*, and brother-in-law and buddy are starting to panic.

(No cell phones back in those days of prehistoric technology. Even today, cell phones can't establish their sight lines in the tumbled geography of the old Laurentians. No way out except the floatplane that will be picking them up in three days, nothing but fear that makes a pathetic vehicle. . .)

Miraculously, that evening he perks up. The cramps and nausea stop, the fever drops, his insides call off their revolt and let him sleep through the night. Come morning he's still exhausted by the previous day's attack, but the color is back in his face, and a portion of his usual humor: *Sorry about that, guys, you won't be inheriting my shotgun this time*. He urges the others to go hunting and let him recover inside where it's nice and warm. A little worried, brother-in-law and buddy come back early with the corpses of three hares blown apart by buckshot for lack of more sizeable game. They're reas-

sured by what they see, Gilles in the rocking chair next to the wood stove, smiling, weakened but hungry, to all intents and purposes cured. That night they celebrate with rum and hare stew, the other two mostly because Gilles prudently sucks on the bones with a little sauce and half a bottle of beer, none of which stop him from belting out a couple of dirty songs in honor of his resurrection: *There's a lady in the grass with an arrow up her ass, pull it out, pull it out like a good Boy Scout . . .*

(All those details, Lila, fussy and unbearable, that your imagination's memory ticks off in tribute to Gilles Clémont's last pulses of life, poor, poor Gilles Clémont, of the fine warrior's head and the bloodythirsty heart, preparing to head for the inferno, where no one deserves to go . . .)

During the night, he's awakened by cramps deep in his intestines, the same as before but worse, sharpened by the brief respite, and the succession of horrors breaks loose again, vomiting, diarrhea, explosions in his belly, sweat, burning thirst, his flesh trembling and screaming, and suddenly he knows, his body ravaged but his mind lucid, he knows he is dying.

He knows it the next day and the night that follows, and the day after that when the floatplane finally touches down near the camp, for his is a slow death that takes its time, making its way through the cells of his liver and kidneys (hepatic and nephritic cytolysis, modification of the mitochondria, destruction of the lysosome membranes, nucleic alterations . . .), leaving all the while, in refined cruelty, the mind intact and available to absorb every tiny particle of pain. He knows it at the hospital, where the doctors come and go, attempting transfusions and examining his poor rotten

blood, in which they immediately detect the amatoxins and the phallotoxins responsible for poisoning him: *Mr. Clémont, have you eaten mushrooms? White mushrooms? Try to remember, Mr. Clémont.* The two others, the brother-in-law and the buddy, swear to the doctors he hasn't, *plenty of booze and meat but no mushrooms*, and they're told it must have happened beforehand, they're presented with the nasty properties of the *Amanita virosa*, commonly known as the destroying angel, which immediately begins its work within the intimacy of the cells but produces no symptoms for the first three days after ingestion, making it totally and utterly deadly. Gilles would have sworn it too, *no mushrooms*, if he'd been able to speak and hear the question but what's going on inside him made all other realities pale and wispy, even his wife's wet kisses and his son's dirty little hand. Inside his being, he is the sole witness to the carnage, and he cries out from time to time to warn them: *the big bear!* He cries out, *It's the big bear!* But they think he's delirious, that he's talking about constellations and stars, the Great Bear, while he's actually naming the evil that's destroying him, the pregnant bear whose stomach he'd torn up a few weeks before to take her gallbladder, and now she towered, roaring in his belly and devouring his guts. . .

Here, Gilles, something for you to eat on the road.

That's nice of you, little Lila.

It'll stay nice and warm in the thermos.

I knew it, you and me. Just you and me, Lila.

SHE CURLED UP in a hidden corner of the boathouse, out of sight but not free of the voices that penetrate even solid bodies. She tried to escape her name, *Lila, Lila!* cast into her

memory with a stench of death and bouncing against the pitiless flanks of Mount Diamond. *Lila! Lila!* she plugged her ears and prayed silently for it to pass, but Simon kept on calling her name and waiting, legs cramping in his kayak by the boathouse dock; he decided he'd waited long enough, she must have gone home, then he headed for his place too, paddling briskly despite the cramps in his back.

fire in the lake

WE CAN COUNT on them. The Great Bear, the heavenly twins Castor and Pollux, the brilliant nuggets of Cancer, Aldebaran, Vega and all the others, all those stars whose names he kept on forgetting, yet they returned unfailingly every night, never having left in the first place, simply obscured temporarily behind the star called the Sun that loomed so large in the sky. We can count on them for essential information, where we come from, what atoms we are made of, for how long and, especially, where we are going. Every night the stars would settle a bit farther to the west, so we wouldn't lose sight of them, we'd realize that they were traveling toward a destination, that the journey was carrying us there too, all together and us with them, the whole universe and its convoy of galaxies, gas, debris and a few rare angst-ridden amino acids, shooting across the sky in constant acceleration toward the great cosmic West. Who was there at the farthest West, pulling the sheets and blankets of the universe toward his side of the bed? Maybe the gods that we'd caused to be born, feeling hemmed in by their loft-like paradise, exasperated by their great number, while we'd led them to believe that they were all unique.

Two o'clock in the morning. Simon was sipping tea beneath the light of the sky, close to the island where the loons were not asleep either. He'd snuck out unbeknownst to Marianne, like a teenager stealing out of bed to join up with his tribe. Had she seen him, Marianne would have scolded him—gently, for she wasn't the kind to get carried away—and Simon's pleasure, built of scaffold-like arrangements as fragile as all pleasures are, would have been disturbed. Thank God that when Marianne fell asleep, it was for a long time, and deeply. He could walk around her and talk out loud without the world into which she'd shut herself beginning to crack. Hardest of all was slipping incognito past Jérémie's door, since he insisted it be kept open at all times. Poor little raccoon, so cruelly battered so early in life—something that made no sense to Simon, who liked to believe in the joyous impunity of childhood, even though he'd seen it more sorely mistreated in the rest of the world and even here; he'd seen the child soldiers, child commodities exhibited like so many old men, bemedaled by scars of war that were much too big for them. Jérémie cleared his throat just as Simon took his evasive action in front of his door. He had no choice but to enter the room and sit down on the bed.

"Where are you going?" Jérémie asked straight out.

"The kitchen," Simon replied, a half-truth. "Do you want a glass of milk or a cookie?"

"No."

What Jérémie wanted didn't surface in either words or demands. But those eyes of his, which grabbed hold of you with their darkness the moment they touched you, were asking for something.

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

“You don’t have to,” said Jérémie.

He smiled a confident smile, a real smile, then rolled over on his side and closed his eyes, bringing his unformulated appeals to an end. Simon gazed at him a moment, his little hands folded on top of the covers, his delicate little head filled to the brim. What would become of him, he and all the other children? How could he pass on his own unshakable confidence in life, without which you waver even before you’ve taken the first step? In the darkness Jérémie recovered the smooth, handsome face from before the fire. The burns slumbered with him, invisible.

He should have taken him along. Should have taken all of them. All victims of ugliness, captives in places of deep hurt where life had no room to stretch its legs. As he made his way across the lake, in the gaping strongbox of night, while richness streamed above him—ah, the host of stars, ah, the castle-like line of the cliff, the air nearly visible with perfumes, the black silk of the lake—all of them in their dark chamber of pain stared at him, unblinking. Even during the summer he subscribed to the solemn dispatches of Doctors Without Borders, of CARE, of Amnesty International; he would unfold them, reread them and annotate them when he was not drawing up petitions and letters of insult to governments here and abroad, all guilty of criminal indifference. *Lighten up a bit, will you?* said Marianne, *Take a break, what’s in it for you, what can you do about it?* Then she went off to the hospital to soothe pain. Lucky her, she had a trade that was useful here and now, leaving him alone with the impotence of privilege.

But at least he could do that. *You are with me.* Against the blasted bodies, the spilled humors, the empty-eyed children,

to soften the column of universal misery as thick as the stalk of a mushroom cloud, he could sit bolt upright in his kayak with his mind focused. *I salute you, Muhammad Bekzhon, in the prisons of gagged Uzbekistan where for months they've been torturing you; I salute you, Nadezhda Kosenchouk, you whose existence I learned of on the Internet, you who are dying of hunger along with your four children in the smoking remains of Chernobyl; I salute you Djamina Alohe of Darfur, destroyed by the murder of your baby Sahel and the sexual sacking of your body; I salute you, tiny Joseph, as you lie dying of AIDS in Maradi, Niger, before you could even know the privilege of living. . .*

As he floated, alone, in precious beauty, they, the wretched of the earth, labored on, crushed by the weight of their numbers. He should choose five or ten at random, pick from the immense pool of human misfortune. Maybe here, in the heart of beauty, he could somehow raise a clandestine altar that would purify the putrefaction, a workshop that would transmute pain into radiant energy. You never know. You never know what you might do if you throw off your cynicism. Maybe at this very moment each of the five or ten sufferers was receiving a discharge of hope in the midst of their torments, a call from an unexpected visitor, an extra ration of rice or a cool breeze on their burning skin . . . You never know if miracles are waiting for us, concealed in the darkness.

The current had drawn him imperceptibly closer to the island. Fireflies lit intermittent flares in space; bats swooped toward the water like dive bombers; bullfrogs throatily called out for love. All these graceful creatures that seemed to be performing for him alone were caught up in toil—eating, reproducing, devouring and killing before being killed,

controlled by the force that regulates and perpetuates, at all costs, life itself. And him? *What about you, Simon? Where do you fit into the great cosmic design?*

Whenever he allowed himself this kind of contemplation, the question came flying back like a boomerang and left him stunned by melancholy. *Nowhere*, he felt like answering, *How few steps I've taken, and maybe in the wrong direction*. But slowly, useless melancholy faded. It's true he didn't amount to much, he'd never amounted to much. Yet despite being nothing, at least he had *this much* within reach, whether or not he deserved it. This extraordinary setting had been placed across his path, and nothing had been asked of him in return except, maybe, a little gratitude.

From the outside, he led a narrow little life. He'd been a physical education teacher, but he was no longer a teacher of anything because of the poor state of his spine. He spent the winter months in a suburban condominium, acting as a volunteer coach for young hockey players, reading too much, taking part in all sorts of sterile discussions, getting excited about all kinds of lost causes and missing summer. He went shopping and cleaned the house, did the cooking for Marianne as she marched off to the front to care for the wounded in a Montreal hospital. On Sundays they had their two children over for dinner, and each time, for him, it was a source of stunned admiration. Where did those unlikely offspring pop up from? How could a tree have given birth to two saplings so different from him? Loïc and Jeanne were both in their thirties, both were married without children, practicing honorable trades—accountant and computer engineer—though he couldn't help noticing a corky odor to them. You could say

they'd succeeded and were good kids, they'd been *saved*, as his St. Lambert neighbor, whose son could have been a heroin addict, liked to tell him. Simon agreed of course, though he was convinced that the greatest threat to his children still lay before them.

But back to summertime.

Summertime, and the children vanished, and fatherhood along with it. And at the same time, that air of respectability that makes us waddle through life with the awkward stiffness of penguins. In summer, there was nothing small about his life. Often he was a hero or a king. Sometimes he felt on equal footing with the leaves and moss, and that was perfect. The fact of being alone most of the time. The fact of being constantly surrounded by water. That helped untie the problematic knots, and created a smooth space in his mind, a kind of interconnected lake whose surface was scarcely ruffled by contrary winds. When his vertebrae hurt too much, he would let himself drift in his kayak. In the water, in a state of weightlessness, everything eventually turned to liquid. He swam badly but floated perfectly. Floated alongside the loons that had taken so long to tolerate him, but now they let out a vague whimper when his monstrously huge body trespassed into their space. He would move off a few centimeters to restore their confidence, more like the indifference of those elegant beings so taken up with their own matters, for whom other populations existed only as a function of their succulence or threat. The same was true of the mergansers and their broods of ducklings, or the irascible old beaver that would slap the water with its tail only one time out of three when he floated near in his kayak, barely managing to

preserve a tradition of belligerence against a clearly defanged enemy. All of them let him take his place. But what was his place? Water or dry land? Evolution had spent millennia yanking him from aquatic life, but part of him seemed not to want to tear itself away.

And when summer came he would be reunited with Lila, his surly queen.

He recognized the head of the female loon silhouetted against the dark mass of the alders like a Japanese woodcut. She was sitting on a nest of grass. He knew the color of her eggs—light-brown, mottled with chocolate specks, never more than two—and most of her daily adventures, which consisted of love jousts, endless singing, maternal generosity, extreme diving, laborious swallowing—for fish would not sit idly by and be ingested alive. Her best-known accomplishments were her great, rending vocalises that split the summer night and disconcerted city folks (*A duck? Come on, you're pulling my leg! That's a wolf!*) But he was the only witness to plenty of extraordinary events: the hours-long diving and singing lessons given to that year's loon chick, who was just as clumsy and brown as the previous year's. The fall gatherings when they'd line up in a row on the lake, chattering in groups of ten, peeping and peering, diving underneath their neighbor to check his belly, throwing themselves into vocal duels, all of them dressed to the nines in their squared suits and their black warrior's helmets . . . And then there was mourning. A few summers ago, one of the two loons disappeared. For months on end the abandoned widow called out and wept for her partner day and night. It was hard to tell what was more heart-wrenching: her incessant call of distress

or the discovery of how deeply felt was the sadness of birds. Lila, of course, did not sleep a wink the whole summer.

Simon would tell Lila of those things, those tiny incidents gleaned as he contemplated the loons or any of the other feathered and furry creatures that moved around the lake. *I saw the heron*, he told her, simply. Or, *two mink were running along the shore this morning*. Or, *there was a buzzard perched on the rock*. Or, *a fox came for a drink right in front of me*. Or, *the sunfish are big this year*. That never failed to put her in a happy mood.

“How big? Where exactly? What were they doing? Of course they were running, but how were they running?”

Anything to do with animals delighted her, right down to the way they scratched or defecated. She’d had cats forever, long, lean gray-coated hunters that she’d tried to turn into vegetarians like herself—in vain, of course. She’d domesticated the trout in the pond one summer, feeding them bread and raw-milk cheese. The trout literally leaped when they saw her, until the great heron took note of the edible swarm and brought it to an end. It was bad enough that they ate one another. But that they suffered on account of men—she couldn’t swallow that.

Their first meeting was something he would never forget. It took place in the cottage, Lila and Jan’s, which had finally become his. Jan welcomed him at the door, a big, hearty, attractive guy who was to stand in his way for all eternity, especially after his death. But at the time, Simon was drinking tea inside, entranced by the place and his own good fortune, talking leases and house-moving with Jan, when she came bursting in, her blond curls fighting it out over her crookedly

buttoned men's shirt, arms full of kindling and suspicion and ferocity in the way she glanced at him. *Do you hunt? You can't do that here. How many children do you have? Are they well behaved? Do you have dogs? Do you smoke?* Her guttural voice was like an overgarment, a second tattered shirt thrown over her slight body to create a diversion. She was certainly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, though not terribly feminine when all was said and done, with her large hands and bushy eyebrows, and her square-cut way of moving and giving you the once-over as if sizing up an opponent. The real test came later, when she began to describe what she'd seen on the road that morning: *A murderer's truck, sir, full of martyrs and not a word of protest, yes, martyrs, go ahead, Jan, laugh, they were heading off to their deaths and they knew it, their poor little heads up against the slots in the side of the truck, trying to get a breath of air at least, since they deprive them of water and starve them to save on feed, it makes me want to vomit, I caught one's eye, yes, sir, I did, you're surprised they can look you in the eye, aren't you, eyes almost blue, eyes from another world for sure, but his eyes found my eyes, I swear, his eyes were looking into mine trying to tell me, from one living creature to another, of his monstrous fear. . .* Then she fell silent, waiting for a reaction. Meanwhile, Jan was pouring boiling water into the teapot again, silent laughter pulling at his lips, but Simon knew he wasn't allowed to laugh, it was of vital importance that he find something appropriate and compassionate to say, while all he could think of, not without horror, was the ham—how delicious it had been!—he'd wolfed down that very morning. . .

They'd rented him the place but he'd missed his chance. They'd rented it to him for ten years and even ended up sell-

ing it to him, and Lila eventually formed a special friendship with him, but he knew he'd missed his chance. If his answer back then—mealymouthed, conventional, so unmemorable he couldn't retrieve it—if his answer had been different, the pathway he'd seen opening up before him would not have snapped shut and maybe Lila, after Jan's death, would have finally let herself love him.

He still saw things that way, even today, but without sadness: an opportunity passes and you fail to grasp it, it never returns and that's too bad and just as well, for you were fated not to grasp it.

Besides, what would have happened to Marianne and him if the pathway to Lila had remained open?

NOW EVERYONE was asleep: Marianne, Lila, Jérémie and the others. Beside each of them burned a little lamp to create the illusion of vigilance, and keep the brigands at bay. He knew how soundly Marianne slept; he wasn't worried about her. Lila was something else again. At Lila's, on top of the hill, the little lamp he'd programmed himself would go on at midnight and switch off five hours later, at that gray hour when at last she was convinced that no one had the strength to harm her. The rest of the time, she saw the malfeasance of people hovering over her, waiting for the slightest moment of inattention to pounce. What she liked about the animals, deep down, was that they'd escaped the human condition. But at this hour, temporarily she slept, curled up in her land of solitude, wealthy sovereign of her anarchic little realm and yet still discontent, dreaming of poor people's wars and merciless struggles to conquer territories that were already hers.

Or maybe she was dreaming of Jan.

She'd never accepted it. She kept looking for someone to blame for Jan's premature disappearance, and since there was no guilty party, the weapon would ultimately be turned against herself. She was stunned, devastated by her impotence. What? You give everything to someone without stint, and that doesn't even immunize him against death? With Jan, she went so far into self-abandonment that she had nothing left to give elsewhere. That's what she told Simon, the odd time when she dared speak to him of Jan. He could understand; he'd seen them together. Together, Lila and Jan were unbearable. The ideal primordial couple, living like squatters in paradise even though they'd been expelled. Compared to them, other couples looked like civil servants hired to reproduce, insignificant retirees who'd joined forces to accumulate the maximum available pensions.

How far away all that was. Yet something remained to be gotten, it lay there within reach, but always just beyond. A woman of such beauty who allows you to touch her, a woman of such beauty locked away and bolted shut, now showing you the key, now hiding it, then showing it again.

Maybe one day he would truly have access to her, when she was too old to protect herself. He hadn't lost all hope. As he waited, he knew he was the only human accepted in her court, the only two-legged vassal to find favor among her four-legged tribe.

THE LAKE ROSE and fell and murmured beneath his paddle like a primitive animal mass, then fell silently back into its mineral existence. *What is a lake?* he wondered as he let

his hand trail through the water, touching its undulating skin, which bore him but could just as well swallow him up. Once again, a feeling of respect came over him, respect for this huge, formless mysterious body as alive as blood—the blood of the earth!—in which so many beings emerged and assumed substance. During summer, of course. Come winter, everything coagulated and lost its meaning.

The nesting loon raised its head and began issuing short, melodious and patient notes that were nevertheless warnings: I see you, don't come too close. Simon decided to push back their mutual limits; he moved slowly in her direction to approach the point when that would no longer be possible. Almost immediately, a powerful ululation echoed off to his right, so close he almost lost his balance. The other loon came up by his side, large and brave, its agate eye focused on him as war cries warbled from its throat and fell from its bill like outsized foreign bodies. Simon paused to examine its collar and the upper section of its black and white feathering so rarely exposed to view. Then, laughing and offering words of appeasement, he shifted into reverse. And, as always, once he'd demonstrated his good will, the loons quickly forgot his existence. The male dived in front of him and surfaced close to the shore in front of the nest. The female got up from her eggs and, with the clunky stride of a creature not at home on land, plopped into the water as her partner took his place on top of the little-ones-to-be. *Changing of the guard*, said Simon to himself, delighted. Something new to tell Lila, to awaken one little girl's pleasure in her.

He knew the little girl she'd once been. Blond tresses pinned behind her neck, perpetually skinned knees, already

as pretty as a picture. He knew the stone house with the creaking shutters, more a ruin than a house, for her father was more comfortable with the land than with the hammer. He had been a strong, handsome man, and her mother a magnificent creature *who was one hell of a character*, Lila would always tack on, paying no attention to Simon's sarcastic laugh. She had spent a carefree childhood in a village located in the midst of rye fields and mushroom-rich woods, alone in her parents' hearts with the dogs, horses, rabbits and two cats, Kosmaty and Maciek, a premonitory bestiary that prefigured what was to be her true family.

When she spoke to him of Poland, it was almost like an oversight, often toward the end of the day when Simon had helped her prune the trees or paint the porches as she filled their little glasses with chanterelle-flavored vodka. Something like an uncontrolled geyser shot deeply buried sediment to the surface and left her defenseless, almost gentle. After her mother's death she had cut off almost all her ties with her homeland, her language, her family, leaving no one but a distant younger cousin with whom she exchanged increasingly rare letters. Cutting off ties solves nothing. Cutting off ties only opens invisible passageways that are all the more insidious, for they link us to ghosts, not real beings.

At the center of her childhood lay her father, and Markus. Lila's voice became a dry stream when Markus's name entered her story. He was exactly ten and a half years old, the same as her, and since he lived in the house across the way, the two walked home from school together. *A more beautiful blue than ours because it was really nicely kept up, but Markus wasn't even proud of it. He dreamed of living in a modern house, like in*

Kraków or Paris where people live side by side in their pigeonholes and share the water closets and other things like that, which makes the universe egalitarian and socialist. . . Little Markus with his grown-up eyes, at the top of his class and too studious and serious to be her friend, but enough to make an enormous impression on her, which is itself a form of love.

Markus, the Jew.

(She would say, I thought for a long time that being Jewish was like some serious secret sickness that Markus had caught and that he could die from.)

(She would add, Which was not so far from reality.)

CHILDHOOD IS A COLD room in which are stored the seeds of all that will eventually sprout and spread leaves, and Simon held the keys to Lila's cold room. When she acted petty, when her eyes gleamed maliciously, he could see the little blond girl with the scraped knees traumatized by betrayal and death who was trying to live by suppressing love, even the very idea of love.

Ever since he met the traumatized little blond girl, he learned to forgive the tall, white-haired blond woman. Sometimes he felt he could hold her in his hand like a tiny, defenseless bird whose narrowest contours he could feel, then with a flutter of wings she would fly off and once more he'd lost her.

BEYOND THE CHANNEL, the stars congregated in clusters in the ribbon of the Milky Way. One spoonful of neutron star matter, Simon recalled, weighed a billion tons, as much as all the cars, trucks and buses on the planet combined. Humanity needed this kind of outsized information, he reflected as he

paddled toward the channel, it needed perspective, urgently needed to free itself from the anthill where melodramas were forever colliding.

The channel formed a half-kilometer corridor clogged with water lilies and the pharaonic earthworks of the beavers. Only the lightest craft, like Simon's kayak, could make its way through. Beyond the channel began Campeau Lake, a large meandering body of water that was conventionally occupied compared to the wild anomaly of Goose Lake, busy with grassy lawns extending to the water's edge and cottages that popped up side by side like smallpox blisters. Simon knew several of the lawn mowers of Campeau Lake, and the owners of aggressive powerboats. Most of them were easy-going and even emotional people once you got beyond the superficial subjects of disagreement. That was his greatest talent. Even perfect strangers would confide in him things he'd never asked, handing over on a standing basis the keys to their cold rooms, as if he were an incorruptible janitor. As he would glide by in his kayak, the cottagers busily mowing their lawns or the solitary souls curled up with a book on their docks would lift their heads, and that would be the end of them. Simon would slow down to greet them with that great smile of his, whose effect he never had to undergo, and that's how it would begin, with a few words, a bit of tried and true small talk—*They're predicting thunderstorms, the caterpillars are attacking the birch trees this year, what with the price of gas, you've got to be rich to go up north . . .* And then the next time or the time after that, he in his kayak and they on the shore, something would mesh halfway between land and water, and they could venture out on it with no fear and lay

down their burdens. Jacques Béloin, the guy with the bungalow as neat as a boiled egg and a worn-out sense of humor—*You can make a beeline for Béloin*—had lost a son in a freak accident from which neither he nor his wife had recovered. *A tree branch, Simon, in downtown Montreal. A branch falls right on the head of a little kid walking down the sidewalk, if that's not a curse then what is?* The Nguyens, who'd fenced off their lovely flowers with a hideous chain-link barrier to protect them from the deer, were worried about their Canadian citizenship that was always being postponed. *We are not at home, Mister Delisle, we pay taxes and work hard and we are honest but we feel we are not welcome here . . .* And Jean-Guy Talbot with the Hells Angels mug and beat-cop's past, who'd begun his life again with the goats he raised in a dry field and petted like dogs, and who couldn't stop talking about his former existence. *High on coke all the time and violent too, I tried my hardest but love can't beat dope . . .*

Simon listened a lot and talked just as much. He loved those conversations and their total freedom, which inspired him into daring comments and audacious suggestions about current crises, or even small everyday worries, and when he sensed he'd reached a dead end or felt a futile darkness weighing on the conversation, he would withdraw. For all those reasons people in the area called him the Parson. He knew it and it gave him a good laugh, the son of agnostics who'd taught him to keep away from churches.

There were exceptions. Some human beings wouldn't let themselves be sized up so easily. Take Jeff Clément. He was the offspring of a well-established family in the Laurentians, and the son of Gilles, whom Simon had barely known,

since he died in his early forties. He remembered Gilles as a resourceful kind of guy who got on his nerves because he'd called him sonny boy right off the bat; Simon actually found him funny under his tough-guy exterior. But he used his shotgun too much. His son wasn't all that much like him, except for the tough-guy exterior and the shotgun. He'd just bought a big section of Campeau Lake and had ambitious plans that would horrify Lila once she found out about them. Better to keep her in the dark as long as possible, particularly about the two beaver killed in the channel by the younger Clémont, who protested and denied it, even though Simon had caught him red-handed. A few moments of conversation, and Simon had him figured out. When a man won't look you in the eye when he talks to you, it's a bad sign, a sign that war isn't far off.

Along the banks of the channel the chorus of amphibians, green frogs and bullfrogs, reached its peak, blending together in a polyphonic din that enveloped you like a mantra. Also reaching their peak were the tiny lanterns of the fireflies and the bites of the mosquitoes that had unfortunately joined the struggle for survival, proving that summer was well and truly here, and that it might be time to return to his sleeping quarters. Simon switched into reverse, trying to capture it all with one last gaze, one final breath, the stars, the dark water, the insects, the vibrancy of life itself. . . *I salute you, Ying Tsien and Kwon Do, who at this very moment, in a military hospital in Beijing, are having your organs extracted to punish you for belonging to Falun Gong. . . I salute you, Maria Sonaro, survivor of the earthquake that wiped out your family in Bogotá. . . I salute you, Youssouf Makhtar, trapped between Israeli air raids and the*

snipers of Fatah al-Islam. I salute you, Khaled Mahmud Assar, buried alive in the prison of Guantánamo. I salute you, Sara and Ben Aaron of Tel Aviv, whose house has just been pulverized by Hezbollah. You are with me. And this too is yours.

The cry startled him as he was rounding the island, a shriek of a cry that seemed to issue from the center of the earth to tear the night in two. He froze, paddle above the water, wondering what known body the cry had come from, a raccoon on the warpath maybe, or a great horned owl swooping down on a field mouse. Small squeaks of protest rose up from the other forest creatures, then subsided into a frightened silence, far deeper than before. Simon began paddling hard to calm himself—what a galloping horse anxiety was, what a fragile package was peace of mind—then the cry rang out again and froze his heart, a cry more muffled but more terrifying as well, for it revealed its true nature, that of a woman abused, coming from Lila's place.

In a few frenetic strokes he came alongside the boathouse dock, but the cry came from next door, a creeping, constant moan issuing from the little log cabin Lila rented out. Simon headed there, though he hadn't met the woman who had moved in the previous day, but this called for extraordinary measures. The door was locked but he smashed through the screen on the big window with his fist, he found himself in the living room in darkness, and shouting, these were extraordinary measures, *Do you need help? Who's there? Come out!*

Someone did come rushing out of the room in the back, a tall slender shadow armed with a baseball bat who closed in on him with a roar. He'd have to fight, though he hated violence, the bat swept through the air right past his shoulder as

he grabbed the attacker's arm, realizing that it was a woman, graceful and young and no more aggressive than he was. He whispered this time instead of shouting, *Take it easy! Stop!* The tall slender figure stopped still like a toy whose battery had run down. Then there was light, since he'd located the switch.

Before him, a naked young woman stood protecting her eyes from the harsh light. She was still shaking with anger, *Who the hell are you? What're you doing here?* Then she grabbed a blanket to cover her lithe, sumptuous body, glaring at him in indignation. Simon backpedaled, stammering, *I'm your neighbor. . . I heard you screaming. . . I'm Simon. . . Simon, from the cottage next door. . . I heard screams. . .* There seemed to be no harmonious way to escape the embarrassing turn of events, but then suddenly, an unexpected turnaround, the young woman broke into a smile.

"Screams . . . Of course."

She was his height, since their eyes met on the same plane, and there was something unusual about her, with her very pale skin, the skin of a princess who'd never known the sun, and her delicate skull topped with short strands of golden hair. Beneath that graceful warrior's helmet her features stood out with extraordinary clarity, as though highlighted by a black marker: an expressive mouth, eyes like green olives, a tiny exclamation point of a nose.

"I thought it was," he ventured, "you know, a prowler. . . though I've never seen one around here."

"I have nightmares."

"Oh, my God!"

"Sometimes I scream in my sleep. I told the old lady about it."

“Lila,” he corrected her.

Then he pointed to the window and shook his head, mortified.

“I smashed up your screen. Tomorrow I’ll fix it, without fail.”

“It’s a deal.”

She broke into a mischievous smile that revealed the small pearls of her biting, carnivorous teeth, and Simon figured she must be his daughter Jeanne’s age, but at the same time with the shadow of a very old soul in her eyes.

“Okay, neighbor. Let’s start again and get it right this time. I’m Violette.”

She held out a large, delicate hand that was as white as her face, but that hand squashed Simon’s in its relentless grip. He couldn’t help thinking back to the baseball bat that had almost landed on his shoulder.

“Violette. I’m sorry, Violette, truly sorry.”

“Thanks for rushing to my rescue.”

“A nightmare, eh?” he smiled. “It must have been quite something. . . .”

She gazed at him, unblinking, with her beautiful eyes, like a young ancestor.

“Quite the nightmare,” she agreed.

“In any case, you know how to defend yourself,” he said lightheartedly.

Right away he realized he’d said something stupid. She didn’t react, but a metallic tint tarnished the green of her eyes and the smile on her face was like a mask behind which she withdrew.

“Yes,” she said a moment later. “Now I know how to defend myself.”

In the end, he stayed on in the little log cottage for nearly two hours. Violette got dressed despite the late hour—or was it early, for they didn't know which end of the night they were dealing with—and together they patched the screen through which hordes of bloodthirsty mosquitoes and gnats had come rushing in. They sat at the only table in the cottage and drank the rest of Simon's tea, which perked her up for a while. It was a decoction of cannabis, Simon confessed, excellent for backaches but just as effective for nightmares. Though at first she'd felt tempted to be cheerful, Violette quickly got to the heart of the matter. She spoke at length and quickly, as if to keep Simon from leaving her to go off to sleep. She had an enormous number of things to say about her life, even at age thirty, and an overpowering need to expose them to the outside air, beyond the bounds of herself. What she had to say struck Simon so forcefully that he lost the ability to speak, and he let her tell her stories without thinking of interrupting or asking a single question, which was quite at odds with his nature.

By the time he got back into his kayak and headed home, the night was damp with humidity and the stars were no longer visible. The two of them had contaminated the night with their blackness. He felt sick with sadness, and moved forward without energy like an old tub about to sink. Poor little Violette, poor girl. It was nothing less than a miracle that she could still smile warmly, that she could still be beautiful. Shocked, his first image of her passed before his eyes; he had already filed it away in a blurry corner of his memory because of its strangeness. Now everything was clear: the slender naked body bravely prepared to do battle, bat in hand, had only one breast.

Why didn't perversion just exhaust itself when it had used up all its oxygen? Who had allowed families and fathers, those essential nurturers of life, to so miserably fail to live up to their nature? Overwhelmed, in turmoil, Simon paddled on, examining his own life, exploring the tiniest cracks to see where he had failed. Had he been beyond reproach? With Jeanne and Loïc? With Marianne? Had someone suffered at his hands and he had done nothing?

Yes. Someone.

Sitting on the dock like an abandoned child, arms wrapped around his knees, head bowed in frustration, Marco watched him come near. Simon caught his breath: his little brother Marco, born too late, by accident, a boy no one could see any use for, the little brother he'd always pushed aside, lost ever since in a kind of fog; by what manner of miracle was his little brother Marco waiting for him on the dock?

Jérémie stood up to greet Simon. God, he was like his father, shrouded in shadow. Simon didn't know whether to cry or to laugh with relief. Instead he decided to bawl him out a little, since that was one of his jobs.

"What are you up to, awake at this hour?"

"You're not sleeping either."

He helped Simon dock, then turned the kayak upside down on the beach as he'd seen him do. Impulsively, Simon pulled him close and hugged him tight. Startled, Jérémie let his arms dangle at his sides.

"What's gotten into your head, little raccoon?"

"Is she dead?"

Simon gently pushed him away, then stared at him, perplexed.

"What're you talking about?"

“The woman,” Jérémie said haltingly.

Simon made no effort to understand or even be surprised. From now on, all unknown lands belonged to the domain of dreams and exhaustion. The only thing he agreed to understand was that both of them definitely needed sleep. He took Jérémie by the neck, as he’d never done with Marco, and led him to the cottage.

“Tomorrow,” he promised in a low voice, Jérémie’s frail shoulder against his chest, “tomorrow I’ll take you out in the canoe.”

marco

IT ALL BEGAN with a bird of prey, an enormous thing, a kind of hawk standing stiffly on its two feet in the middle of the road, head hanging off to one side, neck broken. A miracle that the bird was still alive, a monstrous miracle. He had to move it aside, because it could only hop up and down and block the way even more. One of its eyes was sightless; the other pierced him with a golden, furious glare when Marco grasped it with repugnance and put it on the other side of the ditch. The bird's heart throbbed frantically against his palms, and his hands held the nauseating memory even after he'd parked beside the two other cars. Why him? He'd just arrived from Montreal, frazzled after three hours of driving on a highway full of vacation-mad speeders, he'd gotten lost at the fork in the road at the entrance to the village thanks to Simon's hazy directions, and now his first contact with the horrible countryside was that horrible bird, anyone else could have come upon it before him—but didn't. He thought of Jer and focused on his breathing. He'd come here for Jer, no matter how evil the portents.

Marianne was the only one who'd waited for him. The other two had gone canoeing on the lake, so Marianne

directed him to his *rooms*, which she pointed to with a laugh, where he soon learned to his amazement that he would be sleeping alone in a shack with no electricity and barely larger than a monk's cell, hidden in the trees. He concealed his reaction from Marianne, who was clearly enamored of that propane-lit storage locker to which she and Simon might retire for a night of lovemaking whenever their relationship needed an exotic touch, and which contained a large bed and a small table and, just outside, a pump and basin, and an out-house straight out of the Middle Ages. He could bathe in the main cottage, though—they were too kind, all of them.

Then right away came the snake. He'd let Marianne go on ahead so he could *unpack his bags and settle in*, and of course he had no more than a half-empty backpack, but he settled in anyway, the Arrabal play open on the table since he had to memorize his lines before rehearsals began in July, and hanging above the bed the amulet with the poem by Rumi that followed him wherever he went—*God breaks your heart again and again, until it lies open*. And a joint already rolled to help him find beauty in this place.

In the smoke, Laurie's face would be sure to come floating in, and he could speak to her wide doe-eyes without fear of her turning her back on him as she did in real life, he could test the arguments he would use to convince her the next time he saw her. The joint brought good counsel as long as you didn't exceed the right dose. After that, it was Somnolence and Co., or the brain became a tectonic plate drifting toward angst.

He saw it when he opened the door. At first he didn't understand what it was; zigzagging across a flat rock, it had a large head topped by two swaying antennae, and then he cried

out and the snake hurried off into the thicket, even though the toad trapped between its jaws, tiny legs waving, acted as a brake. A small snake, but a snake all the same, in the process of swallowing a toad—that was beyond the bounds of tolerable horror, and Marco’s panic quickly changed into crazed laughter because it was just *TOO MUCH*, the whole thing like a set piece designed to drive the hero insane—but the hero was laughing, and the spectators with him.

But the grand finale was yet to come.

First, he would have to get through the afternoon and the evening, in spite of his stage fright, and the sensation of being sucked dry that would sometimes sweep over him just before he stepped on stage: *I’m nobody, nobody loves me, I mean nothing*. Everyone else was perfect. It was good to see that Jer had put on weight, and his color was better. They checked each other out furtively as Marco waited for the right moment to speak, mostly waiting for Jer to stop fidgeting and stop avoiding his eye. For once Simon was easy to get along with. He’d traded in his customary sermons on the mount for a playful solicitude that fit him like a fish on a bicycle, but at least he was generous with the alcohol and had decided to be funny, playing his harmonica, suggesting endless games of lost-and-found that interested nobody and not letting anything dampen his enthusiasm. Marianne was her same old self, a little self-absorbed, displaying an impeccable smile and good manners, so accessible that you ended up losing respect for her. No, he was the only one who stuck out, the recalcitrant guest, the fifth wheel in a group that already had its ways of doing things, a piece of pure rock-and-roll that was supposed to fit into a puzzle depicting a lake landscape.

He knew everything would go smoothly as soon as he'd spoken to Jer. Once that major obstacle was worn down, the rest of his troubles would scatter like meaningless pebbles he could nudge aside with the tip of his toe, at some small risk of spraining an ankle. But he couldn't make up his mind. Still, all he had to do was repeat the words the joint and he had already carefully chosen. He was ready for the sacrifice, he would tell Jer, *Listen, Jer, if you like, this fall, if you like . . .* God it was hard, even thinking about it left him short of breath, on the edge of a precipice, about to step onto the stage in the spotlights and discover who, between life and death, would be the final victor. There had to be some preliminaries, that's what was missing. He would corner Jer in the toilet, one place was as good as another, and he would ask him without a trace of bitterness, "What's going on? You don't want to talk to me?"

Jer would blink his eyes for a moment, blinded by the confrontation.

"Of course not," he would mutter.

"You're doing fine with Uncle S?"

"'Course."

"You like it here?"

"Yeah."

"Yes or yeah?"

"It's okay by me."

"Good."

When Jer was pretending his hardest not to listen, that's when he would strike. *Go!*

"In August, if you want, you can go with your mother. It'll hurt, but I can take it."

And Jer would freeze in his non-listening position, as if the worst was yet to come.

"You understand? You can stay with Laurie. I know that's what you want."

"No."

"No?"

Marco would feel sharp pleasure shoot through him; life and not death would win in the end.

"You'd rather stay here with me?"

"Not one or the other. The two of you together, or nobody."

Maybe that's the way things would happen. A tie; start all over. It was one of eight million possibilities. In the meantime, he still hadn't said anything and it was getting late, being as it was Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day, they'd gone outside to warm their butts and incinerate mosquitoes in front of a camp-fire with fireworks that instead of *bang!* went *pfft*. . . That was Simon for you, country kitsch to the last drop. Luckily, another ill-fitting piece of the puzzle turned up, a neighbor, a very pretty and overly tall girl with an odd-looking face framed by a scarf, Violette by name, you could tell right away she liked having a good time even if she did look single. Like him, in fact. It was time he started seeing himself as single again—it wasn't completely natural yet, he still had a *we* buried inside him, it was hard to root out, a *we* as tender as Laurie's eyes at the beginning, but he was going to kick that whimpering shit out and become a free *me* again.

That was the best part of the evening. With Violette looking on, he'd gotten his composure and his humor back and took center stage, declaiming bits of the Arrabal play for them with unfeigned verve, making up whole scenes, he was one hell of a fine actor once the audience decided to love him. Even Simon wondered, his features wrinkled with laughter,

Can we see this play somewhere? and from the depths of his hammock Jer's sleep-shrouded eyes sparkled.

Yet the best moments always fly by the fastest, and without warning night grabbed them and knocked them flat. Violette and Marianne went off to bed, while Simon nodded off in front of the fire, snoring lightly.

When Jérémie climbed out of his hammock, a voice that had fallen still inside Marco suddenly awakened. *Go!* Marco delicately held his son back by his sleeve.

"You want to sleep with me?"

Jer looked at him discouragingly.

"Where?"

"In my cabin."

"There's only one bed."

"It's a BIG bed."

Marco tried to keep his voice cool, completely in charge, and he was managing.

"I've got my room in the cottage," said Jérémie, annoyed. "My own room."

He stared at his feet to make sure he didn't meet Marco's eyes.

"Yesterday morning," he added, to cap the argument, "I saw a deer out the window of my room."

"Don't you think there'll be plenty of deer in the woods around the cabin?"

Jer shrugged his shoulders and kept staring at his feet. He yawned. Marco patted him on the arm and laughed one of his hearty actor's laughs.

"Cool! Forget it, Jer. We'll see each other tomorrow."

He wasn't about to beg or suck up, or bribe someone younger than himself.

DESPITE HIS FLASHLIGHT the forest path was impenetrably black, and just as he was about to panic at imagined movements in the underbrush, he spotted the lit cabin. The good fairy Marianne must have slipped inside earlier and fired up the propane. He felt so secure he decided to go farther down the path to put himself in jeopardy, to beat back that damned fear that poked holes in his stomach the way his flashlight beam poked holes in the night, and then the hawk flew into his thoughts. The hawk that was really a buzzard according to know-it-all Simon. It was still there near the ditch where he'd put it—in what shape now, he wondered, since it was not very pretty to look at in the first place. He stood stock still, flashlight sweeping the woods on both sides. All this threatening silence, this silence inhabited by the unnameable, and to think there were people mindless enough to set up shop in the middle of it for months at a time, and claim they were quite happy.

He saw it loom up in the beam of the flashlight and his pulse raced. Good God! It was even bigger and more terrifying than he remembered, upright like some sinister statuette on its stiff legs, just exactly as he'd left it. Go to it, he ordered himself, then he squatted down beside the thing, the flashlight in his quivering hand. But trying only made things worse, no way to put it back together again, this puffy gray crop, the enormous head drooping monstrously to one side. . . . And then, my God, its eye. The golden eye staring at him, still pathetically alive, seething with pain and curses. Marco drew back with a muffled cry, and a faint movement stirred on the bird's belly: in the halo cast by the flashlight, a tiny rodent and black insects interrupted in their work fled the feathers, the still-warm body that they were devouring alive.

He ran to the cabin. Later, he understood he had only himself to blame, he shouldn't have spent what remained of his happy strength with that living corpse. It had filled him with waves of malevolence, and neither the cozy interior of the cabin nor the fresh sheets scented with lily of the valley, nor even the bouquet of wildflowers that the good fairy Marianne had left on the table, could avert the evil course of things. He smoked one last joint to sink more quickly into sleep. And sink he did.

He awoke a few hours later with the feeling that something was floating in the room. With his eyes still closed, his sleep-dulled mind registered a beating of wings just a few centimeters from his head. Completely alert, eyes still closed, he prayed it was only a moth of the huge variety that flutters through tropical forests, he prayed fervently against the malignant current that hovered over him, inexorable; please, let it not be that *thing*.

But it was.

Ancestral fear, etched into his genetic makeup, the mother of all fears immersed him as the bat circled above, skimming the walls, almost brushing him with its erratic, panic-stricken flight. It launched itself again, and soon, it was only a matter of time, it would tangle itself in his hair and he would die.

He managed to crawl out of bed, pulling the sheets with him, imploring *Oh God in Heaven Oh for the love of Christ!* until finally he located the door and the latch while the whisper of the bat wings intensified, then at last he was outside, curled up in the grass, numb and shivering, the door closed behind him on the ultimate horror.

That was how Jérémie found him, rolled up in his sheets in a ball on the ground.

It was still dark, and the boy had come with a flashlight and a sleeping bag, and the tardy intention of making whatever reparations he could still make.

Marco raised himself on one elbow and switched on his flashlight. Lighting each other's face, they sat there, both equally astonished.

"Listen," said Marco, "you've got to help me. There's a bat."

"Ughh," grunted Jer with a shudder. "You mean there's a bat inside?"

"You've got to help me kill it."

Jérémie gnawed on his lips for a while.

"We can't," he said at last. "That's murder. It's a living thing, so it would be murder."

Marco stared at him in disbelief. He laughed, a forced, exhausted laugh.

"Come on," he said weakly.

"Did you try opening the window?"

Marco stared at him. He tried the same laugh, but it caught in his craw.

"How come you know that, and me, at my age, I don't?"

And he began to sob, rolled up comically in his flowered sheets, on the damp earth. A moment later, he felt Jer's cold little hand touch his neck.

"Stop it, Papa. You've been smoking again. That's why. Stop it."

But Marco didn't know how to stop what had started, and he kept sobbing, not knowing how to stop until Jer's voice piped up again, as soft as silk.

"Come on. I'll sleep with you."

july



the animal world

THE STORM lasted three hours. At first, glasses of Campari in hand, they'd taken a seat on the patio to watch the show. Masses of black and purple cloud rolled in over the mountains, slashed by majestic lightning bolts that were answered, seconds later, by clashing cymbals of thunder. Rain and lake formed a solid wall as they ricocheted off one another. It was beautiful and violent, like a distant reminder of the big bang. And the whole thing was heading straight for them, with its venomous sky and retinue of dark water.

It wasn't long before the pyrotechnics were out of control. Claire and Luc fled indoors, pursued by wind-driven sheets of rain crashing against the windows, flinging the patio furniture about like sticks of wood, threatening to split the walls open. Claire huddled in a windowless corner while Luc stood steadfastly in the middle of the living room, watching the end of the world.

Two days later they were still without electricity, telephone service or running water; a lighting bolt had struck the power line that led to the water pump. Dozens of mature

spruces and pines littered the ground, uprooted or snapped in half like sticks of kindling. Several of them lay across the road like long, mournful carcasses, and one of them had collapsed directly on top of Luc's Jeep.

They cleared away most of the dead bodies, but then Luc's chainsaw gave up the ghost, and now they were going at it with hatchet and handsaw, filthy, disheveled and mute like the survivors of a cataclysm. They worked for hours in the humidity and the overpowering heat, tormented by pugnacious deerflies that successfully zeroed in on the one square millimeter of accessible flesh beneath their clothing and hoods, then flew off with it, triumphant. Plump white admirals that had emerged at the same time as the deerflies strutted their sumptuous black-and-white livery atop the branches, but Claire was hardly in the mood for butterfly watching. She was trying to strip branches from a thick trunk whose boughs seemed to sprout anew as soon as she cut them. Sweat was running in rivulets down her face, her feet were burning in her boots and she was sticky with spruce pitch when the white apparition emerged from the woods. A young woman in a long skirt and with a pretty silk scarf on her head, rings in her ears, wearing—Claire noticed right away in astonishment—leather flats came walking toward them, stepping over massive logs and delicately freeing her lacy white sleeves as they became entangled in the fallen branches. She stopped in front of Claire, bright-faced and beaming, having already taken the trouble to add a spring of linden to the bouquet of wild daylilies she held in her hand.

"What a storm!" she chirped. "Gorgeous! Did you have much damage?"

It was Violette, who was to come to Claire's attention several days later under quite different circumstances, but who for now appeared as an extraterrestrial creature, a city-dweller gone astray who stared in wonderment at the unchained fury of the Laurentian elements while two of those same Laurentian elements stared at her in disbelief.

"Yup," grunted Claire, too startled to say anything more.

"Plenty of damage," added Luc.

Then she went down their drive toward the main road, gracefully stepping over the last tree trunks that remained to be cleared.

In the end, her appearance had been a good thing. After she left, Claire and Luc took a long look at each other and saw themselves as they were, monstrous creatures made of oozy rubber, plastered with dirt up to their eyeballs, and they broke out laughing, something they hadn't done for days.

THAT'S HOW it was: without knowing it, other people were the glue that held them together. Take the weekends, when they had visitors. They realized just how much the two of them had lost the faculty of idle chatter, being wrapped in their grandiose surroundings all the time. The more visitors they had, the greater their complicity. They liked their guests, but they were always united in silent disapproval of them. Their friends were too talkative, too fidgety, they ignored nature's most fundamental laws. The worst were the flower lovers and amateur gardeners. When they'd show up, they were amazed by the wasted luxuriance of the place. And once Claire and Luc took them for a guided tour of the peat bogs and mossy clearings, they'd pull out pails and shovels, set on

uprooting and transplanting to their own gardens water lilies, baby spruce, black-eyed Susans and lichens that would take fifty years to grow one centimeter. When Claire accused them of robbing nature they'd take offense; they sincerely believed they could display to better advantage these fragments of flora whose beauty was wasted here, in the middle of all this *nothingness*. They were so dismayed to be forbidden access to this immense leafy supermarket that seemed free at first glance that they would leave with hurt feelings and never come back. Not that they would be invited back anyway.

Even Claire's dearest friends, the people she was closest too, would occasionally commit a hurtful faux pas that caused them to fall out of favor. If not hers, then Luc's. The weekend before, her friend Simone, absorbed in her endless chatter, had heedlessly moved her beach chair and sat down with all her weight on a frog. Claire's heart almost stopped. It was *her* frog. The one whose appearance on the shore she eagerly awaited at the end of every afternoon, a frog that was grace itself, its skin a satiny luminous green with a dusting of gold, about which Claire thought, *I'd like to have a dress like that, in a fabric that would fit like that*. Now that frog lay before them half-squashed and it took two days to die, having been laid lovingly in the shadow of a rock by Claire, attempting to leap but unable to, its tiny tongue darting painfully in and out of its small mouth and then, *pfft*, not darting at all. Of course no one could share Claire's ridiculous sadness; no one but Luc.

Then there was the cheese. Why did their friends feel they had to bring cheese? *No, don't bring anything*, and the first thing they did when they were invited was to bring cheese. Of course the village of Mount Diamond was lacking in most

delicacies, including this one, but once the visitors left, Claire found herself with phenomenal quantities of Munster, Brie de Meaux and Stilton that she could never consume on her own. She couldn't serve them the following week, since they'd be overripe by then, but she didn't dare throw out luxury goods like those, which meant the fridge and the whole kitchen reeked of stale cheese, causing Luc to crack the same joke every Thursday evening when he arrived: *What's that scent you're wearing? Young Roquefort?*

But there weren't any such Thursday evenings now, since Luc had taken up permanent residence for his two weeks of vacation, which had gotten off to such a resounding start with the thunderstorm. They hadn't had time to ease into their playful daily routine, but that wouldn't take long. Luc didn't interfere with her work, and he was a royal ally when day's end came, when the lake water was warm and limpid, the lamb kebabs perfectly cooked and juicy and the spruce-branch fire was sending up showers of sparks beneath the stars. And above all, these two weeks with Luc would bring a definitive end to the awkward chapter entitled *Jim*.

There was no point regretting, but she did regret it. She regretted listening to her body, that treacherous old horse that will drag you for leagues in search of a bucket of fodder. She'd eaten it, the fodder that is, and it hadn't been worth the effort nor the unpleasant aftereffects.

Mr. Studsmore was a magnificent specimen with hands that had all the moves. If he'd been able to keep his mouth shut, he'd have been as dangerous as hard drugs, as dangerous as nirvana landing on an inexperienced meditator. There'd been two parts to the *experience*—as Claire came to call it—

two parts so clear-cut and so contradictory that they canceled each other out, and made her question the very existence of the *experience*. The first originated in the animal world; she could say nothing more about it. The guy was like caramel that makes you eat it and eats you at the same time. The first time he'd shown up unexpectedly, bringing flowers—white petunias, which she loathed—she gave up even before the fight began. She had to go through with it, the lava needed to erupt; no one can order a volcano to cower in its hole. She felt the cells of her body stretch on tiptoe when he looked her over, though he should have been looking at the money she was handing him—the twelve dollars and seventy-five cents for the basil—but he was taking her mouth instead, undressing her like a dirty old man just by looking at her lips, which she opened in a smile of total collapse.

“My. . . my husband is here. Almost here.”

He understood immediately.

“Okay. When?”

“Monday. Come Monday afternoon.”

“I’ll be here.”

She hadn’t done the talking, it was those animal cells of hers, on the ready, telling her what to say, the same cells that writhed and wriggled in bitches and sows, the cells of the mare whinnying for her bucket of fodder.

“I need compost for my flowers,” she added, the pitiable voice of reason, that poor reason of hers, tail between its legs, letting out a last yelp before scrambling back into its burrow.

“I’ll bring some,” he said, and continued to devour her lips.

That weekend and even the first half of Monday, she convinced herself that the pretext was actually the reason. The

nurseryman would bring her the peat-shrimp mix and there was no reason for it to go further. Not one single reason, reason, reason—reason still cowering in its burrow, quivering like a wretched creature that no one ever thought of feeding.

At one o'clock, she was pacing in the parking area, pallid beneath her tan, supercharged and agitated, when Jim's truck roared up the driveway and knelt before her, and as she glimpsed his eyes gleaming like black pearls behind the windshield, she realized that nature around her was obscenely naked. He took his sweet time stepping out of the truck and closing the door, his hips supple, his muscular arms shimmering in the sun, and as he gazed at her, she quickly pulled off her clothes without waiting for him to touch her.

The details were of no importance, and soon disappeared by themselves (*Was it good? How big was his tool? Who did what?*). She returned to the cottage, alone, her skin scratched by the dead spruce boughs that had formed a rough bed, the blood zigzagging through her veins at top speed, fulfilled and distraught, a beast stunned by its own rutting.

There was nothing to regret about that part of the *experience*, for it had been written, just as surely as the storm that makes matchsticks of your centenarian pines. If they had been two hares or two raccoons meeting in the forest, everything would have been so simple and practical. You're grazing, you're hopping along, and *wham!* you hit an odor you can't resist and *bam!* you leap on the body that carries the odor and *thank you ma'am!* you separate and never see each other again. But there had to be talk. Talk, say goodbye, act civilized as if something was left once the secretions had dried, and start all over again as soon as possible.

The sated animal has nothing to say, nothing to add. How viable a relationship could you have with the food you eat?

Jim had learned French on the job from the lumberjacks and workers of the Laurentians, and that was how he spoke, in scrubby discharges where the mix of backcountry Quebec patois and English left hazards as debris in its wake. Listening to him was so utterly unsexy that Claire kept trying to steer him back to the universal lingo of the Bronx, but he was sticking to his mishmash, figuring that was the way to charm the new French-Canadian bimbo he'd just strung onto his well-polished string of pearls. He was a born pick-up artist and a stickman of epic proportions—to get back to the animal world they should never have left. But there had to be a little talk after they got up from the spruce-bough mattress, and since he'd forgotten to bring the compost, he returned the following day, and they had to talk more to discourage another attempt at the *experience*, and the more he insisted and the more he talked, the more Claire's desire shrunk back into limbo. But once he stopped talking and touched her lips with his eyes, the two animals with bottomless appetites threw themselves upon one another again. But this final, superfluous time was not entirely to Claire's liking. The *experience* was altered, and all that had been tacked on after, to suit the requirements of non-animal civility, brought the whole construction down.

Still, she'd jotted down a few mental notes each time he spoke and revealed more of himself. That was a benefit of her trade, her ability to make a palatable dish of the leftovers instead of dumping them in the garbage. Like most little guys who never had any luck, Jim had built himself an ego of maximal proportions and assiduously cultivated it. He was an

actor of the primitive school, a Brandoesque figure to whom Hollywood kept sending scripts that were beneath his dignity. He had a faith healer's skills at his fingertips and could cure Claire's existential ills simply by touching her thighs. When she told him she wrote for television he lit up—that damned contagious ego-bloating she'd opened herself up to too much—and said, without a trace of bowing and scraping, in the universal language of domination, *You have to write something for me.*

Claire did not wish to get to know him better. She knew her broad impression of him (macho bullshitter) was unjust, but too bad. She was not a court bound by the rules of fair play, and he would be fine as he was, a macho bullshitter, for the character she would weave around him. A guy from the Bronx who ends up running a garden center in some lost part of the Laurentians, who lights your fire by staring at your mouth, was worth more exploration than that, but she would not be the woman who would lay herself before him for any serious excavations. No doubt he would find others to do the job. As Claire was getting dressed at least two women that he must have played the mouth trick on had rung his cell phone (*Oh, Alison . . . How are you? Oh, Lili . . . So glad you called . . .*) before quickly being dispatched.

THE LAST LIGHT of day was fading when Claire and Luc finally set down their lumberjack implements. The clearing of the road was now complete, and they were both exhausted, drained of energy. They returned to the cottage without a word, mired in their discontent. And as they walked, two solitary thrushes burst into song and turned the forest into a cathedral as their voices intertwined, and soon a hoot owl

joined the chorus, *hoo-ya, hoo-ya*, and without saying a word they slowed their pace, overcome by the harmony that fills cathedrals. Claire took Luc's hand and so they walked to the cottage, their hands, grimy with spruce gum, joined together.

Those are the kinds of things that the awkward chapter entitled *Jim* must never put in peril.

The telephone was ringing. The lines had been repaired while they were hacking and sawing their way down the road; they had to have been, the telephone was ringing. Claire darted to the phone without taking off her muddy boots. She had a premonition. She thought she'd made it clear the one time he'd dared. Clearly, she hadn't. (*Don't call me here! Do you understand? No phone calls! EVER!*) This time, Jim didn't try to convince her of anything. He didn't speak and neither did she, paralyzed by Luc's eyes riveted to the back of her neck. Jim let the uncomfortable silence run on for a few more seconds, then he hung up.

She would have to go back to the garden center to make him stop. She'd find the way, and he would stop. Those swooning glances he threw her way when their paths accidentally crossed in the village weren't very serious—like yesterday at the grocery store—a case of lousy acting if ever she'd seen one. The hurt was small stuff: he didn't like being dropped before he could do the dropping himself. Shame he had to give up such an accommodating fornication partner (I stare at her chops, she falls into my arms).

Enough.

To prove to herself just how enough it was, Claire sat down early the next morning to work on her script, putting off her visit to the garden center for another day, and stirring

the *experience* into a dish that was already simmering. For the rest of the week she forgot Jim entirely.

The script was coming along nicely. The portrait of a village with all the wild things that hid there was emerging, life out of nothing, from the infinite reservoir that is nothingness. Claire paid particular attention to her secondary characters, for secondary characters don't know they're secondary characters. What she liked about secondary characters was their status as ordinary people, exposed to the cuts of time's knife without protection, without luxurious rewards. In her story, luckily for her, there were only characters of the secondary kind. It was as banal a village as you could find, made up of fine people with open faces, like the Parson and his wife, Marianne, and with a credit union manager, a baker, a young woman who'd lost her legs in an accident, another who danced naked in whipped cream at the Château Repotel, an ex-cop who raised goats, a grocer who grocered, a black nurseryman who nurseried (when he wasn't picking up girls softened up by their maceration in whipped cream). . . . Weekends, the ladies played cards and horseshoes, the men went off for a drink at the Château Repotel or invented friendly competitions like the greased-pig chase or jiggery-piggery. . . .

Everything was so pleasant, so convivial.

Except that there were no children in the village.

There was another incongruity: the curious little gestures, almost like rites, that everybody slipped into, one after the other, in the midst of daily life (the baker would suddenly dump flour over his head, the nurseryman would start eating compost. . .).

Beneath their benign exterior, the inhabitants of the village had formed a cult. A cult that venerated Nature.

And the inevitable outcome of cults and veneration is sacrifice.

The cult offered up sacrifices to Nature whenever possible, whenever sacrificial animals would appear of their own accord on their territory. But that couldn't be taken for granted; ten years had passed and the village hadn't been able to offer up anything, and Nature had begun to chafe, and to dispatch torrential rains, parch gardens dry, acidify the maples . . .

There had to be a sacrifice, and soon.

And that sacrifice had to be a child.

And so the immense collective sigh of relief when a little boy, in early June, had come to live in the village, a little boy just saved from a fire, an adorable little convalescent with the premonition of sacrifice in his eyes . . .

CLAIRE SWAM LIKE a fish through the waters of this turbid and troubling universe, sticking with a firm hand to her course as she made her way through its contemporary and occult currents; above all she was not afraid to dust it all with a liberal sprinkling of humor. The high priestess of the village, to take one example, was the spitting image of Lila Szach, garrulous and unpleasant. The village had declared her its high priestess, and she didn't give a fuck, she could have done without it, and she carried out her tasks with vengeful ill will: selecting the place and the means of sacrifice, preparing the incantations, designating and appointing the executioner—devilish assignments that seemed to have no end.

Doubts still remained about the executioner, who declined to accept the face of the baker, or the Parson, or anyone else in the real village. Claire could see only his old red lumber-jack shirt and the horribly amiable expression on his face when he raised his axe above the child. It was an expression in search of a face.

Then there was Violette.

To find a place for Violette, she would have to open a breach in the script.

Claire could scarcely believe her ears when Violette, one weekday morning, came knocking on her door to deliver her incredible story, the sort of gift that life is generally unwilling to bestow. It was so rich that it would not fit into some other assemblage of incidents, and it insisted on taking all the available space. Claire ended up with the subject of her next script, the one scheduled for the fall, in the bag. But in the meantime, she intended to use those big green laughing eyes, that long slender body scarred by cancer, immediately, and she listened religiously to Violette, missing not a crumb of her secrets, keeping her on subject, reigning in her own imagination, which wanted to gallop off with smoldering snatches of the story.

Violette discovered that Claire wrote and was paid for it. That was exactly what she needed: an author stamped with the official seal, a painstaking laborer who knew how to bring order to what seemed to be a magma of floating debris. She accepted the glass of white wine Claire offered and launched into her tale. Her smile came easily, and she expressed herself in a melodious high-pitched voice except when she came to certain things that were particularly painful, and then her

smile and voice would drop off. At first Claire thought she was dealing with a full-fledged fabulist, so excessive did Violette's tormented life seem, as if it were copied from the terrible accounts of the supermarket tabloids. But, truth or lies, this was too good a catch not to reel in. And gradually, Violette's authenticity became undeniable. Claire set aside her own plans, stricken with a surge of compassion.

Violette wanted a guide, a midwife. She had rented the little cottage in the middle of nowhere specifically to write a book about her young life, with its cascade of macabre and unexpected events. She intended to do it in three months of solitude, even if she'd never written anything in her adult life outside of annual reports for an insurance company. In Claire's opinion, it was a case of mission impossible, but she said nothing, offering advice, encouragement and glasses of white wine. Violette charged off with a full head of steam, leaving behind her, like a delicate wake, her flowered scent.

Clearly Violette warranted pride of place. She would be the Stranger, the mother of the little boy with the dark eyes, who would unknowingly lead him to his death by moving him into a little cottage surrounded by a sympathetic cult whose only weakness was child sacrifice. She too would die, how could she not? But the circumstances of her eradication remained to be devised.

THE TELEPHONE BROKE the silence a few days later, just after the two deaths of the Celestial Rodent.

Claire was outside, refilling the hummingbird feeders with sugar water. She heard the distant buzzing of Luc's chainsaw as he laid waste to some tree trunk or other. Everything was

in perfect order, the sun hanging motionless in the sky, Luc busying himself in the woods and the hummingbirds piercing the air with their shrill whistles and their U-shaped flights, their long sharp beaks. Taken singly, the hummingbird is a perfect little gentleman, full of dignity, dressed in emerald coattails with a ruby doublet if you please, but bring two of them together and you can kiss dignity goodbye. Claire watched them with mute disapproval. It was a great mystery that such gracious creatures, which she fed for the privilege of closely observing their beauty, could battle each other for a few drops of syrup with such ugly ferocity. The same viciousness seemed to be the rule among all birds, perhaps among all creatures whose natural state is to be starving. Whatever the case, Claire was feeding the very hummingbirds that were constantly warring with one another, meditating all the while on their feathered intolerance, when she spied the Celestial Rodent poised silently on the main feeding station. She moved toward him—or her—cursing. As usual, the Celestial Rodent put on a display of distress, hind paws oscillating like a wind-up toy, while her torso remained perfectly still as she methodically laid bare the forbidden sunflower seed. Claire fitted a stone into her slingshot, preparing to miss for the one-millionth time, but no, not this time. The stone struck the squirrel square in the head, knocking her to the ground, where she lay prostrate in the convulsions of death.

Claire let out a whoop of triumph. But when she came closer to the tiny, trembling corpse, consternation came over her. So easy, so quick, anyone can do it—compared to the breathtaking complexity of evolution that produced this tiny

animal with its silky coat. She had killed. She had placed herself across the path of creation to slice through the whirlpool of a tiny, energy-charged life upon which so many other tiny energy-charged lives depended, judging by the tiny pink nipples on her white underbelly. Squirrels were vermin, of course, all of them, rats camouflaged under the bluff of their bushy tails. And this squirrel in particular ate everything, and sunflower seeds were expensive.

Crap. Sunflower seeds cost nothing when you can live a humane life.

Claire contemplated the handsome tawny fur, the perfectly white belly. Not a drop of blood. What if she poured water on its head, like she did for the birds that flew into the windows?

That was how Luc found her, kneeling beside the corpse of her enemy, bathing its head with solicitude.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” he asked, worried.

Miraculously the squirrel came to, righted herself and blinked her tiny eyes penciled with white.

Claire’s mind was made up.

“We’re going to relocate her.”

She ordered Luc to get the cat cage they’d picked up along the highway and had held on to for no reason. Now they had a reason: they would use it to transport the Celestial Rodent and dump her far away so that she would never return to the forbidden feeder.

In the cage, the squirrel revived completely. In the ten meters that lay between them and the parking area, she threw herself so violently against the metal bars that she managed

to split open her head. Ten meters more and the little maniac would be dead of loss of blood. Claire grabbed Luc's arm.

"Set her free."

As he hesitated, she grabbed the latch and slid the door open. The Celestial Rodent vanished, a ruddy, jagged flash across the ground, leaving four or five tufts of bloody fur on the bottom of the cage. And they saw that the ruddy flash was heading straight for the feeding station.

THE TELEPHONE was ringing as they entered the house. Both of them moved for it.

"I'll get it," said Claire.

Once again, that gut feeling saved her from the worst. The long silence that greeted her, interspersed with indistinct birdsong, must have been coming from the garden center. She waited until Luc had gone upstairs before cutting loose.

"Fuck you, Jim."

Quick laughter answered her, followed by a drawling voice.

"This isn't Jim."

A woman. A young woman. Then it hit her, bright and worrisome. What was her name again, that polite little puffball, that insignificant mouse-brown woman who wore baggy aprons over those hippie dresses that had gone out of style a generation ago, who'd said to her from behind the cash register at the garden center, *Basil sure smells good*. . . what was Jim's wife's name again?

Claire pictured the scene at the grocery store a week earlier, when she'd met the two of them in the aisle, Jim toting a six-pack of beer and darting his eyes at her, his wife in front of

him, moving ahead without looking at anyone, then acknowledging Claire with a faint smile, *Good morning, ma'am*, but with a sparkle in her eye, a knowing sparkle, for sure. Then Claire, struck by commiseration, noticed her round belly, her flagrantly pregnant belly.

Jim's wife said nothing more. But from her silence a miasma bubbled up, a wave of palpable malice that sought to wound, and would wound. Claire hung up quickly before it could reach her.

But it was probably too late.

in the shade of the berry bushes

THE ARTHROPODS were a scary little people with countless eyes staring out of every side of their heads. They wielded complex weapons in the shape of scissors, styluses, sucking proboscises and acid sprays, inclined to magical transformations and bloody warfare waged in total impunity, right under the eyes of the myopic human species. When you got right down to it, whatever was tiny and could be crushed underfoot was an arthropod. Insects were arthropods, spiders were arthropods, but spiders weren't insects because they had eight legs. To be an insect you had to have six legs, and that was that.

Jérémie's nose was in the grass and his chin was resting on his hands. Stretched out flat on the ground, not one of the clandestine comings and goings of the arthropods could escape him, as long as he didn't budge. It's hard not to start scratching when an insolent little arthropod with a mosquito head starts sucking your blood, or another with its ladybug's carapace scurries across your cheek, but you're not a wizard by the name of Jerry Potter if you can't endure torture—at least for one second. First he'd scrambled under a large-leaved bush

close to the little cabin so as not to miss a word of what Laurie and Marco were saying as he carried out his investigations, but Laurie caught him in the act. *You get up right now! You're going to get all dirty!* To which Marco immediately replied, *Let him play! He's just a kid!* To keep from taking sides, J  r  mie moved farther away to continue his work. In any case, there was nothing more to be gained from the cabin, everything in it was wrecked. Laurie's week of vacation was just about over and the score spoke for itself: his parents had fought thirty-nine times in front of him, and only kissed twice, and those kisses didn't really count since they'd happened on the first night, before their reunion really began.

A grasshopper landed on his knee, proof that his camouflage was perfect. *Grasshopper*, J  r  mie decreed, *you're a member of the orthoptera and hear through a tympanum on your legs!* Unmasked, the grasshopper quickly bounded off. J  r  mie's senses were on full alert now, ready to identify other, more spectacular creatures: the green larva of the Tiger Swallowtail Butterfly that has a forked organ behind its head that gives off a foul odor if disturbed, or the Golden Ground Beetle that sprays its prey with a digestive secretion, then waits for it to dissolve before devouring it. Or the best of the worst, straight out of a horror film: the bug called *Scolia*. The *Scolia* glommed onto the larva of the bug called Rhinoceros Beetle, spun it around until it was too dizzy to escape, then imprisoned it in a chamber it wove from grass. And there, in its torture chamber, the *Scolia* deposited its egg in the poor Rhinoceros Beetle larva and in no time the *Scolia* egg became a big fat *Scolia* larva and really gave you your money's worth. It stuck its head into the paralyzed grub's abdomen and sucked out

all the liquid in one big slurp. To be lucky enough to see that, he could lie on the ground for an hour, magnifying glass in hand, as quiet as a corpse, no matter how many bites and cramps he got.

Luckily for him there were arthropods. Laurie and Marco listened to him religiously in the evening when he would bore them silly with his bug stories, even though he could follow the path of his words as they fell into their empty eyes and died there, without the slightest effect. Laurie and Marco were open to nothing, since they needed all their energy to ruminate in silent hostility, so Jérémie's arthropods were welcome, for they kept the outside walls of the house they shared standing, though all the rest had collapsed. In past times, they would have lent him a half-minute of their attention at most, but now he'd hit the jackpot, and he might as well enjoy it. He tied them up like a spider snaring diptera, *which are flies and have only two wings which is why they're called diptera and fly faster than any four-winged insect, funny, you'd think four wings were better than two but no, and the wasps called braconids have a tool in their tails that can poke a hole in hardwood like Laurie's desk or Marco's hash pipe, all the insects and spiders that aren't insects on account of excess legs have antennae that can detect odors from kilometers away, and did you know that humans still can't produce cold light, what an extraordinary thing that is because you don't lose energy in the form of heat? but fireflies and glow worms can do it, cold light, and did you know about chitin, which insects use to make their coats, it's as hard as rock well not exactly 'cause I crushed a couple of them, it's full of pigments that the Indians use to dye their clothes, lots of them look after their kids and give full parental care and even think ahead and lay in*

stores of food for the larva stage to come, there are four transformations beginning with the eggs, which become larvae or caterpillars depending on whether they're *Lepidoptera* or *Coleoptera* that turn into chrysalises or nymphs, and then imagos, the adult stage of all insects is called imago, I wonder if the feminine of imago is imaga like in Spanish, *amigo-amiga* . . .

Sometimes Laurie, her head nodding in drowsiness, would emerge from her torpor and look at Jérémie, startled. *Huh? What did you say?* then she would overdo it for a little while, insisting on leafing through the book Jérémie drew his new knowledge from, recoiling in disgust at the full-color close-ups. *Ugh, that's really ugly. . . Of course, it's a nice book. . . That's kind of our neighbor to lend it to you. . .*

(Kind! There were plenty of things you could say about Sorceress Szach, but "kind" certainly didn't make the list.)

Meanwhile Marco stewed in his juices, and when he couldn't take it anymore he'd jump into the ring, he wasn't about to let the enemy have free reign, he'd cut Laurie short, it was his son's bedtime. *Did you see what time it is? Lucky I'm here, come on, let's wash your face before you turn in*, then Laurie would sear him with her flame-thrower eyes and would have spat on his charred remains if she'd been able to locate them while she used her gentlest touch to stroke and tickle Jérémie and called him my little lamb, *Sweet dreams, my little lamb* . . .

Jérémie should have been happy in his role as the sweet gumdrop everyone was grabbing for, but he wasn't. It was all too artificial, too shaky, it all felt like it was the end of the world. Anyway, as soon as he was alone with either one of them he'd lose his status as the adored child and rise to that of supreme judge, called upon to certify the inadequacies of the

other and therefore choose sides. Marco was the more fragile of the two, so screwed up by what happened that he laced his organic alfalfa juice with vodka. *Did you hear that? She's the one who's leaving. She's the one who wants to go. I'm doing all I can to make it work, everything, I even stopped smoking.* It was true, he didn't smell like pot anymore, not since he'd started knocking back large quantities of supercharged alfalfa juice.

Laurie didn't even try not to be the one who was ready to throw everything over. On the contrary. She'd sit next to Jérémie to read one of those fat novels she always had with her, dropping furious phrases that crucified Marco and tossed him into the wastebasket. *It's not his fault, he's immature. Poor guy, the mind of a fifteen-year-old. I don't want another child, I want a man. It's going to feel like freedom, even you'll feel freer.*

When he was level with the berry bushes, Jerry Potter could turn into an insect himself and see everything insects saw thanks to their thousands of ommatidia assembled in the shape of a sphere. The grassy jungle formed a dense curtain punctuated with openings through which his six legs carried him, up and down, then a mountain of granite loomed up in front of him—a rock!—and he had to climb it so the landscape would reveal, in the distance, sources of live food and fresh water. Hurray! From the summit he could see, beyond an immense swamp (a patch of moss) thick with small bushes (lichen), a huge lake (puddle of water) at the foot of a mountain (tree stump) where it would be lovely to rest after having a drink, and, moving quickly on his six legs, he made his way down the mountain and plunged into the Amazonian rain forest and climbed up and down and *bang!* all of a sudden he ran into something light and feathery in a tree

(tuft of grass) that he would feel cautiously with his antennae so as not to foolishly fall into a cleverly concealed spiderweb, then he began to laugh with all his elytra when he spotted cuckoo spit protecting a succulent baby froghopper he'd gulp down in a flash. But just then, right in front of him, slithering along the spongy ground with revolting rapidity, appeared a millipede called *Julida* armed with a cutting beak, and the fight to the finish began. He sprayed his acid onto the intestine-shaped monster, which parried his saliva and grasped his left elytra with twenty of its horrible feet, and they rolled over and over, squeaking and mandibles clicking and the other nine hundred and eighty legs of the *Julida*—that's not an insect, not that anyone would think it was—were going to strangle him in their sticky embrace, when his hind wings slipped free and he took to the air. For he had true wings beneath his coleopteran's elytra, he could fly and fly he did, high above the jungle and the giant berry bushes he flew from danger, soaring drenched in sunlight with surprising lightness and suddenly other beings gathered around him and embraced him with their protective warmth, welcoming him into a sun-filled universe bursting with love and brightness and there he recognized Granny Marie and Auntie Réjane and his friend Marc laughing and smiling at him tenderly, he felt unbelievably light and happy, he never imagined he could be so happy. . .

Jérémie opened his eyes and everything stopped, first the feeling of lightness because his legs had gone completely numb beneath him. Slowly he rolled over onto his back, feeling the dream and the reality, the memory of death and the presence of life, and knowing nothing with any certainty. He

got to his feet, dazzled by the true light, much harsher than that *other* light, unless the *other* light was the true one, and this the mere antechamber of the real world where he would have to wait forever to return to the place that was truly his.

At some distance, he could see adults moving about, Marco and Simon up on the roof of the blue cottage, repairing the damage from last week's storm, Marianne and Laurie bent over the flowers in the garden, gossiping like the friends they weren't. Imagos on one side, imagas on the other, and he between them, nowhere. It was going to happen at the end of August, he'd gotten the drift, the direction where all the cries and hate-filled whispers of the little cottage were heading, at the end of August he would be divided between his parents, torn apart in the wreckage of his family, where no happiness would ever grow. Every other path had been dynamited, there was no chance that things wouldn't turn out that way. Unless. Unless the month of August never came. That was the life preserver. Maybe there were some words he could repeat over and over the way you rub a magic lantern—Osmeterium, osmeterium, pheromone, pheromone, pheromone—to connect with a supernatural power, *Let the month of August never come*, but which words exactly, how many times? It was risky business, maybe you just needed to drop the incantation wherever bits and pieces of power slumbered. *Let the month of August never come*, across the lake where the great cliff gleamed, in a grotto in the vegetable world of the forest, or even on all fours among the insects so that they would carry it to their queen, the great god of summer, to him high above the world—since there was always a boss supervising every activity, there had to be one assigned to his life.

Now the imagas had left the flowers and the herbs and joined their voices to call him, *Lunchtime, Jérémie, come to lunch*, and the imagos came down from the roof in single file like giant ants—ants, that’s what they were and they were everywhere, you couldn’t escape them.

It was hard to accept, but out of five arthropods scurrying through the grass, three were ants. No sense even thinking about touching them, even with his eyes. He feigned indifference, but he couldn’t stop seeing how they were everywhere. Marianne complained to Simon in her patient voice: *There have never been as many ants in the house as this year*. Open the dishwasher and you’d come upon a tiny black horde that would disappear into the drain. Take a peach from its basket and ten ants would scatter in all directions. Then there was Marianne’s angel food cake, hermetically sealed in the pantry, or so she thought; she threw it away with a look of disgust, for it was tunneled through and infested with undulating legs and tiny rigid bodies. Jérémie kept a guarded silence. Of course there was a connection between their presence and his in the same house, an unmentionable connection. He should consult with Sorceress Szach; the magic spell that set things right wasn’t working. No matter how much he learned about arthropods—and ants—things were going from bad to worse. The more he found out, the more chills ran down his spine. How could he have imagined taking on such a powerfully organized mafia? In Europe there were super-colonies of ants that had networks more than five thousand kilometers long, spanning borders right under the customs inspectors’ noses. Some kinds of ants, unable to feed their own larvae, stole female worker ants from other colo-

nies to use as slaves to perform the task. Most ants you saw were female workers, women soldiers that brought information, food or dead bodies back to the nest. They were wingless. The males had wings, but they stayed hidden in the anthill, where their full-time job was impregnation. When the females developed wings, which happened once or twice during the summer, what you saw were young queens ready to fly off and set up new colonies. Thinking of all those colonies growing underground could give you nightmares. Last week, the new queens had swarmed the windows of the cottage. Jérémie watched them, powerless. Killing them was out of the question. He tried to save one whose broad clumsy wings had become entangled in a web manned by a tiny belligerent spider. Then he stopped, concerned with maintaining a prudent neutrality: he'd already alienated the *Formicidae*, and he wasn't about to get on the wrong side of the *Arachnida*.

The ants in Simon and Marianne's house were called *Lasius niger*. But knowing their name didn't give you any power over them, and certainly didn't help you keep them away from the peaches and the angel food cake.

Luckily, Jérémie could count on his uncle to restore a sense of balance. He claimed, with a sly smile playing at his mouth, that there were billions and billions of ants in the world, so finding ten or twelve in your dishwasher was no big deal, and housing a thousand or so in your ceiling was certainly within reason. And he winked at Jérémie as Marianne flew off the handle.

In spite of his repetitive jokes and attempts to get everyone to share his aquatic pursuits, Uncle Simon was certainly the kindest Muggle that a wizard could hope to have as a sidekick.

He wasn't always trying to stop you from doing what you wanted to, like most adults, and he was considerate enough to live and let live. As long as he showed up at the cottage at meal times and before sundown, Jérémie could wander wherever he felt like, and even turn down the invitations for canoe rides, no problem. Most of all, he was solid as a road, a forest. You knew you could count on him if something evil were to come your way. He was a real adult, an imago like they were supposed to be—like Marco wasn't, for he must have been handed a larva heart when he was born.

When the time came for Marco and Laurie to leave, each got into their own car, a sign of the catastrophic new life that lay ahead. Uncle Simon defused the tragedy by talking a lot, and making sure that eyes did not meet for any length of time, and after, when the two cars had vanished in a cloud of dust, he gave Jérémie coconut yogurt, the best kind. And he hung around, casually, just waiting, showing he was ready to talk about it, about Laurie and Marco each driving off in their own car, about the month of August that was coming full speed unless some evil were to strike it down. And when he realized from the look on Jérémie's face that it wasn't the right time, maybe later, in ten years they'd have a conversation, for now he suggested a stroll over to Sorceress Szach's place.

It was clear that ss (as Jérémie called her to save time) had bewitched uncle Simon. That was no surprise. If you put nice, accommodating prey next to a witch of her stature, what else could you expect? She must not have had to work at it, a couple of quick spells and that was that: he was eating out of her hand, submitting to her every whim. Right now,

he was talking just as loudly as he did at home, and seemed to be the master of the place, but you could tell that was all window dressing. With one look she could make him do her bidding, and suddenly she would dismiss him with her inner voice, and he would feel the irresistible need to leave without having thought about it. And he would leave Jérémie behind, with her, for that was what she had silently ordered.

Sorceress Szach was not yet mollified. Far from it. But he had succeeded in talking to her twice, extracting the beginnings of a conversation from her. He had to pay close attention to her to re-establish the links at all costs—wizard to witch, united against the forces of evil. And he had to make sure she would never reveal the crime she had read in his mind. Strangely, he wasn't even worried about that. When the time came, it would be strictly between the two of them, no go-betweens: she would demand an accounting and decide to eliminate him, perhaps with the assistance of the malevolent *Avada Kedavra*, unless between now and then he had faultlessly accomplished his duty of penance.

In the meantime, it always began the same way, with a kind of humiliation. ss would walk on ahead, pretending she was alone. Worse yet, she would talk to her cats. He would follow behind her, keeping a small statutory distance, menial as a servant. Sometimes she would poke around in the flowers beside her house; other times, with an athletic stride, she would head off into the woods. Without so much as a glance in his direction. And he would follow. The last time he didn't follow, he started back the other way, and she turned around abruptly, having seen everything through the eyes in the back of her head—sorceress or dipteran, it's the same

advantage. *Where are you going?* she snapped, and he understood what the directive was, he was to follow her unconditionally while expecting nothing in return, and without being the first to speak.

Sometimes she would stop and suddenly lose altitude—her large body diving into a bush, she would snatch something in her hand. He knew what came next, he waited, holding his breath, for her to open her hand before him, when she would free the terrified bug that he was supposed to identify. But how was he supposed to find any kind of connection between these jumping miniatures and the large, motionless illustrations in the encyclopedia? *Succubus!* he would guess. Or *Stag beetle!* Or *Daddy longlegs!* And she would cry out triumphantly, *Aphid!* (He should have known, when she searched through the flowers, two times out of two it was Aphid.) Then she would crush Aphid between her fingers and stare defiantly at Jérémie. *This one you can!* she said with no further explanation, and he could see a kind of laughter rattling in her metallic eyes.

Once Simon vanished, he would find himself alone with her. After he passed the test of a few moments of invisibility, she might ask him some questions. But this time Sorceress Szach dropped the preliminaries.

“I’ve got a little girl your age visiting me. She’s down there, by the lake. Jessie is her name. She’s from Poland. Would you like to play with her?”

Where was Poland, anyway? For the moment, playing was out of the question. He was Jerry Potter, and he was on a mission.

“Play what?” he asked, bargaining for time.

"She's in the water, near the boathouse. She's with her mother. I'm sure she'd rather be with you."

Was that an order? ss's voice was friendly, without harshness, almost a mother's voice.

"I don't really like the water," he finally admitted, throwing her a fleeting glance, ready to beat a retreat if he had to.

"Really?" she said. "Fine."

She walked off toward the woods, her back to him. Now he was on familiar ground, and he followed after her as quietly as possible. Only she had the right to mutter.

"Call the municipal office . . . Pay off Laramée . . . We need a dessert, but it can wait," she said in a low voice, as if talking to her feet.

Then, louder, ostensibly for him.

"Watch where you're walking. I don't want you crushing anything."

That's how it was with her: always back to square one. No confidence, even after he stoically tolerated those monstrous queen ants at the windows of the cottage (all the while silently applauding the Ignorant Ones who were crushing them).

"I'm talking about chanterelles," she added. "I could use a few chanterelles."

What were chanterelles, anyway? He'd find out soon enough.

By now he was getting used to the woods. He knew which shortcuts to take without straying too far from the central tunnel, the one that let you emerge from the vegetable kingdom alive. All you had to do was keep moving with the sun in the same place. He could recognize most of the sounds made by the squirrels, and a lot that came from the birds. The

others belonged to nameless creatures he was in no hurry to meet. ss had entered the woods through a clearing that ran parallel to the main trail. From the attentive way she walked he could tell she was tracking monsters too, searching for their tracks in the thickets, but she would find none, of course, because they would go to ground out of fear of her. For once he was walking ahead of her, pretending she wasn't there, looking over his shoulder every minute or two, tearing off leaves and torturing roots without the trees replying. It was fantastic to travel through the forest with such a powerful person; you could actually catch your breath, and be on the opposite side of those who are afraid.

When he turned around, she'd vanished. He looked left and right, pretending not to be looking for anything, but since he still couldn't see her, he began searching for her for real with a touch of panic. Maybe Lord Voldemort himself, the chief wizard of evil, had snatched her? Maybe she'd put on her invisibility cloak and was watching him with a grin of mockery, just a hair's breadth from his face? Then he heard her voice, *Here I am, here!* along with a sound like the kind she made when she called her cats, and he turned his head and spotted her through the trees, seated on a high rock some distance away, her gray eyes riveted like a command. As soon as he came near, she began to ignore him all over again, all concentrated on the landscape before her, which was worth looking at, since they were on the high plateau with the maples, from which you could see everything from above without being seen: the lake with its island, its cottages and human insects.

He was able to stay still and look without talking, the way she did, and he proved it by plopping down on a bed of moss,

his head against a tree trunk. Down below, the landscape was as brightly lit as a stage. The cliff seemed to flow right into the lake and dissolve into pale liquid silver of the greatest purity. The little house where the scarf girl lived was really little seen from up here, and the scarf girl herself, though she was tall, would have looked like a midget termite if she'd stepped out onto her patio. He knew her name was Violette on account of his uncle and his Violette this and Violette that, *Let's invite Violette over for supper tonight, for sure Violette would like it if you took her some strawberries*, but as far as he was concerned she was the scarf girl. Period. She had at least ten of them, in all different colors, that she wrapped around her head. But most of all to call her by name would mean they'd reached the stage of friendship, which was absolutely not the case. She had big saucer eyes that hid all kinds of things, and behind all her laughter there was no laughter at all. At first she gave him candied grapefruit peel whenever he came by her house, then she'd really gotten angry with him the last time and he certainly wasn't going to say another word to her, or take one of her yucky candied grapefruit rinds that tasted more of grapefruit than candy. All he did was say what everybody knew anyhow, all he did was say what he saw, *You're going to die, right?* and she went all purple in the face and got upset as if he'd said something nasty. *Not at all! I'm in remission, I'm completely cured! What makes you say that?*

The other blue cottage was bigger than it seemed from here, with a nice beach right in front of it, and was another good place to stay clear of. The woman who lived there was all sweetness and light, and though she didn't offer him candies, *Would you like a plum? Some cherries?* in her presence he felt like an aphid being milked by an ant for his honeydew.

She was always talking to him and especially making him talk, and one time she even mentioned the word *fire*, which no one would say in front of him, and his wizard's instinct immediately ordered him to take off.

The women here seemed like a harmful species to be avoided—all except his Aunt Marianne, of course, who was always nice to him the rare times she was here, and except Sorceress Szach, surprisingly enough, who probably wasn't even a woman on account of how old she was and a witch on top of that. And since she'd read her name in his thoughts she chose that very moment to speak to him.

"See that cliff over there?"

It wasn't a real question. He gave her a look to encourage her.

"You'd never know it, but it takes two hours to get there. When I was young I'd go there. Up and down, it wasn't easy. Two hours at least."

She smiled. She'd taken off her hat and her white and blond hair was moving in the wind like a real woman's. Her power was especially visible then, looking for once like a real woman and smiling. She looked at Jérémie, and it was hard for him, but he kept his eyes on hers.

"Half the time Jan would come with me. He dove. Just imagine! He dove from way up there! Brrr!"

"Brrr!" Jérémie repeated with conviction.

He put on his ceremonious, adult-sounding voice in hopes of coaxing more secrets from her.

"Who's Jean?"

Her gray eyes shifted toward the cliff across the lake.

"Jan," she said, slowly. "He's dead. In fact, you're sitting right on top of him."

“What?”

She began to laugh as he jumped to his feet to examine the moss with a worried look.

“I buried some of his ashes under the moss. Look, see that big white stone? Right there.”

There was a large white stone swathed in moss with strange words like drawings carved on it. He thought for a few seconds, then sat back down on the same spot, on top of the old ashes.

“If he’s dead,” he stated, “that means he’s not here.”

ss threw him a sharp glance.

“Oh, really? So where is he?”

“He’s in a beautiful place.”

He turned his head away; he didn’t feel like talking to her about that particular journey. He might have crossed paths with that Jan of hers among the smiling beings that had bid him welcome.

“It’s a beautiful place,” he repeated.

But you’ve got to be dead to get there, he was itching to blurt out.

“That’s what they say, anyway,” he concluded, prudently.

She was still looking at him, but now there was something between a smile and a frown on her lips, which could have been friendly or mocking or totally above either of those things. But at least she was looking at him, and it was like a hastily set table where you catch a quick bite, long enough to ask a question.

“Do you know any incantations? Magic incantations?”

Uh oh! That was risky, too direct, and clumsy to boot. But really, he wasn’t too upset with his own audacity once

she began chewing over an answer, proof he'd caught her by surprise.

"If I did," she said very seriously, the smile-frown reaching her eyes, "I don't see what I'd gain by telling them to you."

He hadn't been expecting that.

"We could trade," he said after a moment's thought. "I know one too."

"What is it?"

"Well!"

So she took him for a fool! A mosquito-brain! He wasn't going to spill the beans without a guarantee of something in return. On the other hand, if she could read his mind to know what he was thinking, his hiding places weren't worth fly shit (or dipteran excrement for that matter).

"Okay," he conceded, "mine first. May the month of August never come."

Funny how the words he so often recited in his mind expanded when he said them out loud, how they became kites in primary colors so those who lived on high, who held power, could not miss them. Those on high, or down below. Starting with her, ss in person. She rummaged through the contents of her basket—two miserable little mushrooms—but he'd gotten a look at her eyes before she could conceal them, and saw that his incantation had penetrated the depth of her grayness and even drawn water to the surface.

"This is a chanterelle," she said, showing him the orange-colored runs. "If you find any, bring them to me."

"Okay."

He waited. She got up slowly, not looking at him.

"Time to go," she said.

And since he didn't get up, she let out a pinched little laugh.

"Fine, I'll give you one. An . . . incantation. And then you'll go home."

Home. It was true, he felt like he was home as soon as he went down the hill and turned onto the trail that led to the little wooden bridge, as soon as the forest surrounded him with its scent-papered walls. Home. Since it was home, why should he have to leave? *May the month of August. . .* He stopped in mid-sentence. He'd been at a loss ever since Sorceress Szach gave him her incantation, which said the exact opposite of his and canceled it out. And which was just as likely to work, considering the exact number of ingredients required. Three pine needles, two milkweed leaves . . .

In the sunlit clearing there were milkweeds, the plants whose sap the monarch butterflies loved to gorge themselves on, according to the guidebook, and he found them exactly where ss said they would be, squeezing their tired-looking purple flowers against one another and with their wide rubbery leaves, which left a sticky white liquid on his fingers that had nothing to do with milk. One of the leaves showed teeth-marks, as if some bug had recently taken a bite out of it. He squatted down for a closer look, and a fat, white-belted, black and yellow caterpillar was hiding under it, just like in the guidebook. Heart pounding happily, he was about to capture his prey when he heard the cracking of branches in front of him. Between the milkweed leaves he saw a man cutting across the trail a few meters ahead, an older man dressed for fall, who walked with all the assurance of someone who owned the place. Jérémie crouched down further, to

see without being seen, indignant that some outsider would enter Sorceress Szach's territory with such blithe assurance. Then suddenly the man turned and seemed to head straight for J  r  mie, who hugged the ground and held his breath, and the man walked right by him and went up the trail toward the maple plateau. He must have been the sorceress's guest, the father or grandfather of that little girl Jessie he wasn't interested in playing with, and J  r  mie waited until the man in the old red lumberjack shirt that was much too warm for July disappeared into the trees, before grabbing the monarch caterpillar.

kurki

IT WAS TOO hot. All the months and days hoping it would come, all the waiting for summer and its paradisiacal warmth, and now that it had come it was more like hell. What were you supposed to hope for to avoid disappointment? The coolness of winter? (We'll talk about that in due time, teeth chattering on the ice fields of January.) Lila walked along, stopping every few paces, intensely discontented, drenched in sweat, about to faint. What madness, stepping out of the near-comfortable shade of the house to explore the stifling bush. What madness to move at all, when even the birds had stopped flying. The cicadas were roaring with bliss, but what did cicadas, those crackly dry things, know about the discomfort of sweat? Or insomnia, for that matter? Lila hadn't slept for five days. Last night, overcome by fatigue, she'd finally managed, but piercing cries threw her from her bed, heart pounding. Not her neurotic little tenant again! No, this time it had to be some animals eviscerating one of her cats. Lila rushed out of the cottage stark naked and came upon two raccoons tearing at the remains of a field mouse, shrieking at one another while Picasso, the rebellious

kitten who refused to come inside to sleep, watched the quarrel from a distance of two meters, calmly washing his ears.

And now everyone lay dozing inside, even Picasso, while only some miracle of nervous energy kept her going, burning off what was left of her vital fluids.

She strode on, not knowing where or why, fleeing her own thoughts, her own house, or the vipers that had made their nest in her house. Yet she had been truly happy two weeks earlier, at the news that Agnieszka and her daughter Jessie would be arriving from Warsaw; she loved her little cousin, who was one of the few bearable vestiges of her very former life. Or, at least, she had no reason not to love her. Until now, until this morning. Before her very eyes the veil had been ripped away, and behind it, as usual, writhed ordinary human rapacity.

For that she could thank the real-estate agent who would call her twice every summer. *Mrs. Szach, I've got an INCREDIBLE offer for you.* Bruno Taschereau was his name, and the deep-set eyes beneath his low forehead burned bright with the fire of commerce, with which he hoped to set her alight. But unfortunately for him, each time she responded with the inertia of a waterlogged beam, fireproof to the core. That morning Bruno Taschereau had taken his own sweet time, already sweating bullets under a burning sun, to admire her daylilies and her meadowsweet, which were truly eye-catching above the white sea of petunias, with their flame-red, plumelike flowers. No doubt he was taking the opportunity to size up the solidity of the foundations with his pragmatic little eyes, but who cares, she offered him a cup of coffee and accepted his existence as one accepts the company of caterpillars if one

is a leaf. Anyway, it was not totally unpleasant to know that one was in possession of something that so many people coveted—I'll buy ten acres, *Mrs. Szach*, what are ten acres compared to your thousand, aside from a nice wad of money in your pocket? Okay, let's make it five acres, five measly acres at the far end of the lake, you wouldn't even notice, or even two acres, just enough to build a nice invisible little cottage and make some couple happy. No? You're sure it's no? Why not? His little game didn't bother her but this morning he was slow to move his pieces on the board. Slumped down in the chair, with his coffee on his lap and the empty look of someone who nurtured no inclination for work, he'd started by comparing this summer's heat wave with the one three years ago, then moved on to the depredations of the squirrels and raccoons that were undermining the foundations of his cottage, when all of a sudden, mistaking the benevolent smile on Lila's face when she heard anything related to wild creatures, he decided it was time to go for the jackpot, and he cast his fiery little eyes onto hers as though he were a hypnotist. *Mrs. Szach*, I've got an *INCREDIBLE* offer for you!

Jessie the *Mala* was drawing in a corner of the spacious kitchen, already smudged with red marker ink up to her eyeballs. Agnieszka, who couldn't understand a word of French, was reading beside her, dispensing the occasional heart-warming compliment (*Dobrze! Dobrze!*) and smiling tentatively when the real-estate agent included her in his audience. Agnieszka's blue eyes remained perfectly untroubled when Bruno Taschereau dropped his bombshell. *One million dollars, Mrs. Szach*, I've got a client who's ready to put one million dollars on the table in exchange for your land, and best of all, you'll keep

your house, you won't have to move, you won't have to lift a finger and a million dollars will be in your pocket!

What a weight! But why not five million, or five billion while we're at it, since we're throwing around puffed-up abstract figures? Lila let her mouth drop for a moment and a spasm of wild laughter almost surfaced—she got by easily on twenty-five thousand dollars a year. She never found out who was making the offer—*all I can tell you is that it's not an American*—and she hadn't dared laugh out loud in front of doughty Bruno Taschereau, who got to his feet with a self-satisfied look, convinced he'd planted the right seed in this parched soil—*Think it over, think it over carefully, you won't be getting another offer like this any day soon*—and she left him on the porch, where Agnieszka now stood. Agnieszka hadn't understood a word of what he said, but she must have been sensitive to certain fundamental frequencies, certain round sounds like *million*.

Lila came back to the door a few moments later, alerted by the kind of silence that sounds like a conspiracy, and there, lying in ambush behind the curtain, she heard Agnieszka's deep voice, as if she were having trouble breathing, speaking to the real-estate agent, *How much did you say for this land?* and she saw her eyes, ah, those eyes of hers, those newborn stars, stars flaming with covetousness, which cast a new brutal light on all they touched, on the entire stage of their relationship.

What did she think? That Agnieszka had been writing her all those charming missives from Poland, with such touching regularity, sending her Jessie's lovely drawings, remembering her birthday year after year, only out of faithful filial concern, only—get this!—out of *love*?

Yes. That's exactly what she'd imagined.

But now that lucidity had come home to roost, the pieces of the puzzle fell together perfectly: Agnieszka's tenacity in keeping up to date about her health, and most of all Jessie's little kindnesses, to which she'd almost succumbed, the little girl climbing onto her lap or draping a daisy chain around her neck, guided clandestinely by her mother (Go take some flowers to the old biddy, *szybko! szybko!*).

The weight! It hurt, yes, it hurt deep down, but better straightforward pain than cloying blindness.

Besides, it was almost funny, imagining poor Agnieszka watching the calendar, not allowing a single error of omission, laying at the feet of the old god of the Poles her inarticulate prayers that her *rich* Canadian cousin, with no known heirs, would finally bring her exasperating longevity to an end. . .

If she had not been so unamused, she would have burst out laughing instead of getting that queasy feeling in her stomach.

Rich. She certainly didn't feel rich. Rich people have money they're always fussing over, possessions they set to copulating to give birth to still more possessions. She had nothing, all she had was *this*, and it didn't even belong to her, she was just its fervent protector, this piece of virgin paradise that must be protected against predators and left intact. Then handed on to other protectors who would stand vigil after she was gone. That was the most painful part. Who would take the keys to the garden after her? Who would accept, in full humility, the task of protector without perverting it into multipliable possessions, into millions?

Maybe I'll never die. No sooner had the presumptuous words been released into her mind than she felt a sharp,

unfamiliar pain in her side, to bring her back to her senses. She had to sit down on a rock in the shade of the pines, sweaty and panting, to wait for it to pass. For it would pass; this time it would.

She thought of Agnieszka and Jessie, perhaps already down at the lake and playing like puppies in the warm water, and the pain in her side clamped her once more. It was only that: a sorrow struggling to take shape.

Nobody loves me.

She forced herself upright on the rock, and pushed the whining self-pity back into the shadows. The problem had to be dealt with as a whole, not just its complacent first half.

Fine, but do you really love someone?

The question produced the desired effect; her malaise changed shape, though it lost none of its intensity. She was responsible for everything that happened to her, she knew that, but knowing it did not protect her from the pain.

From the corner of her eye she could see, close to the ferns, the sheaves of Indian pipe that had valiantly thrust their little heads up through the earth, and as she looked more closely she could see many more on the forest floor, white clusters with long, waxy stems that didn't know whether they were flowers or mushrooms. And then there was the wintergreen that had sprung up after the last rains, as delicate as wild lily of the valley, that can be made into sweet little bouquets to perfume the sleepless hours. July's creatures had taken up residence while she wasn't watching.

She imagined Simon paddling across the lake and the tiny wound in her side edged open. He'd finally understood. He no longer came calling like some lake-dwelling Archangel

Gabriel, he dropped by on the run to repair the stairs, paint a window frame, for a bit of chitchat that never ruled out a shot of vodka, and that was that. Gone was the boathouse and the built-in bed that had creaked so mightily beneath their combined weight.

It had come from him without a word being spoken, she'd had nothing to say, no pronouncements to make, none of those splendid exhortations long simmering in her heart of hearts to cushion the shock of the break-up.

Though she told herself she'd wanted it this way, an unexpected bitterness weighed upon her. He had taken from her the initiative of sacrifice, which meant he'd taken everything. All that remained was the outcome: a woman shunned, an OLD woman shunned, the worst possible case, with no hope of revenge. The last coitus of her life lay behind her. Never again. Never again a caress, never again the combustion at the touch of another being, never again the physical exaltation. *Never again: swallow that reality and don't try to spit it out.*

Never again a shred of youth.

She should have been young when it had been the time. She should have been more vigilant, admitted her own beauty and enjoyed it while it lasted, instead of mocking it as if it were an accessory that would surely last forever. She should have. So many things she should have done; never sleep with Simon, never trust Agnieszka, never let Jan die. Never have a father, never be born.

At the very bottom of the precipice, she could go no farther, the only way was up. She pictured herself in a fetal crouch, clucking and cooing to the darkness within her and asking for more, and suddenly that horrified her. *Let it go, let it go!* With

deep breaths, she pulled herself out of her own head and began to see and hear, the ferns, the Indian pipe and the wintergreen, and the cicada that hadn't stopped calling her, and the white-throated sparrows and wrens with their tireless recitals. She straightened her back quickly, risking sudden dizziness—what sacrilege to ignore such delightful displays and make up such painful ones, what sacrilege and what foolishness.

She stood up. Even the heat became bearable when you stopped whining about it. She noticed she'd almost reached the wooden bridge over the creek, bled dry at this point of the summer. Without realizing it, in her confusion, she'd come to the place where Simon's nephew, the little guy, the *Maty*, had told her he'd seen chanterelles.

He was a funny *Maty*, that *Maty*. . .

Not a bit ingenuous like Jessie, or any other child she'd met in recent years.

She didn't know what he wanted. He wanted something from her, something she was sure she could not give. It was as if he'd chosen her from among all possible distractions, as though he preferred her to the Internet and the computer games that Simon had set up for him. He would pop up behind her and set out after her when she went walking in the woods. She might show no feeling, or at best irritation, but that didn't matter, he would follow her. She never stayed irritated for too long, because he knew how to walk in the woods, without making noise, or speaking, on the alert. Once they encountered a deer, and another time, a fox on its fine dancer's legs, and he hadn't cried out excitedly like those city imbeciles who drive away anything that's alive. She was always the first to speak and then, as if he'd been given a sig-

nal, he would turn voluble and come out with bits and pieces of stories he'd made up in his head, or assume a solemn look before asking her a question upon which his survival seemed to depend, and which Lila had no idea how to answer.

And he'd stopped killing ants.

In his eyes she could see just how badly he'd misunderstood her, the inflated image he had of her and that she would have to correct sooner or later if she did not want to add to his delusions.

But in the meantime, she took an ambiguous kind of pleasure in playing the game. It was probably the last time in her life that she'd be given the chance to exert influence over someone.

And besides, the little guy was in urgent need of practicality in his life. Neither his uncle, who dwelled more on water than on land, nor his young parents, absorbed in their disintegration efforts, knew anything about the weapons needed to fight a dreamer's battle.

May the month of August never come. What a sad dreamer's wish, a loser's wish that touched her so deeply it brought tears to her eyes.

This time, she found an answer for him.

May I get through the month of August safely.

That seemingly innocuous formula said it all. Never believe that obstacles—in this case, the month of August—will miraculously disappear. Never believe you won't have to confront them.

Never believe you'll be alone. And yet, you will be.

Hadn't she fought all her battles armed with this modest yet infallible sword?

Since he was at the game-playing age and she had agreed to play along, she added amusing conditions so the *incantation* would be granted—a round pebble, two milkweed leaves, an insect saved from death, three pine needles, one porcupine quill—because she knew he would obey them fervently.

If there was one thing she liked about him, it was his fervor.

He had already explored her land from one end to the other, and seemed to know it as well as she did. Simon had finally given up and stopped setting out rules: no straying from the paths, respect the boundaries, don't go into the forest alone. Instead, he bought Jérémie a compass and taught him how to use it. The little guy had been so happy with the compass, Simon told her. *He hugged me, Lila, like I'd just given him the world.*

Yes, there was a lot about this *Mały* she really liked.

The problem lay elsewhere. (Far, far away in time, in the Polish village of Cieśle, which foreign soldiers had been occupying for two days.)

Every time they went for a walk in the forest, the *Mały* a few steps behind and the cicadas overhead, every time there was a moment when she turned and there he was.

Markus.

Markus's expressive little face.

Jérémie quickly took back his place, but still, there'd been time enough for an abyss to slip into that fraction of a second when she'd seen Markus again, and that was when she plunged downward.

Pomału, Lila! Not so fast, I'm thinking.

She would walk along ahead of Markus, both of them nearly eleven years old, the only weight on their shoulders that of their schoolbooks. The woods were deep and com-

pletely friendly. Beneath the sound of the cicada sawing away tardily, she thought she could hear Markus's thoughts colliding like marbles before flowing into the air.

If you had the world to make over, Lila, tell me what you'd remove.

At the edge of the forest, they would separate without a word, and each head home, as if they were strangers. Better that way, better for Lila, who had to pretend to flee the strange disease that afflicted Markus.

Dojutra, Lila!

See you tomorrow, Markus!

From the corner of her eye, she watched him walk away for the last time, his striped blue shirt, his legs too spindly for his great hunger for life, oh, Markus, so full of intelligence and promise, and he sent her a sign, his back turned, a sign for her alone, his fist open, then closed, then open again. And it was more moving than if he'd kissed her, because this time would be the last, though she had no idea of that.

The next morning he was not at school, nor in the forest. He had disappeared into thin air with his family, his father, his mother, his little sister Olga and his mother's sister, a plump red-headed woman who would be difficult to hide, the whole family swept away during the night as if by a magical wind. (A coincidence that the soldiers who'd been occupying the town for the last two days also vanished.) Nothing left but the clothes and sheets drying on the clothesline and his little sister's bicycle in the yard, five people swallowed up by nothingness, with the door left ajar, and soon to be thrown wide by the comings and goings of the neighbors who carried off the furniture, dishes, rugs, Markus's books, as if nobody had ever lived there.

They've gone on holiday, said the man responsible for their disappearance.

On holiday? In September? said Lila, surprised.

Maybe they had to go to the hospital, said the man who had denounced their strange disease.

But how? Just yesterday. . .

I'm telling you they're gone and that's that! said Mr. Szach, her father, a good man for all that, who fed his baby rabbits milk from a bottle and never raised his voice except when he sang hymns.

That's how it went in the family. The criminal heart ran from father to daughter, though you'd never know it.

THAT'S WHY IT was dangerous to spend time with the little guy and why Lila preferred to meet the creatures of the forest alone. Even when the little guy, who didn't even look like Markus, finally left her alone, she wasn't yet free. He had opened her up and in entered the abyss, and she slid into it with Markus, claiming all the while to him that she hadn't known.

If I had the world to make over, Markus, I know what I'd remove. I'd get rid of the human race, right down to the last.

NEAR THE WOODEN bridge over the creek that had almost run dry, a wall of big round boulders stood, stuck in the earth. Maybe they'd fallen to Earth in a meteor shower. Atop the largest of them, the *Maty* would perch and survey the surroundings, and that's how he'd spotted the orange-colored curiosities two days earlier, which could just as well have been a century in this drought. Lila didn't try to scramble up as he

did; she decided to follow the wall to see what things looked like on the other side. On the other side the sun never shone, and fine moss spread its brilliant green valley up to the base of the rocks, still nurtured by a tiny sliver of the creek that died there. Lila took off her sandals and thrust her feet into this cool cotton wool, and her happiness was so sudden she decided to throw off all her clothes, to hell with the squirrels spying on her, so her whole body could feel the soft core of existence when it was finally at hand. Just then, kneeling in the moss, legs still tangled in her panties, she saw them. Not two or three in ordinary, sparse gatherings against the tree stumps, but twenty, thirty-five squeezed into all the interstices of the moss and rock, plump from waiting so long to be discovered, bright yellow like suns, like gilded kisses, tiny peeling trumpets announcing pure pleasure. Chanterelles. A lake of chanterelles. She took the time to capture the image on her retinas, orange against emerald, so the feeling of abundance would stay with her, for all eternity if possible. Then she pounced on those closest by, slicing them off with her fast-moving knife, taking care not to uproot the embryos. Again and again, she thrust her nose into their tiny plump bodies, which exuded vanilla and apricot, and by the time she was through there wasn't room enough in her basket for even an insect to hide.

It was summer. How dare she doubt summer? Summer in its infinite luxuriance, thirty degrees in the shade and the sun at its zenith, the grand climax of all the outbursts ordered by young king summer, and she, Lila Szach, mortal and incomplete, she was allowed to roll in the perfect youth of summer with the solitary blackbirds, the melodious white-throated sparrows, the black-eyed Susans, the thronging daisies, the

sap rustling on pine fingers, tiny fawns on their two-month legs, the red admirals in their black and white satin dresses, mosquitoes with their high-pitched music and the chanterelles returning, those sublime chanterelles . . .

She finally got up, damp and wrinkled, and carried herself back to the house in the heat that by then had reached new heights. But it was impossible to suffer from anything at all, an obtuse joy had shone its light on her and swept away everything with its luminescent beam. She walked in quietly and spread the chanterelles out on the big table. Agnieszka, who had been dozing on the sofa with Jessie curled up at her feet like a cat, rose with exclamations of delight when she discovered the manna. Then Jessie came over for a look, and the three of them performed an exuberant ritual over the *kurki*, weighing them, comparing them, counting them, sniffing them, their Polish souls equally aroused, right down to their deepest mushroom-eating fiber. There were enough for five or even six different dishes: a potato omelet with fine strips of bacon was a necessity, they would marinate them in *koperek*, of course, and did Lila know that delicious roll in which the *kurki* would be imprisoned in buttery dough, not to mention the *ciastko*, and of course one or two cream *żupa* that Agnieszka could take back with her for the cruel hours of winter . . .

Lila's resentment vaporized like fog drunk up by the sun, and she looked on laughing as Agnieszka brought the chanterelles to her ecstatic lips, exclaiming, *Oh, śliczny! Śliczny!* What intense pleasure she felt, sharing these riches with her, cooking and chatting away in Polish like three little girls, with Jessie playing the role of the most reasonable one. Agnieszka told of her latest distant expedition into the

forest where she'd picked a few chanterelles that were rare in Michałowice, where yellow boletuses mostly grew, and how she missed the trees, especially now that she worked full-time in libraries, which were tree byproducts. Lila hazarded a few questions about life back there, with which she'd lost contact, the grainy texture of real life, with its churches, markets, family, lonely women, love, democracy, were people richer, happier, and why weren't they? In a twinkling of an eye, above Agnieszka's curly head, Lila saw Fiona, her mother, wiping her hands on her yellow apron and winking at her, and from her happy childhood wafted the aromas of fennel and *kartofelki*, which suffused her from head to toe with a yearning for something of the perfect beauty she had once known and touched, yet hadn't looked at hard enough to retain.

LATER ON, the three of them were sitting on the porch, drunk with the heat that had barely abated and the cheap wine Agnieszka had bought—in democratic fashion, little Jessie was entitled to a glass—when a big black Subaru came skidding across the gravel and stopped in front of them. A tall young man got out, a cut-off T-shirt showing off his well-muscled shoulders, eyes concealed by dark glasses despite the dying daylight. Smiling through thin lips, he greeted them heartily. Abruptly frozen to the marrow of her bones, Lila knew who he was before he identified himself. It was Jean-François. Jean-François Clémont, Gilles's son.

The same build, the same street-punk roll of his hips as he walked, and like his father the bottom half of his face was incapable of any openness, but for the rest, he was a poor copy that couldn't match his old man's most delicate traits. Not as

good-looking as Gilles but an authentic chip off the same block, a muddled extension that had come to talk blood, a rhizome that had popped out of the ground farther on to seek revenge. Lila got up, tipping over her chair as she did, burning now where she'd once been frozen, and she whispered to herself in the midst of her inner turmoil, *Too bad about ending the summer in jail now that the chanterelles are out*, and she scanned the road for the police officers who were lurking in the shadows, and who would handcuff her before casting her into hell. But Jean-François Clémont was alone. *Call me Jeff*, he said, offering a hand as massive as Gilles's was delicate. *Call me Jeff. Can I sit down with you a minute, Mrs. Szach?*

He sat down. Agnieszka and Jessie got up for a walk while Lila stayed put, standing then sitting down again, in a fog, out of control, his words lost in it like incomprehensible sounds. Jeff Clémont was talking. Saying what? Talking about Campeau Lake and the heat, but Lila was listening to the sound of the voice he'd inherited from his father; she listened to that cruel and barbaric music alone, from which something threatening must eventually spring. But nothing happened. He talked on, he took off his dark glasses and she saw he had the kind of eyes that didn't like to meet other people's, and the fog dissipated enough that the words that filled the music became tiny, hard pebbles.

Jeff Clémont was describing the land he'd bought on Campeau Lake, he was talking about Mount Diamond, *We're almost neighbors, how about that! Talk about luck, how many people would love to be lucky like us?* Lila scrutinized his face, he really didn't look like his father, except for the echo of his voice and the traces of gestures that reminded her of Gilles's poorest parts. But what did he want from her? She inter-

rupted and asked him as much, using her most courteous tone of voice. He fell silent for a moment, and for a moment he looked at her—two ordinary brown eyes, whereas Gilles's had been dazzling like the Arctic Sun, then he said, *You knew my father. I was just a kid of course, but I remember he used to talk about you. I think he really liked you.*

Out with it, then.

He really liked you, so why did you kill him?

But there was none of that. He meandered on about Goose Lake, which was called Goose Lake—you couldn't get more banal a name than that—like hundreds of other Goose Lakes in the Laurentians—then suddenly she found herself in the middle of his musings, *But you, Mrs. Szach, one of the pioneers, one of the veterans, if it was called Szach Lake that would be original, it would be a tribute to you, so I went and talked to the Laurentian Regional Council and the mayor of Mount Diamond, who's a personal friend of mine, and they agreed to name Goose Lake Szach Lake in your honor, Mrs. Szach, and I'm very happy to bring you the news, especially seeing as you knew my father. . .*

Lila sat like a statue on her chair. She heard the white-throated sparrow and the solitary thrush volleying calls back and forth in the distance, she felt an ill-focused pain in her knees, where her fingernails dug into her flesh, and the Clémont boy searched out her face for the reaction that never came.

He didn't know. He didn't know a thing. Not only did the victim's son not know, he came to bestow upon her, his father's executioner, an honorary medal for services rendered. It was catastrophic, intolerable.

"No!" she said violently, with terror in her voice. "There's no way, I couldn't accept it, please, no."

Jeff Clémont's surprise gave way to booming laughter, and he even put one of his stubby hands on Lila's left knee.

"I knew it. They told me you'd say no at first, but I insist. You're too modest. If you won't do it for me, do it for my father who I hardly even knew. . . "

Every time he spoke those words, *my father*, he pierced her side more deeply, and she began to look at him differently, with fear; maybe he knew everything after all, maybe this was his original and sadistic way of tormenting her.

"I remember how much he loved the forest, just like you, Mrs. Szach. It's a shame to have your life cut short at the age of forty by a senseless accident when you love life so much. . . "

He began to laugh again, his voice a little strained now because Lila was staring at him with worrisome intensity, and he prudently repatriated his hand to his own knee. You never know with old women, with crazy old forest-lovers.

"What did you say?" asked Lila, her voice higher than normal. "Repeat what you said. An accident, what accident?"

"What? You didn't know?" Jeff Clémont said, surprised.

She knew he'd died, she stammered, but that was all, nothing else. So he told her. Told her how, along the 117 just before Lac-Saguay, while he was on his way to meet his brother-in-law and his pal for their annual hunting trip up north, Gilles Clémont, his father, had collided full speed with a moose and they found him crushed to death in his brand-new red pickup, *Right through the windshield, a half-ton moose, there's nothing you can do. . .*

"Are you sure? Are you sure?" asked Lila, and that was all she could say until Jeff's openly astonished look cut her off.

“What else do you want? I saw the photos! My mother saw him. What do you mean, sure? . . . Sure, I’m sure!”

As he looked on, completely ill at ease, she began to cry, hands covering her face, crying then, with no transition, laughing, then she stood up and waved her hand dismissively, *It’s nothing, I’m just upset*, to which he answered, looking away, *I understand, it’s a horrible way to go. . . Even if it was thirty years ago. . .*

She thanked him effusively for Szach Lake, why not, after all? How thoughtful of him, how kind, and she walked him to his brand-new Subaru after giving him a jar of her cream of chanterelles, which he accepted reluctantly. *You’ll see how tasty it is*. She even managed to laugh as she added, though she couldn’t believe she actually said it, *Your father loved my cream of mushroom soup*. Then he finally drove off.

When Agnieszka and Jessie returned, they found Lila strangely quiet, a wild look in her eye. Claiming to be extremely tired, she withdrew to her room.

So that’s what you felt like when you weren’t a criminal.

Flawless.

Something with claws had been removed from her chest, something she’d been living with for thirty years.

She hadn’t caused anyone or anything’s death. Maybe she hadn’t even cooked the destroying angels, and had never given the fatal cream of mushroom soup to anyone. Maybe she imagined the whole thing in her mind, sick with anger.

She did not sleep at all that night, but this time insomnia was better than sleep. She was floating, floating high above the lakes and the mountains, perfectly white like an angel that had never fallen.

champagne

THE HOUSE isn't black, Violette would say. It's white, with flowers all around. Meaning that sometimes you can't even trust flowers.

The house was home to ten children, almost a pack, split evenly between boys and girls. Ten children and a mother of sorts. A mother so totally disconnected from her instincts that you'd need another word for her.

And him. The madman.

There wasn't a single non-threatening object in the house. A lamp, a table, a bottle of juice, the water taps, the bed, a spoon, everything had a worrisome heft, everything could be redirected from its original purpose to beat or choke you. You had to watch out for everything. Don't talk too loud. Never laugh—that went without saying. Disappear. Most of all, disappear. But even if you were invisible, the madman would find you when it was your turn. Time is eternal. It was often your turn.

In the house with flowers all around it, wrapped in suburban silence that let no sound escape, you breathed air thick with terror and you were all convinced that nothing could be

more normal. Growing up consisted of an uninterrupted succession of trials and tribulations that you had to endure with teeth clenched.

Were there toys in such a house? The answer is surprising, but it was yes.

Badminton rackets, hockey sticks, bilboquets, tops, some worn Barbie dolls, word games like Scrabble and Boggle, encyclopedias, wooden animals—lots of wooden toys because he loved woodworking, he had a workshop just beyond the house where he stored his tools and the excess fruit of his labor, things like sleds, birdhouses, swings, abacuses, dog's and horse's heads that didn't look too much like the real thing. When you visited the workshop it was never of your own free will. Alongside the objects and tools, there was enough space in the workshop to tie down a ten-year-old, or even a fourteen-year-old. And the tools could be used for other than their original purpose at a moment's whim.

If you take a young arm and strike it against a table, or lock a knee in a metal vise, the bones don't break right away. You can apply a satisfactory amount of force without leaving any marks. Besides, if there are any marks, the children wear long-sleeved shirts, and their pants are long enough to make sure this evidence stays in the family, far from people whose business it isn't.

Was the madman a pathetic alcoholic who never finished high school? The answer is surprising, but it is no. The madman is educated, with a degree in engineering, from a well-off family, he drank the best whiskey and only on weekends. In the evening he added extra exercises and interminable dictations to your homework, he kept a close eye on your report

cards and he demanded success. If you didn't succeed, the directive was clear: he would kill you.

You made up a tiny country, the twelve of you.

Yet there was no solidarity among you. Shared chemistry, yes. When he came into the house or into the room where you were, the rancid stench of fear that you smelled on your third brother or second sister was the same odor that trickled from your armpits, the gurgling of their knotted stomachs came from yours too. You shared the churning viscera and the information, you knew that complaining and crying when the blows rained down only made things worse, except for the two youngest who didn't know yet but would soon learn. But that didn't make you a united nation. You never came to anyone else's aid; you had more than enough to do to look out for yourself. You were happy when the blows rained down on your second brother or fourth sister because they were not falling on you. You were happy when night came and with it, respite—up to age twelve if you were a girl, because after that, there was another kind of blackness. And when you finally reached the age of escape, you'd run as fast as your legs could carry you without looking back, without a thought for those who stayed behind.

As for your mother, the woman for whom you'd have to find another name, the catalog of her crimes of omission was so long she should have been locked away in some dungeon instead of growing old peacefully in Florida, in the sun that blushes as it shines on her. She never protected her own flesh and blood from the madman's crazed hands, she never denounced the madman's violence, she carefully closed the door to your room when she came upon the madman raping

you, and she continues to insist that none of it ever happened, that you made it all up, all ten of you. If you ever see her again, which you do not wish for under any circumstances, you'd greet her with the fat end of a baseball bat and keep hitting until one or the other—wood or skull—broke.

SIMON LISTENED to Violette. What else could he do? He listened with all the openness he could muster, waiting for a chance to lead her away from that world, to lead her here, to the living beauty of the present. As she spoke, he clearly visualized the ghost house, its well-kept backyard full of daylilies, the freshly painted toolshed set against the perfectly geometrical cedar hedge; he saw a place fraught with order and control through which the occasional ball would roll, chased by silent children. It was a silent film, thank God, no cries or groans could be heard, and he also saw the swing on which Violette, age twelve, head held high, was swinging, unsmiling, the blood coagulating on her thighs under her long pants, but with such a look of dignity on her young warrior's face that he said to himself, yes, she would pull through.

She *had* pulled through, for now she was telling pieces of that old hell. But a new enemy had reared its head—or perhaps it was the same one, cleverly disguised as cells—just as she thought she'd returned to the ranks of the cured, an aggressive cancer had devoured her breast before devouring itself. There too she would pull through.

He saw her every day, in the morning, before their respective guests latched on to them for the rest of the day. He would come by kayak, and most often she would be sitting on her patio, which she'd transformed into a shady studio by

adding two large umbrellas. She was always about to start writing, and she swore she'd get started as soon as her friends stopped visiting her—and she, inviting them.

Tall Violette who stood almost two meters once she added the high heels, big, tall and small Violette with eyes clear and bright despite all the perversity, brave as a kamikaze plunging headlong toward life instead of death, who swore she'd make it to age eighty, *like Mrs. Szach*, and Simon protested, laughing, *Hold on a second, Lila is nowhere near eighty*, and then he made a quick calculation and fell silent, a bit embarrassed.

All this business about age was getting on his nerves. Take the madman, for example. If he'd lived, today he would be one year older than Simon. He died of a heart attack just as Violette was putting the finishing touches on a lawsuit against him. His premature death left her inconsolable, since it robbed her of justice, to say nothing of revenge. Simon's age, then; no wild Precambrian, but someone who might have attended the same university if Simon had continued with his studies after teachers' college, where they trained people like him, people unmoved by ambition. He couldn't imagine what he might have looked like, neither from the inside nor the outside. Where exactly in his brain had the diseased orders begun blocking out the healthy ones? He couldn't help but see in this headless madman who read Kant in the original, according to Violette, a kind of fallen brother who showed him that monstrosity was within easy reach, horribly accessible.

After each of her dark outbursts, Simon took things in hand with the help of the lake. It would take him about an hour to bring her back into contact with life's enchantment.

Everything had gone well so far: things were busy stirring in this Laurentian July, and not a second went by without something colorful or noisy showing up to pry you away from yourself. Violette's patio was not far from where the loons would strut and stroll, displaying their newest offspring, a single dusty-brown chick. Violette was delighted every time they paddled by, and she would throw them bits of brioche that they barely deigned to glance at. Often a thunderclap would make her jump, then she would break into laughter: it was a belted kingfisher plunging beak-first into the lake, then flapping up to its perch in the dead birch tree, crest askew atop its outsized shaggy head. As for more subtle displays, Simon would point them out to her with a finger, or his binoculars. A gray snake that she'd taken for a stick made its way sinuously across the lake. Clinging to her chaise longue, two dragonflies forming a heart shape copulated behind her. In the bay where they'd set up their fishing camp, two herons didn't move so much as a feather, as avid as gold prospectors, and if she were truly attentive, or really imaginative, not far from their skinny flanks she could pick out the head of a muskrat busily devouring cattails.

Everything that creaked or whistled, everything that piqued your curiosity or pricked your skin, everything that skimmed above or beneath the water in dull or flamboyant livery, perfectly happy to be no more than what it was, in that state of perfect ease that was beauty itself, all those things helped her mend. He would mend her. Someone had broken Violette; someone else would have to mend her. It was simple, an elementary duty: every act of violence calls for a protest in return, a gesture of peace to re-establish the

balance. If that didn't happen, soon humanity would be an uninhabitable place.

When Violette left here, she would be laden with beauty so invasive that she'd have to leave her troubled past behind. Amid all her bad luck, she'd had the good fortune to come here.

"Just your luck," added Marianne with a mocking smile.

If nature was on Simon's side, the same couldn't be said of his own family. Marianne, so understanding, so removed from petty jealousies, was clearly concerned he was overdoing it—or that Violette was overdoing it, it wasn't all that clear. She would mock Simon gently and call him *the damaged-heart man*, or more economically, *Father Teresa*. But lately it seemed to him that she was coming on stronger, she'd scoff at him whenever he mentioned Violette's name. Maybe he mentioned it too often. But it wasn't every day—nor every summer—that you could keep company with a genuine survivor, someone who's been through hell, and who you have a responsibility for, since you'd let it happen. *So what?* said Marianne with annoying bad faith. *Aren't we all survivors of one thing or another?* Simon suspected she was touched more by the pain you find prostrate on a hospital bed than by the kind that belongs to someone who's lived to tell the tale.

You had to admit it: there was nothing ordinary about Violette's pain.

First of all, she was beautiful. As bright and fresh as unblemished fruit, with a guileless laugh that would explode at the tiniest spark. It was hard to believe that her healthy color and twinkling eyes hid such ugly scars. Victims are more credible when they walk around with their heads droop-

ing, scarred by abuse and drugs. Like everyone else, Marianne had melted with empathy at the reports of abused little girls placed in institutions, and finally emerging as if they'd been released from prison, faces permanently scarred by hunger. But Violette was too beautiful to play the victim—and to enjoy any empathy. Worse, when they gathered around the dining table, their daughter Jeanne seemed to be the victim next to Violette's sunny disposition; Jeanne was the pinched, sullen star, though she'd grown up protected by a double thickness of cotton wool. Maybe that particular contrast was hard for a mother to tolerate, maybe Marianne unconsciously resented Violette for relegating her daughter to the shadows, for relegating all women to the shadows.

And Violette spoke so easily about things that were so scandalous. Simon's mistake had been to impose her on the family right from the start of the summer, without thinking of the existing thin skins, Marco and Laurie to begin with, then Loïc and his wife, Marie, and now Jeanne, who'd decided to flee the heat of the city and her husband at the same time. *Oil and water don't mix*, Marianne would say, and when she got sententious, she could be insufferable. Why couldn't their own children, who'd always been wrapped in comfort, let themselves be moved by this seismic tremor? Would a few startling revelations about the scabrous fates of their compatriots, of their sisters in humanity, have such an adverse effect on their own humanity?

Well, they did. Things didn't work out.

Simon thought back bitterly to the last barbecue he invited Violette to, which would indeed be the last. Even before the meal began, Jeanne had put on the sour face of a

clergyman deprived of his cassock—*What's gotten into her anyway?* Simon whispered to Marianne a couple of minutes before the guests arrived, to which Marianne responded with a shrug of her shoulders and the enigmatic utterance, *Women's problems*. And then Violette arrived, bursting with health. At first everything was fine, the chops smelled heavenly of rosemary, the rosé was nicely chilled, the conversation alive. Jérémie sulked in his seat as he waited for permission to leave the table; Jérémie also refused to like Violette. Once he'd gone off to his room to play with the bugs he spent all his time hunting and capturing, only adults were left: three women and one man, all a little high on alcohol. Adult subjects emerged naturally from the digestive vapors, and from Marianne's vague question (*What did we dream about when we were twenty?*). Violette took it upon herself to answer quite precisely and at great length, as she always did, and as no one ever asked her to do. At twenty, Violette worked as an escort in Quebec City, she'd been an escort—that is, a high-priced whore—since age sixteen, ever since she escaped from the house where her father had begun years before to introduce her to the rudiments of the trade by initiating her into all kinds of thrilling games, such as stuffing her vagina with flaming rags that would go out for lack of oxygen, or lending or trading her in exchange for bottles of fine whiskey to old pals who became as inventive as they were insatiable, moved by her youth. She was an escort all right, but careful, she was neither the toy nor the slave of any pimp, she was her own boss, and salted away her earnings systematically. She kept away from hard, expensive drugs and swore she'd leave the business the day she turned twenty-one, or when she'd saved

a hundred thousand dollars, whichever came first. The latter did. In her twentieth year, at age twenty to answer Marianne's question after the rather lengthy digression for which she excused herself, Violette's now well-funded dream was to complete a course in public administration in Montreal, meet a nice guy and, most of all, have at least five children.

Simon, already aware of more than a few such monstrosities, was more saddened than shocked by her confession, delivered in a sweet, calm voice, as matter-of-fact as if she'd been describing a holiday in the Saguenay or a fishing trip—with her father. He'd been even more shocked by Jeanne's reaction. As she listened, Jeanne put on an expression of disbelief, disbelief then open revulsion, resting her temple against her index finger like a disapproving elder, her mouth half-open in a grimace of disgust, as if ready to let fly with a gob of spit. He'd never seen that malevolent expression before, and he wondered in fright where she'd got it from, it certainly wasn't in Marianne's amiable genes. Yet he knew that expression conveyed her superiority over everyone else, and it finally came back to him. In Jeanne's frigid eyes he remembered, down to the smallest twist of her lips, his own older sister Lorraine, dead of a coronary brought on by years of bitterness.

Clearly the family tree had ramifications where you least expected to find them.

Jeanne hadn't stopped at a silent declaration of war. She'd replied with these words: *If I were you, I'd forget about the children*, and as Violette looked on curiously, she added, *Considering the genes you've got*. Simon was livid but not Violette, who was used to tougher opponents. She answered Jeanne in her softest, sweetest voice, *What are you saying? You think*

I'd abuse my children like I was abused, is that what you mean? Simon didn't give his daughter a chance to sink any deeper. *Keep quiet*, he ordered, incensed, which he never was, *keep quiet, will you, you're being stupid!* From then on, there was no way out. Marianne tried by weighing in with her own confessions about her dreams of being a missionary—*When I was twenty I wanted to go to Bangladesh, I even bought my ticket but my parents wouldn't let me go*—but nobody was listening to poor plucky Marianne. With tears in her eyes, Jeanne left the table and retreated to the bathroom. Violette kept her head lowered in an ostentatious smile, and now Simon was listening to the loons on the lake, which had raised their voices in turn, and which overwhelmed everything with their loving flights of song.

The week before, with Loïc and Marie, it hadn't been much better. None of the kind of acid debates that women seem to prefer, but something openly virile that had gotten Simon's back up. Loïc made a pass at Violette. Right in front of Marie and everyone else, he wrapped Violette in his honeyed smiles and disappeared down her cleavage, and when it came time to say goodnight, he kissed her on the mouth with revolting familiarity.

That was the last invitation she would get. Instead, Simon would pull up in front of her cottage in his kayak, and their hour of conversation would take place early in the morning, she on the terrace in the shade of her umbrellas with a mug of coffee in hand, and a similar mug between Simon's knees as he floated in his watercraft. Contact was simple and immediate. She always talked about *it* for a while, it was part of finding her way into her story, and fanning the flames of her

coming out before putting it to paper. But she talked about it less and less each time. More and more she waited for Simon to teach her something, to hand her another piece of the puzzle that lay scattered around her.

“What’s a muskrat, exactly?” she asked.

“It’s got a head like a small beaver and the body of a little groundhog with a big rat’s tail,” rhapsodized Simon, “and it can float—imagine that—just as well as it walks!”

She picked up the binoculars again and respectfully contemplated the tiny blur gnawing on the cattails in the herons’ bay, which in reality was a tree stump, since Simon had problems with distance vision.

“Is that a cat we’re hearing?” she asked.

“No, a blue jay,” he corrected her.

“What bird is that singing?” she asked.

“It’s a cicada,” he said.

“And what insect is making that noise?”

He laughed, but softly, to keep from upsetting her.

“It’s a frog.”

It was marvelous. She knew nothing about the world he knew by heart, and he felt like a benevolent God the Father guiding a newborn through the labyrinth of creation.

This morning the subject was deer. She loved deer or, more to the point, the silky idea she had of them, since she’d never met one in the flesh.

“Why don’t they come down to the lake?” she wondered.

“They do. Their tracks are everywhere.”

He had to pry himself out of his kayak and walk on dry land to point out the hard, tiny balls that sprouted like dandelions among the pebbles of the path.

“That there? That’s not cat turds?”

She knelt down deferentially. Now that the stuff came from deer, it was completely different, she got down on all fours, as if to pluck the precious excrement and string them—who knows?—on a necklace. Then she jumped to her feet because Simon was pointing out something else, another irrefutable proof of their abundance. The perfectly geometrical gray belt that stretched around the lake, as though it had been sliced by a surveyor’s knife, and which could be observed, Simon promised her, along the banks of most northern lakes.

Come winter, as soon as the ice has set, hordes of deer come out of the woods and venture out onto the lake. How do they know the ice will hold them? They know, and that’s that. In the spring, you’ll never come across the carcass of a drowned deer—the odd moose carcass, yes, but that’s another story (one of Lila’s stories that he was not about to tell as if it were his). Come winter, then, moving in small, close-knit groups near the shore, the deer are happy. At last they can get to the low-hanging cedar branches, the freshest and most tender, the ones that are born in the water and out of their reach during the summer. They eat and eat until they’re ready to burst, necks stretched as far as they can go, making a meter of nicely trimmed meals, a meter of bare boughs. Afterward, the base of the cedars stays that way, stripped, too bad for them and their wintertime gorging, for decades until the trees grow back again, if they ever do. The next winter, the deer have to find another virgin lake where they can start their tree-stripping all over again.

Violette listened, totally under his spell, after which she wanted to know if Simon had seen them with his own eyes,

their handsome tawny coats dotting the perfect whiteness of the snow. Simon had to say yes so as not to break the spell.

He could understand the power of the spell. He himself could not escape the age-old seductive power of the deer, which seemed to be written in the genetic makeup of all human beings. Such grace in animal form, such utterly innocent grace. Some men tried to suppress that seductive power by shooting the deer, transforming them into hunting trophies and roasts, but it never really worked, for their grace remained whole, inexplicable and mysterious. Even today, to encounter a deer inadvertently on a trail was an acute, almost painful experience for him, as if he were suddenly immersed in his own primitive nature, in the intuition of the total freedom that could be his if he did not continuously undermine it.

It was impossible for her not to encounter deer. It was written, like a promise, that and the fact that she would not be disappointed, no matter how great her expectations.

They had pushed the limits of their usual shared space. It was almost nine o'clock, and Violette offered Simon another mug of coffee that he accepted despite his better judgment, since his nerves were already buzzing with caffeine. Just then a mouse-gray BMW sped down the driveway to Violette's cottage, flattening the deer droppings, and came to a stop just behind them. A guest who couldn't wait for the weekend. It was a bit early to intrude on people, thought Simon, but Violette welcomed the interruption enthusiastically, with a resounding *Christophe!* to greet the young man who stepped from the car. He pulled himself from the vehicle as if in slow motion. He was tall and seemed to be getting taller, with blond hair, an open face and pale eyes. Simon could see he

was handsome, which irritated him, though nothing could be more normal than for Violette to keep company with men as spectacular as she was.

“My brother Christophe,” said Violette. The young man squeezed, or rather crushed, Simon’s hand as he looked him straight in the eye as if taking a test, or putting Simon to one.

Brother and sister did not kiss. They launched into a discussion about who would be there soon, Christophe’s wife and children arriving shortly in another car, inevitably caught in traffic, while he’d been lucky enough to get out of the hospital the day before—*Oh! You were in the hospital?* said Simon and Violette burst out laughing. *I’m a doctor*, said the young man. *Orthopedic surgeon*, he added.

Simon gave him a sidelong glance. This young man in the powder-blue shirt with the perfect Brad Pitt face was Violette’s brother, the victim brother schooled by years of punches to the head and hammer blows to the feet, maybe even repeatedly sodomized, and look what had become of him.

He felt like applauding.

“I brought champagne!” Christophe announced happily as he pulled out a carton of six bottles from the trunk, depositing them in his sister’s hands as she bent beneath the weight.

His sister, his little sister. At least two years younger. They had the same light coloring and delicate features, and something more. Now that he was near, Violette began to move too much, tugging at her scarf, laughing too long. He talked fast as well, still standing by his car; you couldn’t understand half of what he was saying in that overly lively way of his, they were still working on the highway, little Mégane had been colicky last night and they were afraid they wouldn’t be

able to make it, he said everything with such intensity, laughing all the while so wholeheartedly that you were sorry to have missed the punch line. Violette broke into laughter for no apparent reason too. They looked as though they were performing for the hard-of-hearing or the mentally retarded who needed to have their t's crossed and their i's dotted. Or maybe that was their way of letting the only outsider there know he wasn't wanted.

He left, since he had to. He would have stayed to observe them, and try to touch their shared experience. What kind of relationship had they cobbled together? He vaguely promised to drop by for a glass of champagne that evening, though he suspected he would do no such thing.

He'd said, *I'll be by for some champagne*—and they'd laughed as if he'd committed a slip of the tongue.

He would tell Violette another time—early tomorrow morning, perhaps, while that prodigious brother of hers and his family were still asleep. He would tell her that “champagne” is the old French word for *campagne*, or the country. The same clear effervescence. The same world, when you got down to it. Today, who knew that in the Middle Ages, everything that was not the town, everything that was wild territory, was called *champagne*? The *champignons* grew in champagne, the champagne was lovely in July. Later on, the sound of the letters changed, except in the region around Paris where the original word hung on as a place-name—and all the while devising the bubbly nectar that would make a name for itself.

Lila had told him that story, centuries ago. Lila knew surprising things like that. After all, she had to have something

to show for all those years, all those books read, all the experience—those nearly eighty years.

He began paddling against the wind that had sprung up and was blowing from the east, as strong as a mistral. The radio declared that the sticky heat would be swept away by the end of the day, and everyone would breathe easier. Which meant that the hot core of summer was about to end, and Simon was already missing it. What good is summer if it doesn't smother us with heat to remind us of the fertile tropics that all men have known at one time or another, if only through the memory of a handful of their molecules? A stronger wave slapped him with spray and, turning his head, he saw Lila's figure, sitting on the boathouse dock waiting for something—for him, who else?

He would not go. Not today. And not tomorrow either. There was too much to do at home, too many mouths to feed, and since Marianne was at the cottage for a change, he had to pay attention to her, not to mention Jeanne who'd be leaving soon and with whom he hadn't had time for anything. And besides, if he hadn't turned his head just then, he would never have seen Lila. If he kept his back straight the way he was doing now, he could forget he'd ever seen her and hurry home, which was the normal thing for him to do.

But at the last minute, as the loons' islet was about to slip from view, he felt ashamed. Lies were contemptible weapons, and here was one. He turned and raised his paddle as a sign of recognition, but Lila sat motionless in her chair, a picture of disapproval. She was angry with him for sure, for not dropping by her place all week—for the last two weeks, to tell the truth.

He hadn't wanted things to change. He didn't like it when they did, especially warm, long-standing friendships. Besides, who had changed? He or she? Or worse, something between them they had no power over, a bridge that once let them move toward one another and that was now falling away because it had always been built of smoke?

The last time, she'd been in exceptional shape. It was mid-July, at the high point of the heat she could not stand, and there she was, brimming with friendliness and enthusiasm. She'd had nothing but good things to say about her colorless cousin who'd departed after clinging to her for two weeks, and about her new tenant, Violette, who wakened her at night with her earsplitting nightmares, and even for that loathsome Jeff Clémont who'd twice disturbed their calm waters with his Jet Ski, and whom she defended with unusual tolerance.

"He's young, he'll calm down. Besides, he's just bought a catamaran."

When Simon revealed this self-same Clémont's scheme to grab a piece of their lake, she laughed.

"I know," she said, fluttering her eyelashes like a girl. "I know he's ready to pay me a million dollars for it."

This new Lila was charming, effervescent to the core and lightly clad for a change, which only accentuated the slender perfection of her figure. He couldn't remember her ever being so amiably disposed toward everyone, including himself. She smiled as if it came naturally to her, and good God, wasn't that a bathing suit she exhibited under her open shirt, far more provocative and with more cleavage than her customary nudity?

No, she had never been so charming.

Yet the charm didn't work on him. He looked into her eyes and found the intimacy of a caress there, but he couldn't see her as he had before. Now she was just *Mrs. Szach*. *Old Mrs. Szach*, as Violette called her.

What had gone wrong? What had happened to him? He felt so uncomfortable hearing her clucking and cooing like that, making advances, she who never made advances on anyone, his feeling of malaise deepening at the sorry spectacle of her capitulation.

The capitulation of old age.

But he paddled on toward her, his heart filled with chagrin, he paddled over to greet her at least and console her for what he felt or, more properly, no longer felt for her, and as he pulled alongside the dock he realized that what he'd taken for Lila was a beach towel thrown over a wooden deck chair.

violette

THE BOOK WOULD have everything. Horrific pages that would drive the reader to nausea, but also flights of insolent joy that would electrify. Beyond the avalanche of abuse, not a single detail of which would be spared, the lust for life would remain intact in the direst torments, the fervor and the untamed love of life that was her finest talent.

She heard the door of the BMW slam shut in the silence of dusk. All of Christophe's resentment was concentrated in that metallic thud, and Violette smiled indulgently. If he wanted to fulminate, well then, let him. Let him huff and puff and choke in his own lava.

She would exhume everything, bring it all to light. The dark life that lay behind, but also the present. She would speak of the small delightful things that now were hers. The lake at her feet, calm and beautiful as a deserted airport, on which she could walk if only she had faith. The clear ring in the depths of the water, cleansed by the female sunfish that would bravely nip your toes should you venture too close. Yes, she would bear witness to the tiny lives shimmering beside

her: in the water the sunfish eggs that the female would shake from her fins, and in the air the blue-green damselflies connected one to the other like two-storied helicopters.

The BMW's motor had yet to sound off. She imagined Christophe bent over the dashboard checking the gauges, or poring over the road map of the Laurentians for one final glance at the return route. He was so hyper, so obsessive. You'd think he'd come all this way with his case of champagne to intimidate her. Poor Christophe, cowardly as a deer.

She finally realized why there weren't any deer in the vicinity. It was because of the lynx. The lynx chased them away. Every day, in late afternoon, at about this time, the lynx made its way through the woods with its wild creature's snarl. At first, its monstrous hissing followed it with such velocity that she thought it was flying, it was some kind of devilish owl come to torment her. But one evening she'd caught sight of half a fast-moving body between the spruces, half a yellowish body. When Simon heard this, he came back with an excited explanation: it had to be a bobcat, otherwise known as a lynx. He'd never actually encountered a lynx *in person*, mind you. But it was one more valuable asset to add to their collective treasure house, and an unbelievable bit of good luck for her, because lynx were rare, a treat for the eyes, lovers of hares and mice but not of human bodies, which they fled like the plague. Ever since, she had lain in wait at the hour of the lynx with rapt apprehension. It was a real wild animal, after all, a good-sized wildcat that paid her the honor of coming to terrify her once a day. Thanks to Simon, she'd been initiated into one more mystery of nature. Simon was her guide and at the same time the first receptacle of her most repellent confessions. What would she ever have done without Simon?

Without Shyman. She called him that as a joke sometimes: Shyman. It was a good fit, even if he really didn't appreciate such double-edged compliments. *Cut it out*, he said in false irritation, *there's nothing shy about me, I'm just a manipulator who does what he can to avoid conflicts.*

In her book, she would write about the lynx and about Simon too. Her book would be like life: a hospitable uterus in which everything would flourish, the beautiful and the ugly. Those who loved life would love her book, despite its inevitable atrocities. Do we blame life for sheltering mad-men? Do we blame the ocean for being poisoned by oil spills? Her daughter would love her book most of all, her daughter would be infected by her love of life, her daughter Laure, to whom her book would be dedicated.

The doctors were categorical: after months of sterilizing cancer treatments, her ovaries had begun to produce again. Doctors are terrified of everything, so they were devastated. Not her. Those indomitable ovaries of hers, her faithful allies, hidden deep in her body, were patiently beginning to function again, patiently beginning to deposit, like bottles thrown into the sea, the eggs that sought nothing more than a warm, moist encounter to germinate, a dribble of seed to burst forth into a little girl, to begin the invention of her daughter Laure. . .

When she turned her head, she saw Christophe moving silently toward her, silent on his sponge-rubber sandals.

Exasperated, she stiffened. Another pointless effort to be made. Unless she ignored him completely. Unless he'd come back to look for an item he'd forgotten, one of his Lacoste T-shirts slipped surreptitiously under the sofa, his Gucci sunglasses misplaced among the pebbles of the shore.

He sat on the patio, across from her.

"Violette," he sighed. "Violette, I beg you. Have you thought about Mégane, about Derek?"

He sought out her eyes, but would gain nothing.

"What kind of a future are you giving them? You say you love them, but you're ready to sully them!"

Poor Christophe. That's what she had to remind herself. Not to hold it against him for using his own children to cry poor, not to hold his pathetic spinelessness against him.

"I love them," she said, mastering the violence of her voice. "And I know that later on, they'll be proud of me."

"Are you crazy? They'll hate you. They'll suffer on account of you. You're dragging their name through the mud. You think you can call yourself Prislair after that?"

"Then they can change their name!" Violette burst out.

He got to his feet, and she followed suit.

"Turn the page! He's dead, Violette."

"If he's dead, how come I dream about him every night? How come he keeps sticking his big prick into me, every night?"

This time, he turned his eyes away, toward a more neutral object, the terrace railing, the back of the chair, but not the lake: it was too peaceful to absorb his distress.

And I dream, Violette went on, about digging him up and chopping his rotten remains into little pieces. And when I see your gold tooth, Christophe, that handsome gold molar of yours, I see him yanking out our teeth with those big rusty pliers of his, and when I see the water, the lovely water of the lake, I'm back with my head in the toilet bowl full of piss, you remember how he liked to hold our heads in the toilet full of piss?

“Shut up!” Christophe cut her off.

He watched her with true fear in his eyes.

“You’re really sick if you haven’t forgotten all that.”

The birds and the insects were raising a ruckus all around them, and Violette made an effort to return to them. She sat down again. She decided that was enough, everything had been said.

“Okay,” Christophe muttered. “Fine. Listen. If you insist . . . if you’ve absolutely got to . . . to talk about . . . that . . . But at least, for God’s sake, change the names in your book! That’s all I ask. Change your name. Change his name.”

“No. I’m going after his name, don’t you get it?”

“Damn it, Violette! His name is MY name! We’re the only Prislairs in the book! I’ve made a name for myself, I want to carry it on and hand it on PROUDLY! I can’t believe it, my name’s going to end up in some supermarket tabloid!”

Get out, Christophe. She stretched out on the deck chair with her eyes shut, and with all her strength she sent him the silent injunction he eventually grasped. *Get out, Dr. Prislair, get the hell out of here.*

“You’re the only one,” he added. “The only one who keeps stirring up all that shit. Everyone else, Janik, Martin, Simone, everyone . . . We’ve turned the page. We’re living. We’re seeing Mom again. On Sunday we’re eating dinner with Mom.”

“WHAT?”

She couldn’t believe what she’d heard, but yes, she had to. Christophe’s expression, embarrassed and stubborn, confirmed the next family aberration. Janik, Martin, Simone, Florence and the others, and poor Christophe, all with their pinkies in the air nibbling on canapés and sipping dry

martinis with Her, the woman who'd held the madman's hand while he tortured them, all united in a conspiracy of psychopathic silence. . . She jumped to her feet as if a swarm of wasps had stung her, something in her wanted to kill and she ordered objects to rain down on Christophe, the flower-pot, the pitcher, the glasses, the chairs and even the portable grill that weighed a good hundred pounds, until he fled in a panic toward the BMW and started it up with no hesitation this time, throwing up a cloud of gravel in the parking area before dusk swallowed him up.

It took her an hour to calm down, and three-quarters of a bottle of champagne, minus the glass. She came back and sat down on the patio in the last glimmer of sunlight. The animals—birds, insects or mammals?—shrieked and chattered all around her with an intensity that suppressed the sounds within. She found herself smiling.

Okay. Where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?

Her daughter Laure. It was essential that her daughter Laure begin her uterine life this very summer, before the doctors could carve up her reproductive apparatus with their filthy scalpels. (*My dear Ms. Prislair. . . harmful production of estrogen, high hormone levels, proliferation of diseased cells urgent measures necessary blablabla.*)

With an embryo in her belly, no one would start slicing up dear Ms. Prislair.

She would live. She knew she would live. Her older sister Karine, with her the only one who refused to forget their dirty past, had died of breast cancer five years ago because she could not find an outlet for the dirt of her memories. But

she was something else. From the start, she looked disease right in the eye, she knew everything about her treacherous enemy, its sudden turnarounds, its surprise attacks. She knew that her disease, like Christophe, abhorred the very idea of writing, of explicit confessions that untie all knots. Not only was she going to live, but she was going to give life.

She picked up her fine-tipped marker and opened her notebook. *My dearest Laure. My darling daughter. Read this to the end even if it rips your heart out.* That was all. She hadn't managed to begin her tale yet, but tonight would be the night, tonight she was possessed by the force that gives life—or kills. *I was five years old, I was blond and pretty as a picture, just like you, when I realized I was alone, and I had to be strong.*

A hissing, spitting sound, close by. She lifted her head, probing the gloom. Her heart pounded but she decided to confront her fear. She rose. The lynx was nearby, concealed by a small stand of trees. Soon it would come into the open and reveal itself for the first time. She moved toward it, since Simon said there was nothing to fear. She drew nearer and the growling increased in fright and viciousness. Flushed from cover, the animal leaped in front of her with the speed and grace of wild creatures, its chamois-brown coat flashing, neither lynx nor bobcat. Violette, heartbroken, watched as it vanished into the underbrush on its slender deer's legs.

august



the arrival of the king

DAY I

THE CATERPILLAR ate and ate. That was all it knew how to do: eat and excrete. A layer of tiny black deposits covered the bottom of the glass jar, in a quantity doubly proportional to the number of milkweed leaves ingested. Jérémie had been feeding it for a week now, and he was beginning to find the experiment repetitious. It was a handsome caterpillar, no doubt about it: yellow and white bands clearly separated by black stripes, plump enough to command respect and keep probing fingers at a distance. But there was a limit. It wasn't as lively as, say, a cat or a goldfish. Really, it was an intermediate kind of being, with no family and no name, seeing as it had fourteen legs. One day it would have six legs, the regulation number required to be an insect, but in the meantime, what was it? Maybe it had decided to stay this way in the jar, with full room and board, perpetually half-complete.

It had been raining for days. Since the beginning of August, in fact, which could not have been a coincidence. Jérémie had abandoned his expeditions into the woods despite

the rubberized armor his uncle had given him: gumboots that came up to the knee and a cape with a hood that guaranteed you invulnerability. Snazzy get-up, especially the cape. He would put it on and stay in his room, sweating stoically beneath the hood. The outside looked too much like the way he felt inside, a swollen gray abscess full to bursting, oozing with pus instead of spurting it out once and for all.

Uncle Simon was just as moody. He paced the living room, or sprawled on the sofa, eyes on a book he did not read, asking Jérémie if he wanted to play a game whenever he was silly enough to venture out of his room; Simon was bored to death. A kayakoholic about to fall off the wagon. Whenever there was a break in the clouds, he rushed outside to mount his steed, but the sun wouldn't last and soon he would be back indoors, soaked and shivering without having made it onto the water. Sorceress Szach was the only one who enjoyed the lousy weather, since mushrooms were bursting out of the ground like an epidemic, and all you had to do was look out of the window to spot new eruptions mottling the grass, the roots and stumps of trees.

Jérémie had been deceived. He'd carried out his mission heroically, gathered pine needles, round pebbles, milkweed leaves since they were called for, he'd saved a dragonfly from drowning. . . The only thing still missing was the porcupine quill. How was he supposed to find a porcupine quill in that huge haystack of a forest? How was he supposed to meet a porcupine that would be amiable enough to give him one of its quills? Time was flying, the month of August was plunging ever more deeply into its tunnel, and he was missing out on ss's incantation. *May I get through the month of August*

safely. The *safely* gave him the shivers, he saw packs of black clouds and threatening bears making straight for him to *petrify* him. Add one more unsafe thing and it was over, there was no getting through the month of August.

Already, the pack of black clouds had arrived.

ss had deceived him, she'd given him an incantation that was impossible to activate, which meant he could not perfect his own. Now it was too late. The ant episode, that was it; she was making him pay for it dearly. Or maybe it was the other crime, the real crime, the one that called out for great punishment.

Lost in gloomy thoughts, he didn't see the action getting underway in the jar. When he half-glanced at it, as he did every hour, he caught the caterpillar crawling fast and furiously over the leaves, rushing up and down the stems in high gear until it collided with the mesh that blocked the mouth of the jar. Then it would begin all over again, climb up, climb down, crawl, crawl, climb up, climb down, touch the mesh and then start all over again. You didn't need advanced knowledge about caterpillar language to figure out it was looking for the exit. Jérémie crouched down. *What will you give me if I set you free?* The caterpillar stopped on the piece of mesh, rose on its fourth pair of legs, since the first three were mandibles that were only good for eating with and, body half extended, nodded its head as if to signify something. Since he had nothing to lose, Jérémie spoke his thoughts with all the conviction he could muster: *Caterpillar, if you have the power, let the twentieth of August never come.*

It began to undulate and spin a fine silk-like thread. Head bobbing in a figure-eight movement, it wove the whitish

thread with its mandible feet, which must have been an answer, maybe even an exhortation to keep up with the winning formula—*let the twentieth of August never come . . . let the twentieth of August . . .* With the spinning thread and the kneading with its legs, a small white ball took shape, then the caterpillar attached it to the mesh and with no further ado turned its back on Jérémie and stuck its hind end into its homemade nest. Jérémie realized then that this frenzy of activity had nothing to do with his own problems. He was witnessing the magical transformation of a crawling caterpillar into the King of the Butterflies, compared to which all the miserable human worries about *safety* cut a sorry figure. Deliberately, as if in slow motion, its four suction-cup legs detached from the mesh and the caterpillar let itself hang by its tail. Five minutes later it had formed a perfect J, body straight down and head curved up toward its stomach.

Jérémie picked up a marker and a sheet of paper to draw and immortalize this funny living J. Then he waited. Something extraordinary would emerge from the abandoned abdomen, a winged creature much larger than the husk that enveloped it. He waited and waited, but nothing happened. After all its athletic contortions, the caterpillar hung inert at the end of its thread as if at the end of its rope. Jérémie stayed close, watching over its sleep, then fell asleep himself, head on the arm that had done the sketching, lulled by the soft thrumming of the rain on the window.

DAY 2

As luck would have it, it was still raining. That gave him an excuse to stay in his room, after having acquitted himself of

the regulation breakfast in the company of Uncle Simon, of course. The only way to get rid of his uncle, or any adult for that matter, was to submit quickly to whatever he was asked without wasting any time on complaints. Without batting an eyelash, Jérémie wolfed down a bowl of granola rich in health-giving ingredients, mixed with a pot of yogurt with real peaches (a whole peach, peeled with exasperating slowness by his uncle) and two pieces of raisin-bread toast slathered with gobs of the obligatory strawberry jam, which his uncle had made at the beginning of the summer. He wasn't hungry, but what was the use of trying to convince anyone of that, he'd only risk attracting the kind of concern that would be even more detrimental in terms of wasted time. Fifteen minutes after breakfast, he was free again—he'd dodged a third glass of milk by announcing he'd vomit it up as soon as he drank it—to rush back to his room, now his laboratory, and fling himself down on the cushion next to the jar. Fortunately he'd missed nothing; the show offered nothing new since he'd left it.

For hours, the caterpillar had been riven by a series of breathtaking tremors and trances; one did not know whether to call them pain or some new emotion not yet catalogued. But a feverish intensity was at work, a combative intensity worthy of respect. The head at the end of the J crinkled as if it wanted to turn in upon itself, pulling hard at an invisible thread, while the rest of its body writhed and expanded. Something was going on inside; the caterpillar was possessed by another being that was pushing and shoving from within, obeying its demented directives. If only he could have gotten into those supercharged insides. He tried to point a

magnifying glass at the caterpillar, regretted not having a microscope, tried to believe that his pen was a magic wand with bionic viewing powers, but nothing could penetrate the yellow and black and opaque white of its skin. He was tempted to drop the kid gloves and slice through that squishy tube with a sharp-pointed pen or a letter opener just to see what was going on inside, but Jérémie knew if he did that, he'd bring the magic show to a halt, and with it, everything that was secretly throbbing inside. Besides, he knew he would find nothing inside, no formed, recognizable creature, and that was the most troubling thing: he was touching the mysterious realm between two worlds, in which an indecipherable event was taking place—something was disappearing, pushed out by something else that had not yet appeared.

Simon came barging through the door, excusing himself, cordless phone and, so Jérémie thought, Laurie's voice in hand. Since she'd found out that Marco called evenings, she called mornings. Not only caterpillars held opposing forces inside. Simon handed him the phone with a knowing wink, then changed his mind. *Want me to say you're outside?* he whispered, stuffing the set under his arm. But Jérémie shook his head with a distant smile—better to deal with the inevitable, in keeping to the rules for saving time.

Most often, when it came to Laurie and Marco, he managed to stay out of the fray. Whatever happened, he would never be a caterpillar, never a soft, compliant body that others could torment from inside. Nothing would ever possess him, and no one either.

This time, it was Marco.

Guess what, Jer? he said with his evening voice, full of promises and excitement.

Jérémie sat down, ready for lengthy oratorical meanderings, not necessarily boring, but often unpredictable and worrisome. What essential information did Marco have this morning to win him over to his side? Just then Jérémie noticed that the caterpillar's tail was turning transparent so he could see inside it, and inside, there was a distinct body, a globe-like body being born.

We're going on tour: Gaspé, Percé, Kalamazoo, Chicago, Denver. . .

The caterpillar's colors were fading, then all at once, they vanished. A black line appeared on its back, running from head to tail.

What an incredible opportunity! We'll be playing for thousands of people. . . Are you there? Jer? . . .

It was time to throw a few crumbs so the conversation could come to its natural end. *Yes, yes*, said Jérémie, and Marco immediately chimed in, *I'll call you as often as I can, it won't change anything for you since Laurie was going to take you this fall. . .*

It was as if the caterpillar, exhausted by its violent contractions, was trying to escape its own body, thrusting its head into what passed for its shoulders. Then its contractions turned into a kind of rhythmic pulsation, its antennae went limp and its head dropped, lifeless. Now the caterpillar was as straight as the letter I.

"My caterpillar died!" Jérémie cried.

"Your what?"

No, life was present more than ever, the body within was expanding, sloughing off the old skin plaque after plaque, wriggling to force the old husk up over its back where it tore apart like a dress. The yellow and black and white skin, once

so vivid, now the gray of old cellophane, fell to the bottom of the jar. A green body appeared, ringed with pale yellow stripes and marked with tiny yellow dots, writhing with inner energy. Someone else was there within, pulling the strings of metamorphosis. The King. It could only be the King, hidden beneath that disgusting, greenish creature, issuing orders from the tips of his invisible wings.

“What did you say was dead?” said Marco, alarmed.

Marco got upset easily, dragging others with him, including Jérémie, who suddenly remembered that he’d just heard something monstrous, his father was running out on him, leaving him alone to stand against the looming catastrophe, the August 20 wave coming ever nearer.

“I want to go with you!” he begged. It was all he had left, he could feel it, a strident voice calling out, *Take me with you!*

He could sense Marco’s turmoil at the other end of the line, trying to swallow back something impossible to say, and that gave him a brief instant of pleasure, brief because there was no victory in exploiting the depleted soil where only hurtful, warped things could grow.

“Jer,” Marco stammered, “it’s the start of school. . . .”

You can’t miss a month of school. . . . I’ll be away six weeks. . . . And what about Laurie? Poor Marco was so desperate that Jérémie was tempted to stop the bleeding, as he usually did, but this time a mean, unhappy upsurge boiled up from inside, and he felt like casting his father into the fire. He did his best to screw up Marco’s day: he hung up without a word.

But that revenge didn’t loosen the weight on him, far from it; he felt twice as depressed as before and sapped by a sense of disgust that made him want to grab what the caterpillar

had become and deliberately crush it. The green thing was still quivering in a movement that was not its own, and just as Jérémie was about to remove the piece of mesh from the jar from which the insect hung defenseless, the austere face of ss loomed up in his mind like a dire warning. He replaced the mesh without touching its limp boarder, feeling better still because Uncle Simon was standing motionless in the doorway, watching him without a smile. Once again he'd forgotten to close his door and keep out adult curiosity. Too bad, he'd get his revenge later against something inanimate.

"What's the matter?" asked Simon.

"Nothing," said Jérémie.

His uncle didn't push it. He was dressed for going out, wearing rubber boots and a blue raincoat. Clearly there was something else on his mind.

"Come with me. Let's go and pick some blueberries."

"I don't feel like it," grumbled Jérémie.

"Come anyway, you'll learn to like it."

It was an order.

Outside the rain had stopped, but a new watery state had settled in, unbeknownst to Jérémie and his caterpillar as they'd been curled up in their cocoons. The trees bent under the weight of water, the lake mist joined the low sky, humidity had made a body for itself, a giant body saturated with odors and wispy fingers of smoke that decomposed and recomposed as you moved through it. Everything it touched was drenched: plants, insects and humans. It wasn't unpleasant, and Jérémie walked along, squishing for all he was worth in his magnificent boots, enjoying them in their optimum environment at last, and he sniffed inquiringly, for in this upsurge

of fluid smells lurked one muskier than the others, and undeniably suspicious. It could only be the scent of Yew Wood or Centaur. He was mentally leafing through his knowledge of witchcraft to identify the monster that had deposited its scent and even tufts of fur on the spruce branches when his uncle grabbed him by the elbow and steered him in a more mundane direction.

“We’re going to the meadow,” he decreed.

“The pot meadow?” Jérémie retorted.

Simon threw him a searching look and kept his silence for a moment.

“Okay,” he admitted, straightforward. “It’s cannabis for therapeutic purposes, but I see you can’t tell the difference.”

His hand gripped Jérémie’s elbow tighter.

“Are you telling me you’ve started smoking or eating my medication, you little raccoon?”

“Me?” Jérémie piped up indignantly. “Never. Ugh!”

That reassured Simon, who feared the old adage *Like father, like son* more than anything else when it came to Jérémie or, really, to Marco. He handed Jérémie one of the jars to be filled, wildly outsized when you considered the possible harvest of tiny invisible berries scattered in the underbrush. Simon leaned first over one bush, then another, each bent low under the weight of two blueberries each. At that rate, they’d spend the rest of the month here.

Jérémie soon lost sight of him. Now he could get down to his own business, which consisted of tearing up plants and digging in the ground and even lying down at moss level in his super cape to lay hands on treasures far less bland than blueberries. Several small beetles rushed through his fingers

in a panic. Two mosquitoes received the exemplary punishment of the Great Crushing for having dared to bite him on the neck. Winged ants landed on his legs: three, five, soon ten, then he saw they were everywhere, emerging from tiny mounds of sand. Young queens. It was the time of young queens, driven from the nest by their sisters the workers and sent on a mission to establish colonies farther afield, stumbling over the new wings that they didn't quite know how to use, colliding with each other, losing their way in the tall grass, then darting off in zigzag patterns that landed them two times out of three in a bird's beak.

When his uncle came back, he was brandishing a jar two-thirds full, who knows where he'd found the berries. He was in too good a mood to reprimand Jérémie for his dismal harvest. His eyes were shining and he had something new on his mind.

"Let's take the blueberries to Violette," he suggested.

"Why not to Mrs. Szach?" Jérémie counterattacked.

There was a flutter of embarrassment in his uncle's eyes.

"Lila doesn't like blueberries," he said.

Simon's mind was made up, but he didn't protest when Jérémie claimed he was too tired to go to the scarf girl's house. With a smile, he told him to go straight back to the cottage to rest, he'd be there sooner than later to make him pancakes with these fabulous blueberries, then he hurried off, dancing in the direction that made up his mind, relieved not to have anyone underfoot.

Jérémie moved toward the house, dragging his feet, short-circuited by the return to somber reality. How could he be happy when the end of the world was about to befall him? *May the twentieth of August . . .* He searched for a target for his

incantation, then it slipped away because too much around him was clamoring for room. Take that humming sound, the real loud one he heard just then from far away, and high above.

Above him, a noisy, ragged-edged cloud buzzed through the humid air, moving up and down, directionless and dangerous for anyone who might be in the way.

A swarm of wasps.

Jérémie threw himself to the ground, just in case. He remembered what he'd read in ss's book, and now he looked on respectfully as the cloud moved away, as close-knit as a loving family.

It was another of those king and queen stories. A young queen was replacing an old one in a bloodbath, like in all good stories.

The queen lays eggs. She knows the needs of her realm. She ceaselessly replaces the dead and wounded population, lays a small number of drones to carry out the sexual tasks, and lays hundreds and hundreds of workers, the cheap labor that the feeding and the protection of the realm depends on. Then comes a time when she begins to lay queens, queens-to-be, in cells much larger than normal ones. How does she know that those eggs transmit royal blood, but not others, how does she know what makes a queen a queen? She knows, and that's that. And she also knows what will happen next. Soon a young queen will awaken and emerge from her egg; she is the first, and the first of the young queens to awaken turns on the others and kills them in the bud. It lasts only a moment, this horrible and fantastic event. From her luxurious rooms, the old queen hears the carnage, the spouting of

liquids and flesh being slaughtered close at hand, and finally, when she can no longer hear anything, that means only one is left, she who will rule over the realm. The old queen knows then that she has become an old queen. She rallies half the workers that have remained faithful to her, and abandons the hive to the heiress before flying off to found a new dynasty elsewhere. She is the one flying over your head, surrounded by her sword-bearing army.

All those tiny sticky or shelled lives, those astonishing little lives. Bugs. They knew what they had to do, and they did it impeccably.

Suddenly Jérémie thought of his caterpillar, and he ran toward his room. He'd been outside too long, and what if he missed a spectacular event, like two creatures tearing at one another to lay hands on the quivering green body, if two pretenders to the throne were in his room instead of one . . .

At first glance, nothing had changed inside the jar.

Except that the green body attached to the mesh had stopped moving.

Jérémie unscrewed the lid of the jar to get a closer look. Not only was it not moving, it had become as hard and seamless as a stone. A satiny pale-green stone, stamped with nine golden dots, pure gold.

He prodded the object circumspectly. A jewel, a precious stone. And it was alive, holding within it someone of royal blood who was still asleep.

What kind of relationship could he establish with this minuscule condensation of grandeur? Ask favors of it, or pay it tribute?

Long live the King, he murmured. *Long live the King!*

DAY 11

Unexpectedly, things began to look up.

In his hands he held a porcupine quill. Sharp at both ends, fifteen centimeters long, the last essential ingredient in his incantation, and the kind of pointed object that no one would like to have thrown in his face. *They don't throw their quills*, Sorceress Szach impatiently corrected him, *that's just an urban legend. They roll up in a ball and everything else follows—the quill follows whoever touches it.*

The situation was promising, never had his luck soared so high. Not only had he finally laid hands on a porcupine quill, the last essential ingredient of his ultimate incantation, but this last essential ingredient had been given to him by the head sorceress herself. And not only had the head sorceress given him the last ingredient essential to the ultimate incantation but—unsafe incidents watch out!—he would be staying in her house.

For a day and a half, almost two days separated by a long night, Mrs. Szach would be looking after him. Simon would be sleeping outside, as he did every midsummer. It was shooting star season, and his uncle would camp on the shore of a small, wild lake where the shooting stars were particularly visible; for him, to miss the experience would be like not having lived. He'd invited Violette. Of course he'd invited Jérémie too, with hypocritical enthusiasm, and his eyes had sparkled when Jérémie refused outright. But it was fair and square, and Jérémie couldn't get over his good luck.

Sleep in her house. Eat and breathe beside her. Be among her intimate possessions, touch her thrilling oddities, and certainly learn magic tricks of the highest caliber. And settle their old score once and for all.

She laid down the basic rule: *Here we don't eat dead animals.* That made plenty of sense, he thought. He pictured with horror the stacks of long-since-digested chicken and livestock cadavers that must have accumulated in his cells—how had he ever gotten caught up in this barbarous and disgusting thing? *They've suffered enough and died, she said, should we be eating them too?*

That made plenty of sense.

Later they ate cream of mushroom soup and a mushroom omelet. And a Polish cake that tasted exactly like a Quebec one.

The house made plenty of sense too, even if at first it seemed to be a mess. It wasn't a house reserved for humans exclusively, that's why its order looked a lot like disorder. There were cats and furniture for cats only. There were living plants and dried ones. When you opened a drawer you'd sometimes happen upon tablecloths and underwear, but more often dead butterflies, birds' nests, empty hives, snakeskins, pink pebbles, pieces of wood, feathers. The house invited creatures in from outside and made them feel at home. Right now, mushrooms were in the ascendancy.

It wasn't that Jérémie went rummaging, but things appeared of their own accord, drawers yawned open without him having to open them, and he felt she was letting him prowl where he wanted to without restriction.

The only room he didn't feel like going into was upstairs, across from the room where he would be sleeping. His own bedroom was perfect: the bed was soft like a friendly animal, and the decorations of grasses and branches reminded you that you were deep in the woods. The door to the room across from his was half-open, and a cat came darting out

when he pushed it all the way open. He stepped into the middle of the near-empty room, furnished with a desk and a sofa with nice plump cushions against a window, but he was taken by a violent, repulsive sensation, the heart-gripping sensation of being thrust into ice water. He quickly retreated and made sure the door was firmly closed.

As far as the rest was concerned, everything was fine. It was difficult, but stimulating. He couldn't get rid of his shyness, which made him feel clumsy and younger than he was. She made as strong an impression on him close up as from far away. Yet he felt he was where he belonged, there beside her, and that she felt the same way.

They began with the easiest and most familiar: a walk in the woods. This time, his instructions were clear: he had his own knife and basket, and he was to fill it with certain types of mushrooms after having cut them in a certain way. Unlike his uncle's ridiculous blueberries, there was something about mushrooms that urged you on, and in the end his basket was even fuller than ss's. When they met in the clearing and she saw what he'd brought back, she gave him a smile that was as small as it was precious.

After the meal, he helped her chop up the mushrooms to concoct magical potions that looked like real soups but had the odor of mystery about them. They felt no obligation to speak. Then they went into the living room where television and computer were nowhere to be seen, along with three cats that had already chosen the most comfortable seats. At that moment—the high point of the day—she gave him the porcupine's quill.

"Perhaps you'll have some use for it," she simply said, as she set it down on the table beside him.

He knew what it was, immediately. He touched it with his fingertip, with due precaution, because now things were getting serious. The chances were better and better that the incantation would work, and that all this would be true: you could command something to agree and obey—in other words, the universe really could be the way the books said it was. Magical.

In front of them, the whole time, there was the photo.

A large photo hanging on the living room wall, in the place of honor. From everywhere in the room, you saw only the photo. The man in the photo was laughing. The same kind of laugh that the scarf girl had, a false laugh that doesn't even conceal, a laugh you can see right through. And what you saw was a man who cried and was depressed far more than he laughed. His laugh was false but his love was real, you could see that too, he loved the woman whose head and partial shoulder could also be seen in the photo, the young, bare shoulder of Madame Szach—you had to call her "Madame" back then, she was better than a real woman, better than a beautiful TV star.

Jérémie wanted to say something polite about the photo to make her feel good.

"It must have hurt when he fell."

That was what came out, spontaneously.

She followed his eyes to the photo.

"Yes," she shot back, then she froze. "What are you talking about?" she asked, her voice a notch deeper.

It was embarrassing. He didn't know what to say. A film had run through his head, a memory of a film, it could have been one of Laurie's old TV reruns. He could see the man, the man falling, falling endlessly without seeming surprised, as if

it was premeditated, and landing with a dull thud on the sharp rocks below. A violent image from an old violent movie.

“Who told you about that?”

“Nobody.”

Was she going to lose her temper? She was torn. Then she decided to come and sit down close to him and look him in the eye, unblinking. It lasted an eternity. Under the weight of her gaze, he suddenly felt like crying, but he resisted. The time had come. From sorceress to wizard, something was going to happen, she would absolve or punish him.

“I didn’t mean to,” he began with sobs in his throat.

She kept her silence.

“I tried to put it out, afterward . . . But the fire was too strong. I did all I could . . .”

He could resist no longer. A baby inside him, a larva, was whimpering, making him cry. He cried. Then she did something strange. She stroked his head. With one hand, as if he were a cat that could purr. That made him stop crying. And they said no more about it for the rest of the evening, not about the fire that Jérémie lit, not about the photo of the man who killed himself jumping off the cliff.

DAY 12

He woke up with a start. He’d dreamed that the monarch, the King held prisoner in his jar, needed help. He had completely forgotten about him for the last few days; the green stone seemed lost forever in its mineral slumber. He sat up in bed. Where was the jar? Where was he?

The forest surrounded him. A very pale light had begun to illuminate the treetops beyond the window. It was day-

break in the big white house. He jumped out of bed. Threw his magician's cape over his pajamas. Rushed down the stairs, cursing the squeaking of the ancient wood.

Mrs. Szach was asleep in the armchair in the living room. Judging by her wrinkled clothes and face, that's where she must have spent the night.

Jérémie remembered she'd been fighting all evening while he was pretending to read, observing her out of the corner of his eye. After the porcupine quill episode that was the high point, a decisive chapter had come to an end, and they'd each settled into their own side of the living room as if they'd been sharing the same territory for years. Jérémie was allowed to leaf through the old illustrated atlases with all the photographs of dead people pretending to be alive. He took care not to get too involved in the books in order not to miss anything around him. A cat jumped up onto ss's lap as she was opening her mail. That was when the enemy had appeared: the mail. She opened a letter and read through it as she stroked the cat's back, threw the letter to the floor and opened another. Then she jumped to her feet like a coiled spring, to hell with the cat she'd thrown to the floor. The news must have been about as bad as it could get, because she began walking up and down without so much as a glance in Jérémie's direction, she called people who didn't answer, all of this punctuated with angry outbursts, and prudence dictated that he keep a safe distance from her. She didn't notice when Jérémie went up to his room.

Now she looked so tired he wished he had strong adult arms to pick her up and lay her in her bed. But he was happy just to protect her sleep by putting out the cats that were

complaining against his legs, then slipping out himself with the lightness of a ghost. She'd still be asleep when he got back a half-hour later, precious jar in hand. With a little luck, it would happen today. Sorceress Szach and Jerry Potter, together for the great occasion: the arrival of the King.

Meanwhile, it was a funny time to be outdoors.

It wasn't a time for humans. The burnt odor of skunk filled the air with its lethal particles. Night had officially ended, but it still hung in the trees. You were disturbing something. You showed up in the middle of an intimate encounter to which you weren't invited. Beings slipped through the underbrush, others gave off cries of alarm. And not only animals. J  r  mie scanned the ground for a magic wand, sturdier than usual.

He noticed that mushrooms—gypsy mushrooms whose plump gilled caps he could recognize now—had sprung up along the trail overnight. As he stooped to gather them, he saw legs.

A man's legs.

A man was walking through the woods. He was coming down the path that J  r  mie was about to take. If both continued on their way, they would collide in thirty seconds.

The man walked noiselessly, he knew his way. It was the same man from before with the old red lumberjack shirt, the man who paid no attention to private property. Running and hiding became virtual and impossible actions with every second that J  r  mie delayed, and soon it would be too late since the man was almost upon him, graying hair beneath a grayish cap, tall body above high boots, a big knapsack from which protruded sticks and branches, the red lumberjack shirt with torn pockets, and eyes that could *petrify* you where you stood.

But a pleasant face, yes, a gentle enough face that almost smiled, but a scary face all the same—maybe because of the scar that disfigured his cheek. For the man, and that was the most surprising thing of all, had the same scar Jérémie did, in exactly the same place. It was as if Jérémie knew that face, but his knowledge was buried so deep that he could never bring it to the surface. Especially those two dark eyes. Eyes that looked at Jérémie and went right through him.

The man didn't see him.

He stopped a few feet from Jérémie, who was holding his breath, then decided to turn onto the path along the lake, moving slowly, as if no one were watching his every move, holding his breath.

Why did the man pretend not to see him?

Or had Jérémie really become invisible?

The cape. It had to be the cape.

With Jerry Potter's invisibility cape thrown over his shoulders, what could be more normal than not being seen?

Being invisible gave you a powerful surge of joy. You could do anything. You could, for example, follow that man until he reached his destination, the end of the lake or the deepest part of the woods, or even the secret cave where evil was concocted, if that was where he was going.

the forces of evil

YOU COULDN'T TELL that he was totally evil. Part of him was murky, you could see that, but you hoped it was just one part. You kept hoping right up to the last minute. Bright eyes, the flash of a diamond in the rough. You thought that light came from some deeper, inner healthiness. You thought evil was in the minority, a wound that would eventually heal. But the opposite was true. Good served the bad. With him, evil was always in charge, without exception, especially when he caressed and when he smiled.

My name's Gilles Clémont. What's yours?

When you came across him in the woods, you were struck by how much like an animal he was. The woods were his principal residence, his second skin. He could stand motionless and attentive for hours, he could be agile and energetic depending on the requirements of the hunt, his hunt for fresh blood. He liked killing. He stood astride two worlds, the animal and the human, the predator and the ingenious, and he brought the two together.

When Lila caught him red-handed on her land, armed with a shotgun before hunting season had begun, she gave

him a piece of her mind, but he didn't back down. He came closer to her, to try to convince her of his rights. She smelled it right away. The scent of a dangerous animal. She sent him packing with the strongest words she could find.

He came back the next day without his gun. He took up position in the same place, where she'd caught him, and he waited there. The place was a clearing in a pine grove, with no interest to a hunter other than it being one meter from the main trail. She might not have come by the whole day, nor the whole week, but he waited there, sure of his instincts.

I thought I told you this is private land!

She remembered her anger the minute she spotted him, even if he wasn't armed.

Don't you know what "private" means?

And his answer.

How'd you like to meet me at the bar in town tonight at nine?

I'll buy you whatever you want. They've even got champagne.

She was speechless. Totally inappropriate. Not even a grasp of the elementary distance between incompatible species, not even that much common sense. She laughed in his face and walked off without wasting another second.

She could have told Jan. Normally, she would have.

There's a guy in the pines, he's bothering me.

Jan would have taken his rifle from the rack.

It would have been over fast. But maybe not. Back then, it wasn't a good idea to let Jan take down his rifle.

He waited two weeks before making another appearance. Maybe to let her forget him, put her fears to rest if she had any, or to give regret a toehold in her mind. After all, real men were rare, men who had the kind of desire that lays waste to everything in its path.

When I think of you, Lila, I get like a moose.

Big and hard as a moose.

One morning he strolled nonchalantly into her house, he crossed the threshold of her intimacy with complete self-assurance. Jan walked ahead of him. Jan opened the doors for him, handed him the keys to the kingdom, so to speak.

Jan was delighted. He introduced him enthusiastically.

"This is Gilles. He's a contractor from Mount Diamond. He'll be giving us a hand."

Gilles's smile. Not arrogant, which would have been suicidal, but joyful and juvenile, the smile of a boy who's just caught his first bass. He nodded with a mixture of deference and mischief, and threw her a look with his cold beast's eyes, and everything was clear: he wanted her.

(But not to love her, or even seduce her. He wanted to hunt her down, just once, and get it out of the way, then move on to something else, to other prey.)

"Madam," he greeted her with a triumphant grin.

That was the time to say, *Wait a second, I know you!* Or, *Jan, he's the one, the thug I was telling you about!* and that would have been that, his nocturnal desires would have evaporated in the light of day, but she said nothing. That was her first mistake. She had underestimated him. She believed his pale eyes could not conceal anything sinister, she believed he was just another primitive creature to tame.

Or maybe she just wanted a little danger.

With Jan and her, there were no concepts like being faithful or unfaithful or belonging to each other until the end of time. They didn't need a spoken commitment, since they'd found each other and had never left. They were members of

the same tribe, which consisted of the two of them. Part of Lila would die when he died, but in the meantime, part of her slumbered when he was depressed. Jan suffered from periodic attacks of darkness, and he would take to his bed, sick with despair. When Gilles Clémont appeared in their forest, Jan was just emerging from one of his low zones. He had just begun to venture out of the small upstairs room where he hid to think his dark thoughts, she was just starting to talk to him again, cook for him, he had begun to swim in the lake again. He was getting over it, one more time. They had no choice but to live with it, the state that returned sporadically and lasted a few weeks if nothing serious exacerbated it, like a nasty toothache when the tooth is gone, when all you can do is wait it out.

Except that at the end of one of his depressions, like in the middle, Jan wasn't a whole lot more loving than a chair, and his libido was below the negative line, about where his soul was. She thought she'd gotten used to his periodic, inevitable indifference, used to being invisible in the midst of her full glory as a woman. And suddenly Gilles Clémont appeared, all fur and muscle, in shape and shiny, deadly handsome, as insistent as a fever and just as contagious.

Just you and me, Lila. Little Lila.

She never got into the cab of his brand new red pickup like he kept wanting her to. She never let his smell of fur and murder get the best of her. She never slept with him.

But everything else you can do that hovers on the edge and fans the coals, she had done.

Let herself be rubbed, felt up, kissed but not on the mouth and never for long. Accepted the words ever cruder that he

whispered between doors, trees, directly behind Jan's back as the two chopped wood in their forest. Drank his desire like a bitter alcohol that went to the head, and disgusted her a little. But did nothing. She stayed passive at least, at least she raised some small resistance, she never touched him, she was never the one who wanted. Sometimes she would send him packing, the way you chase away a sticky-fingered raccoon from a garbage can once he's gotten a taste for what's inside, chased him away, told him she'd had enough, they could have nothing together, but she'd let him back the following week so he could work over her hand or her rump. She kept him from sleeping, that's what he told her, *I can't stand it, I can't sleep anymore*—it must have been true, but so many things keep us from sleeping, including insignificant things.

All the mistakes were hers, all of them, even if the evil had come from him.

Thirty years later that was just as true, and she found no consolation there.

I never learned, Jan, forgive me.

On this night, thirty years later, Lila was having trouble sleeping. She sought refuge on the living room sofa, bathed in the flat light of the moon and facing Jan's photo, hoping for encouragement, for a sign. Waves of anguish played havoc with her breathing and her beating heart. Maybe she was in mortal danger, maybe that would be the solution.

In that photograph toward which everything in the house converged, Jan was forever caught in his rush of love for her, and simply that picture, simply contemplating that immortal picture, was usually enough to keep her fighting spirit alive (life is nothing but battle, broken by cease-fires of different

lengths). To have been truly loved is not given to everyone, it's a luxurious gift that can be used for a long time to come.

Help me, Jan.

The letter lay at her feet, crumpled, devastating. By now she knew it by heart, each of its murderous words quivering in the formaldehyde of administrative jargon, beneath the garlands of the municipal coat of arms.

Notice of expropriation. Dear Madam. You have four months. Dear Madam. Sincerely yours. A ski and recreational resort. A ski resort at the foot of Mount Diamond. Ski and recreational resort, four months to accept our offer of five hundred thousand dollars. Work to begin in April 2010. Dear Madam. The developer, Mr. Jean-François Clémont. Sincerely yours. Sincere expropriation. The work will be carried out by the developer Mr. Jean-François Clémont.

She'd done it again. Trusted the wolf, let him into the sheepfold, laid the lambs down between his paws (not a wolf, Lila, not that fine free beast that thrives in its wildness, more like a rat, no, not even a rat, a stout-hearted rodent with none of his twisted spinelessness, no animal could be so lacking in dignity as to be compared to him, call him a vicious werewolf instead, yes, a monstrous combination of the worst of the animal and the worst of man, a werewolf rotten down to the smallest particle of its bandy-legged nature, a bloodthirsty werewolf from father to son).

She needed air. She needed to go outside and walk, recall what the normal function of an organism is—even hers, worn as it was, still showed signs of mobility. She paced back and forth before the nightscape of melting trees and white sky. The night was full of the nasal chirping of crickets. Crickets

already. Before the crickets had come the frogs, but after the crickets only cold would occupy the night, the silence of cold.

And since she was accumulating indices of morbidity, only a handful of insects and peppered moths fluttered around the outdoor lamps, when even last week thick clouds of them had swarmed, colliding with one another. The daylilies were looking bedraggled too, each of them might have a flower or two a day left to bloom, then kaput until next year. Summer really was sneaking away like a hypocrite, despite its warm appearances.

A puffy shape caught her attention under the lamp near the astilbes. She went over to them and discovered a boletus in the moss, only recently born yet paunchy, without a trace of larvae in its cap. She leaned over to delicately twist the foot of the mushroom and cut it from its radicle, then pluck it with a sharp motion that spoke of her experience. It was a magnificent boletus with a body like a tender sausage, a dimpled cap with caffè macchiato striations, and the scent of wet hazelnut. It filled her hand as if it were meant to be there.

Then anguish surged up once more, and words began to bombard her. Those damned words from the city's letter, soon to be followed by other words, startlingly, words from far away, from thirty years ago, the words she'd found in one of the drawers in Jan's office when she'd gone through it after his death, in the little upstairs room where he holed up when he was at his worst. Words scribbled by a clumsy hand, crookedly set down on a scrap of brown paper but heading straight for their evil goal.

I fuk your wife. She like it.

No signature (or a werewolf's signature).

Jan received that anonymous note discreetly and he'd filed it away in a drawer with the same discretion, making no waves.

She'd never made the connection between that nasty scrap of paper and the great upsetting. Why, tonight, should she make one?

Jan's fatal accident was an accident.

He'd jumped too close to the rocks. His foot must have slipped as he readied himself for the dive. He slipped the odd time, just like anybody else. One foot slips, and two lives collapse.

Jan would never have committed suicide because of those clumsy, anonymous words belched out by a pathetic mind. He knew how jealous men could be. Most of all he knew the weight and beauty of existence. He loved Lila, who loved him. He loved life, even with his sickness. He was wildly in love with the lake; he loved this little part of the world so much that he didn't want to be anywhere else. Jan was fine, as fine as any sick person could be. He would never have killed himself, he was just coming out of the darkness and after the darkness he'd always tell Lila, *I feel like a new man, I'm coming back into the world*. All possibilities lay before him, and what happened depended on him alone, *I'm being reborn, Lila*, he would say, laughing, *what a great idea, every six months I'm born, I can see myself being born, as if I were father and son of my new life!*

Of course, his excessive enthusiasm didn't fool her, nor did his laughter, which could snap in two even as it was rising. But she was sure of this: Jan had never been a truly desperate man.

On the eve of his death, their bodies had joined, one within the other, calmly, tenderly. She'd caressed him, and he looked on like a spectator, a consenting spectator. And afterward, when she turned over on her side to sleep, he whispered in her ear by way of a joke, *You deserve better than that*, to which she'd answered, *Of course I do*, without an ounce of recrimination, in a joking tone herself—he'd laughed, in any case.

Those were the last words they spoke to each other.

Early the next day, August 17, Jan went to the cliff as he did every week to leap into the blue like an angel, to experience a few seconds without care while in free fall.

What connection could there be between their final words and Jan's failed dive that crushed him on the rocks below?

What connection could there be between Gilles Clémont and the letter from the town that arrived thirty years later to dispossess her of much more than her life?

A wave of anguish swept over Lila, for now everything seemed perfectly intertwined, everything conspired to tell her that there was no escape from the nexus in which every blade of grass and every cricket's chirp seemed to match the beating of her heart, nothing could survive disconnected from the rest. From this mixture of molecules, this stew of crickets, grass and Lila decomposing, new, still-unimaginable lives would one day be born, but in the meantime, every breath became a groundswell, every movement would unscroll a choreography, and if the forces of good were multiplying, the forces of evil were also producing, far from their native roots, innumerable offspring. That was how the forces of evil perpetuated themselves down through the years, watered with encouragement and error, their waves swelled in size, thirty

years was nothing for them, thirty years of being handed down from father to son, propagating their plan for destruction, spreading barbarity as they went.

(When Gilles Clémont butchers a fox before your eyes, Lila, and you don't kill him on the spot, you let him sow in your own soil, the very soil where you pick your chanterelles and lupines, the seed from which will spring the chain saws and bulldozers designed to level everything that raises its head, kill everything that moves to hasten the advent of parking lots and luxury condos on Mount Diamond.)

(When you let Gilles Clémont kiss your breasts without tearing out his tongue, Lila, you've all but handed him the pen and brown paper with which he can write *I fuk your wife* to the man you love who will be desperate enough to lose concentration in the last seconds of his life on the cliff.)

(When you invite Jean-François Clémont into your house and ply him with a pholiota pâté flavored with Sauternes wine, Lila, despite the hundreds of flagrant indications that he is a barbarian son of a barbarian, you hand him the keys to the sacred garden, the better for him to profane and convert into a vulgar playground.)

(When you let Jan's last words be *You deserve better than that*, without protesting, and taking him in your arms as he was silently begging you to do, you slip a loose stone under his foot as he readies himself to dive and he slips, Lila, and he falls and you fall with him, never to recover.)

Connected.

Then sometimes brutally disconnected.

There was life with Jan, and life after. Two universes so different they could not possibly accommodate the same

person. You had to change and harden. Sometimes Lila regretted ever having known Jan, their flights of passion, their osmosis. The more celebratory life is, the bloodier its loss—and the loss is always longer than the celebration. Sometimes Lila convinced herself that it would have been better if Jan had never existed, instead of existing so briefly.

Gilles Clémont also changed after Jan's death.

Changed his behavior, as if to prove that his heart no longer beat in the same black cavity.

Overnight, he stopped all unwanted gestures, all bold words. Discreet and delicate—those were his new colors. He left baskets of raspberries at her doorstep, steaks of deer meat wrapped in gunny sacking—which she immediately threw away, horrified, while acknowledging the warmth of his intent—and even flowers, daylilies he'd plucked from her own flower beds, but it was the thought that counted. Most of all, he gradually put the finishing touches on the projects that Jan had begun: to clear a path to the boathouse, to complete the roof on the new cottage in the hollow of the bay (the one Claire was to buy a few years later), to lay the foundations of the log cabin that Jan had designed (the very one that housed Violette).

Young Simon also offered to help Lila; he had been her tenant and visible admirer for the last two summers. But young Simon was part of another story.

Gilles crept into Lila's deep woods and into her life; there could not be one without the other. She had been at such a loss, so buried in her wreckage that she accepted everything with gratitude, including the ludicrous hint of a thought for Gilles, so at ease in the woods, so helpful and competent,

with as an added attraction the constant caress of his pale eyes when he thought she wasn't looking. She'd begun to think that maybe later, maybe after all, since she'd been mistaken about him, maybe he'd end up being an artificial replacement for the man who could not be replaced.

He had a wife and a little boy, and never talked about them. Lila knew about them and was untroubled by their existence. Gilles's real life was in the forest, not with his wife and son. He must have been attached to them, the way you're attached to hot water when you wash, the way you appreciate practical things that bring comfort.

She began dreaming about him. Not often, an image from time to time, mostly when the weather was hot, a fleeting image of his glacial eyes and of his shoulders when he attacked a tree trunk or a pine beam, the choreographic imprint of his muscular legs astride the brook or him rushing up the stairway toward her house on all fours.

Then there was the fox.

All this time, while Gilles was more often at her house than his, building or digging or surveying the woods as if they were his, Lila had noticed muffled gunshots. Each time she mentioned it, he told her the noise came from the other lake, Campeau Lake, known as a hangout for poachers and other lowlifes. She chose to believe him instead of remembering the first time she'd seen him, standing in the pines with his illegal shotgun, primed for spitting death.

On that particular morning she'd gotten up with more energy than usual, and she decided to walk to the end of her property and set things straight: this is what she owned, here were the limits of her responsibility. After two kilometers of

living and dead trees scattered across the mossy undergrowth, undisciplined brooks and lunar boulders held fast in the earth like giant eggs, a bright red smear stained the wild landscape. It was Gilles's pickup parked on a road he must have slashed through the bush, for Lila could not remember having seen it before. Her first impulse was one of delight, yes, a sense of physical happiness to find him there, and she ran toward the truck, her face feverish, for something inside her had tipped into transgression, and God only knows what might have happened with that excited body of hers, ready for abandonment, if only what she saw had not existed, if only Gilles had not been Gilles.

Two meters from the truck she saw Gilles's back moving energetically, bending and straightening in the bushes as he let out a lumberjack's deep *Huh!* as if he were chopping up the trunk of a fallen tree. Then she heard other sounds behind his virile noises, squealing, moaning and rattling that punctuated his movements, the movement of his rising and falling axe.

It was a little fox caught in a metal trap, more like the bloodied remains of a little fox that the axe was hacking to pieces. Nothing was left but the furry tail to attest to what had once been the animal that lay there, trapped. Then even that disappeared with the final blow. Gilles lopped off the tail and brandished it in the full light like a silken trophy, and it was then that he realized Lila was standing behind him.

A shadow of shame flickered across his eyes, but his true nature quickly reasserted itself, and he stood, defiant, before her, deeply embarrassed but not to the point of losing control. He was first to speak.

"It was attacking your cats," he said. "A real devil, I caught it attacking your gray cat."

Quickly he wiped his hand on his pants. Dropped the axe at his feet. He was covered in bloodstains. Lila looked at him in silence. Briefly he twirled the tail between his fingers.

"I'll clean it and make you a scarf, a nice scarf for you, baby."

She backed away slowly, keeping her eyes on him. She stopped by the truck, saw his shotgun in the bed, lying on top of a canvas sheet. Pushing aside the gun, she pulled back the canvas: she recognized a hare, maybe even a raccoon on the pile of blood-soaked fur and feathers, then she looked away.

"They were attacking my cats too, I suppose?" she said in a weak voice.

He knew there was no use answering or trying to defend himself; he'd lost his chance with her, all his chances. Tough luck, that's how it is, you play to win, sometimes you lose, it's no big deal. Lila, however, was struggling for breath and stunned.

"Why do you do that, Gilles? Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders. Why the hell was she nosing around in the backwoods, in men's territory? How could he make her understand what a man really is, a real man, violent and free the way he should be?

"They're just animals. It's hunting. It's them or us."

"An axe, Gilles! That's not hunting, that's slaughter!"

Again, he swept aside the accusation with the back of his hand.

"Foxes are nasty. You've got to be nasty with 'em."

He took a step toward her. She took two steps back.

"You don't know nature. I'm part of it, that's how I am. Is it my fault if I'm a man?"

"I don't ever want to see you again on my land."

"Don't get all upset, baby."

"I don't ever want to see you again."

He threw her his bluest, most persuasive look, but he hit a wall. Then his look hardened too, since there was nothing left to lose. He dropped the wretched fox tail at Lila's feet, picked up his axe and climbed into his pickup, whistling. She didn't move when the truck nearly backed into her. She felt cheated and disgusted but strangely strong, like a widow who's just put her mourning behind her.

Of course she kept hearing gunshots, discovering his nets in the trout stream, finding the remains of a disemboweled bear. He took care not to let her catch him in the act; that was his only concession. But he would never surrender his right to kill on land he considered his, for he had marked it with blood—and of course with urine too.

Only death could put a stop to it. A kamikaze moose on Highway 117 would do the job, instead of Lila.

Right through the windshield, a half-ton moose, there's nothing you can do . . .

A WARM WIND carrying the beginnings of a mist had risen, and Lila decided to turn back, since the way was blocked in all directions. It wasn't true that death had gotten the best of Gilles. He had returned in his destructive rhizomes, he continued to smile through his son's loose mouth, *Call me Jeff*, the years had passed but he'd gotten her back.

. . . *Szach Lake, that would be original, and it would be a tribute to you, Mrs. Szach. . .*

Well, Mrs. Szach had fallen for it like a schoolgirl, hook, line and sinker. Worse, she'd been stupid, letting Jean-François Clémont into her home and treating him like a prince with her vodka to coax him into ostensibly tipping his hand. *I'm the million-dollar man. I'm ready to buy anytime, Mrs. Szach, everything will work out fine, you'll see, I really love it here. . .*

Even when she repeated her clear and definite *no*, he'd kept up the smiles and the bowing and scraping. *Too bad, but we'll be friends anyway*, he concluded, avoiding her eyes, but he was sharpening his knives, delighted, deep down, at the money he'd save, since now he'd get what he wanted half-price.

. . . *I've been talking to the Laurentian Regional Council and the mayor of Mount Diamond, who's a personal friend of mine. . .*

She would fight. What else? Rest would come in another life. How could she think that the worst adversity was behind her, that her final years would pass without struggle, in vegetative quietude?

In her living room, Lila suddenly remembered that she wasn't alone. Besides the cats and the ghosts there was also, theoretically, a little boy whose existence she'd totally forgotten about and who, the last time she'd seen him, was lying on her rug leafing through an old atlas.

Jérémie was sleeping in the room she'd assigned him, upstairs. Curled up on his side, face exposed, his breathing so quiet she sat down beside him, hoping to be touched by his lightness. She pulled the sheet over his shoulders, but his fragile nature entered her and, sitting motionless next to him, she felt like crying over him and over herself, over all the

losses to come. Then he shifted in his sleep and gave a happy cooing sound.

Mrs. Szach, what's your witch's name?

That's what he asked her, lying on the floor, leafing through the old atlas. He was watching her out of the corner of his eye while she, seated farther off, was going through her mail. The question struck her, but not for long, since nothing was more unusual than this little guy's questions.

"My witch's name?" she repeated, stalling for time.

What the hell could she say so as not to disappoint him?

"Try to guess."

He returned to the atlas, but did not have to think it over too long.

"ss," he guessed.

She must have turned pale, or shuddered, because he thrust his nose back into his book, alarmed.

ss. Yes, it suited her perfectly, since you had to call a spade a spade, and what was the point of pretending she was nobody's daughter from nowhere? Jerczy Szach, her father, and sweet little Markus arose to show their poignant faces. Lila began to see Jérémie in a new light. First Jan, now *Tata* Jerczy and Markus. What right did he have to bring back the ghosts?

"That's exactly it," she said ill-humouredly.

Then she broke into a laugh that lifted Jérémie's pained face from his book.

"A sorceress, is that it?"

She'd always suspected herself of loving war and preferring the company of skunks and boletuses to that of humans. Sorceress. *So that's what it's called*, she said to herself, still laughing as she opened the strange envelope sent by the town.

SHE MUST HAVE fallen asleep when she'd come downstairs from the little guy's room. Sleep took her by surprise in her armchair, opening a clearing in the middle of her distress. When she opened her eyes, it was daylight.

Something had changed. The cats weren't lazing at her feet, angling for food. When she went upstairs, she realized the little guy had let them out, and gone out himself. She made pancakes, lined up her tastiest jams on the table and waited for him. Time passed slowly. The three cats came back, but not Jérémie.

sage lake

NO ONE, or almost no one, knew Sage Lake. The only way to reach it was across Campeau Lake, and even then, you had to find your way through a swamp, and then make a fifteen-minute portage over rocky ground to get there. Once you arrived, nothing spectacular awaited you: conifers standing in a circle around black water, with fewer fish than other lakes, and you had to row, just like in prehistoric times.

No dwellings allowed, no private property, not a civilized soul. Sage Lake belonged to the slew of provincial parks open to fishermen, hunters and attentive contemplators of nature.

The hunters and fishermen quickly gave up on it because of its lack of bounty, and attentive nature lovers were hardly legion along the shores of Campeau Lake.

Which left it all to Simon.

From his place, to clear Goose Lake via the channel and cross Campeau Lake from one end to the other, including the portage, and paddle across the full diameter of Sage Lake up to the Site would take him a good three hours if there was no wind. Three hours of exertion that put his back to a serious

test but that, when it was over, royally reimbursed each of the parcels of pain and fatigue he'd expended.

Sage Lake was not round as it appeared at first glance. To the east opened a deep, hidden gulf, and at the end of this gulf, like a treasure, the Site lay hidden.

The Site held within its memory the formation of the planets. It was a promontory hewn out of violence and rock, revealing even today the shrieking passage of an asteroid, of star debris that carved out the tender skin of the young Earth before finally ending up, a spent force, in its monstrous hole. You could see how the waters had joined in, how they had filled the hole, polished the sharp edges, scattered sand in its inner reaches, and brought moisture enough for life to colonize the extraterrestrial object.

When you entered the opening of Sage Lake, you first noticed the life of the Site in the form of huge white pines that managed to rise up like cathedrals on a thin layer of soil. And the farther you continued on the water, the longer the list of riches to behold: twisted sculptures in the flanks of the promontory, rock shelves to stretch out on, natural staircases weaving their way down to tiny pebble beaches. Once you reached the top, it was something else again. You were alone in the world on a peninsula that had survived the Big Bang, scented with Mediterranean scrub, opening up onto a 360-degree panorama. You slept at some small distance from the overstimulating beauty, in the pine woods whose soft, needled ground seemed expressly designed for a tent.

When Simon discovered the Site twelve summers ago, it had all but overwhelmed him.

Because of his weak spine, he did not return there often. A few times alone, with the sense of wonder just as strong, and

once with Marianne, when it had rained cats and dogs and the wind blew so hard it took them four hours to get back, almost capsizing three times.

For Marianne, it was a lot of work just to admire the landscape.

The Site was not a place for everyday affairs. It evoked the extraordinary, summoned you to go beyond yourself, spoke of the capacity for ecstasy. Lila would have had the necessary madness, and Simon would have loved to show her the Site back then. But Lila knew her territory, and water was not part of it. Then time had passed—Lila's time.

Now, someone else was with Simon on the magical promontory, an entirely suitable someone.

Violette began by rushing from one end of the rock to the other, crying out in excitement, then she stood motionless facing the lake, both hands on her face. When Simon came near, he thought she was crying. She was laughing with the sound of sobbing, since the place called for nothing less.

"Oh, Simon!" she managed to say.

It was hot and dry, the sky was a compact blue, the water would be warm enough for swimming, and that night the Perseids would rain down upon their heads like so many pieces of silver.

"Just wait and see," exclaimed Simon.

Which he kept repeating, even if everything was already perfect, beyond further perfection.

Violette had worked hard. She'd never lifted a paddle before, she barely knew how to swim and the sun wasn't good for her. Not a single complaint crossed her lips, and she refused the rest breaks Simon suggested; when she shouldered the large knapsack during the portage, not a sigh. She

was a tough cookie, with no lack of opportunities in her past life to hone her courage. She'd never camped out in the wild, never slept anywhere but in a bed, and she couldn't contain her enthusiasm.

"What time are the falling stars?" she asked in a little girl's voice.

He felt as though he was giving a gift of inestimable value to a little girl, a little Jeanne more adventurous than his own, more hardened but, above all, less blasé, a little girl with the deceptive body of a woman struggling to make up for pleasures lost.

Still, he felt obliged to call Marianne before setting out, absurd though it was, obliged to ask her permission.

You know, Sage Lake is such a gorgeous place, and with the Perseids on top of it, and she's never seen falling stars . . .

Marianne laughed on the other end of the line. He thought he'd detected in her laughter that little cackle of mockery she would use when the subject of Violette came up, and muffled irritation rose within him. *But Simon*, Marianne went on in her even-tempered voice, *Why are you even asking me? Just go! It'll do you good!* As if to answer Simon's silence that she knew by heart, she added, *But most of all, it'll do her good! And that's worth more than the nasty little objections I might have . . . don't you think?*

Dear Marianne. In thirty-four years of life together, he could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she'd provoked a quarrel—and even then, was it really a quarrel? No. Never.

What will you do with Jérémie? she added, almost as an afterthought. And she laughed in earnest, a hearty laugh of cordial complicity, when Lila's name came up.

Lila's going to look after Jérémie? Poor kid!

They laughed together at Lila, Lila who was more authoritarian than affectionate, then he listened as she lamented, without laying it on too heavily, the state of the hospital's emergency room, which weighed on her mind, and then he finally hung up, his conscience almost clear. Almost, because he could not quite forget that he'd failed to treat Lila with integrity, even in jest, even under the pretext of preserving matrimonial harmony. God, it was hard to be fair and just toward everyone under all circumstances.

He set up the tent in the pine grove. Violette watched for a few minutes while he began to piece together the poles, then she joined in and was soon carrying out the same motions in less time than he took. Actually, it was an old and small tent, easy to figure out, without high-tech zippered frills, without a fly, a model with a lengthy past and no future, and with zero waterproofing—even the dew would give it a thorough soaking. But Simon had spent magnificent nights in it, a few rare times with Marianne, often with Jeanne or Loïc, back when he was the one who concocted adventures for them, their hero. One adult and two children could sleep at close quarters. Two adults would inevitably end up in each other's arms. The tent would be for Violette.

"I'll sleep by the fire. That way I can stop the nightmares before they get into the tent."

"No way," she protested. "If you sleep outdoors, so do I."

How to believe that sooner or later they would have to sleep? For now, the sun's rays shed their effervescent light everywhere, the water around the promontory was gilded like an immense piece of honey-spread toast across which skated water striders in irregular formations. Like tiny hydraulic

bumper cars, they leaped over one another at the last minute to avoid collision. In the air above these minuscule skaters, clouds of white flies rose and fell in the light, when they weren't being devoured by a bass leaping from the water or by dragonflies that threw this midair meat market into turmoil. Simon slipped into the water slowly so as not to startle Violette, who was watching him from a distance. She'd taken off her dress, and under her dress she was wearing a pretty sky-blue swimsuit that gracefully set off the cloudy white of her skin. She didn't want to get wet. *I can't go any deeper than my waist, Simon, I'll suffocate.*

He said nothing, but by the end of the day he would teach her how to feel at home in the water.

He led by example, showing how hospitable a territory it was.

Water supports us. Despite our leaden gravity, water supports us and relieves us of our need for rigidity and tension. Water returns our lost joy to us, for it is clear that floating was a part of our lives well before other complicated, irksome actions; floating is the most precious thing we left behind when we landed on Earth. (To be convinced, simply observe astronauts moving like butterflies through space, then returning to Earth stunned and changed; think of the newborns howling unanimously in distress at being torn from their haven of weightlessness.)

Water bestows on us its gift of lightness. That was the first thing he would teach her.

And water was a passageway too.

Especially when it was a little cold, like today. Water that's a little cold grabs your attention, it reminds you of the work to be done, the work of letting yourself go. Simon dove in but

not deep, splashing back and forth for the fun of it, and he soon forgot someone was watching him, that he was putting on a demonstration. Left to himself, he floated on the passageway and a moment later he entered the other world, or the other way of seeing the world, his own contours wiped away, neither alone nor separated from the rest, there was no more Simon, nor water nor air fish algae water strider foot heartbeat. Who was swimming, who breathing? For a second he was part of the great triumphant body shining through in its constant transformations, all rough edges that might lodge thought or suffering worn away.

Then the moment passed and he pulled himself up onto the rock, a contented smile on his face. Violette watched him enviously from nearby.

“Lucky man,” she said.

No, it could not be communicated, one day it would happen when she was alone, more at ease, it was part of those chance experiences that are revealed only to one being at a time, in a state of total openness. But to enter the water and feel lighter, he could do that now. And so could she.

“Come here,” he told her.

In one of the walls of the promontory was a basin of fresh water, warm from its enclosure in the sunlit stone, and so clear it revealed all the details of its gilt bottom and the feet that touched it. Here, thought Simon, you could not be afraid of the water. Or, to be afraid, you would have to look elsewhere and capture the real reasons, the real enemies. Here, the water was totally innocent, nothing could be held against it.

He lowered himself into the water first. Violette followed him without a problem until she slid in up to her waist. She

froze and began to laugh too loudly, as she'd done with her brother Christophe.

"No," she said.

During his old career as a physical education teacher, he had often done what he was doing now: looking into the eyes of a young person terrified of the water to drive away the fear and turn it into a game. He sank with a smile beneath the surface, then emerged again, *Look, I'm making bubbles, look at the beautiful bubbles, head in, head out, look how easy it is, warm on top and not even cold underneath, look, see how much fun it is, look, do what I do, up, down, up, down!*

She dove into the water violently, as if to punish herself, but stayed under only for a second, then surfaced in a panic. Crying, she pummeled Simon with her fists as he tried to calm her, *No, I can't do it! He stuck our heads in piss! Don't you understand? He stuck my head in it and held me down!*

She had finally returned to the pool of horrors for the first time since they left Goose Lake, which was a definite improvement over previous days, when they inevitably ended up in that particular wallow—but even this time, the only time today, was once too much.

"It's over," Simon told her with all the firmness of evidence. "You can see for yourself, it's over, we're here together and the water is sweet, come back in with me."

He held her from under her wrists so she could easily break away if the contact was too much, *Trust me*, he told her, *trust me trust me*, and he felt her relax and drop something heavy. Her green eyes in his, they sank slowly into the water together and stayed there for a full second, while Violette grabbed hold of his hands and squeezed them hard.

Then, both eyes open, they looked at each other as they rose to the surface.

It was a great victory.

She could hardly believe it had happened, she needed to make sure it really had, *Again!* she said, and once more they slipped beneath the water, eyes and hands clasped, and stayed below for two seconds. After the fourth time, with her asking for more and fighting for breath, he announced, laughing, that they'd done enough, and it was now time to award her the gold medal.

Later he would remember the exact moment the shift took place. The second time they came out of the water, her green eyes changed color, her laughing green eyes in the depths of his took on a fresh, tender light when they stood straight again, and he had credited that to her victory.

They changed into warmer clothes, him with his back turned, her barricaded by modesty in the tent, and he lit a fire in the hearth already built among the rocks. He'd brought the fixings of a somewhat sumptuous spread: skewered shrimp to grill over the coals, a couscous salad to eat cold, and with a triumphant laugh she pulled a bottle of champagne from her knapsack—the last of the batch her brother had given her. In the end, she'd been right to weigh herself down with that bottle despite Simon's admonitions that she should travel light. Could there ever be a better reason to celebrate than today, when not only had he taken her to heaven, but he'd put an end to her fear of water as well? *You did all the work*, Simon corrected her, but he did agree that her reasons for celebrating were undeniable—even if the tepid champagne was all it took to give him a blockbuster of a headache, a fact he did not mention. He clicked his plastic cup, which contained more

foam than liquid, against hers, ascribing to delight and champagne the glitter that settled in Violette's eyes, like a new way of looking at him.

He talked a lot as he grilled the skewers, fed the fire, as he ate and drank, and later he would remember how hard he was denying the obvious. An irresistible current was pulling the ground out from under his feet. They sat side by side on the crest of the rock, between them what was left in the bottle, from which they drank directly in shared rejection of the decidedly contemptible plastic cups.

Shyman, you don't know how good you make me feel.

Shyman, you're the person I feel best with.

Every time she threw sentences like those at him, he immediately turned them into a joke—*I certainly hope I make you feel good, if I didn't, what would be the point of me being here? Right now I'm bound to be the best possible company, seeing as how the competition isn't too stiff*—until she nearly lost her temper and thumped him on the shoulder to shut him up. With a hearty camaraderie re-established between them, he could breathe easier without being entirely sure of what he hoped to avoid.

They heard a loon, and soon saw it pass over them. *Look, he's following us*, said Violette, and Simon explained that it wasn't *their* loon, each lake was home to a pair of loons, and he told her as well that the fleeting glimmers on the ground weren't fireflies but glowworms, since firefly season was over, as was strawberry season, and the time for tree frogs' love songs too.

"Be quiet, will you?" said Violette with a smile. "Did it ever occur to you to stop talking for a minute and just relax?"

They were still side by side, with the empty champagne bottle off to one side. Dusk had fallen around them and they hadn't even noticed.

"One-zero," grumbled Simon, who then pretended to sulk in silence.

Then she put her head on Simon's knees, and her move was so natural he could only lay his hand on her shoulder and caress her just as naturally, the way he did with Jeanne when she was young and would sit astride him, unafraid of loving him. Violette let him caress her a moment, sighing with contentment, then turned and looked him in the eyes in her new way, which was not the way of a little girl. *Kiss me, Simon*, she said.

Though it wasn't surprising, he took it as a catastrophe. Gently, he drew her to a sitting position.

"Violette, you don't have to do that."

"Of course I don't."

She took his hand and held it, and gave him a gaily defiant look.

"I know you want to please me," he said. "It's really okay."

He patted her hand, then pulled his away, a simulated caress to shift things back into neutral.

"I'm the one who'll be pleased," she said.

"Come on, a beautiful girl like you."

"A beautiful girl like me what?"

"You've got your whole life ahead of you, Violette."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You'll meet a handsome young man."

"I certainly hope so," said Violette happily. "What about it?"

Then she let out a cry of delight; out of the corner of her eye she had just seen a falling star. Simon used the diversion

to stoke the fire and bring over the sleeping bags to use as covers, then he found a position from which he could comfortably watch the sky at some distance from her. Part of him, the strong and dominant part, was sure he'd suppressed that troubling interlude between them. The other part flailed around in silence.

In the end, the real show took place against the immense black curtain where the true stars flamed steadily, so numerous they overwhelmed you with amazement and reverence. From time to time, a brilliant slash sliced across the black silk and drew from them—sometimes simultaneously—a brief sound of triumph. But it was a time for silence, not exclamations, for the falling stars, Perseids though they might be, were discreet compared to the others, streaking across the sky once a minute, light years away from the downpour Simon's memory liked to invent each year. *Why are some stars still while others fall?* whispered Violette's dreamy voice, and Simon was about to reveal the fraudulent nature of falling stars—those ridiculous little pebbles that burned as they entered the atmosphere—but he stopped his petty sermonizing, which reduced beauty to a handful of crumbs, and fell silent, cursing himself (*That's enough, Parson!*).

Several falling stars later, Violette's voice emerged from her reverie again, pulling Simon from the beginnings of sleep.

"I make a wish every time I see one. You?"

"Me? Not really."

"Want to know my wish?"

Even half-asleep, Simon hadn't lost track of the current, and he recognized the tender nuance, the color of honey that flowed into him.

“If you say your wish out loud, it won’t come true,” he said, awake now.

His eyes were open, and he noticed wisps of cloud rolling across the sky.

“I’m cold,” said Violette.

“Let’s move closer to the fire,” Simon answered.

He remained standing, building in the hearth structures of dry wood that the fire devoured with a roar. Finally he sat down. Without thinking, without self-censorship, he chose the same trunk as Violette. She was curled up on herself, like a golden dragonfly in the cocoon of the sleeping bag. She watched the fire with dazzled eyes.

“All of it,” she sighed. “It’s all so beautiful. See how the fire’s body constantly changes?”

“It’s true.”

“I have to thank you, Simon. It’s important for me to thank you.”

He knew it was time to speak to her for real. Why couldn’t he tell her he loved her? That was the only thing that came to mind, the truest, he loved her but he didn’t know how he did, like a little girl who could have been Jeanne’s sister, like a woman of troubling beauty, like a victim whose wounds he might heal. He loved her ardor, her beauty, her youth, her courage, even her scars. He loved just being near her, he looked for any way to be near her. That’s all he could say. And it seemed quite enough.

He was afraid things would change between them, change for the better.

“I’m just happy you’re here with me,” he told her. “Sitting here beside me, it’s perfect, and I’m happy. It’s thanks enough for me.”

She gazed at him tenderly, with a smile that didn't try to spare him.

"It's not enough for me," she said.

Thirty centimeters separated them. She reduced the distance to zero.

"It's all I can give you," she said, pressing her body against his. "It's my best gift. Please accept it."

Reading his mind, she whispered in his ear, "I'm twenty-eight years old, Simon. Stop pretending I'm not a woman. We're entitled. You're entitled."

She kissed his ear and he laughed, excited by the unlikely situation—a nondescript older man with an intoxicating beauty at his feet, and here he was hemming and hawing and acting hard-to-get—and the delicious way she described herself, like a gift. He loved the chilly little fingers that crept under his jacket, and he struggled, more for the sake of appearances, not to give in right away. But why not give in right away? What was the point of his hypocritical, coy games?

It was the other man. He could not get rid of the other one, the madman, his age and size, his neurotic double who'd so abundantly used Violette, little Violette, somehow he couldn't forget Violette as a little girl. How could he be sure that if he went down that burning path he wasn't obeying the will of the madman, his destroyer's work? How could he be sure this was what she really desired, in her freedom as a woman, and that it wasn't some twisted trauma that continued to speak through her?

"Maybe I disgust you," she said, drawing back. "I disgust you because I only have one breast. Is that it?"

"Are you nuts?"

He was so dismayed that he held her close, *You're beautiful, magnificent* were the only words that came, then everything was said and done, everything slipped from his control, he was on fire and the woman who kindled the fire first took on the face of Lila, a young Lila who wouldn't have been spooked or soured by mistrust, and next the stunning face of an unknown woman he was soon to know intimately, and who would let him touch once more the overwhelming mystery of femininity.

Later, in the tent, when he remembered that the former victim Violette lay in his arms, everything was so lovely he felt he could still repair the world, that with tangible gestures this time, he could wipe away the trace of the Other and plant the seed of tenderness among her scars.

All the while, the wisps of cloud that had floated across the sky became the aurora borealis, and until the wee hours of the morning they touched off vivid bonfires, but Violette and Simon saw nothing.

IN THE CANOE that carried them away from Sage Lake the next day, Simon could not take his eyes off Violette's shoulders, or the small of her back as it rippled with every thrust of the paddle like a lake swell filled with promises of coolness. He was in a state of shock still, still stunned by delight. He had never encountered a sensuality like hers, fluid and ripe, one that made everything solid disappear. She knew her body so well that her knowledge opened the bodies of others. He had never been touched that way. And never been so well received.

He could not keep his eyes off her. From time to time, often at the peak of his thoughts, Violette would turn to smile

at him. His very being had been turned upside down, but the energy created by her smile and the curve of her back, and the countless images of her, kept him going. She had succeeded. She had transfigured her hellish experiences into voluptuous knowledge that gave pleasure to her poor body, which had been so deprived of it, and gave pleasure to others besides. Alchemist and magician, ravishing little enchantress. She turned again and offered a brave smile. She was exhausted too, but no matter how many times he told her to stop paddling and let him do the work, she refused and nearly lost her temper.

The transition was sudden once they reached Campeau Lake. It was rush hour for Jet Skis and the overpowered outboards towing loads of children and adults who would never grow up in brightly colored inner tubes. Here was the national pastime of the Laurentian lakes at one o'clock in the afternoon and, amid the uproar, Violette and Simon wiggled their way like tadpoles among the wakes of the thundering monsters.

Once they reached the channel and left danger behind, they had a good laugh. How could you imagine a more diabolical return to Earth than this chaos of sound and fury at paradise's door? Soon they re-entered their semblance of nature, not entirely wild, since it was bordered by a handful of peaceable humans and their discreet shelters, but this disorder was theirs, and they let themselves drift slowly along the shores of Goose Lake.

It wasn't over yet. Simon knew that he would pick up life where he'd left it, and she her own, but a luxuriant new space lay before them, one that would hold them alone, and it seemed impossible that sooner or later they would not return there. He knew the texture of the urge to begin again, and it had to be kept at a distance. Treasures are not to be squan-

dered; what has been given cannot be claimed. He would wait for it to come from her. Perhaps it would never come again.

He gazed upon the delicate profile of her head, the supple line of her body, and he told himself it might not happen again, once was enough, one magical experience like that was enough to keep him satisfied forever. She chose that very moment to pierce him with her crystalline eyes and the thought that she might desire him took his breath away, that she would be the one to draw them again and again back to their shared planet, and he could not resist this complete upheaval.

“Look!” Violette called.

She pointed her paddle toward the small log cabin, Lilliputian in its splash of sunlight.

“There’s someone on my patio!”

Simon could barely make out the house on the bank, but Violette picked out more and more details.

“It’s Mrs. Szach,” she said.

Lila. A sick feeling, like a whiff of guilt, threatened to get the better of Simon, but he dispatched it, for he had never felt so right as he did now, and he paddled faster in the direction of the problem. There had to be a problem, since Lila had taken the trouble to wait on Violette’s territory. Unless she was suffering from an insurmountable outburst of jealousy, which would also be a problem.

Lila had the tormented expression of her worst days. She didn’t look at Violette, too concentrated on the moment when Simon would lift himself from the canoe.

“Jérémie’s disappeared!” she cried once he got out of the boat.

She poured out all the facts at her disposal, which were none too numerous: Jérémie had gone out during the night

without her noticing and had not come back; yes, she'd gone to Simon's place to look for him and to the boathouse and even into the woods, on all the strategic trails they used, calling his name in a piercing voice that he couldn't possibly not hear unless, unless. . . . Then Lila's strength abandoned her, Simon took her by the shoulders and led her to one of Violette's wooden deck chairs. And noticed, as he did so, that she weighed even less than Violette.

"I'll get you some brandy, Mrs. Szach," said Violette as she disappeared into the house.

"What are we going to do?" said Lila, her normal resilience gone, seeking omnipotent comfort in Simon's eyes. "What are we going to do?"

Simon rubbed his forehead, unable to share in her distress. Jérémie couldn't have gotten lost in the woods, not with his compass around his neck like a protective medal, he couldn't have been attacked by a wild animal because even the black bears were as cowardly as hares, and in any case, not a single specimen had been sighted for years. What then? The little bugger must have hidden out in a patch of forest only he knew about, telling himself stories and losing track of time.

The more he tried to reassure Lila, the more Simon's confidence wavered, because one significant detail just didn't jibe with the rest: never, never would the little raccoon miss a meal, submitting to that sacrosanct adult rule with Spartan discipline, the better to send them packing the rest of the time. No, Lila insisted, Jérémie didn't show up for breakfast, nor for lunch, he'd had nothing to eat since the previous evening, *Poor little guy, poor Maty; he must be dying of hunger*, she wept, biting her lips.

They each drank a glass of brandy. None of them knew what to do. Simon looked out over the lake with a changed eye, frightened, imagining its bottomless depths, a headwater lake with water so pure, so dense, that no sound could pass through it, not even a piercing voice like Lila's. He banished his vision of the raccoon floating beneath the waters.

"Maybe we should call the police," Lila suggested.

"We should call Marco first," said Violette.

"Marco?" interjected Simon with sarcastic surprise that made Violette frown.

"He is his father, after all," she shot back. "And he's a lot brighter than you think, the lot of you."

And she went back inside the house as Simon looked on, perplexed. *She's got Marco's number*, he thought, *she's got his number, like she knew him personally*, and that thought, at first no larger than a distraction, began to assume alarming proportions, and shoved all other source of distress into the background.

"I didn't even tell you," said Lila in an exhausted voice, "I didn't even tell you that horrible business with Jeff Clémont, the expropriation . . ."

"Your friend Jeff Clémont?" Simon muttered, then Violette emerged with olives and candied grapefruit peel, as if they were on a picnic.

"Marco's on his way," she said laconically.

That made Simon jump.

"Some help!" he grumbled in spite of himself. "Maybe he'll even commit suicide before he gets here."

Violette reprimanded him with her eyes, then Lila got up. She couldn't just sit there waiting, arms at her sides, she'd start beating the bushes, in the pine grove, for starters. Simon

got to his feet as well, as if called to order, and suggested they explore the area around the clearing where Lila had not yet looked. *I'm coming with you*, Violette said, and since Lila's back was turned, he brushed her cheek with two slow fingers.

"You should get some rest," he told her softly.

At a time like this, sleep was out of the question, she told him, and she set out with him, walking by his side. He didn't wait. He was too upset to keep still or get involved in flowery niceties, he asked her right out about Marco. How did she know him so well, considering she'd only seen him once at his place.

"Did you sleep with him?" he asked bluntly, in a voice that tried to be free and easy, *modern*, as if sleeping around was something he did all the time, his favorite subject of conversation. It worked. Violette answered in a calm, clear voice.

"Yes."

A painful mass came to rest in Simon's chest, but he said nothing, and Violette added that it hadn't really worked, not for him, and not for her either. What did that mean, "it hadn't really worked"? Did it mean he hadn't ejaculated? Shaking with irritation, he hurried off with long strides to put distance between them and could think of nothing else, Violette with Marco, with plenty of others, okay, but with Marco, no, not Marco, Marco whose only claim to a shred of honor was being Jérémie's father.

"Jérémie!" Violette called out in her honeyed voice, which no one more than two meters away could hear. "Jérémie!"

He added his voice to hers, he shouted at the top of his lungs: *Jérémie! Jérémie!* In his voice was anger and the hard mass blocking his chest: *Jérémie! Jérémie, for God's sake!*

raspberries!

THE RASPBERRIES were hiding under the leaves and thorns, at eye level as long as you were squatting. Claire was squatting. Her right foot slipped into a hollow between two rotten stumps, and the other was caught in the berry bushes. Waves of pain radiated from her lower back when she thought of it, but she didn't think of it too often. It was like a small parallel city down there, almost cool, and full of the undisciplined music of insects and the heady scent of raspberries. She'd come upon manna: endless clumps of raspberries, heavy and plump, the best and last of the season, and they were putting up some resistance. You had to work your way down into the shaded underground passageways where they'd taken shelter, then slide an open hand or a container beneath their soft bodies, where they would drop at the merest trespass. You could encounter a bee, and escape with no more than a cry of pain and a burning welt, but you could avoid the bee as well. You had to move slowly, steadily, despite the cramps, the scratches from the thorns and the mosquitoes in your ears. Bees didn't like hyperactive types, and that was fine, because Claire didn't either.

Luc would have hated what she was doing and the state in which she was doing it—hemmed in by spines, thorns and wheezing, almost kneeling in servitude. She was in seventh heaven. That humility suited her perfectly. Between prostrating herself before plants and prostrating herself before people, the choice was not hard.

Luc preferred servitude of the second kind. For the last three weeks he'd sacrificed his Fridays to the so-called emergencies in town, those precious summer Fridays he had set aside for holidays yet could not protect against his boss's voracity.

Meanwhile, Claire's freedom had gone to her head and intoxicated her. She'd put the finishing touches on the last draft of her script yesterday, delighted that no petty slave-driver with an overblown ego could take liberties with her life. She'd made up her mind to take the next month off to lounge about, discover, read, ride her bike and kneel down on the ground as often as nature's abundance required. When you bothered to pay attention, you could see how prodigious nature was, never lacking in loyalty to those who bothered to pay attention.

Take this natural raspberry patch, for example. It covered several hectares along a logging road she discovered that same day, the first day of her official holiday. It was no accident.

Wild raspberries are nothing like the ones you buy in the market. Their scent is a powerful concentrate of summer. If summer has a smell, it is that of a wild raspberry patch on a hot day. Wild raspberries seem to grow on the first spot of cleared land, and that's true. You can always find the

odd spindly plant just about anywhere, but to discover an entire patch that yields enough for you to stuff your mouth by the handful before filling a dozen jam jars, that is a whole different story.

You have to look for logged areas, but not too recent, where the trees have been cut flush against the ground: raspberry bushes are among the first to take root on the poor, tormented soil, burned by the sun. For the first few summers they prosper, send out colonies, rule like kings. In their shade, they shelter the tender shoots of quaking aspen and birch, but that is a mistake. When the aspen and birch begin to grow and cast their shadows, they sign the raspberry patch's death warrant. Claire had twice discovered raspberry patches in the last decade, and twice she'd lost them. Even an immense property like Lila Szach's, abandoned in full flight to anything that grows, was now spent for raspberries. She bought her berries at the market and thought nothing of it. Until today, when a happy bout of indolence caused her to get in her car, drive up to the game preserve and along the gravel road, stopping for no apparent reason beside a Toyota already parked there, then stroll off at random, but there is no such thing as randomness, walking and suddenly coming upon a flat expanse of ground stinking of rotten wood and deforestation before it exuded the fragrance of raspberry. There is no fragrance of raspberry, to be honest, except when you stick your nose right into it, squatting down like Claire, between two stumps, nose buried in the thorny branches and the insects.

The plants seemed to be experiencing their golden age, standing proudly atop the heaps of wood and stumps like trophies, spreading as far as the land was flat. She wanted to cry

out *Raspberries! Raspberries!* as they called out *Land! Land!* when they discovered America.

Now the patch was depleted, and Claire's hat was overflowing. It was a high-crowned cloth hat that had impeccably performed its improvised role as a bucket. Claire clambered out of the bushes full of scratches, streaked with sweat, beaming. Not only had these raspberries made her smile, but so had all those yet to come, next summer and the summer after and the summer after that, all the incredible richness that lay before her. Given, a richness given to those who took the trouble to take.

She looked around to see where she was. An odd plot of land, at first it seemed devastated, its sandy outcroppings thrust up without protection between the sun-bleached corpses of trees and raspberry bushes, an odd kind of desert that served as an oasis for a multitude of creatures. A large heap of dried black droppings showed that a bear had come this way and luckily had not stayed. Crickets leaped about clicking their castanets, goldfinches and white-throated sparrows pecked at the ground, an invisible cicada was humming, flowers had sprung up all around, scattered reminiscences of rosebay willow herb and purple thoroughwort, the first goldenrods, the last black-eyed Susans, gilded petals surrounding their coal-black hearts. The sun was a self-assured August sun, fully oblique, coloring everything it touched a bright yellow. It was a day of plenitude, threatened as were all plenitudes, and that's how Claire felt, at the peak of something perfect that could only slowly begin to fall apart.

A person wearing a cone-shaped hat emerged farther on from a thicket, the owner of the Toyota no doubt, and was

moving toward Claire with short tired steps, a bucket in hand and a water bottle dangling from their belt. A woman of course, a true professional in humility who'd crawled beneath her share of bushes. When she reached Claire, she stopped to catch her breath. She was in her fifties, red-faced and exhausted, bent beneath the heat and the weight of raspberries. She smiled radiantly at Claire, *It's my life!* she exclaimed, a cry from the heart, and Claire returned a broad smile of approval.

Another woman who knew she was at the summit, in abundance.

On the way back, Claire drove very slowly, filled with sudden seriousness, a duty to the present. It was time for putting things by, for a day when pleasure would be rarer. Not only putting raspberries by, but images of these rich moments, all the images, even the heaps of rotting wood, even the windshield sticky with dead flies, and the gravel road with its gaping potholes. In the depths of December's blackness, during a bout of the January blues, to bring back the image of that buzzard atop the telephone pole could be a powerful thing. Besides, wasn't everything that appeared before her eyes worth at least a glance? Without Claire, the raspberries she harvested would have fallen to the ground and rotted—with barely a nibble from the ants. Without her to certify their existence, to see them at least, to congratulate them in her own way for having successfully come into the world, all those heavy bumblebees, those loud-mouthed blue jays, the birches stripped bare by caterpillars would have expended their energy for nothing, forever wasted. Between two walls of spruce a tiny parcel of lake shone briefly. A horse was grazing on a hill—a stallion in a state of erection, Claire noted in

her laborious attention. The fields passed like calendar pages: orange with devil's paintbrush in June, white with daisies in July, and now yellow, the already-wan yellow of rusted goldenrod. All this hung in perfect balance on the ridge, ready to begin its tumble downhill. Reason enough to feel your heart go slack, as if gripped by apprehension.

A familiar uproar shook Claire from her meditations as soon as she got out of the car. Since the field had been abandoned to her, the Celestial Rodent had been throwing her weight around, trumpeting at dawn to scare away intruders and signal her conquest of the feeder, chasing or being chased but always in full active mode, scurrying about in leaps and bounds and vociferations. She'd begun to wreak havoc on the geraniums too, just for the hell of it, out of personal malevolence or to spice up her diet. The geraniums were dear to Claire's heart, their flamboyant red was pure happiness, but lately they were red no more. No sooner opened than the lovely little buds were nipped off, scattered around the yard, gnawed on for the sake of appearances only. Claire didn't like the Celestial Rodent anymore. Once again, she yelled at her, clapping her hands, which was a waste of time and effort. Once again, she wished her the worst: some devastating squirrel disease or an attack by a hungry vulture, something definitive that she wouldn't have to personally be involved in.

In the midst of this ridiculous skirmish, Claire spotted the Parson and Lila Szach coming toward her, and behind them a young man she did not recognize, along with pretty Violette, all of them converging on her with expressions so strange they became threatening. Claire felt her apprehension solidify and take shape with them.

“Have you seen Jérémie?” the Parson called.

Since Mrs. Szach and the Parson were talking at the same time, it took Claire a while to understand, then conclude she didn’t care to know. They were talking about the boy, the little boy, who had disappeared. About the police who would take three hours to get here from Mont-Laurier, *and when they get here, what’ll they do?* asked Lila darkly. *They’ll perform miracles*, the Parson stated, and the young man behind them, whom Claire recognized as the father of the boy she’d met at the beginning of the summer, lashed out at her and everyone else.

“We’re wasting time! Did anybody see a car? That’s the question we should be asking: Miss, if you please, did you see a car with a man at the wheel?”

“Marco,” sighed the Parson, “there are hundreds of cars. What do you think?”

“A man at the wheel,” Marco continued, addressing Claire directly, grabbing her by the shoulder to make her look at him, “a man wearing an old red lumberjack shirt, alone or with a little boy.”

“Leave her alone, Marco!” the Parson burst out.

Claire had turned pale, and paler still as she drew back; she’d seen a few cars for sure, but what was that old red lumberjack shirt doing here at a time like this?

“Red and black, or maybe black and brown, or yellow and black, who knows?” the Parson muttered.

“Red and black,” Lila Szach told them. “I remember the boy told me once about a man with a red and black jacket!”

“I’m going to the village,” said the Parson, grabbing Marco’s arm, who tore himself away. “Are you coming with me?”

Violette sat down on the ground and declared in a small voice that she would wait here for the police.

“Don’t you feel well?” the Parson inquired immediately, and Claire saw that Lila Szach was staring at him as he squatted down beside Violette and put his hand lightly on her head, a hand that seemed to know that tender path.

“Did anybody go to the cliff?” she asked, heartsick.

IT’S NOT *my fault*, Claire said to herself, *I refuse*. She didn’t want to give birth to real horror, just because she’d conjured it up in her stories. Anyway, it was crazy, impossible. Crazy and impossible, but it did look as if the murderer with the quiet deep eyes and the red lumberjack shirt had escaped from her script and was wandering free in the woods—either that or he already existed, he had forced himself on her imagination as she wrote, as she dove into the void, her antennae out to capture invisible things. Diving into the void shouldn’t be allowed. Who knew if diving into the void shattered the already porous walls between what appears to exist and what does not yet exist?

No. All men wear red lumberjack shirts when they go into the woods, the boy met one of those men once, big deal, and now the Parson and Lila were at wit’s end and resuscitating that hunter, who’d long since returned to the peace and quiet of his home. Just a nasty coincidence, nothing to do with this terrifying image.

The bloody pulp of a boy’s face.

If ever that horrifying image she’d invented with such jubilation, if ever the words she dashed off to cause a sensation—the axe rises, gleaming and red, the man looks at us with a

peaceful smile, the camera pans down to show at his feet the bloody pulp of a little boy's face—if those inept words arose from the screen to take on reality, Claire would never recover.

She spoke in measured tones of a premonition when they asked her why she had the macabre idea of the cliff, and the Parson frowned, indicating he didn't think much of premonitions. But Marco said, *I'm going to the cliff*. And Lila Szach, livid, added a second later, *Me too*.

That was how they portioned out the anxiety of their missions. The Parson would ask around in the village, Violette would stay right where she sat to wait for the police and the three of them, Claire, Marco and Lila Szach, would head for the cliff and her premonition in her rowboat.

It was an old rowboat that kept the water valiantly at bay, thanks to Luc's summer caulking. Claire thought of Luc with desperate tenderness as they rowed off toward possible tragedy. He would be arriving that evening—what state would she be in when he showed up and she could finally cuddle up in his sturdy arms? Marco rowed like a drunkard, totally without coordination, with brute force that had to be spent in some way, and as he rowed he talked to kill the silence. It took no more than ten minutes to cross the lake, ten minutes of interminable crossing. *He's such an intense kid*, said Marco, *he scares me sometimes, sometimes I'm scared for him*, everything that Jérémie meant to Marco came tumbling out like frothing rapids, but Claire was more worried about Marco as guilt and love for his son overwhelmed him. *Little Jer, my poor little Jer*, he muttered, *he thinks we don't know he lit the fire, lit the house on fire, the house we wanted to sell on account of the separation . . . My poor little Jer . . .* Great pain was upon him, and you had to

be frightened for him, frightened that he could not face it. *Ah Jer*, he begged, *Come on, Jer. . . please . . . Come on . . .*

Lila Szach threw him dark, sidelong, helpless glances, then she looked Claire in the eye, and Claire returned her gaze. Her eyes, an unrelenting gray, were normally dominating, but now they wavered from weakness. Claire did not lower her gaze. They were two strangers thrown together into the most brutal, obscene intimacy: the intimacy of misfortune.

"Do you know any prayers, any incantations?" she asked Claire, and her gray eyes welled with tears.

"I believe in luck," Claire answered.

Marco moaned between clenched teeth, calling his son's name with every stroke of the oars, until Lila Szach, almost prostrate on the rear seat, spoke to him.

"Calm down," she said, almost sharply. "You have no reason to blame yourself."

And she added in a voice so low Claire had to strain to understand, "It's my fault. He was my responsibility."

But I invented the killer! Claire added with a bitter laugh to herself. She saw herself in the absurdity of their situation, she saw how ridiculous they were with their three pain-wracked forms in a creaky old rowboat while a magnificent light, the kind that exists only in August, enveloped them in its liquid gold silk, while the birds mocked them, the hermit thrush, two strutting kingfishers, a handful of distant ravens—but no more white-throated sparrows, the sparrow's song had gone missing. A beauty that was absolute, absolutely false, Claire thought, a flattened backdrop at the foot of which writhed monsters and worms that devoured putrefying bodies. She pictured the beginning of a film she could write about the

three of them right now, three shipwrecked survivors without a shipwreck in this cardboard beauty waiting for blackness to break loose, then she hated herself and shut herself up.

Now the cliff was moving forward to meet them, sunlight attached to its long granite and quartz flanks. A few cedars absorbed the light, forming green hedges where the eye could rest. The rowboat made one last scissor-cut through the silk of the lake, then bumped hard against the shore. They were there.

“What else do your premonitions say?” asked Lila Szach, a hint of sarcasm in her disarray.

Claire avoided her eyes.

“We’ve come for nothing, for sure,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

If she’d known how to craft prayers, right then she would surely have offered one that ran like this: *May we have come for nothing*, to hell with the improbable addressee, just reciting the prayer out loud would have made her feel better. She was sorry she was the kind of person who loathed prayer.

Marco leaped onto the rocks and found an outcropping to tie up the boat. Activity brought him back to life, and now he was alert, sizing up the adversary. He began to shout, holding his hands like a megaphone, *Jérémie! Jer!*

“There’s a trail to the left,” said Lila Szach. “It goes to the top, you can dive from there.”

She paused. She made to get out of the rowboat, had almost taken Marco’s hand, but she changed her mind.

“Take your time. Be careful not to twist your ankle.”

She sat back again and scrutinized the cliff face, the way she would have examined someone whose company she did not wish to keep. Claire knew about Jan’s death; Jan’s death

and its devastating effect on Lila was one of the first things she discussed with the Parson, several years ago.

No matter how you looked at it, the cliff was stained with blood.

Marco took his first-aid kit from the boat, along with rope, harnesses, a flashlight, a little pouch containing bandages and Mercurochrome, enough to treat small scrapes but of little use if it came to a body hacked to pieces with an axe by a man in an old red lumberjack shirt. Standing on the rocky shore, stomach churning, ready to vomit, Claire watched him. She would have given anything to run away, throw these intruders overboard and row like a madwoman to get as far away as possible from the carnage. To receive full on what might follow, to think of Marco's face and all of Marco in the mad and impossible eventuality that he would come upon *the bloody pulp* was more than she could cope with.

"Let's go up," said Marco, giving her no choice but to follow.

WHAT DID THE sight of blood do to you? The sight of a lot of blood, not just a couple of stains that looked more like beet juice, no, a flood, a bloodbath, to use the popular term, covering big chunks of torn flesh like a thick soup?

Claire always thought she knew instinctually, having visualized it and translated it into visual terms more than once. It wouldn't be long before she realized just how far short of reality her instinctive vision of blood really was. There would be a learning aspect to the horrific experience; she would emerge from it less ignorant, and maybe even with some terrifying ideas for even darker writing.

Marco was the main problem. The sight of someone being destroyed by suffering, someone tender and caring: she had not managed to imagine that. In her cruelest scripts, people who suffered did it the modern way, with a hero's or a coward's grimace playing at the corner of their mouth, the right line spoken at the right moment, better to boost their score as a human character. Marco was suffering and she couldn't work that into a story, it would tear your heart out and paralyze you. She followed him, behind his fidgety goat-legs. The path was charming, well laid-out between the flat rocks, among dried blueberry bushes and fumewort with its delicate pink and yellow blossoms, and under other circumstances she would have found it infinitely charming. She watched Marco's narrow back, almost a girl's back if you removed those pathetic rescue contraptions, the rope looped over his shoulder in twisted skeins indicating that he had never been a Boy Scout, and she felt like sobbing. If that terrible moment made up its mind to happen, how could she keep him from dying of an overdose of pain?

Jérémie! Marco shouted over and over again.

He leaned against a jutting rock at a turn in the trail and motioned to Claire to stop.

"You're making too much noise," he growled. "All I can hear is your footsteps."

He was expecting to hear something. So he was doing better than she'd thought, he hadn't really begun to collapse, he still had the strength to be unpleasant with her.

Leaning against the rock, he shouted his son's name, then listened to see if anything came back. Suddenly his face lit up.

"It's a bird," said Claire. "A red-headed woodpecker."

The look he threw her was more irritated than pained.

"We're going to find him," he said peremptorily. "I know we will. I know he's alive. It's a law of the Dharma. Nothing happens to us in life that we cannot bear, and that I couldn't bear."

Claire swallowed. Her shelter against pain was desperately pitiful. On the wasted earth they inhabited, only the opposite seemed true, that people were endlessly facing pain that was far greater than them, but this was no time for lucidity, and she murmured, *Of course we're going to find him* without the slightest note of conviction.

They crept up the trail again at a turtle's pace, in a silence that concealed nothing. If she stopped staring at the path, if she lifted her head, the splendor of the lake washed over Claire and filled her with despair. She kept her eyes on Marco's feet, busy in their dirty white gym shoes, then she came to an abrupt stop.

"Listen!"

Once more, with a sucker's delight in his eyes, he grabbed her by the arm and squeezed hard enough to keep her from making a sound.

"The woodpecker," she said in a low voice. "Or maybe a blue jay, sometimes their songs sound the same."

"Be quiet!"

Marco's transfiguration began there, with that *Be quiet!* shot out like a bullet, like a whip lash, an action. It was as if he'd finally made up his mind to stop whining and fight; he was fighting, and right now she was the first available enemy.

"You're going to stay right here. Not a sound, got it? Move only when I call you!"

He headed off like a flash, agile feet slipping and finding their footing at every stride, his head swiveling like that of a monstrous heron. *Jérémie!* he shouted at the top of his voice, then he stopped still, falling silent to listen, then he rushed off again, letting out that animal, almost sexual cry that demanded response, demanded that you come running. Soon Claire lost sight of him, and all that connected her to him were his hypnotic cries.

Marco's transfiguration was in his attitude, Claire noted when she thought about it later. Events are constantly taking place, and there is nothing we can do to stop them. But the attitude we adopt, when the events we can do nothing to stop do take place, is all-powerful. The attitude—right, perfectly right—has no impact on the event that continues to unroll its sticky, unforgiving tape, but it does on the outcome of the event.

That's how Marco raised Jérémie from the dead. How else could it be explained?

Against all odds, at a certain point in Marco's ascension, Jérémie answered. Claire never heard him, she heard only the birds the whole time, and eventually Marco's excited cries, calling to her to come quickly.

Once she was kneeling beside him on the edge of a crevice in the rock, she could clearly hear the fragile voice of someone calling *Papa!* and answering Marco's outpouring with monosyllables.

The little boy had fallen into a crevice that had to be at least three meters deep, and it looked as though something was broken, something that kept him from moving.

A miracle.

“Hang on,” said Marco. “Hang on, I’m coming to get you.”

He was in exaltation, his transformation into Superman, into Spider-Man, was complete, and though he knew nothing about slings and ropes, he threw something together that miraculously resembled a kind of hoist, and that would have earned a patent for inventiveness, all the time talking to his son and giving Claire clipped and contradictory orders: *Hold it this way, no, that way, pull here, no, there!* Claire helped him enthusiastically, and she couldn’t help smiling now that she realized there would be no bloodbath, nor thick soup in which chunks of flesh would float, and she swore, as Marco made his way down into the hole and as she just about tore her wrists off holding the rope, which wasn’t all that securely fastened, to stop telling bloody tales and change her line of work. She’d learn to write humor, or campaign speeches, or become an ornithologist or a housewife doing crosswords and Sudokus as her only source of thrills while Luc slaved for the both of them.

Jérémie was pale and in pain, and one of his legs was at a curious angle to the other. But he was alive, and glowing at having been found after having been so afraid he never would be. On the way down the trail, clinging to Marco’s back, he launched into a disordered explanation of the adventure in his feverish voice, *I was following a man but it was a Centaur because he disappeared when he turned around and saw me, and that’s when I fell, trying to pick up my magic wand. . .* that Marco answered with a plea to relax and be still, laughing out loud himself in his immense relief.

Lila Szach stood up in the rowboat the moment she saw them.

“Yésus Maria!” was all she could say, a wild jubilation in her gray eyes.

In that old rowboat, worn away by years of uselessness, Claire experienced the apotheosis of the day, and of the entire summer. Now they were four, and if Jérémie was the wounded king of their small floating island, she was its queen. Marco thanked her with the same insistence he’d used to push her around earlier, and Lila Szach, the irascible, the foreign, the inaccessible Lila Szach, kissed her on the mouth in her wild gratitude. They were all a little intoxicated, a little crazy, thrown wide open by the emotion that flowed through them like they were a single circulatory system. Claire accepted their excess gratitude, though she’d had nothing to do with the miracle, though the ordering of coincidence had come from elsewhere. It was so good for a change to feel truly a part of something, a community, that she laughed and cried along with them and grasped whatever came her way, every single delicious crumb of the apotheosis.

LUC HAD ARRIVED. His Jeep, spotless and shining, was parked symmetrically next to Claire’s car, which suddenly looked like a slattern. True, he never used his to drive through the bush, he kept it immaculately and securely depression-prone in concrete parking garages. Claire laughed as she moved toward the cottage. She’d drunk too much vodka at Lila Szach’s, now she was in a hurry to snuggle up to Luc, she relished in anticipation the breathless tales with which she could finally seduce him. He’d brought in the raspberries and the hat. When she came through the door she saw he’d placed them on the table in a deep bowl, where their ruby glow shone in abundance, and that he’d stuck his hands into the fruit.

“Raspberries!” she called out to him in triumph.

He jumped, then looked at her a moment, perplexed.

“Hello,” he said, serious.

She had to tell him everything, beginning with the discovery of America in the shape of raspberries and ending with the festive rowboat, preceded by the unforgettable stallion with an erection—it would be endless and passionate.

“Your hat’s a mess,” said Luc. “Nothing stains worse than raspberries.”

No, blood does, Claire felt like telling him.

But the telephone rang.

She picked it up, trusting, the first to answer in accordance with a survival guide she’d internalized since early summer. The anonymous caller hadn’t sent a signal for weeks now, but here she was again. Claire felt the beginnings of panic clutch her stomach. Luc didn’t seem inclined to move away and give her the room to react correctly, to adopt the right attitude, the perfectly right attitude, perfect in its justice.

This time Jim’s wife, in her now familiar voice, told her, “Don’t hang up, please.”

Jim’s wife’s name was Francine—Claire had had the time to commit it to memory since back then.

Francine and Jim Bloor’s Nursery.

“Listen, Francine,” said Claire.

She heard her own calm voice and noted that her state of mind was unfolding without irritation, and most of all without hatred. The story was like a carbuncle coming to a head, and she must delight in the spurt of pus, even if Luc was there, because without spurting pus there could be no remission.

“My name’s not Francine,” said the voice. “It’s Maud.”

“Maud?” echoed Claire. “I don’t know any Maud.”

She was even more disturbed when Luc took the receiver out of her hand and told her curtly, "It's for me."

He didn't talk long, *I'll call you back* he said, then repeated it in a lower voice, or was it a more tender voice, because the other woman—Jim's wife, who was now called Maud—was clearly arguing with him on the other end of the line.

"I'll call you back in an hour."

He hung up. Then looked at Claire with clear eyes that shone with a fighter's determination. He took her hand and led her to the sofa.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about it for a while, but I could never find the right time. Looks like it's now."

He spoke. Of the flood of information that flowed over her, Claire retained only fragments.

Maud, who wasn't Jim's wife and who appeared from God knows where, was in love with Luc.

Luc was in love with Maud.

It had been going on for a year. For exactly ten months and three weeks—that last bit of information, though swamped by the rest, remained imprinted in her mind.

"Whatever you like," said Luc after a long digression of which Claire understood nothing, as if he were speaking a foreign language.

In fact, it was a foreign language.

"We can sell the cottage," he summed up. "But I'd really rather hold on to it."

marianne

HOW MANY MEDICAL histories, how many prescriptions, intravenous drips, observations, immobilizations, files, hand washings, solutions, dressings, changings of dressings, how many vital signs, cordial smiles, hurried steps, how many guilty cigarettes? Almost all in the double digits since this morning—except the cigarettes, which she'd managed to hold below five. How many *How are we feeling this morning? You're looking charming, how splendid you are, very solid for someone at death's door, just who are those eyes sparkling for?*

Ibidem.

Those who'd lost their sense of humor answered with a groan. But most, surprisingly enough, always found a happy reply, drawn from the vital wellsprings that kept flowing through sickness.

I'd really be walking on air if you'd give me a cigarette.

I was dreaming about you, nurse. You and me on the beach in Acapulco, a real eyeful.

A bed of live coals, that's what it was. Every day, for too many hours, she threw herself upon it and every day she

would be burned, but burned in a pleasant way, aches and pains cauterized, freed of the dry branches of her life. She slept like a child as soon as her head touched the pillow. She would awaken in perfect condition as fuel for the fire, and leap back onto the coals. It would last as long as it was to last, but for now, that was it. She was overflowing. Had she been working less, she would probably have exploded.

It was lunch break and Marianne went for a walk outside for a change of scenery, to vary the spectacle of suffering.

Besides, she wasn't "keeping company with suffering," as Jeanne unceasingly called her actions, but with health. She played with health, bribed it, jested with it, sweet-talked it to bring it back stronger. The whole notion of suffering, if you asked her, was tainted with contempt and fantasizing. People would say, appalled by the insurmountable, *Oh my God, how he must be suffering!* or *Death I can deal with, but I can't handle suffering!*

Suffering was serious business, but it was just one of many. Suffering was part of a much larger group that had limits of its own. When you looked closely, unemotionally, you saw that there were burns and shooting pains, tiny, sharp, vacillating tongues of flame stoked by dread. The suffering of dread was the worst of all; it was a monster. It had to be calmed at any cost, no matter the gangrene and the dislocations of the body.

All the while, summer was blowing past in a gust.

It was ten after twelve and Marianne was walking along Ste. Catherine Street thinking about Simon, who was enjoying the countryside in his life of contemplation. She was not envious of him in the slightest, and could barely understand his immobile existence. Sure, there were those fragile verte-

brae of his. But that didn't explain his propensity to hide out in the vegetation, far from life's reality. Marianne walked along, buoyed by the vibrating humanity around her. She thought of her next cigarette as she thought of Simon, telling herself he shouldn't find out that she'd started smoking again. She thought of Simon and wondered what justification she could claim for not joining him next weekend in the great green void.

These days, he did not love her. She clearly irritated him on the rare occasions she showed up. It was one of those periods she had to get through, even if it wasn't the first. These days, Simon was crazy about that girl Violette, and he was the only one who didn't know it. That naïve blindness of his, that stubborn determination to be palsy-walsy with the object of his passion, got on your nerves if you happened to be witness to it, but you didn't have to look. In lengthy promiscuities like theirs (more than thirty years, *oof!*), it was normal to lose interest in the landscape under your nose, and feel the need to put some distance between you and it for a while before you could appreciate it again. At the risk of getting caught up for good in another landscape.

I don't get it, Mom, Jeanne fumed. It doesn't bother you, you don't feel anything?

It always struck Marianne how curious it was to be criticized for her composure, while the whole world was spiraling out of control because people couldn't control their emotions.

It was true that she had a kind of gift, an enormous capacity for neutrality that could be mistaken for indifference. Maybe it was indifference after all. Indifference in the face of the harassment and irritation that radiated from everyone else.

Not coldness, but an indifference of warmth, a way of saying, *I am going to help you, but I am not going to suffer for you.*

At the corner of Ste. Catherine and Clark, Marianne slowed down, then stopped on the sidewalk.

Behind a metal fence, a man was dancing.

Open-air performances were commonplace during the summer months, with their succession of festivals, but this was something different. First of all, it was not very spectacular: the dancer was performing in a vacant lot, atop a square wooden platform crudely thrown together on the ground, without artifice, without even a costume, alone. Marianne didn't dare step around the metal fence to join the group of spectators who had gathered in a circle around the man. She stayed on the sidewalk; it was as good a place as any for a cigarette.

She ended up smoking three.

Something was out of place. She knew nothing about dance, but she could tell the man was a trained dancer, a professional who should have been performing on a proper stage in front of a rapt audience, instead of flailing about a few steps from a sidewalk where all kinds of people down on their luck—whores, squeegee kids, Inuit beggars—hung out. She observed his movements, the great waving of his arms that ended with his limbs stretched forward, and his slow-motion circling of the stage as he looked everything and everyone in the eye. She understood, or thought she understood, that he was doing it on purpose, he had chosen proximity with all that was repulsive, the raggedy present and the poverty-stricken streets. He was bestowing something luxurious upon an environment that had none.

When she thought she'd figured that out, Marianne stepped around the protective metal fence and, after handing over what was left of her pack of cigarettes to a young guy picking up butts on the sidewalk, moved closer to the stage. She wanted to hide behind backs and shoulders but it wasn't easy, there was only one row of sparse spectators, and in spite of herself she was in the front row, looking uneasily into the dancer's calm eyes, staring at the sweat that soaked his T-shirt and the strange movements whose story and meaning she alone was probably unable to understand. She understood nothing but she stood there, tense, fascinated, and each time the dancer turned his burning gaze on her, she did not avert her eyes as she wanted to. His body was firm and supple of course, but his face was astonishingly tanned and mature like that of an old wolf, he was in his fifties, maybe more, fifty-six like she was. She applauded with everyone else when it was over. The dancer withdrew to a corner of the vacant lot where he'd left his things, followed by a handful of spectators who must have been his friends. A small, dark-skinned man who'd been watching the show to Marianne's right, and who had applauded enthusiastically, escorted her back to the sidewalk, and threw her a misty glance.

"Will you be back tomorrow?" he asked.

When she smiled hesitatingly, he added, "Tomorrow's his last performance. I come every day, every day at noon."

"Really?" said Marianne.

She didn't dare ask why, but kept on looking at him with a questioning smile, and he answered of his own accord.

"I need it," he said fervently. "I really need it!"

THE AFTERNOON was short, since Marianne had started work at five that morning. No sooner had she escaped this particular hospital than she hurried off to the far reaches of the city to another one, where Jérémie was recovering from his misadventures, and the triple fracture of his leg. The poor kid hadn't stopped asking after his monarch, but no one wanted to tell him it had dried up, imprisoned in its jar. She brought him a gift of a butterfly mounted inside a handsome glass box. He took it unenthusiastically. *It's dead!* he said, full of blame.

Later, her supper with Jeanne had been calamitous—up until dessert, that is. Jeanne was going through a rough patch that she insisted on keeping to herself. But now, all Marianne had to do was look up at her from her crème caramel and she burst out with the truth.

“I'm pregnant!” she declared, as if she were announcing *I've got leukemia!*

It was a catastrophe, Jeanne thought, she'd gotten in with the wrong man, the wrong life, now wasn't the time to add further complications, and Marianne listened to her with nods of commiseration. She was tempted to say, *Keep it! Keep it!* meaning both baby and husband, but Jeanne let it be known that she wanted no advice. She kept her counsel, and by not speaking she seemed to be in another world, lost in her secret. Which Jeanne noticed.

“What is it, Mom?” she asked all of a sudden. “Do you have a lover?”

That made them both laugh, Marianne most of all.

THE FOLLOWING DAY at five minutes after twelve, Marianne was at the hospital entering lists of patients and symptoms

into the computer system when an alarm went off inside her. She glanced at the clock and dashed out of her office, giving no explanation to anyone. She ran out of the hospital and onto St. Denis Street, then left onto Ste. Catherine, pushing aside someone whose sex, age and degree of drunkenness she could not ascertain, and ended up in a sweat at the metal fence at the corner of Clark. The dancer was dancing, surrounded by a larger circle of spectators, among whom she recognized the small dark-skinned man. At first she was tempted to keep her distance, safe behind the barrier, and light up a cigarette. But she would have lost everything, and she'd come to grasp something. She slipped behind the comfortable back of a spectator she chose for his tall build, but the man stepped aside to make room for her and propelled her, in spite of herself, into the front row. At first she felt ill at ease, wondering why she was there in the first place when her days were overfull already, and what was the point of all these unintelligible movements and this outrageously forceful gaze, in all its directness, for the dancer had spotted her and greeted her with his pale eyes, and soon she thought of nothing more, for the dancer's body had taken up all the space. Then it was over, and she applauded as hard as everyone else without understanding what had happened, and why she had tears in her eyes. The people began to disperse. She looked around for the small, dark-skinned man who might clear things up for her. She saw him, but he'd gone up to the dancer and was speaking to him, and that kind of audacity was beyond her, and she hurried off.

She left, overcome with questions and worried delight that together formed a fog. Then she dove into the crucible of work, and the fog burned off.

The next day, she was examining X-rays with the new orthopedic surgeon, a good-looking, ambitious young man who would certainly become hospital director one day, if he didn't end up as the minister of health. Young Dr. Prislair, for that was his name, who, in the voice of a man in a hurry, who would go far but would first have to put in extra effort to get where he was going, spoke rapidly of torn popliteus and tibialis anterior muscles and of subacromial articulations that hindered arm flexibility, and Marianne visualized all these muscles in movement as Dr. Prislair pinned them to the ground; she visualized the regal, ample gestures of the dancer stretching his brachialis and gastrocnemius muscles, displaying what a human body consisted of and how incomparable it was. It all lasted a second, Dr. Christophe Prislair noticed nothing, while Marianne received a discharge of beauty and smiled, smiled at the thought of what the dancer had done to her; he had opened a window inside her through which grace had come flooding in.

september



the end of the world

CLAIRE RAN AIMLESSLY through the woods, panic on her heels. She ran as if her life was in danger—and her life was in danger, her hard shell had cracked, her being forever breached, the blood flowing out of her. Luc was a part of her, and if that part could break away, all the others could reveal their true fragile nature: her hair, her legs, her heart, her happiness by the lake, her talents slowly fashioned, none of it had ever belonged to her.

A root tripped her, slowing her mad progress, and on her knees she broke into sobs. Her overflowing panic at last found release, and she got to her feet and returned, almost calm, to the cottage. But inside her, everything continued to die.

She telephoned Luc because he was the only one who could stay the slaughter. Hadn't he held her close before they parted this morning, more tenderly than ever? All was not lost; she would change, both of them would change, besides, people are always changing without even wanting to, and even more by wanting. Why leave now since he hadn't found it necessary to leave during his ten-month affair? And what did affairs with outsiders matter? Did she leave after rubbing

up against the sumptuous chassis of Mr. Studsmore? If she were erasing things, wasn't it more logical to erase the past ten superficial months than the past twelve deep years?

He answered her with the same tender, patient voice, as if speaking to a sick but beloved child: *Just relax, go outside and sit in the sun, it's not the end of the world, nothing will change this fall, I won't be moving out until November, you can stay at the cottage until October like you usually do, enjoy it, stop getting down on yourself. It's not the end of the world, nothing against you, stop seeing it like something against you, when you get down to it, it's strictly my business, it has nothing to do with you, try to relax, it's a beautiful day, go sit outside.*

She hung up, lulled by his voice, almost relieved. But just as quickly his words implanted their implacable reality in her mind, *I won't be moving out until November*, than panic rose up inside her, and she had to call him again to hear the other reassuring things she'd forgotten, things he'd surely slipped in along with the intolerable ones. After her second call he stopped answering. And later that evening, at his place, at their place, when she called over and over again, he let each of her soss shatter against the answering machine.

That's when the hatred came.

Afterward, she applied herself to the meticulous task of hammering out and solidifying her hatred, endlessly redrawing the picture of the coward the scoundrel the cheat, aided in her work by a handful of close friends who rallied to her side. It worked. Luc was no longer recognizable, he'd become a monster, no one but a suicide case would want to get close to him, and in the process she recovered some of her backbone.

But the cottage.

The cottage, the extension of her skin, her hard drug, her paradise where, it was understood, her ashes would complete their disintegration—the cottage, the cottage was threatened.

She told her friends, *I'm keeping it I paid more than half he's the one who's leaving he can go screw himself*, and her friends nodded in approval.

When her friends were there, she could picture the future. She could believe what she was saying, that Goose Lake would be unalterably hers, already the pain was fading, there was life after death.

As usual, her friends spoke in loud voices instead of listening to the loons, they stepped on spiders, walked on the delicate lichens that had taken fifty years to come into the world, not one of them knew how to light a spruce-bough bonfire nor sit quietly in front of it and watch the secret cities reddening in the coals. When her friends stayed longer than two days, Claire despaired, the despair of having to compare their deafening presence to the minimalist and harmonious presence of Luc, who was gone forever.

She ended up sending them away with the flimsiest of excuses, or they would leave without her asking them to stay.

When she was alone, the lake would become a balm once more. All alone, there were moments when she could be open to what was with her now, the lapping of the water, the birds, the woods gradually being painted shades of blackish-brown, she closed off those other conduits, the imaginary ones that plunged into the maze of future anguish. For a few days, the birds thronged to the feeders. Errant grosbeaks and white-breasted nuthatches tried to elbow their way in between the regulars, and a group of goldfinches and chickadees gave

noisy voice to their indignation. The sunflower seed supply was being depleted, for the same craze had struck the rodents: chipmunks with stuffed cheeks scooted back and forth between seeds and burrow, and after them came squirrels completely overwhelmed by the task at hand—chasing everything that moved, gorging themselves to bursting, hiding their provisions in preposterous places they would immediately forget about (under a dead leaf, between two leafless asters, under a cushion on the chaise longue). The rowdy atmosphere reminded her of Boxing Day, when feverish customers fought for bargains with an eye on closing time. It was hilarious and brutal, and a time of trial. The hummingbirds fought for the season's last drop of sugarwater without knowing it, or perhaps they did know, deep in their miniature brains, that the kindly hand that had provided them with their vital liquid was about to turn off the tap, and that they would have to take to the road again, head south. War cries replaced melodious song, the dire warnings of the blue jays answered the squeals of the kingfishers. At times a short moment of peaceful yearning rose from the long call of the loons, then the din would resume. In all those intense cries there hung a palpable anxiety, but an excited anticipation as well, the anticipation of change.

Claire watched them and figured she would have been better off as a bird.

Or anything else that had no commitments, and could fly off excitedly toward change.

Because here, all alone, she had the time to feel the pain of stifling fear. If it happened. If that was taken away from her, if she couldn't keep it, if it ever happened.

She gazed at the sandy beach, the sparkle of underwater gold, the eye-catching masses of bog-laurel and wild oats; she needed them. She gazed at the island and the cliff rising up from the lake like a proof of perfection. She gazed at all that surrounded her and that perfumed the air, rustled in the breeze, reddened, faded, stridulated, called out, flew, and a voice inside her begged, *Don't leave, keep me with you always*. She gazed at the cottage in all its affability, set down among the other primitive lives like a natural nest.

As she contemplated the cottage, Claire began to comprehend that she would lose everything.

The cottage was a monument to Luc's energetic existence.

The cottage existed before them, but in an incomplete form that made it look more like a model than a place to live. Luc had replaced the windows, remodeled the cathedral ceiling, ripped up the old linoleum, destroyed the colonies of carpenter ants. Insulated, painted, manipulated every kind of material conceived for prying their way into houses. Since no worker from the village would accept such a demeaning task, he dug out the basement single-handedly, bent double for weeks, more alone than a convict in solitary confinement.

The seal of his sweat was everywhere, dripping down to the lake. He'd rolled flat stones for what must have been kilometers. He built a sculptural hearth. He designed a dock that curved like a sidewalk. He dredged out the creek bed to discipline it, he fashioned stones and earth to create a rock garden where only the flowers were missing.

Claire had planted the flowers.

That's what she'd done. Planted flowers. Fed the flowers and the small animals, fed Luc. Contributed money, of

course, more than him. Then simply took pleasure, pleasure for months and years from the beauty and the fruit of Luc's sweat. While he, the recaptured prisoner, frittered away hot summers in an air-conditioned office, except for the two regulation weeks of vacation, when he would come and pour more sweat into the cottage.

Where did she fit into this disciplined wilderness? What were her founding acts that proved she had taken possession of this place? Phlox, giant black-eyed Susans, lupines, geraniums, garden herbs. But successful flowers like hers spoke only of themselves and relegated the planter to oblivion. She had also transplanted rare ferns behind the rock garden, maidenhair ferns with marvelous branches that appeared to float like elves in the wind, purloined the first year from Lila Szach's maple grove. Her hikes through Lila Szach's woods awakened her interest in ferns, and she had come to know more than two dozen species. But where was it to be seen, her deep-seated promiscuity, her love for life in its other forms? Where was her close relationship with the ferns, so that all could take due note and account of it? She knew in what gulches lay curled the ostrich-feather ferns that produce fiddleheads in spring. She picked only the bluish crested shield ferns for bouquets because it is the only species that tolerates immersion in water. She knew the meadow brakes that lined the road were direct descendants of the same plant that kept company with the dinosaurs. She knew the evil properties of the common fern that, according to contemporary or medieval specialists, could cause cancer or invisibility.

The fruit, the trees, the small animals: she knew each by its name, whereas Luc, tools in hand, gave them only a pass-

ing glance. He was the outsider, the builder, while she was an adopted member of the great family of wildlives.

But those traces spoke only in low voices.

Luc's monuments weighed heavier in the balance. Especially the weight of his sweat.

When she understood that the scales were tipped against her, and that losing Luc meant losing the lake, Claire did not run off in all directions like the first time.

She felt no panic, for panic is the anticipation of tragedy to come, and this tragedy was here before her. It was pure catastrophe, as pure as death. Claire felt a kind of relief: she would never have to fear its arrival, for here it was now.

She cried for days.

The inextricable whole formed by Luc and the lake could not be replaced. It was the once-in-a-lifetime jackpot, the kind you win only with extraordinary luck.

She stopped answering the phone, and could not bear to see anyone. All her strength was focused on her pain, on the storm she would have to weather alone. That didn't stop her from sitting in the sun, strolling through the woods, culling the last blackberries, and even swimming once in the cold water and feeling a bitter flash of joy. Tears kept flowing down her cheeks like a monsoon out of control. One evening, face drenched and stomach full of red wine, she picked up a pencil and a notebook and began a list. A list of all the living creatures she encountered that day, and that she would lose.

1 blue jay, 2 chickadees, 1 nuthatch

The Celestial Rodent

Chipmunks (3)

Red-headed woodpecker
Northern flicker
Hérons (2)
The Celestial Rodent
Spiders at the center of their web (4)
Cicada (heard)
Loons (6)
Mosquitoes (many)
Large-mouthed bass (near the dock)
Partridge
The Celestial Rodent
Deer
Swarm of wasps (heard)
Late-emerging monarch
Dark blue insects with fat bellies
Bats (3 or 4)

She read the list over twice. It helped her, it gave her strength. She'd partially captured those creatures, they would leap and flutter on demand whenever she summoned them, maybe they'd even rescue her from the black hole. That was what she had to do: take note of everything, break down everything into portable particles, carry off all she could.

She had two weeks left.

Those evenings, the sunsets were extraordinary, the sky ablaze, as if fierce colors had been vomited up by the earth, by summer as it abdicated, purging itself of the teeming life within it. Seated on the dock, snuggled up in her shawl, she wrote, *pink fuchsia, purple pink, carmine, blood red, cherry, lilac, eggplant, purple, plum, mauve, copper, gold, orange, saffron yel-*

low... A flight of geese almost sank her: they flew off, carrying summer with them, leaving her behind in glacial grief. She got ahold of herself and wrote, *Monday, September 14, 7:00 pm: third flight, 18 Canada geese.*

As long as she made lists and double-checked them, as long as she memorized their contents, she kept the tears at bay.

She devoted her days to the task, once she pulled herself from the troubled sleep into which the pills had cast her—it was either sleeping pills or a state of living death for the night. Her head still fuzzy from drugs, stains of amnesia on the underlying malaise, she threw herself into the endless task of naming everything.

It was a monstrous job, naming all that she had seen and experienced, each parcel of emotion from the territory that lay before her, up to the border of the provincial parks to the north, starting with the hardwood floor on which she stood in a state of precarious balance, reaching back across twelve summers stuffed to bursting with both insignificant and happy things, an entirely impossible job which was, in itself, a necessary reason to undertake it.

That was the price of saying farewell.

She divided everything into four, the four points of the compass, and began with the east, the only legitimate starting point, appointed by the sun.

Immediately to the east, beyond the section of varnished hardwood floor on which she did her exercises every morning, beyond the window through which the sun poured its first effusions, the proud phlox and the purple lupines that had been so brilliant now lay dormant, and beneath them slept eternally the tiny animals she'd buried in among the cedar

twigs to protect them in their after-death—little house finch, graceful cardinal with the splintered head, juncos with their fine gray vestments mottled with blood, emerald frog more beautiful than the rest, poor chipmunks wrested too late from the jaws of Lila Szach's cats . . . Who would spare a thought for them whenever a new dark flower sprung up from their small disintegrated souls?

The pencil was already shaking in her hand and she hadn't even covered any ground yet. *Farther, faster!* she urged herself on, straightening in her chair, and at the farthest reaches of the known east the ravaged flatlands she had just discovered loomed up, the brush cuttings illuminated with the little red berries that would never come for her again. Angry, she forced herself to write *Raspberries!* with a stiff hand, the paper soon to be spattered with the acid water of her eyes. She called forth the most banal fragments of nature whose recollection would leave her intact—but everything was contaminated, the wild strawberry patch, the thick moss on the slopes, the lichens with their candy-red branches, the sweet-smelling pathway she explored, singing, Luc's face as sweet as a stone, each square meter of territory touching off a happy memory that exploded in her hands.

They came running, no need to invite them in, they stepped forward as if they'd been hidden away in an airless vestibule whose door had just been flung open. The happy memories welled up from all directions and all at once, combining everything: Luc, the four compass points, the positions of the body, the elements, in the lake water, in front of the spruce-wood bonfire, in the airy moss of the slope, on the upholstered wood of their bed . . .

Happy memories are treacherous weapons that bleed you to death.

Before Claire's eyes the happy memories paraded by, deprived of their logical outcome, twisted and devalued, failures and wounds since they had not fulfilled their promise of permanence. They tore away the joy they'd once given her and, instead of being carried by them, she was losing them all.

She put down the pencil and notebook and admitted she could not do it.

She could not do it alone because she was falling with nothing to show her the way, without a guardrail, she was in free fall toward distress and did not see how she would ever recover from it. Nature in its indifference was casting her out, giving her to understand that she was not one of theirs, despite her illusions of osmosis. The only one of her species, she tumbled into a pit of pain toward states of prostration far worse than death, and it was only from one of her species that some form of salvation, some stretcher, might emerge—that conviction lit up her darkness and sent her to the phone. Messages had been accumulating there, messages from friends and family telling of their affection with the words you'd expect to hear, the same recriminations against Luc that had been perfectly useless so far, that had given her no lasting peace. After the familiar voices, she came upon a message from her neighbor Violette, and listened to it greedily. Violette in a rapid-fire, almost impersonal tone was summoning her to come over, as if she'd read her mind and wished to comfort her as quickly as possible—but how had she found out?

Yes, Violette would help her, and Lila Szach, why hadn't she thought of Lila Szach and her amiable vodka? And even the Parson; she'd never used his obvious thoughtfulness. They were her real siblings, the only ones who could understand what she was about to lose, and offer consolation, for somewhere hidden in the bushy richness of this place a solution existed, one they could tease out better than she could, Lila Szach first but also the Parson and Violette.

She was impatient to get out into the excitement of hope.

Outside, she was greeted by calming beauty, the sun motionless between the blues of the sky and the lake, the flamboyant reds of the maples, a procession of loons on the water sounding a pastoral symphony into which blended, from a distance, the calls of geese, while closer by two herons flew heavily overhead, with cymbal-like voices one behind the other. Even a chickadee was offering up its delayed spring song. Sounds of hope everywhere, even directly above her, where the high-pitched whistling of the Celestial Rodent caught her unawares. Lifting up her eyes toward the sound, Claire saw the animal popping in and out of the interstices of the cottage roof with an ostentation that pointed to something, a fresh conquest. The squirrel seemed to have taken up residence in the cottage itself, and anyone with any experience in the field would have concluded exactly what Claire did: as of that moment the roof was shot, there would be no clearing it of the litters of squirrels to come. Once the surprise had passed, Claire felt an evil wave of jubilation. At least she would not be departing this place without leaving behind heirs, far noisier and more visible than the other traces she would leave.

She first thought she would go to Lila Szach's place: she was the strongest of the lot. But Claire was afraid of her own reaction; what if she broke down sobbing at the sight of Lila Szach's intimidating gray eyes? She rushed off toward Violette's place. She would cry all her tears with Violette, who had done much worse with her, who'd revealed herself even more immodestly. At that moment, breaking down in front of someone was exactly what she needed.

The umbrellas on her patio were open. Beside an empty glass was a pitcher filled with what looked like lemonade, with a few bees sinking beneath the surface. The appearance of life ended there: not a note of music, not a voice, the venetian blinds of the cottage completely closed even though it was nearly eleven o'clock.

Without much hope, she knocked lightly on the sliding door, but right away Violette answered, very much awake: *Yes!* A second later Claire heard, *It's not locked*, which she took as an invitation.

She saw Violette in the half-darkness, facing her as if she'd been expecting her for an eternity. Violette spoke first, sparing Claire the halting attempt to find a preamble.

"At last!" she said in her hard, urgent voice. "I thought you'd never come."

She did not move, her head stiff against the back of the chair, and Claire saw in her an incomprehensible arrogance that brought tears to her eyes, in the pitiful state she was in. But she did not have the good fortune of dwelling on her wounds.

"The ambulance is coming," said Violette. "I'm going to the hospital."

Claire could only utter exclamations as Violette told her everything in rapid fire, with no other emotion than that of emergency, and that curious immobility of her torso that made her look like an Egyptian princess, which she soon explained. She couldn't walk at all, something in her vertebrae had given way, she'd been feeling the pain nibble at her back the last few weeks, and then *crack*, the machine had broken down totally.

"My brother's coming, my brother Christophe, he'll collect my clothes and my things. . . "

She looked at Claire, unblinking.

"I'll never be back, that's for sure," she said.

Me neither, Claire could have shot back, but it didn't occur to her because now the epicenter was here, with Violette, whom she listened to and looked at intensely. Her eyes grew used to the semi-darkness and she saw how graciously the place was decorated—embroidered cushions, scarlet drapes, houseplants everywhere—how lively and bright everything was.

"Simon doesn't know, neither does Mrs. Szach," Violette went on. "Tell Mrs. Szach I left. I don't owe her anything, I paid everything up front, and Simon, I just can't face him right now, he'll make a big thing of it. I'll call him. Tell him that, tell him I'll call him."

But she wanted something different from Claire.

"Look on the table. It's there, a notebook with pages of notes."

Her story. The accumulation of wounds and nightmares she intended to turn into a book.

"I can't do it. It's harder than I thought, lining up the right words. You know how. You write it."

She listened a moment as Claire refused with a manic energy—*No, I don't do that kind of thing, it's absolutely impossible*—then cut her off, her eyes shining.

"Here he comes! I hear his car! Quick, take my book, take it with you and get out, otherwise he'll destroy it, quick, I'm telling you. . . ."

Violette's eyes were fastened to Claire's, they were begging her but they held other things too, the fear of what was to come, the icy intuition that she was about to leave more than this cottage.

"Do what you want with it," she said. "Anything—whatever you want."

Claire snatched up the binder and the loose sheets, a meager pile that hardly weighed anything. Then she left after a last look at the happy room where Violette sat like a queen, smiling. She heard a car door slam shut and someone's footsteps slapping down the gravel path, and she ran for the woods, toward the trail that circled the cottage and climbed back farther on.

She stopped running once she reached the spruce grove and was invisible. She sat down on a rock, stunned, gasping for breath. On the verge of collapse, but in a different way, a collective way. Why hadn't she held Violette close, why hadn't she taken her hand, kissed her forehead, done something human that would distinguish between being alone like a dog, and just being alone? She pictured her smile among the embroidered cushions. Violette hadn't asked for caresses or whiny intimacy; Violette wanted something else from her.

And she would do it. God knows how and when, and in what form, with what instruments or, more like it, what

weapons, but she would do it. What other essential thing did she have to do, what else did she have to do at all?

She knew the path before her by heart. She took a few slow steps, as if going for a stroll. The path she knew by heart was also a luxuriant corridor, a work of art in its own disheveled way. It was a joy to be here. She moved ahead. She saw herself move ahead as she truly was, dispossessed and naked, with someone else's life in her hands.

who's crying?

SIMON WAS SURPRISED by his own strength. He'd eaten almost normally, appreciating the acidic and slightly rubbery texture of the eggplant he'd cooked, and now he would enjoy the late afternoon sunlight.

As he neared the shore, he spotted the thing washed up, less than a meter from his kayak.

He recognized the outsized head of a pike, fully a third of its body, the gaping prehistoric monster's maw with its seemingly dislocated jaw. From the belly of the beast spilled a whitish mass of viscera that swarming insects had transformed into an entirely distinct, shuddering creature. For an instant, disgust overcame all other emotions. Then he steadied himself; all that lay at his feet was a dead fish, as ugly in its death as he would be in his, and he went off to fetch a wheelbarrow and a shovel to bury it farther off. But the shock stayed with him. It had been years since he'd seen a pike, and now two had appeared, one after the other, in less than a month. The first brought him straight back to Violette, three weeks before, in another life.

They shouldn't have caught it, much less eaten it.

There was something wrong with that first pike, it had been swimming in circles for hours, head just beneath the surface. Violette spotted it first and told Simon about it over the phone, *there's a big fish out in the lake, something's caught it, go get it and I'll cook it tonight, if you're free, that is.*

Free. He would never be free again, not with her constantly on his mind, and even less free with her inviting him over to her place. He'd said yes without a second thought, his heart pounding like a long-distance runner's, his legs wobbly.

He took care of himself, for all that, and didn't surrender without a struggle to his dependency, which was as exhausting as an illness. Since Sage Lake, he hadn't called her once, and only one morning had he paddled as far as her place in his kayak, and of course that was a terrible mistake, since she invited him into her room and quickly destroyed days of careful resistance and work on himself.

It was worse now that he was alone, with Jérémie back in the city and Marianne tactfully abandoning him to himself. He had too much time; he was a prisoner of excess territory.

That day, the day of the first pike, the last day with Violette, he paddled briskly toward the dark form he could see moving close to the islet. He knew Violette was watching his progress across the water through her binoculars, and the thought of it touched off wildfires in his spine. From the shore, the shape circling beneath the surface looked more like a beaver or a very large turtle, or more prosaically a tree branch, but close up it was indeed the large head of a fish protruding halfway from the water, as if gasping for air—a pike that must have been a meter long, and clearly in distress.

Simon was no fisherman. He hadn't fished for centuries. When he settled at Goose Lake years before in Lila and Jan's

rented cottage, he was just like everyone else: the first thing he did was drop a line in the water. He remembered how miraculous the fishing had been, how the bass had bitten as if possessed, as if they'd never seen a worm in their lives—which was undoubtedly the case. Lila had waited for him on the shore. *How many did you kill?* she asked in her gravelly voice. He hadn't understood, and asked her to repeat herself. And he laughed, taking it for a joke, or for a Polish woman's lack of linguistic accuracy—we say: *catch* fish, we don't say *kill*. But she clung to her linguistic approximation. The proof was she was still there, waiting for him on the shore when he came back from fishing the following day, with the same question.

She didn't say: *I forbid you to fish*. She simply mentioned the names of other lakes in the area—Campeau Lake and Lake à l'Équerre—where the fishing, it seemed, proved much better—that was her expression, *proved much better*. *You can see for yourself next summer*, she added, looking him in the eye.

To reside in her paradise, he would have to consign his fishing tackle to limbo, that much was clear.

But what about the herons? he protested as the summer wore on, seizing a favorable moment for revolt. *And the ducks and the kingfishers? And today, the otters! They must have eaten dozens, just today! Why not me?*

That should have been the clincher, but instead it touched off a flicker of mirth in Lila's eyes. *When you're an otter*, she said, *we'll discuss the matter*.

He turned his attention to the creeks that drained into other watersheds, or Campeau Lake, where no female Cerberus stood guard, but the fun had gone out of it. It was the pretty Polish woman's fault, she made him question what he'd always considered legitimate: we move in, and we take.

All the life teeming in the water or anywhere else teems for us. We cast our lines, shoulder our shotguns, we have an automatic claim on the food, a first-night privilege over the lesser animals.

Suddenly, it was no longer natural. What is that insatiable hunger, that makes us lay hands on everything?

He had stopped liking fishing without even thinking about it.

In fact, he really didn't like fish.

So what was he about to do now?

The pike continued its concentric path, eyes skimming the surface of the water, like an automaton powered by inexhaustible batteries, stricken with a disorienting fish neurosis that kept it from fleeing as Simon's net drew near. It let itself be dragged along lazily behind the kayak while Simon, mortified, reminded himself that fishing season was over, he was poaching, he hated poachers, and what he was doing was far worse than fishing.

But Violette stood on the shore, clapping her hands and making V-for-victory signs, and he had to admit, as he looked at her and imagined the night to come, that his delight was infinitely greater than his guilt.

The pike was dying, but it did not want to die.

Simon let it lie on the beach, hoping it would give up the ghost. For the last hour it had been shivering, its jaw chattering, its horrible big head with the eyes that continued to see. It would never be ready for meal time, and Violette begged Simon to finish it off. It took him several attempts to crush the fish's skull. At first he struck it with the conviction that one day he would pay for what he was doing. But a few seconds later, killing had become a normal, even necessary act.

For the rest of the afternoon he waited to go to her place. He didn't even try to think of something else; he'd never win that battle.

They would do it again. They'd done it a second time two weeks before, miracle and paradise renewed, and now it would happen again. When he returned with the fish, she gave him that look he'd learned to recognize; he would have gotten down and begged for that look. She wanted him to want her. He could not convince himself that maybe she wanted him, that would have been too much to take.

Before dinner, she came close to him, but said, *Later*.

All the seasonings and spices could not manage to hide an underlying flavorlessness, and the scent of muddy bottoms, not so strong that you noticed it right away, but slowly pervading everything. The fish was bad. Even helped along with a cream sauce and plenty of garlic, it was revoltingly coarse and briny and chewing it was a stomach-turning experience. Simon gave up immediately and advised Violette to do the same as a matter of simple precaution. But Violette refused, she'd gone to a lot of trouble, just cutting up that cursed tough flesh had been a feat, and she ate her entire portion, washing it down with wine and laughing that it wasn't all that bad.

It made her sick, of course. Luckily, it happened immediately, which ruled out complications and secondary poisoning. She vomited up everything she'd eaten and went to bed. Simon washed the dishes and put them away, then kept watch over her until the middle of the night, until she told him she would be all right, sleep would soon look after the light backache she had. Though he had imagined something better, caring for her was a kind of happiness. He would have gladly spent the night on her sofa listening to the distant song of her

calm breathing or, if need be, the tumult of her nightmares, but he went home because such was her wish.

She called him first thing the next morning. Her bright but slightly tired voice told him she just needed more time to recover, but as soon as she was back on her feet, she would get back to work on the botched supper. Next time she would make pasta, did he like pasta? Next time, after the pasta, she'd keep him the whole night through and it would be electric, Violette promised.

The shovel was no good when it came to heaving the remains of the viscous monster into the wheelbarrow, he had to use his bare hands and fight against nausea. He dug a deep hole beneath a spruce tree, dumped the corpse in it, covered it with branches and tamped earth, then the minimal ritual was over.

Afterward, there was enough sunlight on the lake for a kayak outing.

The day was mild all the way to twilight, filled with perfumed warmth that did not belong to the autumn. Otters had arrived in the bay two weeks earlier and now, heads above water, they were spitting like harpies. If he held still, they forgot about him and resumed their cavorting, arching gracefully then diving, surfacing half the time with a squirming fish to be gobbled up quickly before the others could steal it. They were numerous, sharing the quiet sunset. Loons gathered in their fading formal wear, making small talk with throat song, insects on borrowed time hovered in columns in the light, and high above, Canada geese headed south in undulating, chattering V-formations. As soon as the sun set, the trout in their spawning grounds joined the festivities,

rubbing their swollen, languorous bodies against the rocks in a sex-charged ballet around the deposited and fertilized eggs. Simon saw another human on the shore, his neighbor Claire striding along the beach, something she did not do often. Though it would have been comforting to talk, he did no more than wave and she responded in kind, from a distance, for that was how he felt she preferred her contact.

All the while, Violette.

Violette, pale and defenseless in her arena as the wild animals closed in.

He began paddling hard, for how else could he exhaust what sought to cry out within him? With so much violence bursting out everywhere, there was no use adding his own. His feelings could wait for another time and place. Muster his strength for tomorrow, for both of them, for her most of all. Transmit his strength to her, whatever it took. Return to the hospital tomorrow, even if she told him on the phone to wait till next week.

She no longer looked like herself, lying there, eyes closed in her deathly pallor. That's what he thought when he entered the room, *It's not her*, then, as his heart missed a beat, *It's not her, it's a corpse*. But someone spoke, *She's sleeping, that's all she can do, sleep*, and he saw a woman seated beside the bed get up and address him, *I'm her mother*, she said. *And you are . . . ?*

Violette's mother was small and thin and had blond hair, most certainly dyed, a smile as red as a wound, and the head of a suntanned old doll. Not all that old, probably his age, but sunlight hurries things along, the Florida sun much faster than the one in the Laurentians.

In a flash he remembered everything about her, the woman for whom he'd have to find another name. *I'm a friend*, he said, then ignored her with all his strength and tried to make contact with poor little Violette lying crumpled in the bed, whiter than the sheets and swollen with bad blood.

"She's all puffed up," said the doll, "cortisone makes her puff up, and she sleeps the whole time."

He whispered her name to try to rescue her from her poor imitation of death, but the doll kept chattering away, and even dared sit on the edge of the bed and seize Violette's defenseless hand—that brown, withered, ring-studded appendage of hers pounced like a bird of prey on the whiteness of Violette's hand, and he rushed out of the room, his blood boiling.

He hurried to the nursing station to put an end to this intolerable masquerade.

By one of those coincidences that often lie scattered along the path of our lives, the hospital was Marianne's, and Marianne had come to Simon's rescue on several occasions, extracting from the physicians information they covered up like state secrets, monitoring Violette's condition from a distance and managing to talk to her twice. But now she'd rejoined the orthopedic department hidden in another wing of the hospital, and he found himself alone in consultation with white-coated professionals who looked at him askance, and could not understand his demands—what was his connection with the patient and, since it was nonexistent, how could he dare presume that a sick girl did not need her mother? And since he insisted and gave no indication of backing down, they called in someone who put an end to the scene. It was Christophe, also wearing a white coat like the others, since he was a physician and it happened to be his hospital too, it

was doubly legitimate for him to be there as a doctor and his sister's brother. Whereas Simon was nothing, which Christophe, who had led him into a closed consultation room to hear him out, repeated coldly, a neighbor was nothing when a human being was breathing her last, for that was Violette's situation. The tall blond young man who one day, in front of Simon, laughed so loudly as he blathered on about nothing in particular, now wore the expression of a man who would never laugh again. When Simon told him that it was an act of violence to impose her mother's presence on Violette, in that closed consultation room Christophe lost control and shoved Simon up against the wall. *None of this is any of your business, none of it!* he spat with the intensity of someone who had known great pain. Simon knew that her tormented brother was right, but out of love for Violette he hung on, protesting, until Christophe ordered him to leave and threatened to call security.

Violette's call had been his resurrection.

In the interim, he had to die a thousand deaths yet still stay alive, back in their suburban apartment, until Marianne came home. Marianne helped him. She promised to talk to the nurses on the ward, who could act surreptitiously to keep the Undesirable One at a distance. She felt so stricken by Simon's turmoil that she invited him to a dance performance—*dance!?*—and he nearly burst out laughing, the proposal was that incredible. He decided to return to Goose Lake and spend the night there to overcome the shock, which was a good thing, since Violette's voice was waiting for him on the answering machine.

It was Violette, alive, playful, loving laughter, and there was as much laughter as exhaustion in her voice, *I saw you,*

you know, I knew you were there but I was pretending to sleep, I always pretend to sleep when she's in the room.

She asked him to call her, and he did. It was after ten o'clock, not exactly hospital hours, but they connected him to Violette no questions asked and joy swept everything else aside.

How are you, Simon?

It was Violette's old self, and each of her sentences, glistering like pearls among her silences, slaked vast expanses of his thirst. *Looks like I still have some fighting to do*, she said. *It's not the first time they've given me up for dead, you know.*

In the meantime, she wasn't in pain because they were generous with the morphine, but she was confident, her bone marrow destroyed by metastasis and her confidence unshakable, and her confidence struck Simon and illuminated him against his better judgment. *The morphine makes me dream*, she went on, *I dream I'm at Sage Lake, the tall pines, the warm water, just the way it used to be, and I just about jump out of my skin when I see the herons turn into nurses . . .*

He heard her gentle laughter, but also sighs and true pain that trembled and contained itself. *They took out everything Simon, my ovaries, my uterus, everything, no children ever, maybe I was pregnant, they didn't want to tell me if I was pregnant or not . . .*

He must have spoken too, but afterward he didn't remember anything he'd said, his words were there only as a background for hers, a protective wall around her strength that had to be defended and kept alive. *Pregnant*, she'd said, and the intoxication that her words gave him slowly turned to poison.

If she was pregnant, it could only be by him.

Maybe, she'd said, and what she said meant nothing, had no basis in certifiable fact, one chance in a thousand, in a million. But a chance all the same, an infinitely small, Lilliputian possibility.

Then she'd said, *Come back next week. She'll be going back to Florida next week . . .*

Her voice dropped a notch. *I'm getting tired.* Her last words were like half-sighed music, slipping into sleep, *I'm going to Sage Lake . . . I'll be there before you, you want to bet on it?*

NEARLY A FULL day passed, and he kept her voice intact within him, listening to it often to make sure he'd missed nothing, weighing each word, each silence to know what to expect. Her cells knew if the game was lost or could still be won, essential information dwelled in the unspoken, to which he should have been more attentive, and he waited for evening to call her again, he could not wait till next week, when he could stand over her bed and fill her with the will to fight, *Otters, Violette, at least three of them, I counted eight adult loons in their winter plumage, hooded mergansers all over the shore, you should see the trout rubbing against each other, they're so big they must be one hundred . . .* He would bombard her with these quivering lives and she would live, for life was contagious.

It was good to paddle to the point of exhaustion, until his back caught fire, paddle to kindle the pain that would put him in touch with Violette's, and from a distance their weakened vertebrae would call out to one another.

Wasn't that Lila who just stepped onto the boathouse balcony? He raised his paddle, that was her, all right, her two

arms waving like semaphores, she was beckoning him, but he restrained his desire to rest his head against her once-hospitable breast. In the state of extreme vulnerability that he and Violette shared, one careless word would drive him under, an affectionate clumsiness could destroy everything.

For instance, a call from Marianne this morning had struck him like a dagger.

Yet her words were intended as a source of joy, as they would have been at any other time and might still be. Marianne, counting on the beneficial effect, had told him that Jeanne was pregnant and had finally accepted the fact, and the best part was that *she was expecting not one but TWO babies, Simon, two! Twins, two at once for us, for you . . .*

Marianne laughed, filled with a happiness she dispensed by the drop so as not to upset Simon, but it was too late—he was upset. *Marvelous!* he stammered, but he was devastated.

Two children for Jeanne who wanted none at all.

None for Violette, ever.

He hung up, disturbed by his own resentment, a helpless witness to an injustice, a fraud, but worst of all struck to the heart by a fantasy built on the thought of children to come. *Maybe I was pregnant:* Violette's words threw him into a turmoil, opened up a vanished planet that he had the misfortune of briefly glimpsing, an incendiary illusion—Violette pregnant by him, living a long life, carrying him with her into a new existence as broad as a royal way—into which he thrust his dazzled gaze, before it snapped shut again.

It took him two hours to recover and destroy something that didn't even exist, and that held him back from the reality of life.

The reality of life smelled strongly of damp spruce and moss and grew much cooler as the sun dipped behind the mountains. Simon took in the peace of the lake, there in his kayak, and slowly he rediscovered his essential functions, the seasonal tasks to be completed before returning to town—draw the dock onto the shore, cut the water and bleed the pipes, hang the kayak from the porch . . .

To his right, Violette's patio gleamed in the setting sun, and he forced himself to contemplate it without weakening. This was his durable landscape, he would have to learn to look at the little log cabin as a neutral entity with interchangeable contents. Two tiny forms stood erect on the patio looking out over the water, and he drew nearer to the motionless little creatures—flying squirrels or field mice?—then he came close enough to see that they were two abandoned coffee cups.

Then, of course, the tsunami he hadn't expected swept over him. Violette finally vanished in the wake of their brief affair, for she herself was vanishing beneath the weight of the metastasis, it was impossible for her not to vanish, splendid Violette with her short trajectory, who sought only time to repair her childhood and spend her fervor, the unutterable cruelty of seeing her disappear, struck down so young, and Simon broke into sobs, overwhelmed by the wave, he too struck down, drowned in darkness.

But part of him rose to the surface, wondering, *Who's crying? Who's shedding all these tears?* A part of him had not drowned at all, and assured him he was getting through, he would get through, head held above the turbulence. A part of him looked down upon himself in solicitude and greeted him, *I salute you, Simon, in distress, I am with you.*

a scent of roses

FLEEING HEADLONG, all of them.
A killing field of broken hearts and shattered bodies the likes of which Lila had never seen. Most could not be put together again. Lamentation and losses would have to be accepted. Whatever remained would have to be put back on its feet, and new life breathed into a group that threatened to sink.

September had been far too beautiful, it had softened everything far too much. As long as the geese sliced across the sky, and maples flared in the sunlight, you could hang on. You were torn, watching over summertime, not letting it out of your sight, wanting to be where and when you should be so as not to miss its last breaths. She had walked endlessly to cling to all that was still shiny and vigorous. The trees were aflame against the blue of the sky, the heady smells of ripe fruit hung in the air. Once a huge insect, numbed by the chill, tried to land on her and she hurriedly stunned it before realizing it was a cicada, a magnificent torn cicada whose thick black body now lay on the ground, its transparent triangular wings mangled by her thoughtless hand. She picked it up

and set it on a branch, hoping it would be able to repair itself in the sunlight. She heard cows mooing far off, in the fields near the village. She heard them twice a year. In spring, the sounds were heart-rending, for the cows were crying, literally crying over the little ones torn away from them. Now, at the beginning of autumn, it was a happier sound: they were calling out in tender notes, calls of love. Fall was when cows were in heat, Lila was sure of it, which no one else she'd spoken to would consider seriously. (What? Cows in love, those gross overwrought machines, those teats suspended forever above our milk glasses, those future T-bone steaks?)

The cows were groaning with desire, the geese chattering in excitement. And two moose had allowed her to come upon them in their intimacy.

She was standing on the patio of the log cabin that had to be cleaned of the residue Violette had left behind. As she let her eyes drift over the water, she made out dark shapes on the curve of shore that gave onto the marsh. Seen through her binoculars, the sight was breathtaking. An antlered male and his bare-headed mate were foraging along the shoreline, taller than horses, then ponderously they came together, one behind the other in the water, and swam, one head crowned, the other smooth, like the solitary rulers they were, so masterful that she felt she was watching a forbidden spectacle.

Once, with Jan, she'd seen a moose dive into the lake and disappear.

Thirty years later, the image of the great antlers breaking the surface before vanishing forever still tormented her—and Jan's explanation that wounded moose enter the water to die, in the depths that alone are worthy of being their graves,

where some small man in his thirst for trophies would not intercept them and stick their heads on automobile fenders and game-room walls.

The pair made their way across the channel and slowly drifted out of sight, the two of them fully alive—until, she didn't know when, detonations would begin echoing from over the hills, deer-hunting season was on, not to mention the other threat that caused her nightmares, that of an immense parking lot spreading its concrete over the marsh.

IN THE END, all the sunlit scenes lost their color. In the weakened state into which a fine September had thrown her, misfortune began to close in on Lila and contaminate her.

She wept with her neighbor Claire, who had come to bid her farewell.

Young Claire had kept her dignity through her pain, and that had impressed her. People who know enough to restrain themselves are so rare. Claire came knocking at her door, her face sad, her eyes sunken from giving up all their tears, but with a large bouquet in her hand. She had cut everything that was still standing in the rock garden and given it to Lila. Though it was only eleven in the morning, both drank enough to be tipsy, and hopelessly overemotional.

She had tried, too. What could be more normal? She sent out feelers, trying to find out if it might be possible to buy a piece of land from Lila, around a bend in the shore, invisible from where they stood. Her voice stood bravely upright, disciplined by iron will, but you could tell the storm would break as soon as she was alone. For a moment Lila looked deep into her eyes. Why not grant her the little she asked for, why not

alter her rigid diktats for once? But that curve of the lake, a place unmarked by traces of human beings, was exactly where she'd seen the moose. To cut short the hope she saw gleaming in Claire's eyes, she decreed that it was not a good idea. To have her former paradise, her old lover within arm's reach every day, now flirting with someone else? Not a good idea at all. The light went out inside Claire. *It's true*, she sighed, *I'm sure you're right*, she recognized, even in her pain. Then Lila came out with one of those sententious phrases that make you hate yourself as soon as you've spoken them. *It's not the end of the world*, she declared, *what seems to be the end of the world is only the end of one world*. If someone had said something like that when Jan died, she would have scratched out their eyes. Thank God she was able to hold her tongue after that, and take her neighbor in her arms, and tell her without words how much she regretted not having known her better.

And Simon, poor Simon. He'd made her cry too, with that sordid story about Violette.

She was jealous, that was true, over what she felt was going on between him and her young renter, she even started regretting having rented to a capricious little beauty who played the martyr to make herself interesting—not to mention the stuck-pig cries that awakened you with a pounding heart at night. But that old resentment had been well and truly put to rest, and she hardly remembered it had ever existed. Poor little *Malá*, life had been so tightfisted with her right to the very end. And poor Simon, with a gaping hole in the middle of his body that last morning when he'd come to pour out his hurt to her. She could see it all even as he described it, and she was horrified by the brutality that existence can inflict

on us. Simon had gone to the hospital, determined to break through the barricade that Violette's brother had erected and kick that *pervverted mother-doll*, as he called her, out of her room if he found her there. But he encountered an entire family armada: not only the mother and the physician brother, but several other tall blond figures were gathered in the corridor, going in and out of the room like it was the intermission of a play, talking in stage whispers, while Violette, whom he hadn't even seen, lay in a coma and was drifting farther and farther away, and he hadn't even been allowed to stay with her one final moment—*You can pay your respects at the funeral parlor and the burial*, Christophe informed him, showing a courteous smile, and Simon felt like strangling him then and there, along with the rest of the warped family.

The worst part was that climate of fervid delight that he sensed among them—as if they were happy to see her go, *poof*, the talkative, embarrassing witness, eliminated—*or maybe I've been reading too many detective novels*, he concluded in a moment of self-mockery.

Lila hugged Simon tight. What else could she do but temporarily take on part of the burden? Then he went back to town, leaving her with the memory of defeat in her arms.

That's how she ended up. The receptacle of all that heaviness, she was abandoned in the fading summer with the memories of victims embedded in the landscape. Yes, she had wept. She didn't think she'd have so many tears for other people. It had reassured her about her own humanity, which was not a very rich treasure-house. But softened and kneaded by these waters of despair, what was she to do if there was no way to stop absorbing them?

These were troubled times. New threats came from all directions, now that the good weather had broken. Rain and wind completed the disfigurement of the trees. The sumptuous red of the maples littered the ground, shredded now, worn away by water. To look outside was to contemplate death and dying. Once the maples had turned gray, the birches were next to have their yellow ripped away. In the end, only the dull green of the conifers bravely remained, blending into the hues of the earth, sky and lake. The loons and the squirrels held their silence, while only the odd crow croaked out its apocalyptic cry. The geese stopped streaming overhead in tumult, lifting her eyes to the sky, heart burning, overcome with nostalgia.

Winter was coming, the giant that strikes down the weak and the old.

After winter, the threat, instead of flaming out, would intensify, and one day that was horribly near even the dull green of the conifers would molt into gray—the gray of parking lots and cars come to rub elbows in the gray of the condominiums of the new Mount Diamond recreation center.

Lila almost collapsed in horror and discouragement herself.

But something held her up.

They'd found the little guy.

The little guy was alive, and more inventive than ever, his leg broken into pieces that would knit back together, a marvel of self-healing youth. She had spoken to him on the telephone the week before, a brief conversation he'd initiated himself, *How are you, Mrs. Szach?* he asked her, full of the deference of protocol, *and how are your mushrooms?* He wasn't doing

badly at all, he'd learned how to perform dangerous leaps on his crutches, and he'd started school again, though he wasn't sure he liked it, he was living with Laurie, who made him eat revolting meat, and there was something he wanted to tell her, that he'd been thinking about for a long time: if he'd been a lot older, and she a lot younger, it wouldn't have been totally impossible, after all, for them to get married.

It's true, she said with the same solemnity, *not totally impossible*.

When they found the little guy, she realized that life did not hate her after all. The great and intolerable catastrophe had been averted. When they found him she'd sworn, as the ground that still held her and as the sky that did not fall to earth were her witness, to never let herself be overwhelmed by misfortunes that could be faced. Compared to the monstrous disappearance of the little guy, everything else could be dealt with: the pains of death, the deaths of others, solitude, old age.

Even Jean-François Clément's designs.

These were hard times, and careful thought was needed—keeping dry and warm while storms raged outside.

Now, in the warmth of the house, as birch logs whistled in the woodstove, the cats were sleeping belly exposed on the armchairs, and the smells of cooking floated out of the kitchen. She had welcomed three newcomers into the family—not without some slight disturbance—a small black Angora, and two semi-feral kittens that had never been fed or petted by a human hand. They were asleep in the heated shed on mohair blankets to give them a chance to leave their scent and rest peacefully, far from Vieux Minou and Mama, who would have loved to rip them to shreds. And Picasso, my

God! Picasso was among the losses. She hadn't seen him nor hair of him for more than a month, she'd ranged through the woods calling his name, and over time she'd come to accept that somewhere beneath the trees his soft gray-and-white fur coat was slowly decomposing. She had wept for him too.

The time for weeping was over.

Now she felt strong and diligent, her hands moved without haste or panic, she chopped fennel and seasoned fried onions, while a confidence she'd never thought she would feel again pulsed in her veins. She tossed the mushrooms in the skillet over high heat to make them give up their liquid, threw in a pinch of sea salt, wondered if cardamom would be appropriate to heighten the flavors, or if it would submerge them in its exoticism.

Confidence had returned a few days earlier, when she stepped out into the rain to burn off the fog inside her. Stiffened by arthritis and anxiety, she still managed to walk down to the lake. Everything was abandoned, dark, liquefied, a perfect backdrop for a nervous breakdown. There was no wind, the lake absorbed the water falling from the sky without a wrinkle, it was the perfect time to spy on the trout in their spawning grounds. She couldn't remember exactly which rocks they liked to congregate around so she followed the creek, her heart as swampy as the muddy trail. No trout anywhere, not even the shadow of a quiver of life on the horizon. She'd decided to turn back when she spotted the three adult mushrooms growing in a triangular pattern on the bank, their white caps glimmering above the yellowed foliage. She couldn't believe her eyes; she approached them slowly to preserve the mirage, then spread the dead leaves. They were

perfect, without an insect bite, the head just spreading its cap, the body bolt erect just losing its ring, a smooth, satiny color. At the base of the bulbous stalk, the volva could be seen, the egg-like growth from which all had sprung, from which the beautiful white flower had emerged. Close up, the gills gave off delicate incense, and she recognized the odor of slightly faded roses.

Standing in the drizzle that was working its way into her clothing, halted in the flow of her thoughts and ordinary life, Lila stood still, waiting to discover how to respond to what was calling out to her, for she was being called. Before her were three destroying angels at a turn of the trail and at a time of the year they never grew, she was being spoken to, and she tried to understand the message. Then she pulled from her pocket the little knife she always carried with her.

A CUP OF vegetable stock had been added to the pan, and white wine on top of that. It was time to add a potato and let it soften in the soup. She went to the pantry for the potatoes, bent over to scratch Vieux Minou's neck as he rubbed against her legs in hopes of more edible encouragement. She peeled the potato absentmindedly, turning her new confidence loose to give her fresh ideas.

The idea, among others, of not going back to town this fall.

Of spending the winter at Goose Lake, which she'd done only with Jan, the last two years of his life.

All alone, Lila, all winter?

That was how Simon discouraged her each time she floated the hypothesis. Indeed, it was floating, and easily brought down to earth.

This time, the idea kept returning with solid assurance. Of course. All alone, all winter.

Six cords of dry wood were piled up against the shed, the house was well insulated, the chimney had been swept, the grocery store at Mount Diamond delivered all year round, she could sign a contract for snow-clearing and upkeep with Bruno Mahone—for what it was worth, but she knew how to whip the foot-dragging village militia into shape.

All alone with five cats, the squirrels, the snowy owls, the chickadees, the crows, mink, foxes with their snowy coats, the white hares too, and the deer that could rest at last. If worst came to worst, the village's five hundred souls were only a telephone call away and fifteen minutes by car—in optimum conditions on a cleared road.

The freezer was full of vegetables, stewed fruit, pâtés and soups. And Jan's shotgun lay hidden in the linen chest. For dangerous drop-ins, which would never be animals.

Snowshoeing at least two hours a day.

Enchanting images flowed by. The snow she had never really liked was of superior quality here, light powder that whipped up like a meringue when you walked in it, and she pictured herself, tireless on her snowshoes, striding from one end of her territory to the other, on the alert for rare sights—there, a herd of deer in its winter feeding grounds, the animals looking up from their foraging to greet her with a glance, at a turn of the path a wellspring and a waterfall studded with diamonds of frozen spray, and why not a few owls fast asleep in the downy spruce, and each evening breathtaking lavender sunsets against a soundtrack of coagulating lake ice. It seemed to her that she'd had all that with Jan.

Or maybe Jan's eyes had brought those miracles into being.

She pictured herself reading too. Jan's books, an entire library abandoned in the living room. Returning from her outing, with rosy cheeks and regenerated mind, she would sit down in front of a crackling fire, a mug of hot rum in her hand, the cat tribe curled up on her lap, and she would delve deep into the books of men, the best among them.

For the only men that she could associate freely with were the dead ones who wrote books. When it came to living men, and even certain mediocre dead men, there was always something to fear. But dead men who left books behind also left behind the best of themselves, which was not really theirs, it had to be said, but which came to them from higher up, or deeper down, and which they'd never really had the choice of abandoning when they died—otherwise, what do you think, they would have disappeared with their treasures.

This winter, she would try to reconcile herself with men—the best among them, those who'd peeled back the enveloping layers from the human spirit and discovered at its core a meaning of life. From her own library, she would draw works in Polish, to hear her mother's music again: Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, Przybos, and from Jan's, poets and mystics, madmen or wise men but nothing in between: Hölderlin, Meister Eckhart, Lao-tzu; their origins and their era would mean little to her, she would sit them down together around the woodstove with grog or tea, whatever they preferred, and they would have a true conversation.

This winter, she would discover the meaning in life.

The whole idea shone in all its splendor. Lila dropped the potato she was whittling down to a peach pit and sliced it into

the soup. Then she poured herself a shot of vodka to celebrate her non-return to town.

Books, snow, and what else!

In the unlikely event that she would begin to miss human contact, in between illuminations and tramps through the snowy woods, she could always slip into the village anthill.

That last idea was as amusing as you could hope to find. She could attend all the sessions of town council, and gain access to the secrets of that unstable town hall where they hatched expropriation schemes. She was the oldest in the village, and certainly one of the least retiring. She might even run for a position that would let her sabotage things from within—alderwoman, administrator, clerk . . .

Mayor.

To be mayor, you had to be a permanent resident of the village and know how to bang your fist on the table.

Her honor, Lila Szach.

Lila laughed aloud, with the complicity of alcohol and the smell of the soup, not to mention that of Mama and Vieux Minou, who formed a captive audience at her feet. It felt good to laugh. There were brief interludes when life was uproarious.

She sat down. Her laughter had awakened a tiny pain. On her left side.

It was an old familiar cramp, one she knew well. Too sharp and insistent to be a friend, it was settling comfortably into the center of her chest.

She leaned back, breathed deeply. Maybe she'd been standing too long, bent over the soup pot and its odor of faded roses.

Yes, it came from the soup.

A breath or two of destroying angel certainly wouldn't cause any damage. She'd refrained from sticking her finger in to taste it—but breathing it was certainly inoffensive.

Since she'd already done it.

She recognized that suave scent, the nutmeg she substituted at the last minute for cardamom brought it out, made fuller by the heavy cream, a scent that was very old indeed.

Here, Gilles, something for you to eat on the road.

The pain had found its place at Lila's core. The pain came with that smell and it would be there after the smell disappeared.

That's how it was, when you turned yourself into a criminal. It had to leave its mark. But with time, the mark became bearable.

Maybe she would start drinking too much, like *Tata Jerczy*, to make the mark bearable.

She'd been thinking of *Tata Jerczy* a lot lately. Even before finding the mushrooms, she'd think of him at the oddest times, while feeding the cats, taking a shower, and she wondered what it would have been like to see him before he died.

Jean-François Clémont was a father too. He had two little girls, seven and ten, who looked just like their mother. Pretty as a picture, with curly blond hair.

She was getting ready to bump off their daddy. It was tough, losing the daddy you loved.

Even when she began to hate *Papa Jerczy*, she'd never been able to stop loving him at the same time, her love was like a heartbeat, the breath of life, a reflex. It would double the hurt, it would make two people to hate: him, and herself, who couldn't stop loving him.

That was the reason, deep down, why she'd been right never to see him again.

Who knows, she might have found him pathetic and, instead of spitting in his face, maybe she would have just cried over him.

Enough of that.

One daddy at a time.

Stop by the house, Jeff, we've got some things to chat about.

She could dump the whole thing in the garbage, and the pain in her chest would melt away with the smell of the soup, and she would recover that feeling of lightness she had so recently acquired.

Stop by my place before you head up for the hunt, we'll have a cup of coffee.

If she threw it all into the garbage, the two little girls with the blond curls would be spared the pain—while the moose and the thousand other creatures without words to defend themselves would fall before the onslaught of the bulldozers.

Well, that's very kind of you, Mrs. Szach. You'll see just how proud you'll be. The biggest recreation center in the Laurentians, after Tremblant.

Someone had to stand up, a fighter. An exterminating angel. In these hard times, when everyone was crumpling from weakness and liquefaction, only she remained on the front lines, all alone.

LILA ADDED a pinch of pepper and lemon juice to preserve the color. Then she poured the mixture into the blender. In five seconds, the cream would be smooth and white, ready to eat. Her finger was poised above the switch.

She remembered that too. The pain in her chest, but also the dread, just before she pushed the switch.

Here, Jeff, something for you to eat on the road.

Well, that's mighty nice of you, Mrs. Szach.

It'll stay nice and warm in the thermos.

She'd have to live with it again, that clawed weight on her heart.

And the autumn, interminable and gray, that stretched out before her, months of darkness before the whiteness of the snow. She had no plans for the in-between period, nothing to relieve the nothingness of autumn and her soul.

A noise close by disturbed her, it was a grating sound, then she saw the car. What was this intruder doing here, a blue car she'd never seen before that dared to appear from around the curve in her road?

Through the kitchen window, she saw the car pull up her drive, and someone got out. That slender shape, the spindly legs, Lila's heart stopped beating because Markus was coming straight toward her, no, it was the little guy, it was Jérémie smiling ear to ear, hopping along on his crutches.

She dropped everything, and in her joy rushed out to meet him.

jérémie



the key

ONCE OR TWICE every summer, he would climb it, alone.

He would set up camp for a few hours on the flat rocks on top of the cliff with cheese and vodka, and let his spirit soar into the heights and stretch out as far as it might. Then he would make his way down at the same time as the sun, walking more rapidly because the body also needs to be urged on.

He took his time on the way up. The day was new. He moved along the trail, eyes peeled, lifting from their hiding places small treasures that at first didn't look like much—dry red berries on crooked branches, gray feathers, eagle feathers, perhaps, more likely a gull's, furry milkweed. He stuffed it all into his big knapsack. A black and white devil popped out of the bushes, a skunk with its tail raised like a flamethrower, and it barely left him time to leap aside. The spray missed him by a millimeter, filling the landscape with its repulsive incense.

He was still laughing as he crossed the plateau where the maples grew.

Lucky, even with skunks.

Lucky and loved. *Full of shit like Christmas turkey*, as Marco would have said.

As he walked along in the contentment of those who are in no hurry, the lady of his life was in the white house, busy being with him while doing other things. In another place, he had four grown and fulfilled children, full of daring and plans. He had true friends from one end of the world to the other.

And he had this, for all this time.

These kilometers of jungle and lake.

Anybody else would have developed a feeling of triumphant superiority, or peaceable gratitude, or, at least, happiness.

Not him.

The world was going badly. Every day the news came slicing down like the blade of an apocalyptic guillotine. It tormented him. He tried to compensate. Give to the world as he might, very little of his good fortune reached it.

He had come upon good fortune at an early age. Once, he had crossed over to the other side of life, as if on a Sunday afternoon stroll before returning unhurriedly home. The experience had delivered him from fear. It had been his first stroke of luck: to be freed, so young, from that which poisons others' lives.

His second stroke of luck was Lila Szach.

She died one August while climbing the cliff. When they discovered her several days later, only steps from the summit, she was unrecognizable: her body and her face half-devoured by animals. He remembered how traumatized Simon had been. Above all because of the animals, and she who had never eaten a single one.

When he would reach the top of the cliff, he would scatter the pebbles, feathers and branches, all the little nothings he'd collect along the way, into the air, as if in her direction.

In the clearing, he paused for a minute to contemplate the surroundings. The blue eye of the lake stared at him unblinkingly from the landscape floor. The maple grove whispered with the movement of the winds and the birds. On a fallen trunk farther off, he spotted a sculpture in gleaming mahogany—a *reishi*, one of the large, brilliant polypores to which the Japanese attribute powers of longevity and happiness.

Over the years, he'd found fifteen of them.

HE WASN'T REALLY surprised that she left him everything.

He and she were connected. As if they had recognized each other, as if they'd known each other before they'd met. He remembered how she'd saved him from an elemental danger, that first summer. For his part, he was sure he'd saved her during the years that followed, even though he couldn't explain what from.

What would she say today?

Dobrze, great, *Jérémie!* Or, *You hopeless idiot of a Mały, what got into you?*

HE HAD JUST given away Goose Lake.

At the foot of the cliff, he stepped up the pace. Better move quickly if he wanted to reach the top. The cliff was what kept him solid. The whole place, splendid, restorative, peacefully determined to create life, had cured him of almost everything, and brought him as near as possible to happiness.

And it ended up being worth several hundred million dollars.

Predators had been prowling around for some time, looking for pieces of living flesh to tear away. He recalled vaguely that Lila had faced the threat of expropriation that very first summer, and had been saved in extremis. When she talked about it, her wild delight made him smile. *A moose! A moose right through the windshield!* But moose, back then, were so numerous they kept pouring onto the roads laid across their territory. When Lila's predator met up with a moose on Highway 117 at the end of that summer, he died on the spot. Like so many before him—like his father, in fact.

Now the threats were coming from all directions, and most of all, from within. At this very moment, he knew hunters were squatting the far reaches of his land. He was at war with his neighbors, the twins, who wanted to sell their grandfather Simon's cottage to the highest bidder, despite the contract that expressly forbade it—the old contract still valid between Simon and Lila. And his children, who owned just the second blue cottage, were getting dazzling offers that left him deeply perturbed, a jaundiced look in the eye.

It was time to entrust the lake to more official, better organized protectors.

Time as well to let others benefit from his royal good fortune, others who never had such luck.

All this would become a park.

A park that would give small reflective groups from everywhere the chance to observe that which existed nowhere else: real wild animals that fled instead of begging for food, plants so healthy they were green in their banality, century-old pines threatened only by insects or lightning, a crystalline lake that had never seen an algae bloom.

A protected park would put the brakes on human rapacity. Why, then, did he not feel a sharper, more definite sense of relief?

He paused halfway up the cliff to catch his breath. He leaned against his favorite rock, which overlooked the crevice where he'd broken his leg so long ago.

Lila's face floated in his memory, rolling her eyes the way she did on one of her bad days: *The weight, Jérémie, the weight!*

Thank God he'd lost the hair-trigger sensibility that used to bedevil him, and bombard him with terrifying images he could not understand. Some intuitions did remain, just like with everyone else, sometimes bright flashes in the shape of faces. After Lila, there was the pretty woman who visited him now, the pretty woman he'd met the day before at the ministry, with her ageless beauty, her blond, polar beauty set with magnificent pale eyes. She shook his hand energetically, *Call me Melissa*, she would be looking after the park at Goose Lake, she kept smiling and Jérémie found it strange that her smile carried no warmth, *I know your village very well*, she added, handing him her card, *my family used to have a cottage in the area*. Then she began to talk about nature with an excess of enthusiasm as he stood there silently, fingering the card on which he read her name, Melissa. *Melissa Clémont, Sustainable Development*.

Leaning against the rock, he took a sip of water and a bite of cheese. Before him, the ancient, rounded mountains with their water stains leapfrogged over one another, but quietly, they were the oldest mountains in the world, they had tramped their way through the years with nothing to offer

but their rugged beauty and hidden powers. He rubbed the itchy old scar on his cheek. A sense of unease would not let him rest despite the perfection of the panorama, a sense of unease with pale eyes.

Then the sun surprised him, as if he were watching a black and white film suddenly flooded with color. The mountains caught fire, with the sky and all that surrounded them. In the light of the blaze, the garden to which he had just handed over the key shone like gold. Tears came to his eyes. It was only the dawning of day, but what good fortune to be there, what great fortune to still burn with all the other living things. The sense of unease fell away like dead weight, and he began to climb again. Already the heat was rising and he unbuttoned his coat, his old red lumberjack shirt with its torn pockets. For a moment he thought he spied, from the corner of his eye, a small figure behind him, the figure of a child who had followed him all this way, and he turned around. But of course there was no one, and he started climbing again toward the sun, toward Lila.

acknowledgments

SEVERAL FRIENDS helped me, often unawares,
in the building of this universe:

Thanks to Ann Charney for writing *Dobryd*.

Thanks to Elisabeth *Elżbieta* Jelen for nurturing me with all things Polish.

Thanks to Francis Gingras for champagne of all kinds.

Thanks to Chrystine Brouillet for the first fairy ring mushrooms and the first monarch caterpillar.

Thanks to Paul-André Fortier for his *Solo 30 x 30*, at the corner of Ste-Catherine and Clark, December 2006.

Thanks to the Vipassana Meditation Centre, Sutton, Quebec.

And, as promised, my fondest thoughts to Y.S., who might be beginning her childhood again somewhere else.

Monique Proulx