

Sophie Voillot

Anecdotes

Parts 1 & 2

Translated from the French by
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Few, if any, survive their teens.

Maya Angelou

*Lark of memory
it is your blood that is flowing.*

Jacques Prévert

I

The Snarling Telephone

July 31, 1975

We were living north of Jean-Talon, just on the threshold of Ville Mont-Royal. I'd left the house running; I was in a hurry to meet Steffi, who lived in a duplex on Grosvenor Avenue with her German family. We didn't go to the same school, but from the very first time we met, we were inseparable. We spent our days listening to Janis Joplin in her room with the blue ceiling we'd repainted together. At the very last minute I'd had the idea of letting some whiteness show through to reveal a crescent moon and a few stars. It was very pretty, and I was immoderately proud of it.

Arrived not long before from Senegal where she'd learned French, Steffi was funny, she had long silky hair, a beauty mark on the side of her nose, and I couldn't even tell that I was a bit in love with her. I didn't know it was possible.

Since the holidays began I'd had permission to go out alone, but still not to invite anyone back. I often ate at Steffi's, though she'd never once set foot in our house. I don't remember what we had that night, but I'm sure it must have included potatoes and mustard. The last bite swallowed, we got up, said we were going for a stroll, and took the bus on Queen Mary in the direction of Café Campus.

"I'm suffocating... see if you can open the window a bit wider."

Despite my struggling to slide the window back, it blocked at the end of its run and nothing budged. It was already open as far as it would go, but a feeble breath of weary air came to settle on my neck. My nape was hurting. The day before, my mother had shaken me violently for a reason I can't quite remember: I'd forgotten to put the little spoons on the table, or taken the wrong pair of slippers into her bedroom.

Steffi pulled on the yellow cord:

“Come on, Miss Lunatic.”

She called me that because my head was always in the clouds. Without watching where I was going I darted into the road, but a hand grabbed me by the shoulder and roughly yanked me back. The departing bus brushed by me, honking all the way. I’d never noticed how huge their tires were. Without Steffi’s presence of mind, my life would have ended then and there. Short of breath, our hearts pounding, we stood frozen for a moment before crossing the street.

We got in easily despite the impertinence of our sixteen years. It wasn’t the first time. Anyway, the beer didn’t interest me as much as the music and the joints being passed around the tables. As soon as I’d smoked a little, I leaped onto the dance floor, buoyed by gusts of joy.

When I got too hot, I went to join my blond sprite sitting not far away with her mug. She always had a pack of Gitanes tucked into the pocket of the maxi coat she wore day in, day out. We ended up smoking four or five in silence: we weren’t the kind to babble on without stopping, and in any case Jim Morrison was talking louder than we were.

I kept glancing around from one table to another. Still shaken by the encounter with the bus, I lowered my gaze for no particular reason. It came to rest on a twenty-dollar bill folded in two, astir under an empty chair. I dove for it and resurfacing, found myself face to face with a smile framed by freckles, to which I inquired:

“Is it yours?”

“No,” he answered, “but if you want some acid, I’m going to buy some, it’s five bucks each.”

He too had very long hair, and a playful gleam in his eyes. I didn’t hesitate. I was up for anything.

“Wait a minute, I’ll see if my friend wants some.”

“Not a chance,” cried Steffi. “Acid is corrosive, it makes holes in your stomach.”

Signing to the guy that I wanted only one, I furrowed my brow, not at all certain that what she said was true, but by then she’d got up to leave. Her tolerant, discreet parents still would be starting to worry. I’d told mine that I’d be sleeping over at her place. We argued under our breaths for a minute or two. Finally, I promised to be careful and not to let myself be abducted by horrible satyrs with bad intentions. We kissed and I turned back towards the smile, whose owner was named Jean-Louis.

He placed a tiny violet tablet in the palm of my hand.

“It’s micro purple, you know it?”

It was weightless. I swallowed it just like that. I showed Jean-Louis my tongue to make sure that the acid had gone down, he stuck out his own tongue while nodding his head, we laughed. Then we went bopping about to some rock tunes while waiting for his buddy Normand.

There he was, tall and dark-haired. Jean-Louis took him aside. They looked at me, heads together, Normand popped his microdot, and we went out to find a taxi to go and trip at Jean-Louis’ place, he had good music, Normand guaranteed it.

We went down Côte-des Neiges, then Guy to Sainte-Catherine, and we turned east. Beyond the Latin Quarter, I was entering unknown territory. I may have been living in Montreal for more than six years, but I’d never gone farther than rue Saint-Denis.

I felt butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Jean-Louis and I were making eyes at each other in the back seat, bumping our foreheads, rubbing our noses, while Normand, who still had a little time left before he started to get high, made conversation with the driver.

We got off at rue Joliette and climbed a staircase that rocked gently, to find ourselves in a little bedroom with a mattress on the floor. The walls were covered in psychedelic

posters. I didn't yet know *Echoes*, *Fragile* or *Selling England by the Pound*. I wasn't going to forget them. Handling his 33 rpms with respectful dexterity, Jean-Louis played them one after the other. As they'd seen all their shows, he and Normand knew the words by heart, which they declaimed for my benefit, enhancing them with theatrical mimicry. I lapped it up, just as everything began to shimmer.

Between Jean-Louis and me, the smiles got wider and wider. After the third LP the tall dark friend arose on the pretext of stretching his legs, and went off, leaving us alone. We remained on the bed, side by side.

Bit by bit the whole room began to breathe, and I started to talk. While the posters took on life, Jean-Louis listened without interrupting, and I was able to express all that I'd never said to anyone, not even to Steffi: I think I was afraid to scare her.

The threats. The screams. The cruelty. For example, when she wanted to punish me, my mother would pick up the phone and tell the school that I was sick again, yes, the poor child. Yes, her delicate health. After which I spent the day imprisoned in my room. Another instance: the day I found my thighs covered in bruises because of a napkin left on the tile floor. Or the sessions of humiliation, the mother and stepfather on the couch, my little sister and me trapped facing them, trembling, reduced to nothing. Just recently, I had this nightmare that haunted me still:

I open the closet near the front door. Inside is my little sister, dead, smeared with scarlet blood. My stepfather comes up from behind and gives me a smack on the head with all the contempt of which I know him capable. "You're the one who did that, eh, you bitch!" But it's not me, it's him. I can see it in his eyes.

Here comes my mother, her face contorted with rage. Beside herself, she goes looking for something in the bathroom. It's her bottle of sleeping pills. She pushes me against a wall, pries my mouth open, tries to make me swallow the whole container: she wants to make me kill myself.

Ah, but in Jean-Louis' arms, I was very much alive. And though this was perhaps my first acid trip, I'd not been a virgin for some months now. Dorothee, my other friend, swiped pill samples from her gynecologist father that she passed on to me, contravening several laws at once. I'd already slept with a few university students in the afternoon, in rooms filled with books and light. But nothing had prepared me for this seismic current, for the surging life force which propelled us towards an ecstatic pleasure that swept away everything in its path.

Dawn painted the night blue. Rocked by the birds' crystalline chirping, we slid into sleep beneath sheets strewn with heavenly violets.

When we rose, tropical sunlight was flooding the kitchen. The LSD's effect had dissipated. All that remained were iridescent reflections on the surfaces of objects, and the steam from the kettle describing mildly convoluted spirals. When I saw what time it was, I panicked.

"I have to call my mother! I was supposed to be back by ten."

Except that out of the entire universe, one single object was challenging me with a snarl.

"The telephone... it's going to bite me."

"What will happen if you don't call?" asked Jean-Louis as he was dropping bread into the toaster.

"I'll be killed when I get home," I replied without thinking.

"And if you don't go home? What you're going through isn't right, you know. It's not normal."

I hung there, suspended like a fish out of water, while the idea worked its way through my supercharged neurons. What did I have to lose, I who, the day before, had almost met my doom beneath the wheels of a bus?

The first advantage I saw was not to have to hold out my my hand to the angry telephone. The second was Jean-Louis' look of complicity as he placed two cups of coffee on the table. The third, this immense space opening up before me with vertiginous ease. All I had to do was nothing... and that is what I did.

I never went back. Not that morning, nor the next day, nor any other.

The Hottest Day

It was after four o'clock when we went downstairs to find some shade on the sidewalk. With the sun bearing down on the back wall and the tarred roof, the heat inside was unbearable.

Jean-Louis sat down on the wrought iron steps.

"I bet we could cook an egg on the sidewalk across the street."

I didn't answer. My Indian blouse, white cotton, was sticking to my skin. We'd taken two showers that were already just a dim memory. As I didn't know I was leaving home, I hadn't thought of bringing an overnight bag or a carryall. My legs were weak from pleasure, and my sudden change in status was making me dizzy.

We saw Normand coming from afar off, tall as he was. He seemed surprised to see me.

"What are you doing?"

"We're stewing," I said.

He sat down on the steps, next to Jean-Louis.

"Shift over man, I'm hot enough already," Jean-Louis exclaimed, pulling away.

But Jean-Louis, I don't know how he did it, even if his long hair had curled up a bit, not a drop of sweat, nothing. Finally we all got up, and obeying the law that hot air rises, we decided to set off for some fresh air at the bottom of the hill. We went down towards Place Jacques Cartier, crossing Viger Square. It felt weird to walk by the statues of Joan of Arc and Marianne, flanking the front of the Union Française.

As we walked, we brought Normand up to date on our situation. He nodded his head in silence, but drew his hand several times over his chin, as if smoothing an imaginary beard.

"I don't know if you've heard," he said finally, panting, as we worked our way towards Place Vauquelin. We're breaking. A record. For heat. Today. Never seen before... in history... so they say!"

We were finally able to breathe some cooler air as we crossed Rue Notre-Dame and set foot on the slanting cobblestones of Place Jacques Cartier. Everything seemed new to me, bright, multicoloured. Later, when I watched the film *Obscured by Clouds*, at the end, when I saw everyone going down the very last hill, it reminded me of that moment.

We went to sit on a bench in front of the Nelson Hotel. Not far off a gang of percussionists was beating out a lively rhythm on their congas and bongos, I'd learned the instruments' names in music class. They were going at it hard in the muggy late afternoon, I could almost see the cinder they raised drifting up towards the veiled sky. Jean-Louis passed me a joint of hash that smelled like paradise. It was all I needed for me to think I was already there.

A guy planted himself under an awning and opened his guitar case, which he set down in front of him, wide open. He tuned up quickly and sang a Bob Dylan song, then one by Charlebois. Passersby began dropping coins into the case. Interesting.

To think that my guitar was all by itself in my abandoned room!

For two or three years I'd been strumming a few chords, teaching myself with a little manual full of diagrams and an album of Cat Stevens scores. Looking back, some of these songs now seemed prophetic. Especially Wild World and of course Father and Son, except in my case it would have had to be put in the feminine. One day, for a neighbour's birthday, I'd dared to bring the instrument out and sing a little, and it didn't seem like I was hurting their ears, they even asked for more.

As I still had some change in my jeans pocket, I went to get three hot dogs with relish and mustard at the snack bar facing us, and I offered one to Jean-Louis, then one to Normand, in celebration. A little music, a little coolness, two new friends: I didn't need more than that for my new life to seem sweet and gentle.

A bit later they got up, yawning, and I trailed them back. They looked at each other strangely, I didn't quite know why. We left together and walked up to Jean-Louis' place without talking much, subdued by fatigue and the heat.

"That lukewarm bath felt so good! Do you have something I could use to dry my blouse?"

I'd finally decided to wash it with hand soap in the basin, it was better than nothing. Jean-Louis offered me a metal hanger.

"No, it has to be plastic or else it will rust."

I clearly heard him sigh just as he turned to rummage in the closet. When I came out of the bathroom, he was sitting stiffly on his mattress.

"Listen Josée, I don't know what you're thinking, but you can't stay here. I find you really neat, but we hardly know each other. I broke up with my last girlfriend not long ago, and I'm not ready to fall in love again. Besides, I live here with my sister, and she's coming back from her holidays tomorrow!"

Nothing like a cold shower to counter a heat wave.

“I’m the one who doesn’t know what you’re thinking. I’ll be gone tomorrow, don’t worry.”

I turned my back and lay down, my face to the wall, my pupils like saucers. I knew what I was running from, but so far I hadn’t thought to ask myself where I was going.

“Listen, don’t take it like that... I don’t know, is there something I can do to help you?”

I turned around, the better to smile into his eyes.

“The guitar I saw in the living room, is it yours?”

“Yes, but I don’t really play it. Why?”

The next morning, Jean-Louis laid it on thick. After a hearty breakfast washed down with lots of coffee, he made me a gift of a few cigarettes with a box of matches and he even gave me back the five dollars for the tab of acid we’d bought together at Café Campus:

“This is for you, sweetie. Good luck, eh!”

We hugged, then I went down the stairs holding the guitar case in both hands, to better guide it around the curve. There was even a little compartment in it where you could store your cigarettes.

“Hi Steffi, it’s me.”

“Hey! Man, where have you been? Your mother’ freaking out, she’s called here a hundred times.”

“I ran away, I don’t ever want to go back. You know, I never told you everything... can I come see you?”

“If you’re not going back to you mother, you’d better not. My parents promised to call if they saw you.”

“Can you come and meet me then?”

“Where are you?”

“In a phone booth, but we could meet at Place Jacques Cartier, at the foot of the Nelson Column.”

“Okay. Do you need anything?”

“You wouldn’t have some old clothes, would you? I’ve nothing to change into...”

An hour later, there she was, my blonde sprite, with a little backpack filled to bursting. There were two pairs of pants, several T-shirts, a belt, a light sweater and a heavier one, a windbreaker, and two pairs of socks. She’d even thought of underpants. I flew into her arms. She offered me a Gitane and I scratched one of my matches.

“It’s lucky that we’re almost the same size. But what are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry, I have a plan. Wait, I’ll show you.”

I took the guitar out of its case and checked it out. It had a nice body, pale wood, a rosette inlaid with mother-of-pearl, metal strings, a dark brown neck, pick guard and bridge, and a black headstock on which was inscribed, in italics: Aria. After having tuned it by ear, I stood up, opened the case at my feet, cleared my throat, and intoned:

“It’s not time to make a change, just relax, take it easy...”

After five songs I’d already collected what I needed to buy two hot dogs. Except that Steffi didn’t want hers, so I scarfed both of them down while she watched me with a worried look.

My demonstration had worked, I’d found a way to earn my bread, my sausage, and my ketchup, and my relish! After swallowing the last bite, I finally told her everything about what I’d left behind me: the rage and the blows, the threats and the fear, the bad dreams and the snarling telephone.

“You see why there’s no way I can ever go back.”

She sat there speechless, struck dumb. Just then, two policemen decided to amble down the square towards Rue de la Commune.

“Listen, I don’t want to alarm you, but your mother’s called the police, there’s a search warrant out to find you.”

I felt myself go pale. Quickly, I buried my head in the backpack and pretended to search for something.

“It’s okay, they’re gone. Look, my parents are expecting me for dinner. But you, where are you going to sleep?”

“Oh, I’ll think of something.”

Watching her climb towards Rue Notre-Dame, silhouetted against the setting sun, and disappearing into the crowd, I saw my childhood slipping away from me. An abyss opened up, and today I wonder how I was able to survive that moment in time, that precise instant when a new light, curiously solid, as hard as the stone beneath my feet, laid bare my almost total destitution, the utter completeness of my solitude.

How did I not implode, in this free fall, in the absence of everything?

I know two things: all moments pass, that one like the others. You cannot spend your whole life scrutinizing the void in silence, sitting on a bench, as night falls. I must have been thirsty, and started to move, looking for something to drink. Placing one foot mechanically before the other. The body wants to live.

I also know what saved me. Terror. Physical fear. The panicked heart, the strangled breath, the icy shivers at the mere thought of the star performer in my nightmares, the larger-than-life ogress who had brought me into the world only to destroy me. My entire being was now animated by a single compulsion: at all costs, never again to fall into her clutches.

The White Horse

What's hardest when you have nowhere to sleep is to get through the wee hours, between the bar closings and dawn. You have to be constantly on the move. The police wouldn't let us sleep on benches, and as a declared runaway I couldn't risk being asked for ID I couldn't show, having left home empty-handed. A bit more and I would have begun to see myself as a serious delinquent, but the truth is that I was a minor, innocent, unwashed and with hair unkempt. Helpless.

I would have liked to go back (in time) the better to leap forward (into the void), but there was no point dwelling on that. The first nights, I'd tried my best to bed myself down in the dank night, but I was like a doe in a land of wolves. No way to close your eyes. It was only with other escapees that I felt somewhat safe. A burnt-out street light, a friendly stretch of wall, created a small dark nook below Place Jacques-Cartier, at the corner of Rue de la Commune. There were several of us huddling there, sheltering behind our curled fingers the ember of a cigarette passed furtively to and fro, it was almost a game.

There was Martin, diabetic, whose father must have been worried about him, but so what; I didn't quite know why he had taken flight, but my guess was that his stepmother was not kind to him. Bertrand, a soft-eyed giant who rolled his Rs on the tip of his tongue and played the recorder like a nightingale. He had a whole slew of them. Mireille the vagabond, so round and blonde that Danny, who could read music but not the alphabet, had fallen madly in love with her. She was never separated from the tambourine she carried over her shoulder, strung onto a scarf that was as Indian as her flowered dress. Whenever she opened her mouth to sing, artless words welled up from within her. Danny followed her everywhere with his electric guitar and its little amplifier on which he accompanied her with a raw, gravelly blues that made people feel good wherever he went. He spent half of his money on batteries, it was a vicious circle.

They didn't let go of each other for even five minutes, "I think I'm a nymphomaniac, what can I do, I want it all the time! I love it so much!" Mireille confessed to me, one night, with wide, panicked eyes. It's true that she projected an avid sensuality that was utterly irresistible. With her little pink socks in her cracked white leather shoes, she looked delicious enough to eat. I understood very well how one would want to nibble her ear or sniff at her neck. In fact, I found both of them adorable. They were the only ones in our group to cuddle up. As if by common agreement, no interest was shown by the two other guys and me. We had other fish to fry, to say the least.

My clan of fallen angels. We knew we could rely on each other, we were all in the same boat heading for the high seas as long as we could manage to hold our heads above water. The five of us would have made a great band, had we only been able to maintain a modicum of discipline. But you couldn't ask too much of us. It was already an achievement that we'd worked out a way to help each other bum a few coins: as of mid-morning we took turns keeping an eye on the gear while the others went to hold out their hands to the tourists, easy to spot with their cameras on their chests. After that, we were on our own. My specialty was the businessmen sitting on terraces, downing their coffees while mopping their brows after having left a tip on the table. A bright smile, an innocent gaze, my head slightly tilted to the side: "Can you spare a quarter?"

It wasn't too hard to escape their hands: pretend to laugh, dart away with a twirl, back off while lobbing them a thank you, make them think that nothing was more flattering than to be hustled all day long. Anything rather than make them angry. Anyway, they could all go screw themselves, the little self-important bourgeois with their heaps of money. Up to a point, anyway. "Can you spare a quarter?"

I hadn't given up on what I called my recitals, but I had to rest my throat a little, along with my raw fingers which, thank God, were getting tougher every day. Also it felt good not to be always lugging around my guitar and back pack. I couldn't take my eyes off them for a second most of the time. The lookouts, after a while, tended to doze off on the bench around which we congregated.

I often had the same dream:

I run, I run through an endless maze of corridors to escape my mother who is pursuing me, crazy with rage, armed with a giant carving knife.

It was always quieter on Mondays, I don't know why. The Earth had turned on its axis seventeen times since I'd moved to the other side of the mirror, and here it was: my birthday. I was seventeen. For the occasion, I dressed just as on that fateful night: the faded bell-bottom jeans, the white cotton blouse, the Indian leather sandals. The other clothes in my minimalist wardrobe came from Steffi, I was very happy to have them but they weren't really mine, not really me.

The suffocating heat had somewhat abated. A light breeze from the river cooled us despite the blazing sun. We sat in a row along the sidewalk, our feet on the cobblestones, on the side of the square where the cars climbed toward Notre-Dame. They moved more slowly than on the way down, it was less unnerving. I'd only told Mireille about my birthday while the others were off looking for coffee. I had no expectations, but at a certain point they all looked at each other. They must have rehearsed their choreography, because everything unfolded marvellously. There appeared before me a pack of Export A, topped with a little Jos Louis chocolate cake in which a candle was implanted, then the fourth in line lit it and they sang *Ma chère Josée, c'est à ton tour*, it was brand-new at the time. We had all in unison intoned Gilles Vigneault's *Gens du pays* on the mountain to celebrate the *Saint-Jean*, eight weeks earlier. It might have been a century ago.

It was so kind of them. I don't know what came over me, all of a sudden the contrast with my childhood birthdays got to me, and just before blowing out the candle I said, in a forlorn tone of voice:

"Right, happy birthday, Josée..."

Fortunately, I don't think they heard me. Or else they were very adroit, because nothing showed. Only Martin, who had come up to light the candle, admonished me under his breath:

"You know Josée, it's not good to be bitter, it's no fun for you or the others..."

"You're right," I replied. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, just start over! Make a wish this time."

He lit it again and I blew it out, trying hard to wish I could be happy. It was the best I could do.

I tore the cellophane off the cigarette pack, offered it round, and my mood lifted just as, behind me, I heard a voice call out:

"Hash, pot, acid, meescaline!"

It was like being in the old market, between the cabbages and the carrots, "beautiful carrots, freeesh!"

"What kind of acid?"

I hadn't taken any since my first time, but for the occasion I was prepared to repeat the experience. I still had some change from the day before, not a lot: it was either that or a hot dog with fries and Coke. What the hell, I'd heard that LSD cut your hunger... and with the Jos Louis, I'd be able to fill my stomach a little.

"Bang yer queen!"

"What?"

"Tangerine. Just a sec, I'll show you."

Curly-haired, bearded, hirsute, he offered me an orange microdot that sat on his outstretched palm. I'd never seen him before, but it seemed he was a friend of

Bertrand, who telegraphed me a “yes,” nodding his head to reassure me. All right, okay, there it was, I gave myself a gift, thinking about my wish as I swallowed the miniature host.

There were lots of people around the percussion bench. A pleasingly complex rhythm was spilling out from it, with long loose phrasings that evolved but did not repeat themselves. My stomach began to tingle, and the sound was getting to me. I went closer.

Sitting in the middle, in a beam of light, a silhouette haloed by curly hair was pounding away with practised force on two congas of different sizes, linked by leather strips. I kneeled down between two freaks who were whispering, full of admiration.

“That’s her, that’s Francine.”

“Seems she just got here from Quebec City...”

“I saw her play the other night with Michel Séguin!”

“Wow.”

The way other percussionists leaned in to listen to her between two offerings, you could see that her talent was inspiring everyone. She had a little feline face, delicate limbs, fine hands. But when she brought them together to form two flattened pyramids, their joints serving as summits, when they beat down with rapt zeal onto the stretched skins, when like two serpents’ heads they undulated one behind the other, she sent out waves of fire that went right to my solar plexus. I felt connected to a source of life-giving energy.

The more I watched, the more I listened, the more the power radiating from her exploded in multicoloured eruptions. Against the light, I made out from the corner of my eye silhouettes coiffed in feathers, personifying, with unbridled elegance, life in all its guises.

When they'd finished playing, the musicians got up to unwind, but not her. She just sat there in silence, and so did I. She lit a cigarette, blew the smoke toward the endless blue sky, stretched, saw that I was scrutinizing her every move, and said:

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Uh, sorry, Francine..."

"How do you know my name?"

"Uh, a guy told it to me a while ago..."

"Well it's none of your business who I am. Take off!"

"Uh..."

Getting to my feet, all flustered, I thought: Uh... that's all I know how to say, for Pete's sake.

It must have been an hour since I'd last laid eyes on the clan. I went back to them, my spirits low. Sylvain, Bernard's friend, was still there. He made room for me and I saw in his eyes that he hadn't missed a thing. I sat down between him and Bertrand. Leaning back against Bertrand as on a bulwark, I breathed a long sigh. He sighed with me. We stayed like that for a moment. The silence spoke volumes, and it didn't lie. Then Sylvain shook himself, rose, and said to me:

"Stop beating yourself up, that's the best thing for you to do. Listen, I have to go see my connection, but I'll drop by later in case you want to smoke something good for your birthday."

I said okay then I picked up my backpack and my guitar and I went my way. A bit farther on I found a streetlight beneath which I could stand, and I opened my notebook while turning my back purposefully on Francine: don't think about her anymore.

I wanted to work on my repertoire of French songs. Echoing Charlebois, I took flight “*on Turkish carpets...*” Really, this girl had got me down. But bitterness is not good, Josée, for others, or for you. So I raised my eyes to the sky; it was blue for me too, wasn’t it? And I went to my favourite Vian, “I’ve made my decision / I’m going to desert.” The prophetic words flowed out, lifting me up in the process, the strings undulating beneath my fingers.

Fuzzy little clouds began to roll my way, and I had to stop because the chords were becoming confusing.

I drifted toward the river, and sat down cross-legged on a cement block, in my usual position. Once, when I was a prisoner in my bedroom, punished for who knows what, my stepfather burst in, exploded in laughter, and called out to Her Immobile Majesty, slumped on the couch in front of the TV: “Missy does nothing at all, she’s installed like a Buddha, this is Nirvana, no less,” and the other chortled... but so what, I sat the way I wanted to. The breeze was caressing my temples, the little clouds were frolicking in the blue. I saw the sky breathing in and out. Each time, the puffs of wind pushed spirals of incredible beauty along their way, far above the world.

Down below it was the railroad tracks, stone, concrete, asphalt. Little by little, an iridescent pattern worked its way into all this mineral, a honeycombed network run through with diagonals; you would have thought they were butterfly wings. I could have remained there, immersed forever in their contemplation, rooted in my cement, my hair in heaven. I felt all-powerful and detached from everything. I knew that all I had to do was to grind out four or five tunes to earn my daily hot-dog, but anyway, I wasn’t even hungry. Still, as night fell, my restlessness returned. I uncurled myself at my leisure, I stood up, I turned back.

The lamps on the terraces lit up one by one in the blue dusk. I started climbing slowly over the cobblestones. No sign of the clan, each one must have gone off seeking their fortune on their own. I crossed Rue Notre-Dame and found myself in front of the Place

Vauquelin fountain. A fickle wind was chasing the water drops from one side to the other, producing nomadic rainbows. Water is life, said the mother in the Beau Dommage song. If you think mine came out with such things, it was more like: "I'm warning you, if you don't water the lawn right away," or "So that glass of Perrier, is it coming?"

Now I was free, free as the shimmering air at the end of day, as the liquid dust tumbling within it. I sat down. I raised my eyes.

Atop the column of water, just before it imploded to come splashing down into the basin, a white horse was rearing proudly. As the sun edged into the night, the moon rose on the tip of Île Sainte-Hélène, and my horse of foam greeted it, churning its front paws. The moon was almost full, and how perfect was that, I had nothing better to do than to watch it rise slowly toward the stars. I didn't see many of them, but I knew they were there, and life needed me to have faith in them.

"Is it a C or a D?" said a voice to my left.

It was Sylvain, holding out to me the famous joint. I hadn't even seen him arrive. I shot back:

"It's a D, silly. It's waxing."

"It's almost full for your birthday, that's a good sign."

"Why so?"

"It's a period of increasing energy, full of promise."

"I like that..."

"And look, it's just at the phase where you can best make out its dark side. On the left, the piece that would have made it perfectly round, it's there thanks to the light from the earth!"

With so many gifts, my smile came on all by itself.

I relaxed. He took the opportunity to draw closer. He slipped his warm hand under the cotton of my Indian blouse. He straddled me from behind, one leg on each side, and began to caress me discretely, protected by the cloth. I leaned back against his torso and reared like my horse, without telling him, it was my secret. His hands moved down over my skin, onto my stomach, I opened my legs, he slid into me, I was wet, his fingers bent, he pressed gently, then more forcefully, my pelvis jumped for joy and I opened out beneath a sky dazzled with stars.

For a long moment we said nothing. Then, very softly, he approached his mouth to my ear, and whispered:

“Would you like to suck me off?”

I had to mull this over for two minutes before I could answer.

“I don’t know, there’s too much light...”

What I did not tell him – I wouldn’t have known how – was that I’d never done that in my life, and before doing so I wanted to be truly in love, for it to be worth my while. As if, given how I’d lost my virginity, I needed to draw another line for me to cross of my own free will.

“We just have to find a dark corner...”

“Okay,” I said, “but I just want to stroke you.”

With no glare from the street light, we could better see the moon. He took my hand, placed it on his column of flesh, and moved it slowly to show me what he wanted. His glans was incredibly smooth. I played at sliding my fingers all around it, he seemed to like that, he closed his eyes, threw his head back, began to breathe more heavily, then he took my hand back into his own, rolled it tightly around his shaft, thrust it up and

down faster and faster and when he groaned, a milky stream spurted toward the Milky Way and I saw my white horse prance once again.

A Beautiful Day

“Look, Josée, You’re really cool, but I don’t feel like lugging around your backpack and mine too, you understand?”

Sylvain’s words had been resonating in my head for three days, reminding me of what Jean-Louis had said a few weeks earlier. It wasn’t as if, in my impotent naiveté, I was looking to move in with him. Or even as if I intended to have him shouldering my burden, literally or figuratively! But he didn’t leave me any time to set him straight before vanishing from the square. You would have thought he’d never set foot on it.

Since then I would only swear by Janis Joplin.

Only she could understand me when she howled out the pain of a heart thirsting for love, spilling her guts, Cry Baby, nothing held back. For her I’d dared to leave Old Montreal, to climb up to the corner of Berri and Sainte-Catherine, and to slip into Archambault where I’d managed to swipe a songbook with chords, words, and all. To make amends, I’d bought a small E string, the cheapest they had.

Back on the street, the cold cellophane wrapping clung to the damp skin under my blouse, my heart was beating hard, so hard! Rush without running, zigzag from one dark corner to another, turn here, then there. Learn to breathe again. But on the way back down to my domain, what a triumph!

Sitting on the ground, leaning against the crumbling wall we used as a shelter, I worked on the songs one by one, and as soon as I finished I started in again. In time I began to know some of them by heart, except Little Girl Blue, which moved me so much that I

couldn't sing it without bursting into tears. On the other hand, with Get It While You Can, every line came out of my gut as if I were the one who wrote it: be happy when you can! In lieu of a guitar solo, I would go off on a barely controlled high-pitched ululation. It worked not badly, but I had to shorten it, I didn't have a whole orchestra to back up my wailing. My favourite was A Woman Left Lonely, which lent words to my wound. A woman. That's what was strange, my having barely emerged from childhood.

When I saw Mireille and Danny munching their fries out of the same carton, I wondered why that couldn't happen to me. Me, who felt so alone, so helpless since Sylvain told me to take a walk.

As if I wasn't already walking enough.

Hey! I was hungry for him as for some essential nourishment, but whichever way I looked, in whatever direction, nowhere did I see his silhouette. *Hey!* Only his look-alikes, that each time made my heart stop, leaving me with a hedgehog in my throat, rolled into a ball.

"Hey! Are you all right?"

I jumped, startled. I hadn't seen Steffi arrive. Crouched down beside me, she was eyeing me with some concern, blinking in the sun.

"I don't know. I'm not great, to be honest."

"I can see that. Listen, you want to take a walk with me? Just to make a change?"

It wasn't the first time she'd tried to lure me away from Old Montreal, but so far, except for my raid on Archambault, I'd hunkered down there, it was the only place in the whole universe where I'd been able to make a place for myself, however minuscule. I felt magically protected there, while the rest of the city seemed patrolled by police with only one thing in mind: to find me, to grab me by the ear, to bring me to my knees at the feet of my mother... and that would be the end of me.

It had already happened the previous spring. I can't remember on what pretext she'd again lashed out at me, but after school I'd turned in circles around the bus stop and I'd let several go by. My feet wouldn't let me climb inside. But they did want to take me to Café Campus, on the other side of Côte-des-Neiges, and I'd holed up there for hours, sampling every joint that came my way. I was trying to persuade Jean-Marc, a bearded type who was a university student, to invite me to his place for the night, when the harpy burst in through the little side door, foaming at the lips, and charged right at me. It was as if she possessed some kind of otherworldly radar.

She shoved me into her white Ford Granada with the blood-red seats, and sped to the police station, dragging me inside against my will. An officer seemed to be waiting for us, she must have phoned before leaving. As to how she knew where to find me, I always suspected my little sister, but I didn't blame her: she must have been grilled within an inch of her life.

The officer led us into a little room with a desk, a chair for him, two chairs for us, and a baleful fluorescent light overhead. And there, before the farded mumsy with her wee duplicitous smile, bejewelled from head to toe as always when she wanted to reel someone in, he lectured me and interrogated me with an air of sham benevolence.

"Listen, little lady, you mustn't frighten your mother like that. It's not as if you were being badly treated at home, eh? You seem to be lacking for nothing, isn't that so?"

Even though I was sending him mute signals by widening my eyes like a hysterical owl, it never entered his mind to take me aside or to have her leave. So I said nothing. In any case, even without my opening my mouth, I knew what I was in for. And as soon as we were back home I got a hiding that made all the others look pale in comparison.

Okay, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to leave this square where I was going round and round. Without admitting it to myself entirely, I perhaps also hoped, a little, to run into Sylvain. We headed toward the subway, a dry, dusty wind in our faces. Once at the

station, Steffi handed me a cut-rate ticket. It reminded me of the distant time when I too was a schoolgirl. We got off at Sherbrooke, just two stations on. We'd really only taken the ride to get to the top of the hill. What a luxury.

How pleasant it was to sit under the trees' green parasol. We'd been all wrong, Jean-Louis, Normand, and myself, back at the beginning of time. The breeze was cooler higher up.

Steffi handed me the bottle of water she'd bought in the subway. It was the best I'd ever drunk in my life. It felt like I was quenching a millennial thirst. While she lit a Gitane, I brought out my guitar and started to strum a few chords of my own invention with two fingers. A bit higher on the scale, I found something open and dreamlike that calmed me. The leaves rustled gently around us, we were at peace.

"Stéphanie!"

A spindly silhouette wearing a brown leather hat was walking toward us with a bouncy stride, hair flouncing in the wind. Steffi introduced us. His name was Marco, I no longer remember where they'd met. He sat down on the ground facing us, took off his black leather sandals, opened his yellow leather bandolier and brought out a bottle that he offered to Steffi. It wasn't in anything leather, just a paper bag. That's how I discovered caribou. The first time, it took me by surprise. It was hot, strong, and sweet at the same time. I told myself that it was the Southern Comfort of the north. Saint Janis, pray for us.

It was now or never for me to try out my new repertoire of songs. I strung them together softly one after the other, just to see if I could remember the chords without referring to the songbook. When I say softly, I don't know if everyone would agree, given how hard it was for me to pronounce those words without choking up. But at the end of Me and Bobby McGee, they both joined in with some loud la la la's straight from the heart. Then we went silent for a moment, nobody moved, and I set down my guitar amid the calm, there was nothing to add.

Marco broke the silence.

“I’ve got some good Acapulco Gold at home, want to come? I live right over there, it’s not far.”

On the other side of Saint-Louis Square, we entered a little street where I’d never been. It bore the name of a legendary prince, and there were paintings on the walls of the houses. At the corner of de Bullion, we came on a fountain into which a little prankster had poured some dish detergent. The white suds that poured onto the sidewalk heightened my feeling that we had just entered a children’s book.

“There it is,” said Marco, gesturing gallantly with his arm.

We climbed the stairway leading to an apartment smelling of dust, with rooms all in a line: in the front, a double room whose rear section featured a big dining table, then a kitchen, and right at the back behind the bathroom, an incredibly spacious bedroom with a balcony and a wooden stairway leading to the alleyway. After giving us the tour, Marco placed an LP on his stereo’s turntable. It was Gilles Valiquette, *Chansons pour un café*. I remember feeling that it fit him like a glove, and since then I can’t think of the one without associating him with the other, especially since I saw a resemblance between the two faces, the one smiling on the album cover, and the other, bending over the table, intent on rolling a good-sized joint, which he then held out for me to light.

What a beautiful day, repeated the singer. Taking my first toke, I told myself that at least it was ending better than it began. We smoked, listened to some records, and after about an hour Steffi got up to leave. She had a fair way to go before making it home: up Boulevard Saint-Laurent on the 55 bus to Laurier, changing to the 51 and heading west to Grosvenor Street, not far from my former school.

Seeing her getting ready to leave, I felt as if, after having half-way crossed the arid Nevada flatland in a covered wagon, I was seeing my traveling companion off to the Old

World. Night falls swiftly in the desert. I wasn't sure where I was going to plant my tent. I think I remember Steffi just then looking hard at Marco, who exclaimed:

“Josée, if you want to crash on the couch, no problem, there are no fleas here, and no bedbugs!”

The Art of Loving

For three nights I'd been sleeping on the red couch in the living room, and I was clearly fleshing out. Marco, who was a few years older than me, was studying sociology at the University of Quebec, and frequenting all sorts of organizations that were one way or another anarchist or revolutionary. He got up early in the morning and left to hand out tracts after having downed a boiling hot cup of coffee. I spent my afternoons alone in the apartment furnished with charming antiquarian finds, including an oak bookcase where I went from discovery to discovery.

Since my arrival, I'd not stepped out the door, and I'd devoured *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, my first Castaneda, followed by *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm (a German like herself, Steffi pointed out), and let's not forget *Summerhill* and its free children, which validated my response to the physical and mental violence I'd endured for so long in my mother's house. Stretched out in the half light, I immersed myself in those life-saving readings that fed my dreams of a better world, a magic world, a marvellous world where women and children would be free, schools open, and houses too.

All this time, no thought of Sylvain even entered my head.

Two David Hamilton posters faced each other in the opposite corner of the room. On the right, a fair-haired girl with downy skin was reading with utter seriousness, through her round glasses, while comfortably ensconced in a cushioned wicker armchair. Upraised by her bare knee on which the black book cover rested, the diaphanous cloth

of her flowered garment spilled over her hips. On the left, two young girls with bare legs were lying on a beach, one on her back and one face down.

Although they were equally blonde, I could easily see Steffi in the one on the left, and me in the one on the right, who was a bit more tanned. The two vaporous images in sepia mirrored my life so well that I cast myself into them so as to share their languorous and tender adventures, a blade of grass in my mouth, a light breeze in my hair.

That's where I was when Marco burst in and headed straight to the kitchen, where in one gulp he downed a large glass of water.

"Ah! I got my unemployment insurance this morning. I've just come from the bank, we can call the pusher."

I didn't say anything, but I smiled from ear to ear, I was so happy to be included in this "we." He also smiled, on the way to his bedroom where the telephone lived. He'd explained from the beginning that it was a quieter place to talk in case there was a party going on in the living-dining room. He had barely hung up when the phone rang. A bit later he returned to the kitchen, on the way throwing a pile of clothes into the washer, and announced:

"That was Stéphanie, she's coming for dinner, did you know she had a new boyfriend?"

"What? No. Since when?"

"She's going to bring him, I think she wants you to meet him."

Marco rummaged on the shelves for a while, then declared:

"It's looking like a spaghetti. I have lots of pasta, sauce, ground beef..."

"Oh, I said. I could make my grandmother's Italian meatballs!"

“Great. But in the meanwhile we have to clean the place up a bit, okay? You could start by picking up your things...”

He was right, I'd scattered my meagre possessions all around the living room. While he chopped onions and celery for the sauce, I began stuffing everything into my backpack, looking glum.

“Don't take it like that! I'm not blaming you, I just like things to be in order when I have people to eat, that's all. If you have dirty clothes, I was going to do a wash, you can just toss them in. Can you sweep up once you're done?”

Grateful, I resolved to show myself worthy of my new assignment, even if I was having trouble reconciling my two realities, the old and the new. In the bourgeois household where I grew up I'd never in my life wielded a broom. But I soon figured out the functions of the little brush and the dust pan, and I didn't have to blush at my ignorance where the household chores were concerned. Even if I had to gather up half the litter a second time because my aim was wide when it came to the trashcan. Luckily, Marco had gone out for cigarettes.

The dining room shone like a new penny and I had just spread an almost white cloth over the table when footsteps resonated in the stairway. I jumped when I saw two strangers come in, one behind the other! I saw at once that they were a well-matched couple, the tall brunette with very long hair and the twin to Plume Latraverse who was removing his shiny black motorcycle helmet.

Except that the one in the lead, a certain Chantal, rushed up to Marco and kissed him on the mouth, and I saw at once that she was his girlfriend or at least his companion, and that she slept with him or if not, it wouldn't be long. As soon as I realized that I was staring at them wide-eyed, I turned quickly to the door, a bit shocked all the same that he hadn't said anything. The other, clearly, was Marco's pusher, and his name was Varan.

“Isn’t she a bit young, this one? Her parents aren’t going to come looking for her?” he said, pointing me out with a corner of the saddlebag he was preparing to unzip.

“No problem,” Marco assured him, “Josée is a free spirit, she hasn’t gone home since her first acid trip, eh Josée, you’ll tell him all about it!”

Head nodding all around. Cigarette paper, lighter, ashtray, check out the merchandise, life is good. You could almost hear an angel humming I’m so cool, I’m so cool, I’m so cool.

Steffi arrived a bit later, flanked by the guy I was going to have to share her with, a tall redhead with pale eyes called Julius, who got on my nerves right from the start, with his bottle of chianti. She made the introductions. I coldly shook a hand that was bony and white.

He was the son of her father’s friend, they’d met at a showing of *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* at the Goethe Institute, they kept whispering in German, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The only saving grace was that his hair colour precluded what for me would have been a quandary. I don’t know, thinking back, which would have upset me more: that he be blonde like her (which would have excluded me), or brown like me (which would have meant that I was being replaced.)

We all sat down in a cacophony of chairs scraping the floor, and Marco added a plate for Varan, who had just accepted his invitation. Then he began rolling a three-paper joint while I applied myself to my task with renewed enthusiasm.

It was a very simple recipe. You just had to crumble the ground meat in a big bowl, add chopped garlic, salt, and herbes de Provence, break in an egg yolk and mix it all together, preferably with your hands.

The only challenge was to gauge the size of the meatballs according to the volume of the mixture divided by the number of guests. The trick was to split up the whole into as many parts as there were people, then each portion into small pieces of more or less

equal size, which you then rolled in flour before browning them on all sides, in a well-oiled pan.

That made six little balls per person. With a mound of spaghetti and a big pot of sauce, that should do it.

“Is it good?”

“Not bad,” replied Mario, “except that... well, to tell you the truth, there’s a bit too much garlic for my tastes.”

I looked around the table. They all wore the same expression, even Steffi. It’s true that this wasn’t like German cooking, but still, I was a bit put out. After having saved my skin at the cost of a total break with my family, I found it painful to be shamed in the eyes of others by my traditional little recipe, especially since my voluntary banishment had made those others all the more important to me.

Too much garlic. The cliché of the Mediterranean with the pestilential breath, the olive complexion, the oily hair, was baring its aquiline nose. To hide my chagrin, I declared:

“If they’re too strong for you, give them to me, I haven’t had them for a long time!”

And I dug in with relish, the better to choke back the raspy little ball trembling in my throat.

The Lion's Tooth

Steffi had just left with her guy Julius, he preceding her down the stairs, she just behind, one hand resting on his shoulder as if she were blind or limp. We cleared off the dishes, and while Marco was dealing with them alongside Chantal in the kitchen, I found myself alone at the table with the famous Varan, who had not finished his glass of wine.

“So, you like acid?”

“Yes, not you?”

“I don't mind it. You want some tonight? I know a guy who's got good stuff.”

“Thing is, I don't really have any money...”

“Ah... listen, it's not a big deal, I'm in the mood, I'll buy two, and you'll owe me for next time.”

I thought fast. There wasn't much likelihood that we'd see each other again. All of a sudden I felt hemmed in by these four walls that were all I'd laid eyes on for days. And this business of the meatballs had left me with a sour aftertaste, never mind the spectacle of Steffi being charmed by that frivolous ninny. It seemed like a mild night outside. And clearly, Marco wouldn't mind finding himself alone with the tall brunette. So I sighed:

“What the heck, why not?”

“All right. You want to ride with me? I didn't bring my other helmet, but I know Marco has one, just a second.”

A few words in the kitchen, a cupboard opening and closing, some goodbyes and goodnights, and we're on the road... the helmet was tree green and glittery, a bit too large but if I tightened the buckle under my chin, it held pretty well.

“Anyway, you'll see, I'm very cautious, very careful.”

I'd never climbed onto a motorcycle in my life. I expected a thunderous noise, but no, the engine purred softly and we edged gently away from the sidewalk. First stop: an anonymous apartment block near the Laurier subway station, into which Varan vanished after entrusting me with his black helmet and the night it mirrored. Fascinating. My gaze got lost in it for what seemed an eternity. Four and a half minutes later, Varan came back with the tiny pills that we swallowed with matching gestures.

Then my baptism on two wheels continued.

The previous year, I'd been invited to spend a spring night with another friend, Marie-Laure. Her parents had gone off to open their cottage I don't know where. No doubt calculating that there was safety in numbers when it came to our doing something foolish, they had also authorized their older son to invite a friend. The brother and sister, normally at each other's throats, had called a truce in order to organize a basement party that would go down in history.

The next afternoon, once we'd cleaned things up, we were listening to Cat Stevens in Marie-Laure's bedroom while grooving on his curly hair, when the big brother, who had just got his driver's license, knocked on the door and invited us for a ride along with his guest. We innocently climbed into the rear seat of their mother's little Chrysler. The two boys got in the front, the doors slammed, and we hit the ground running. For what seemed to me to be endless hours, the car sailed through the small streets criss-crossing Mount Royal, the tires squealing. And they zigzagged to the max so we too would squeal, terrified, while the two sadists in front chortled away.

But nothing like that now. The acid had begun to rise up in us as we rose too, to the top of the mountain, where we stopped for a moment to contemplate the city stretched out before us in its suit of light. But I had got used to the sensation of rolling along in the open air, so we headed back into it, dancing in its arms for a while longer. I learned how to lean from one side to the other on the turns, and it was fun.

I remember that we stopped for gas. The engine went quiet, I set my feet down on the ground with a springy stride, and as I distanced myself a little from the machine, I clearly saw it smiling back at me with a friendly wink, a stout and friendly animal. Run through with iridescent reflections, it floated peacefully close to the ground, its kindly girth breathing in and out.

Then I see myself in the middle of a little park, facing a central structure ringed with stones, perhaps a column, perhaps a fountain. Something insistent was stirring inside me, I began to give it voice to disrupt the silence of the trees. Janis, Janis, Janis, poured forth from this body of mine, but there was always more streaming into the mild night. Varan was there on the periphery, monitoring with half an ear. I saw him as a discreet protector, we didn't really click, but it wasn't a problem. The magical sky was looking down on all and everyone.

At last, when I went silent, he paid me a small compliment along with some restrained, but sincere applause. Then I suggested that he bring me back to Marco's. The moment had come, I felt, for me to return to my den like the little animals that were surely curled up asleep all around us.

The apartment was slumbering peacefully, plunged into darkness. We sank down onto my couch. Varan went in search of an ashtray and two glasses of water. While I waited, the room came alive with bold respirations and a shifting grid of multicoloured stripes. The sepia photographs took on all kinds of delicate hues. When he returned, I exclaimed:

"It's crazy, you know, I see rainbows everywhere, but the purple looks more vivid than it really is, I don't know what that means. The greens are also stronger, deeper, as if everything was more alive, or intense, or..."

He cut me off:

“Yes, but talking about stronger, lower the volume a bit, don’t forget that you’re... when we’re stoned like that, we sometimes forget.”

“Oh, right.”

All at once I felt very awkward, guilty, suddenly aware that it was late, that Marco was doubtless asleep on the other side of the kitchen, itself a dark presence at the limit of my field of vision, which a minute earlier did not extend that far. And I was overwhelmed by fatigue. I felt the weight of all I’d lived through since the first of August. The dizzying transformation of my life since that day went to my head, and I took advantage of Varan’s going to the bathroom to stretch out, one arm over my eyes, shielding them from the harsh illumination of the ceiling light. How good that felt.

Ultimately, all I required was this couch, this room, this house.

My eyelids lowered, I let myself go, imagining what my life might be like if Marco allowed me to stay awhile. I could offer to contribute, strumming my guitar down in the street, or in the park...

When I opened them, Varan was seated beside me lifting up my blouse. I saw him as at the end of a long tunnel. He lifted my Indian skirt with one hand, while undoing his belt with the other. I don’t think he even took off his pants. He brought his fingers to his lips, moistened them with his tongue, and buried them between my legs. Removed them. And slid in to where they had been.

The ceiling light blinded me. My head was spinning. The hedgehog curled up in my throat kept me mute. I no longer knew how to move. My field of vision shifted in sync with his faster and faster pounding of the belly. It was so ridiculous, so stupefying, that it had nothing to do with me. As if to protect me, thousands of white sparks wrapped me round. If I aimed my eyes in one direction, there were so many of them that my sight was all befogged. On the wall, pictures were being splintered by the jolts.

All that remained of them were muddled jumbles that made no sense.

He pulled out just before coming, jism spurted everywhere over my stomach and between my breasts. It was viscous. It was gluey. It ran between my legs and stuck to me everywhere. My ears rang as if a bomb had gone off inside me. In the resulting crater, all that was left was profound silence.

“You see. I’m very cautious, very careful.”

Varan went back to the bathroom, then he picked up his helmet and his leather jacket.

“Well, I’ll be off.”

I focussed my eyes on him, dumbfounded. He gave me a little ersatz smile and peered at his watch... he was checking the time! That’s when I understood. I leapt to my feet.

“You...you’re not stoned!”

“Wow, right on. You’re pretty darn good. Yeah, you took it and I just... pretended.”

With that, he shot me a mischievous look, with a mocking little smile. He was proud of his feat, that was clear.

The sparks mushroomed before my eyes, silence engulfed everything else, and when it was over he was no longer there, nor, barely, was I. I was motionless for a long time. I think I was waiting for the David Hamilton photographs to pull themselves together. In any case, it’s when I made out the young girls with their bare legs that I came to myself. Their innocence betrayed, the perversity of the photographer’s adult gaze, I only understood them now. Shaken as I was, I began to feel again. To breathe through the bitter rent in my disconsolate lungs.

I managed to get myself up. My hand trembling, I turned off the ceiling light. Since that day I cannot bear them. The first thing I do when I move in somewhere new is to install a rheostat so they can never again blind me.

The bathroom was next to Marco’s bedroom. I didn’t want to make any noise, but I still had to negotiate the hallway to reach my clean clothes. How lucky. Then I rinsed myself

off as best I could in the basin of the bathroom leading off the dining room. I rolled up my soiled skirt and stuffed it into my bag with the rest of my belongings on top. I pulled on my jeans, fished my second sandal out from under the couch and for a moment, under the ceiling light, contemplated that space I was preparing to leave forever. Marco was going to wonder what had got into me.

I knew that it was a venomous lizard.

I set my foot down on the solid ground of rue Prince-Arthur. Not a soul in sight. Only greasy papers, beer cans, empty cigarette packages. I got my bearings, just enough to distinguish north from south, then headed down rue de Bullion toward my only refuge in this world: Place Jacques Cartier.

I'd only gone a few blocks when the birds began to chirp. The sky was coming on blue. My knees were shaking. At the corner of Sherbrooke Street I let myself slump onto a stone wall. I felt nothing. I barely breathed. I was still stunned. And it lurked still inside me, that curious silence with its high-pitched, unreal stridulation.

But the blue was paling; on my left, I saw a few toothed leaves coming out of the darkness, a frail stem surmounted by a bristling head of stars. A dandelion.

A dandelion from out of nowhere, a small living thing, amazingly growing between the sidewalk's asphalt and the stone wall. It was plotting a path toward the sun, it had flowered and formed seeds primed to fly off to the four corners of the world. A golden mane that was shaking itself off in the light.

Something welled up in me. I who have a crooked incisor, who was born under the sign of the lion. *Dent de lion*, dandelion, tooth of the lion. It would be my nom de guerre, my secret totem. A prolonged tremor took hold of me and I decided... no. I knew. That I would live on. Flourish. Perhaps even cast my seeds to the wind.

I stood up. I strapped my backpack to my shoulders. And roaring, I leapt toward the south.

Requiem for the Messiah

The first time I saw you, you were sleeping. In fact, I heard you before seeing you because you were snoring on the old living room couch. I'd walked for a good part of the night before coming back to my new friend Sylvio's, and I remember saying to myself: "Here is someone who is sleeping the sleep of the just." What I felt was that you could not slumber with such abandon on a caved in sofa, with the rising sun striking you full in the face, if you were not at peace with yourself. Of course I had a tab of acid in my body and even if the trip was winding down I was still seeing rainbows on the hallway's walls and life was asserting itself, you know, with a quiet force, where all blends together, endowing everything you see with deep meaning.

Thin, edgy, with fiery eyes and crow-black hair, Sylvio was having breakfast in the kitchen with Michel, younger and paler, who I called his blondfriend, just as a joke. I'd met them together in Old Montreal, but Sylvio said that between them nothing had been carved in stone, you couldn't lose sight of the Revolution, and conjugal ties only entrapped us in an outmoded style of life, he did have a way with words. He'd painted black slogans onto his old yellow Corvette: Property is theft, Religion is the opiate of the people, and also, on two lines, Vengeance is sweet / to the Indian heart, because he had Mohawk blood, and if we stop remembering, we forget.

Sylvio was generosity incarnate. He welcomed into his Saint-Léonard three and a half young people who needed a place to spend the night, and he'd been bailing me out for two or three days.

I'd had no trouble picking up my old habits and reuniting with the gang of fallen angels, who'd hardly been aware of my three-day absence. But the carefree nonchalance of those first moments had been obliterated by a ravenous crocodile gnawing an ever-deepening hole in my insides. There was no question of my going back to the affluent home where I'd been beaten. And as I was not yet eighteen, I hid myself with growing

unease every time I spotted a police car. I spent my time cowering in the lobby of the Hotel Iroquois. That's how I saw Woodstock 27 times. It was running non-stop on a screen overlooking the terrace, and it was my new religion. I always knew that one day I would go to live in a hippie commune and find true happiness.

Meanwhile, I found that the cobblestones of Place Jacques-Cartier did not make for an especially comfortable bed, and the wolves were still roaming by night. I could spot them now by the icy vigilance they awakened in me. And it was no longer good enough to take naps on a bench in the sun, twenty minutes here, a half hour there. Time passed, and I was not getting enough sleep.

That night, I'd reeled off one Janis after another: *it's all the same fucking day, man*. While I was trying to put my guitar back in its case, an obnoxious drunk refused to leave me alone until Sylvio intervened and brought me back to his place. With the corner of a shag carpet where I could set down my backpack, a large three-cushion sofa and a threadbare catalogue, it felt like I was at the Ritz.

"Who's he?" I asked, as I served myself a cup of coffee with one teaspoon of sugar (there was no more milk).

"Oh, he's an old friend who's just got here from the West Coast. His name is Denis, I know him from tree planting."

Michel and Sylvio had pulled up their chairs and it was starting to get hot in the kitchen, so I went into the living room, cup in hand. Just then you opened your eyes, and I saw a gleam of light. A green ray, as in Jules Verne's novel. I'd had a whole collection of his books in my former life, the one I'd abandoned three and a half weeks earlier and that now struck me as an island drifting afar off, receding with ever increasing speed.

I'd never seen eyes like yours, and I've never encountered them since. Green, yes, but jade veering to turquoise, shot through with rays of gold streaming outwards from the pupil. Two suns staring back at me.

Impulsively, I held out my cup of coffee. You said, “Wow, just the way I like it.”

We went out into the little yard, the sun was beating down already, and what moved me most was a butterfly larking about from one side to the other of the metal fence. It passed through the mesh as if there were nothing there. I was both saddened that the chain link was profaning the morning’s gentle mood, and happy that it wasn’t inhibiting the insect’s flight.

You said that I was pretty intense, I said yes, and we kissed.

Our first night was one of delirious passion. I could hardly believe my abrupt transition from hell to paradise. You smelled so good, your scent was intoxicating, I could have lost myself in it, my eyes shut, or in your gaze, eyes wide open.

The month of August seemed endless, we had never known such heat in Montreal in human memory, and Sylvio was starting to feel claustrophobic, so we dipped into the *Journal de Montréal* and you read: “Second floor partly furnished with mezzanine corner of Wolfe and La Gauchetière, seventy dollars a month, that’s not much, I bet there’s no hot water.”

You were absolutely right, the floor was buckled and the tap ran cold only, but we were the first to visit and you signed the lease on the spot, I was very impressed.

We moved in two days later. Michel had a buddy who worked on disaster relief for an NPO in Verdun, meaning a “non-profit organization,” I was learning all sorts of new things. One or two trips in a Corvette and for nothing at all we found a mattress, bed linen, a few pots, pale green melamine cafeteria dishes, a fistful of utensils, a table and two chairs. Along with the shabby old couch left behind beneath the window, that was all we needed.

You would pay the rent with your unemployment insurance topped up with some little under the table jobs, and I would buy food, earning small change with my guitar. I was making progress, I didn’t always have to watch where I was placing my fingers. And

since you'd explained to me that the police had better things to do than to chase after runaways like me, I was less nervous. And people liked what I was doing.

The rest of the time we spent in bed. I could have let endless days go by stretched out beside you, inhaling the hollow of your neck, the roots of your burgeoning hair, so thick, your curiously golden skin beneath your freckles. Your tree bark. You were the trunk planted in the middle of the forest, I bestrode you like a bounding doe. You came into my eyes. And in resplendent detonations, I burst into bloom.

When we were not afloat up in the mezzanine, you taught me to live: how to cook porridge like your mother, mixing powdered milk with water so it would be creamier. How to sprinkle cinnamon onto a slice of toasted white bread after having smeared it with margarine. How to wash two plates at once, sliding them one over the other as you went. But I was the one who found a way to make perfect grilled cheese sandwiches in a little dented frying pan with a lid that didn't fit: you had to lower the heat so the cheese had time to melt before the bread went black.

Sylvio and Michel came by one afternoon with a gift: a radio cassette player they'd found I don't know where. Sylvio said it had fallen off a truck. He'd picked up two, one for them, one for us, I never stopped learning. Michel found CHOM on the radio, he put a big bag of pot on the table, brought out a bright yellow pack of Vogue papers from the back pocket of his jeans, and got busy rolling a three-papered joint that he started to pass around while Jimi Page roared out *Our shadows taller than our soul...*

Smoking always had the same effect on me: after two or three puffs I started to jump up and down on the kitchen floor. *Oye como va mi ritmo, bueno pa'gozar...* I didn't understand much after *ritmo*, but that bit I knew by heart. Without being quite aware of it, I moved into you, swaying my hips. I made eyes at you while thinking of our awakening that morning, stretched out side by side like languid beasts.

Sylvio didn't need a diagram. As soon as he'd finished his joint, he rose to his feet in the smoke-filled room:

“Come on, darling, I’ll buy you a beer at the tavern!”

“Okay my sweet, I’m coming, bye-bye lovebirds,” Michel responded, before following his lover out, forgetting the plastic bag on the table.

Now it was just the two of us on the threadbare couch, stoned together for the first time. The sun had just set, but I had the feeling that your enormous eyes were lighting up the entire room. Then, slowly, you focussed them on me:

“Can you hear it?”

I turned off the radio and pricked up my ears, I thought you were talking about the wind. But all was calm.

“Uh... no.”

“He’s on the prowl, he’s just waiting to catch up to us, then... he never lets us go.”

“Will you tell me what you’re talking about?”

“Not what, who.”

You lowered your voice.

“The Devil!”

It was my turn to open my eyes wide. My mouth, too. I didn’t know what to say. The only believer I knew was my grandmother, so thin, so rigid, and so Catholic, always so proper and aloof, never one word louder than the other. She was constantly going into churches and lighting candles for the Holy Virgin.

I would have dearly loved to have one on hand to drive away the darkness and your fear.

“He wants our souls, you understand... what he wants is to win. To triumph. You have to be very, very careful. He’s the most cunning of all. Much more cunning than any of us.”

The night was bearing down on the window pane. I could almost hear the menacing maelstrom in your ears. I began to see white sparks everywhere, ever since a certain night that was happening to me whenever things got tense.

Mustering all my courage, I tried summoning the light on the ceiling, but its brutal illumination was of no help. You just stayed there, frozen like a deer blinded by implacable headlights. I shut it off, and seeking a distraction, I turned on the radio.

An electric guitar began to play, backed by an unbelievably gentle organ. A man's voice started to talk about a small isolated town where there appeared a stranger bringing joy, after the passage of the prince of darkness... and the return of the Messiah, who was sure to arrive. I came to myself with a jolt.

"Listen to this!, Just listen, instead of shaking like a leaf! Your Messiah, he's going to return, you'll see, everything will be all right..."

The guitar wailed with sorrow and with hope. I tried to hug you, but you drove me off with your terrible stare.

"Leave me alone, dammit. I didn't grow up in a chic neighbourhood, I don't know English."

Throwing up my hands in despair, I climbed to the mezzanine to seek refuge, to calm myself, to try to restore what was left of my buzz. I longed to recapture some of the euphoria from earlier on, but I had a knot in my throat.

And the guitar wept still.

I must have fallen sleep. At night's end, I felt you stretching yourself out beside me. I heard you sighing, but I didn't dare move into you.

You were still sleeping when I went out the next day, tired of turning in circles without making any noise that might wake you. When I returned you were pacing up and down,

lighting one cigarette after another. The metal lid that served as an ashtray was full. I had barely set down my guitar case weighed down with coins, when you attacked:

“Okay, Josée, things are going to change.”

“...”

“Planting trees is hard, but picking fruit, that I like. It’s pear season in the Okanagan Valley. I think I’m going to go there.”

I had a bad feeling, but I forced myself to speak.

“Okay, I’ll go with you.”

“No, I’m going alone.”

And it’s then that you spoke those unbelievable words.

“Anyway, every time I said ‘I love you,’ it was always in quotation marks.”

“What?”

“In quotation marks! If you’d really listened, you would have heard them.”

Either I was going mad, or you were. I didn’t hesitate for long. I took a deep breath.

“Fine.”

I climbed the ladder one last time. My poor backpack was moping all alone in a corner, along with the hedgehog. The one swallowed up my belongings, while the other returned to curl itself up in my throat. I came back down with a pillow under my arm and I grabbed my guitar after picking up the ounce of pot along the way and stuffing into the flowered pillow case.

At the top of the stairs, I turned around. Now it was you with the open mouth and the bulging eyes, your eyes that I would never see again. A few years later, I would

doubtless have told you to go fuck yourself, but as I was still soft-hearted, I said Farewell.

If memory serves, I did, all the same, slam the door.

Sylvio's was a long way off, but my feet knew the way. When he opened the door, I saw on his face that he understood everything. While he cracked open a bottle, Michel offered me a meagre little joint. So I pulled the baggie from the pillowcase, and they let out cries of joy. That cheered me a bit, but I didn't linger. I took my beer and went to throw my broken heart down onto the sofa. Even though I dug myself in with all my strength, I couldn't find your smell among the cushions.

A few days later, arriving at Place Jacques-Cartier as usual, I found it empty, even for a Tuesday. After having ordered my hot-dog at the deserted counter, I asked the guy what was going on, and he stared down on me:

"Yesterday was Labour Day. Where do you live?"

I was starting to ask myself the same question. Sylvio was not hiding his eagerness to see me spread my wings, or in other words to fly the coop. Every time I went out, I took my bag with me so as to disturb him as little as possible. Now I set it down on my favourite bench, where I had taken so many naps. Lying there was a torn copy of *Mainmise* for the month of August, meaning a century earlier. Its blue cover proclaimed COMIX! As I had nothing better to do, I sat down and opened it.

On page 9, there was a comic called *The Return of the Messiah*. My heart started to pound in my chest as I began to read it, turning the pages with a trembling hand. Then I came on the classified ads and read:

My blue house is open. Those who would like to leave will leave, those who want to stay will stay. Merlin, 9th Avenue, Ferme-Neuve.

Blue cover, blue house... Avenue 9, page 9. Fine. Message received. I shut the magazine, and I walked to the Voyageur bus station, where I made inquiries: the bus for the Laurentians went as far as Ferme-Neuve and no farther, I had the feeling that it was made just for me. It would leave in three hours.

I counted the little change I had left. I was quite a bit short. So I went back out, stationed myself at the corner of the street, and I reeled off all the songs I knew until I had enough money to get on board. I also called Sylvio. To thank him.

I found the blue house. The door was ajar. Merlin was an old bearded hippie who had lived for a long time in San Francisco. He was full of stories. I moved in. I wept for three days, sitting at the window playing Joan Baez's *Diamonds and Rust* over and over, with her unwashed phenomenon, the original vagabond, who strayed into her arms, temporarily lost at sea...

That autumn, Merlin taught me to meditate, to make a fire in the wood stove, to cook whole rice. At night I slept on the sofa, nothing new under the moon. He opened his bedroom to all the pretty boys in Mont-Laurier. I knew that song.

It's also there that I discovered the *I Ching*, that ancient Chinese text, both an oracle and a source of wisdom. Reading the preface written by Carl Jung (another discovery), I was able to give a name to what had happened with the number nine in *Mainmise*: a synchronicity. A coincidence whose only meaning was subjective, for my eyes alone. In that moment full of import, time and space began to pulse together around my new couch, a vibration echoed outside by the trees' red leaves in the wind. I, who so dearly needed to orient myself in this world where I felt myself plummeting down in free fall, I had found my Ariadne's thread.

In the middle of October, Merlin suggested hitchhiking to Montreal, just for fun. We prepared our knapsacks. Into his, he slipped a bottle of Caribou that kept us warm along the icy road swept by autumn winds. But the sky stayed blue all day long, and come the

night, we arrived in Old Montreal. Place Jacques-Cartier recognized me immediately. It was as if I'd never left.

"Josée, Josée!"

I turned around. Michel and Sylvio were waving their arms in my direction. I flew into their arms. I was happy to see them, but they seemed strange.

"Everything okay?"

They looked at each other without saying anything. Then they drew me aside as Merlin kept the Caribou company.

"It's Denis... something's happened to him."

They poured it all out pell-mell. That the previous summer, it was not from the West Coast that you were returning, but from prison. For armed robbery. Because you were hooked on heroine. That you had to undergo treatment for your addiction. That it wasn't unemployment insurance you were receiving, but welfare. That you were too proud to admit it. That harvesting pears was just a pretext to flee your demons. That once you arrived in Vancouver, you stole a car to continue on to California. That you were caught. That you were locked up.

And that ten days ago you were found hanged in your cell.

After that, they studiously got me drunk.

I'm missing large swaths of the days that followed. I know I stayed in the city while Merlin returned up north. That I was still welcome. But, as if lifted up by a wave and set down elsewhere, I never went back.

I still ache for you when I hear Roy Buchanan's song. You must know that he hanged himself in prison too, twelve years after you. I hope he found him. His Messiah. When I found out, I came close to losing my way once again. Who can say what terrible premonition loomed up before you that night? What black hole yawned beneath your

beautiful feet? Into what mad dash you threw yourself so as not to fall into it? Without success...

In my most mawkish moments, I go so far as to imagine that if you fled, it was so as not to drag me with you into the void. And the strangest thing is that this song is still a comfort. Unlike some voices whose poignancy no longer speaks to me, yours is still part of my life. And that weeping guitar is filled with so much compassion that to lament along with it does me good.

It heals.

II

Portage

It was a foul wind that had set me down at Philips Square across from The Bay, with the junkies shivering two or three to a bench, the alkie hiding bottles in their perennial paper bags, and the hawkers peddling trinkets along Sainte Catherine Street.

October was drawing to an end, we'd soon be in the glum no man's land between Halloween and Christmas, plus it was getting colder and colder, this was no joke. The problem was that I played the guitar very badly while wearing gloves. Tapping your foot to warm you up, that was okay: you had to keep the beat. But singing through chattering teeth, nothing was worse than that. Nightingales do not quaver.

What a jolt to hear a voice behind me exclaim, with a slight North African accent:

"Not bad, not bad at all!"

I spun around, frowning. He was tall and dark with short hair, elegant despite his bowed shoulders, in his dark blue woolen pea jacket. He too was holding a guitar case. He sat down on the little wall dividing the square from the road, and he patted the space beside him, inviting me to follow suit. I packed up my own instrument and went to join him. But as my jeans jacket didn't reach lower than my waist, I chose to stay upright in front of him, hopping in place.

He handed me a cigarette, we smoked, staring at each other, and finally he asked me if I was hungry. What a joke.

"Is it so obvious?"

"Just took a chance. I'm Gaby."

"I'm Janis."

“Well Janis, I’m going for a smoked meat, you can join me if you want.”

He seemed harmless. His eyes even had a certain softness.

I followed him west for several blocks, the wind in my face, until we reached a yellow sign, Sam’s Delicatessen.

Gaby opened the door for me and we went down to sit on wide benches in an orange and brown half-basement that was warm and cozy. The menu was as tall as I was. With the two guitars and my backpack, we didn’t have much space. Every page was swathed in plastic, this was fancy. Except I had a horror of smoked meat, so I ordered a cheeseburger with fries, I was salivating already.

The servings were even larger than the menu. I widened my eyes and dug into my burger while Gaby stretched open his jaws and pushed in his sandwich, dripping with mustard. After a few mouthfuls I took a big swig of water, caught my breath, and remembered my manners.

“You want a taste?”

He shook his head.

“No thanks. I don’t mix meat and dairy.”

“No? Why not?”

“I’m Jewish. The Torah won’t allow it.”

“That’s funny, my grandfather is Jewish too, but I never heard him mention that.”

“He must not be very religious, your grandfather.”

“No, he even married a Catholic, that’s proof.”

“Wow. What kind of Jew is he?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, does he come from Eastern Europe, for example?”

“Ah. No... from Egypt.”

“I see. So you’re one quarter Jewish, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s better than nothing.”

“Hah. It would have been plenty enough to have problems during the war.”

“I know.”

After that, we finished our food in silence.

Later, as we sugared our coffee, he asked me, à propos of nothing:

“Whereabouts do you live, exactly?”

“Exactly? Nowhere.”

“Are you living on the street?”

“You’ve got it.”

“What do you do for sleeping?”

“That depends.”

“And tonight?”

“Haven’t yet figured it out.”

“You want to come to my place? It’s not far.”

I sighed. It always ended like that. No one pays a meal for a lost soul just to groove on her bright eyes. As for me, to be truthful, I'd rather spend the night in a man's bed than in the doorway of a sordid building with busted neon lights.

We went out into the darkness, climbed Drummond Street, crossed Sherbrooke, leaving behind us the floodlit entryway of the Ritz Carlton, and stopped in front of a Victorian manor house in red sandstone with a tower, chimneys, a pointed roof, the whole kit. Just as I was starting to believe that I'd perhaps stumbled on a rich heir, my heart began pounding in my chest.

A metal plaque was gleaming on the wall: Portage Program for Drug Dependencies. It was like a switch had just been thrown. As if, invisibly, my life's tectonic plates had realigned themselves just a little. And as if, deep in the water, my feet were touching the sand. Ariadne's thread, a coincidence that only had meaning for me... according to Michel and Sylvio, Denis had done all in his power to register for this gruelling treatment, but he was thrown out because he'd punched out a care worker. I was furious: "You're telling me this now?"

An alleyway ran along the left side of the building. We followed it and emerged into a little courtyard tucked in the back. Two or three parking spaces and then, farther on, I made out a curious two-story structure with a French style roof and dormer windows. Gaby climbed the two stairs leading up to it and wrestled with the lock for a moment before opening the door:

"Welcome chez moi."

I followed him up the narrow stairway, several of whose steps creaked under the worn linoleum. Three doors opened onto a hallway lit by a naked bulb at the other end, screwed into the ceiling of a kitchen where an ancient fridge was rumbling away. His door was the last. He invited me into a rather large room furnished with a three-quarters bed, a little table, two chairs, and a chest of drawers on which were piled a

number of fat books with titles in Hebrew. Most important, it was well heated. I dropped my things into a corner and sat down on one of the chairs while he settled in the most naturally in the world, to roll a joint of hash.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I have to admit that that this is not what I expected... I thought you were straight.”

“Especially with the addicts’ program just beside us, eh?”

“...”

“Actually, there’s no connection. This house was there long before the big one was built.”

He lit the joint and held it out to me. Colour, fragrance, sweetness... no question, this was a high grade rendezvous. Then, between two tokes, he continued:

“There are five rooms, all told. Three upstairs and only two on the ground floor, because of the laundry room. We all know each other. We’re almost all Moroccan Jews. By paying a low rent, I can work part time and pursue my religious studies. That’s good. Besides, I’m responsible for collecting rent for the owner, and he gives me a reduction. That’s even better. And then there’s music...”

As I was relaxing bit by bit, he brought out his guitar, took the time to tune it well, and began to sing, in a low voice, songs by Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. His fingers moved up and down the neck like hammers on a piano. You would have thought they were sculpted just for the purpose of sounding chords. With his other hand he plucked the strings with an intelligence I’d long ago witnessed in my tender years, watching my great grandmother at her embroidery.

I began to doze off in my chair. With the flat of his hand, he stilled the strings' vibration. He carefully propped the guitar against the wall. He went to open the side of the bed nearest the wall and came back to me with a little smile:

"Hey, lie down there. I'm going to read for a while."

Too astonished to react, I stretched myself out, sighing with pleasure. Gaby covered me with the dark blue quilt. He placed on the table a large volume, a notebook, a candlestick, and something to write with. He turned off the lamp on the chest of drawers. He opened his book, which was next to the candle, he installed himself, positioning his chair so as to block the flame, and I fell asleep to the rustling of pages being turned one by one.

Aboard the Sailboat

I was awakened by someone whistling. And I smelled coffee. I risked opening an eye. A veil of rain was fogging a small window I hadn't noticed the night before, hidden as it was by a curtain that was now pulled aside.

"You sleep soundly, don't you?" smiled Gaby, while stirring his coffee at the little table, all bright and perky.

He was already dressed, and newly shaved.

"What time is it?"

"Ten at least."

"That's not late."

"The sun's been up for a good three hours."

I sat up in bed, groaning, so he'd know exactly how I thought about the day. Then I drew my fingers through my hair and saw that my braids were all tangled. I quickly removed my hand, a bit embarrassed.

"Come on, drink your coffee and after, if you want, there's a shower in the hallway, I can lend you a towel."

Was he reading my thoughts, or what?

"That's okay, I know where mine is."

I found shampoo and conditioner in the shower. Even without a comb, I managed to loosen most of the knots with my fingers, that was progress already.

Two or three days earlier I'd collected enough money to wash a load in the laundromat. A good move: I felt almost beautiful going back into the room in clean clothes. But I didn't know how to deal with this strange bird who hadn't even tried to touch me during the night.

"Come and eat," he ordered me, waving his hand over the bread, butter, and jam that had appeared on the table while I was getting washed.

He didn't have to say it twice.

"The Bonne Maman, they're kind of expensive, he declared, downing his last mouthful. But they're the best."

"Ah, yes, I hadn't noticed the name. It's not everyone who has a good mother, you know."

"You may be right. Tell me, what do you do for money?"

"You've seen me, I sing in the street with my guitar."

"And that works?"

“Does it ever! Yesterday I picked up at least three dollars.”

“Okay. The rent for a room like this is 17 a week. Do you think you’d be able to make it?”

“I don’t know. I could always try.”

“Good, I like your attitude. Here’s what we’ll do. Today we’re the 27th. In a few days there’ll be a room freed up at the end of the hall. You’ll take it, and in the meantime you’ll stay here. If that’s what you want, obviously.”

My mouth full of food, I didn’t have to reply. In fact, I didn’t know what to say. Me, take a room? I confess that up to then the idea had never crossed my mind.

I was living day to day, and not even that. Hour to hour.

“So? Cat got your tongue? Do you want the room or not?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t even seen it.”

Gaby rolled his eyes.

“She’s playing hard to get, besides! Okay, come with me.”

We went to knock at number 3. We heard music inside. Joe Dassin’s Indian Summer was on all the radios. A girl in a miniskirt came to open the door. Gaby introduced us, then Myra invited us in. Right away, I saw the brightness filling the room despite the fat grey clouds looming over the day. On Gaby’s side you mainly saw the facing wall, while this room looked out on the open side of the building. I’ve always loved to watch the sky go by.

“Okay,” I said.

“There you are. Janis is going to take your room, Myra.”

“Great. That way, Esther won’t be the only girl. You’ll be neighbours: they’re just between Gaby and me, she and her boyfriend.”

“They’re still sleeping at this hour, they go to bed late,” observed Gaby.

Myra shook both our hands, then we found ourselves side by side in the hallway, a bit ill at ease.

“So what are you doing today,” he asked me.

“Hmph,” I grumbled. “When it’s raining like this, it’s not much fun playing outside.”

Playing outside. That didn’t mean what it once did, when I was a child.

“Listen, today is a study day for me. Do you think you could keep quiet and not disturb me?”

“I don’t know, do you have something to read?”

“Yes, I have two or three books that might interest you.”

Among the volumes of Talmud and Torah, I did find a few pocket books I could possibly curl up with. I began by opening up *The Life Before Us* by a certain Émile Ajar. Alone on Doctor Katz’s sailboat, I made a long voyage, and when I raised my head, the light was fading already.

“It’s really true that the best companion for passing the time is a book,” Gaby smiled, while clearing off the table. “Do you like potatoes?”

“Do you know anyone who doesn’t like potatoes?”

“I’m not sure, maybe you’re a fussy eater, too. It’s all right, I’m just teasing you. Come on, we’ll make something to eat.”

He led me into the kitchen, where the fridge was still grumbling away. Fortunately, it was plugged into the wall away from the room. Otherwise it would have been unbearable. He pulled open the door and said:

“Listen, I’m going to show you how things work here. There are three shelves, which is convenient: one for each room. I’m on the bottom. The middle one is for you, and the one on top is for Esther and Benjamin. There’s more room there for two people, you can pile things up. It’s the same in the door, each one has a shelf to store juice, milk, and so on. We share the dishes, and we wash everything in the sink over there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

The sink was on the wall next to the hallway, abutting the bathroom. On the left there was just enough room for the enormous water heater in one corner, then the vibrating refrigerator in the other. Along the remaining two walls there ran a long counter where were installed a toaster, a dusty coffee machine, various cutting boards, as well as a big tin can where the cooking utensils were propped, forming a stoic bouquet.

Below, several milk cartons were lined up. Gaby bent down and pulled out what was left of a bag of potatoes, which he emptied onto the counter. There must have been five or six. He thrust a peeler into my hand.

“Now you peel and then I’ll grate.”

“You grate your potatoes?”

“Yes, to make pancakes.”

“Oh.”

“Stop being suspicious and peel.”

Waiting for me to supply him with his raw material, he began by mincing onion and rapidly blinking his eyes.

“You know how clever an onion is? It can make you cry while you’re putting it to death.”

He dumped it all into a salad bowl and added the grated potatoes, a beaten egg, flour, and spices. Then he lit the gas under a large pan he’d anointed with a healthy spurt of olive oil. When the first sacrificial sample began to sizzle just the way he wanted, he started dropping in heaping spoonfuls of the mixture, which he flattened out before carefully turning them over at just the right moment.

Meanwhile, he’d put me in charge of cooking fried eggs. But as I didn’t yet know how to crack them open without breaking the yolk, they came out scrambled. I managed that pretty well. We flopped the result onto two plates, and went back to eat in his room. His pancakes were wonderfully crisp.

Then we did the dishes. It troubled me to rediscover, on this new planet, the same fleeting gestures of day-to-day life I’d shared with Denis. I wash, you dry. You pass your hand over mine to reach the plates in the drainer, in the process I leave a trace of foam on the end of your nose. We laugh. We make sure the gas is off, the hot water tap tightly shut.

This time, I stretched out on the bed immediately. He came to sit near me, tilting his head to the side with a puzzled air, but I didn’t give him a chance to speak, I approached my lips to his until they touched. We nuzzled gently for a few minutes. We pulled back a little. We stared at each other for a moment.

Then he sighed:

“Okay, fine, but this mustn’t become a habit, all right?”

Hippos and Gazelle Ankles

“Woman! Don’t tell me that you used the same knife for butter and pâté again? Without even getting rid of the evidence? Mind you, I’d rather have it that way...”

I was starting to regret having slept with Gaby. First of all, I have to tell it like it was, it wasn’t memorable, and since then he’d been calling me Woman. Every time, I sighed and rolled my eyes.

For the four or five days since I’d moved into my new lodging, I was finding it hard to leave it. Without admitting it to myself, I’d so much missed a soft bed, a pile of books, endless daydreams while watching the clouds come together and drift apart...

Except that I still had to go out, not only to earn my rent, for which Gaby had got me, as he proclaimed in a triumphal declaration, a discount of two dollars a week: “I told them that you were helping me with the accounts.” The most laughable of pretexts. I hated figures. But I also had to buy some food, however simple and light, even if he allowed me a generous share of his own provisions. As long as I kept kosher, whose restrictions I could never get straight.

“Oh yes, sorry!”

“Never mind, keep the rest of the butter, I’ll buy some more. But be more careful, okay?”

I tossed off an “okay” while tearing down the stairs so fast that I almost ran into the pay phone posted near the door. Sure, it was convenient to be able to make calls without installing a line in your room, but it could have been put somewhere else, I told myself for the umpteenth time already. Every time I went down the stairs, in fact. I’d made a big decision, and I didn’t want Gaby to see me exiting the house in sandals. Even if, as the sun dipped down this late afternoon, it was still acceptable to be seen wearing them over to The Chateau, at the corner of Sainte Catherine and Mountain Street.

I'd spotted some Aldo boots, fawn leather, high, with laces, a dream. I was banking on the Friday crush, as the offices let out, to pass unnoticed. My heart was pounding as hard as the time I went after the Janis song book. But I was determined to be done with frozen feet. Even if I had to sacrifice my adored Indian sandals, which I'd been wearing ever since I ran away from home.

No dallying, I had to be as quick as possible. I took out two boxes from the shelf, one size 8 and one size 9, blessing whoever invented self-service. I began by trying on the 9: not only did I have enough space to wiggle my toes inside, but the back didn't slide along the heel when I stood up. Bingo.

With the balls of my feet, while ostensibly placing the size 8 box on the adjoining chair to divert attention, I dragged my sacrificial lambs as far as I could under my seat. Then I got up, put the empty size 9 box on top, brought them both to where I'd found them, and left the store, hastening slowly, focussing my thoughts on the hare, the tortoise, the ant, the grasshopper so bereft when the north wind blew, and I found myself outside with new boots, half laced, under my bell-bottoms.

Breathe. Don't run. It was as if I'd been doing this all my life.

I climbed the stairs on the tips of my toes and slipped quietly into my room like... well, like a thief. I stashed the new boots into the little closet that my meagre possessions barely filled, and I stretched out, opening the first book that came to hand: one of the San Antonio novels I'd picked up in a church basement bazaar and that drew from me peals of laughter, sometimes in the middle of the night, making me chortle even more, but under my breath. It was excellent cut-rate therapy. My heart began to calm itself, and my breathing too.

A little later I pulled on my only other pair of shoes, running shoes I'd been carrying around with me ever since I'd resorted to Disaster Assistance, in order to go to the bathroom. Predictably, I ran into Gaby, who was making coffee with the espresso maker everyone shared, snubbing the electric one gathering dust in the corner.

“Ah, you’re there?”

“Uh, yes, I was out of cigarettes.”

“Good, I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

“If it’s for the rest of the rent, I should be able to give it to you tomorrow.”

“No, that’s not it. Tonight is Benjamin’s birthday. Esther wanted to invite you (I had my doubts about that), except you’ll have to wash the dishes, you know, so she’ll find the kitchen clean.”

“Oh la la, I’m sorry, excuse me.”

I’d become an expert at repentance thanks my early training in dealing with screams, blows, and punishments.

Guilty you are, and guilty you will remain.

“You don’t have to apologize, just pay attention, it’s not complicated.”

That’s not the way I wanted things, but somehow my pledges of dependability always led to dereliction of duty, and I found it hard to fulfil my household tasks voluntarily. I did my duty at last, however, and then Esther took over to prepare a fragrant feast.

All four of us gathered in the middle room, which I was visiting for the first time. It was bigger than the two others on the floor, with two windows, a double bed, not a three-quarter, a larger table, and three chairs instead of two.

I took the third, Gaby sat on the bed, and the lovers treated us to chicken with cumin along with saffron potatoes. For dessert, Esther opened a ribboned box, but instead of a cake, it contained a dozen gazelle ankles.

The almond pastries were both powdery and unctuous, with a flowery taste that complemented the delicate flavour of the mint tea. Doubtless inspired by those

familiar delicacies, Gaby and Benjamin began to reminisce about their youth in Casablanca.

“Do you remember the time we took our motor scooters along the Corniche...”

“Ha ha, yes! We went like the wind...”

“We turned onto the beach...”

“And we sank down like hippos at low tide!”

In the midst of the general laughter, Esther got up, Gaby gave me a sign with his head, raising his eyebrows, and I pushed my chair back to help clear up. To my great surprise, instead of going right back into the room, Esther opened the tap and began washing the dishes, so I gave her a hand. It was not my style to do this twice on the same day, but I wanted to take the opportunity to get to know her.

Despite my good will, I think she found me a bit doubtful. She answered my questions tersely, but I learned that she was engaged to Benjamin. That they’d met at the synagogue. That she’d come to study business in Montreal. That she very much missed her family in Morocco. And that if they got up late on weekday mornings, it was because Benjamin worked nights and she used that time to study because it was important for a couple to keep to the same schedule. All this with haughty condescension, as though the air she breathed was purer than mine.

When we went back to the room, the boys had brought out their guitars and begun to play, Benjamin doing rhythm and Gaby melody. I didn’t know the piece, but it was really pretty. Then they shifted to *Blowin’ in the Wind*, and without thinking, I joined my voice to that of Gaby, harmonizing spontaneously.

Like Monsieur Jourdain, I was composing counterpoint without knowing it.

They looked at each other, nodding their heads, and Benjamin asked if I had a special request. I suggested Me and Bobby McGee, he knew it, and as my voice was already warmed up, I did something not too bad, in my opinion. Gaby seemed to agree:

“Benjamin and me, we play together with two friends, one on keyboards, the other on drums. But we need a singer. How would you like to rehearse with us tomorrow night?”

“In a real band with mikes, amps, and everything?”

“That’s right,” smiled Gaby.

To celebrate that, he rolled a “digespliff” that we smoked as a trio because Esther didn’t want any. I almost felt like blowing the smoke in her face to punish her for her superior attitude earlier on in the kitchen, but I let it go. I was too happy.

Mikes, amps, and everything!

Have you ever seen the rain?

The rehearsal was to take place in the basement of a Notre-Dame-de-Grace synagogue. Gaby, his guitar and I took a ten-minute walk along Sherbrooke to grab the 166 that went up Guy Street. I’d never noticed that this bus turned on Queen Mary to continue toward the west. No need to transfer. It was like the mirror image of the two routes I took to go to school in my former life, the 165 south down Côte-des-Neiges, then the 51 west on Queen Mary. That was only a few stops, but it was just enough not to be practical on foot. Especially since the famous hill could be challenging, especially in winter. On the way down the descent was too fast, particularly if the sidewalk was icy; on the way back you could easily find yourself on your hands and knees in the slush if you didn’t watch where you put your feet. But we weren’t there yet: it was only the beginning of November.

Our route passed very close to Steffi's. I craned my neck to get a view of the street in case I might glimpse her blonde mane on the arm of an orange mop. But no. For the first time in my life I was getting a sense of those temporal strata, each with a distinct reality, superimposed on the same urban space.

I suppose that's to be expected if you live long enough in one city.

We went down a few more streets, in that blue twilight that bestows on all things a dreamlike softness before night falls. As soon as we crossed Décarie with its constant stream of cars, we entered into one of those bubbles of peace and greenery that do not come cheap. The synagogue was all yellow stone, with two large wings flanking a greystone stairway. Before pulling open the weighty door of solid wood, Gaby pulled out of his pocket a triangle of blue satiny cloth. He unfolded it briskly, to reveal a skullcap that he expertly popped onto his head.

"As you can see, it's very modern here, very contemporary, even if the synagogue was completed in 1958," he informed me with a sweep of his hand.

"How about that, that's the year I was born!"

"The congregation was founded on Fairmount Street, but that was before your time, you couldn't have known it," he went on, teasing me as usual.

"Wait, you mean the old synagogue facing the Collège Français?"

"Yes, that's it."

"I know it like the back of my hand! It's my former school. I loved it there, but I only stayed two years. The Spanish lab was in that building, and also my ballet class."

"Ballet class, eh? So you're a young lady from a good family. Listen, you wouldn't be a kind of black sheep? You were expelled, is that it?"

I went silent. Down in the basement, we crossed a large party room leading to a closed door through which we heard some artful arpeggios punctuated by pounding on a large

drum. Gaby ushered me in and made the introductions. The pianist, pudgy and jovial, was called Sam, and the drummer, who seemed made from matchsticks, Adam. He just nodded his head and greeted me with a hearty kaboom! They too wore skullcaps.

The space was not very big, and seemed to serve both as a rehearsal room and storeroom. Three or four fluorescent lights flickered on the ceiling behind frosted glass panes. The two big instruments faced each other on the floor, on each side of a little angled platform, just big enough for the console, the amps, and two mikes. Gaby climbed on, plugged in his guitar, and did a sound test: check, check.

I just stood there, intimidated.

“You can take off your jacket, you know,” he told me.

He was right. I was hot. I obeyed, blushing, slid my scarf into one of the sleeves, and put everything down on a pile of chairs in the corner. Then I took a deep breath, braced myself, and climbed onto the platform to be beside him.

“Benjamin should be here soon,” he announced, after checking his watch. “He had an errand to do. Meanwhile, we can warm up with last night’s songs, okay?”

He started strumming the chords of *Blowin’ in the Wind*. I said okay, we sang together, then Gaby moved on to *Me and Bobby McGee*. The other two listened. By the end, everyone was smiling. I gave a big sigh and relaxed a bit. Just then, Benjamin arrived with a bass guitar that he too plugged in. They ran through a few numbers from their repertoire, and I sat on the edge of the platform, listening.

They did a bit of everything, from Bob Dylan (*Lay Lady Lay*, *Along the Watchtower*) to the Rolling Stones (*Angie*, where Gaby and Sam particularly shone), and including Creedence Clearwater Revival. They played *Have You Ever Seen the Rain* for a first time, then Gaby said to me:

“Come on, take a look, I’ve copied out the words. Let’s try it.”

The sheet of paper trembled a bit in my hand, but I could still read it.

We got through to the end despite my hesitations. I was glad that they didn't stop at every little hitch, I wouldn't have known what to do. Then there was silence and they all exchanged glances.

"Not bad," smiled Sam, "except that you don't have the right phrasing in the chorus. They go: 'liiiii wanna kno-o-ow, have you ever seen the rain, falling down on a sunny day...' and what you did was more like "I want! To know, have you ever..."

While he was talking, Gaby came down, planted himself in the middle of the four of us, and replied, looking me right in the eyes:

"I like it. It's original. You have your own way of interpreting it. Kind of like your signature."

I could have kissed him. Was he the leader of the group or what? The others nodded their heads for a minute, then they played it again my way. Afterwards we rehearsed it four or five times, stopping whenever there was a question of rhythm or harmony to deal with. And it was not always me on the hot seat.

"All right," sighed Benjamin. That's it for tonight? I have to take off, I'm starting at eight o'clock."

"What do you do?"

"I'm barman in a hotel downtown," he replied, lying his bass down in its case.

But first, he took a little rectangular package out of the niche that served to support the neck. And he gave Gaby a nod. While the others pretended to look elsewhere, the package changed hands along with several twenty-dollar bills. So that was his errand! The guy who supplied Gaby with his excellent Moroccan hash, was his next-door neighbour! What a small world!

We shut off the lights, filed back through the big room, and once outside each went their own way. Rendezvous next week, same time, same station. My feet were not quite touching the ground, I felt as if I were glowing in the dark. Sitting on the bus, I began to hum:

“Je veux! Savoir, as-tu déjà vu la pluie...”

In my head I was trying to follow it up with the right number of feet. But it wasn't easy.

“Tomber du ciel / quand il faisait soleil” almost rhymed, but seemed awkward.

It didn't matter, I was just having fun.

When we got home (how I liked to pronounce those words), Gaby invited me into his room and rolled a little joint just for a taste, just for the two of us. It was much better than the first time, in both respects. After, we lay side by side smoking the same cigarette, and I asked him:

“Gaby, what's it called, the skullcap you put on your head when you go into the synagogue?”

“A kippa. You wear it to show your humility before God.”

“That's funny. The more I learn about Jewish customs, the more I'm aware of their absence in the life of my grandfather. I'm wondering if he gave all that up for the love of his wife? She was half Marseillaise and half Corsican, but Catholic through and through.”

“Maybe he just grew up in a family that wasn't observant?”

“When I think back on it, it must have been a bit of both. It's true that I never saw them wearing a skullcap or celebrating anything, him and his brothers, when they came to see us. On the other hand, he'd worn his old fez when he left Egypt for France. He kept it on a high shelf, in his closet.”

“Perhaps he felt more Egyptian than Jewish.”

“It’s possible. He had the look, in any case. You know the Egyptian show on TV? I’ve always found it hard to watch. First, I don’t understand anything, and then the host looks too much like my grandpa.”

“Why? You don’t like him?”

“On the contrary. I miss him too much ever since...”

But I couldn’t go on. I didn’t want to spill my guts right now. I shrugged my shoulders, still lying on my back next to him, then I stretched out my neck to rub my head against his.

“Tell me, have you given your grandparents any news of yourself since you’ve been rambling like that in the streets?”

“The street is not a ramble.”

“Okay, I grant you that, but will you answer my question?”

He passed me the cigarette, and I blew a big cloud to the ceiling before sighing:

“No.”

“You don’t want to answer, or you haven’t given them any news?”

“I haven’t given them any news.”

“And has it never entered your mind that they might be worried about you?”

“Who do you take me for? At first I was too shaken up to think about it, and now... now I don’t want to be found.”

“That bad, eh?”

I nodded my head in silence.

“Look, you don’t have to give them your address, you could just write to reassure them.”

“Okay. I’ll see.”

That said, I got up to go and sleep in my bed. Here there wasn’t enough space for two, and I needed room to reflect.

Dial Zero

I’d developed a taste for pilfering. I don’t know if it was the challenge of getting away with it, the satisfactions in defying authority, a way of claiming the luxuries to which I felt I should be entitled, or just a way of attenuating the solitude of my room, but for a number of days I rarely went out without coming home with a candle. Round or square, scented or not, the only requirement was that they be thick enough to stand on their own, without needing a candlestick.

As soon as dusk fell, I lit them all at once. The sight of them delighted me. I stretched out on the anonymous bedclothes that came with my bed, and I widened my eyes to drink in my swag of light and heat. The only drawback was the drippings of wax onto the chest of drawers, but I’d learned to peel them off, once they were well cooled, by prying them up with the blade of a plastic knife.

The telephone rang, I jumped, and the flames began to tremble. Even if it came from the bottom of the stairs, the sound seemed to originate just outside my door. I had early on acquired the habit of counting the rings, having adopted the ingenious system into which each new tenant was initiated upon arrival, identifying the recipient of the call.

This time it was clear as day, not only did the caller not know the code, but the words “hang up” were not part of their vocabulary. I went down to answer.

“Hello, this is Sergeant Hébert of Station 20, droned a robotic voice. Can I please speak to Gabriel Azo... Azoulay?”

This was the first time I’d heard his second name. It sounded strange, as though it concerned someone else entirely. At this hour Gaby was certainly at the yeshiva, the Talmudic school he attended several nights a week.

“He’s out, can I take a message?”

“Tell him to call me when he can. It’s about a robbery at the Chevra Kadi... Kadisha synagogue.”

“Yes, I know the synagogue, I’ll tell him. What was taken?”

“Well, among other things, an electric keyboard, percussion instruments...”

Right after my first rehearsal! Really, this was a bit much! But then I thought...

“This is a joke, right? Is that you, Benjamin?”

“I assure you that I’m very serious, Miss. Tell Mr. Azoulay to get in touch with me as soon as he can.”

And he hung up after having dryly reeled off his number. I sat down on the steps’ cracked linoleum, I was cut off at the knees, had a hedgehog in my throat. What was this terrible misfortune that was always dogging my steps? Was I being punished for my thievery? Was life really the product of a great cosmic pendulum’s swinging back and forth?

Nature was always raining on my parade. It was now officially too cold for me to play outside. My body’s response to this frigid blockade came down to my stomach shrinking itself into a hard little ball. But at least I never felt hungry. Still without papers, I had no idea what I was going to do. All roads seemed barred, and the only promising outlet that I thought had been opened up for me was now gone.

And so without thinking twice I leapt up, grabbed the receiver again, and dialed zero. You couldn't make long distance calls on that line, but I'd just remembered about what in France was called a PCV call, or in Quebec, reversed charges.

The local operator talked to a *téléphoniste* over there who replied, sounding like a flight attendant, "Hold on, please." Then I heard the familiar ring, long and monotone, and imagined the white telephone in Enghien, sitting on the little table on the house's first floor landing, or what's called the second floor in Montreal, nothing is simple.

"There's no answer, should I let it ring?" asked the operator after two minutes.

But just then, I heard the voice of my little grandmother.

"Hello, yes?"

She always answered like that.

"A reverse call, from Josée in Montreal, do you accept the charges?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Talk, Miss, you have France."

"Jo... Josée, is that you?"

"Yes, Mamie, it's me, how are you?"

"I... that is... I was sleeping... it's two in the morning."

"Oh la la, excuse me, I totally forgot about the time zones!"

"Uh, listen, can you call me back tomorrow? At... call at five, no, six o'clock in the evening, is that all right?"

"Your time or mine?"

"Mine."

“All right. Sorry to have wakened you.”

“Goodnight.”

The line went dead with a series of clicks. No outpouring, no emotion at all, hardly any reaction... it hadn't gone at all as I'd imagined it would ever since Gaby had put this idea into my head.

“It must be because you got her up in the middle of the night,” he said to me the next morning, to reassure me, in the bus taking us to the synagogue. “You'll see, things will go better next time.”

Except for the platform and the pile of chairs, nothing was left in the little room but a few electric wires tossed onto the floor. Everything else was gone: the console, the amps, the mikes, the piano, the drums, and even the two chairs that went with them. Planted there like bowling pins, the boys shot sad glances into every corner. I couldn't see anything because of the rain.

“Do you think they're going to suspect us?”

Benjamin's voice echoed bizarrely in the empty space. Gaby shrugged his shoulders.

“Why would we want to steal our own instruments?”

“I don't know... the insurance?”

“But that's impossible,” cried Sam, waving his arms. “It happened Saturday night. And I don't know about you, but me, I don't carry anything on Shabbat.”

He'd pronounced the final T as if he were advertising a beer: Nothing beats Labatt. And they all nodded their heads, both perplexed and reassured. It wasn't one of them. Me? I didn't count. They hadn't even had time to give me a key.

“You have France.”

“Hello.”

It was a man's voice, but it wasn't my grandfather.

"Hello? It's Josée."

"Yes, good evening my dear. Do you know who I am?"

"No..."

"It's Papa. I'm your Papa."

"..."

"Hello, can you hear me?"

In France, in those days, that question was on everyone's lips whenever you tried to make yourself understood through that infernal contrivance.

"Yes. Yes. I hear you, oh la la... Papa?"

"Yes, my dear, your Mamie called me this morning, she told me about last night, she asked me to come over tonight after work... and here I am. But you, where are you, still in Montreal?"

I leaned over to check through the lace curtain on the front door to my right.

"Still in Montreal."

"And you ran away from your mother's... how long ago exactly?"

"Since August 1. A bit more than three months."

"Still. Three months with no news. You've held out for a long time, haven't you? But you and I, it's been a lot longer than that, eh? Six years."

"Almost seven."

"I think about you all the time, you know. Every day."

“Me too.”

I spat that out like I was a hoarse trombone. My vocal chords refused to vibrate. I thought perhaps it was the hedgehog’s spines loosening their hold.

“Listen... you must be wondering what I’m doing at your grandmother’s.”

I cleared my throat with a rusty rake I kept nearby.

“Ahhh, no, I don’t know. I’m a bit in shock.”

“Me too. Listen, I have to tell you something.”

“Yes?”

“It’s... it’s about your grandfather.”

The hedgehog stopped cold.

“...”

“He got sick suddenly and... I’m afraid he died. About three weeks ago. A liver cancer that came on very fast, there was nothing to be done.”

“Hnhnhnhh...”, the bristled ball was grinding away.

My throat was too constricted, I couldn’t cry.

“I’m sorry, my dear. Your grandmother tried to find you, to let you know, she even left a message with your friend Stéphanie, but she had no news of you either.”

I had not even called Steffi since I got here even though I had a telephone at hand. Things had become strained between us, but there was no point thinking about that now it was clear what was weighing on Mamie. She had asked my father (my Papa!) to go to her house so he could give me the news. She couldn’t bring herself to tell me in the middle of the night, point blank, just after having been wrenched from her sleep. Perhaps even numbed by a sleeping pill, given the circumstances.

Suddenly my knees gave way. My stomach turned. I tried to sit on a step but although the earpiece, on its twisty wire, just barely managed to reach me, the microphone couldn't make it to my mouth. I pulled myself up and collapsed against the wall, but couldn't reach the floor without letting go of the handset. I had no choice but to take it all in on my feet.

What I told no one, is that the message had indeed got to me through Steffi, when I was living on Wolfe Street with Denis. Your grandfather is very sick, you must phone France. And then everything collapsed, and in my anguish, far from forgetting this dark cloud that weighed more and more heavily on my head, I forced myself to ignore it because I was frightened. Terrified at the idea that it was a trap. That my mother, in cahoots with the police, was waiting for me to phone my grandparents in order to track me down with her supernatural radar, launch a quasi-military operation, and snap her claws down on me forever.

So I didn't listen. I didn't obey. And there we were. My Papy died during that bizarre period following on Denis's death, before I came to Phillips Square. An elusive chapter, a no man's land where my memory had nothing to hold on to: no water, no air, no sound and no light. Only the wind to sweep me up and carry me off.

Oh Papy... can you see me from where you are? Have you found me in the whirlwind? Caring as you are, you must have your eye on me. It's perhaps you, my Jewish Papy, who put me on the trail of this tall dark man with a gazelle's eyes who swears only by Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh...

"May God bless you, my dearr," he repeated to me every day, or almost every day, in his Egyptian accent. "My little *chérRrie*. May God bless you."

"I have to hang up, my dear, every minute costs money."

All this time, my newly-found Papa had remained silent on the other end of the line. On the other side of the Atlantic, at the other end of time.

“Yessss, I understaaand...” I managed to gasp.

“Listen, do you remember your grandparents’ address?”

“Yes. I know it by heart.”

“Good, so write me here, then I’ll answer with my own address, and we’ll plan for the future, all right? But meanwhile, give me the one where you are now.”

It was not the same with him. The likelihood that he would surrender my address to the ogress was less than absolute zero.

“So yes, it’s rue Drummond, *dee are you em em oh Andy*, but after that you have to put “the house in the courtyard, room 3.”

“Very well, the house in the courtyard, good, and that’s where you’re calling from?”

“Yes, there’s a public phone in the entranceway, but it’s complicated to call me, I’ll explain it to you when I write.”

“Very well my dear, courage, your grandmother hugs you, we’re thinking of you, you’re no longer alone now, all right? We’ll keep in touch.”

Click.

Friends in High Places

Dear Papa,

I’m writing you from my little room in Canada that I’m renting in the city’s centre, very near the Ritz! The “house in the courtyard” is very old, it was built during what we call the French Regime, (before the territory was lost to the English, in 1763.) I know that for France this is not so long ago, but here it seems very much like antiquity.

The first snowflakes started to fall today. Well, we've already had a few light snowfalls that didn't even whiten the ground, but despite the fine weather, this snow's decided to stick around for a while.

My little table is installed in front of the window, and as I write, a squirrel is grooming himself on the guardrail, it's cute as anything.

I know that this letter will take a week to reach you, but if you only knew how eager I am to read your words and to hear your voice again, after all this time!

I have to tell you how our system works. It's very simple. There are two steps to follow when you call me. First, you let the phone ring the number of times corresponding to my room number, that being three. Then you hang up and wait a minute or two before calling back, giving me the time to come downstairs. And that's all there is to it.

Many hugs,

Josée

Terrribly contrite, I'd finally decided to phone Steffi after I got back from the post office. She wasn't proud of herself either. Our falling out had begun with the battle of the books:

Among the second-hand books I liked to pick up on the cheap, I'd come across a pocket edition of the Dhammapada, a collection of aphorisms attributed to Buddha, whose reading brightened my nights. I'd tried to talk to her about it, but as luck would have it she had started reading Das Kapital, and swore only by dialectical materialism. Our ideas clashed, and no light was shed.

"Tell me, did you ever call your grandmother? She was so concerned, and I was in the dark, I had nothing to tell her..."

"Yes I did, yesterday. Oh Steffi, I suppose you know about my grandfather?"

"Yes."

“...”

“...”

“I’ve so much to tell you, what if you came over to my place?”

“You have a place now?”

“Yes, I’ve had one for a little while, I’ll give you the address, okay?”

“Gaby, do you have any scotch tape?”

“Here, but you’ll get it back to me, eh?”

Since the temperature was now below zero, the bell was frozen solid. It was the prehistoric kind, a sort of metallic knob with fins you had to turn clockwise to get it to bleat like a goat with a head cold. But only when it was warm!

Afraid that Steffi might ring without my knowing and leave without my seeing her, I went down to stick onto the glass a note I’d written by hand on a half-page of my notebook, starting over three times so as to properly centre the text.

THE DOORBELL IS FROZEN

PLEASE KNOCK

THANK YOU

Not so complicated. But I wanted it to be well done.

As a result, she knocked very hard, and I rushed downstairs to let her in. We both had red cheeks, me from emotion and she from the cold.

“So this is my room, here, put your coat on the bed. I’ll give you the tour, come into the kitchen, we’ll make some tea.

No oohs or aahs from Steffi, I think the quarters that were a cozy shelter for me suffered from comparison to the plush apartment she was used to. The stained teapot, the unmatched cups, the wobbly sugar bowl that up to now I'd found charming, seeing them through her eyes, I was almost ashamed. Almost. It was too much fun to be inviting my best friend to play tea party with me in my room, like in a perfect childhood. One lump or two?

We had a few sips, traded timid smiles, and then I launched into everything I had to tell her in chronological (and tragic) order. From my meeting with Gaby to the synagogue robbery (yes yes, a synagogue, yes, a group of Moroccan Jews), then the surprise of finding my father, and to conclude, how I learned about my grandfather's death.

She took me tenderly into her arms and I wept a little, but the wave rose so high that the dam refused to break. After two or three tears, I quietly pulled away. Night was falling. With a sigh I lit the collection of candles, sat beside her on the edge of the bed, put my head on her shoulder, and Gaby knocked on the door.

"So that scotch tape? Oh, sorry."

"No, that's all right, Steffi, this is my neighbour Gaby, his room is at the end of the hallway. Come and sit, Gaby, there's more tea. Gaby and I make music together, or at least we did, I was telling Steffi about the robbery, Gaby plays the guitar, eh Gaby? We met when I was singing in Phillips Square, that's how I got here, and..."

A real chatterbox. It wasn't at all like me to go on like that. In the right corner, my gentle gentile and in the left, my handsome Maghrebian Jew... I felt as if I were the only drop of water that could stop that powder keg from exploding. As long as I kept spluttering on.

Bam, bam, bam! More knocking, down below. Gaby volunteered to go and see who it was. Meanwhile, I continued rolling the joint he'd begun.

"Hey, tell me, is Gaby your boyfriend?"

“Not really... He’s mainly a friend. It’s wonderful the way he got me in here. Aside from me, they’re all students, or mostly.”

“And there are roomers on the first floor too?”

She was making conversation, of all things. Had we really come to that?

“Yes, two, because under Gaby there’s a laundry room. But it’s funny, I never see them. I know there’s one who’s a medical student, and the other, I don’t know, maybe law. They’re always buried in their books.”

With that, an awkward silence, an angel drifting by. Steffi began toying with an invisible thread hanging down from her T-shirt’s hem. I had a decently rolled joint to tap on the table. Gaby was taking his time returning, and as I didn’t want to light it in his absence, I took my fingernail and dug out a tiny mahogany crumb. I gently impaled it on a blackened needle there for the purpose, and lit it deftly before handing it to Steffi.

“You’ll see, it’s really good, my other neighbour gets it from Morocco.”

She bent over, made an O with her mouth, pulling her golden locks back with her hand.

“Oh la la, open the window,” exclaimed Gaby on opening the door. “The police are down there, they want to speak to you.”

That’s it, they’ve found me! A cold chill ran down my spine, and I heard myself stammer:

“Eh, what?”

“Yes, they’re questioning everyone about the instruments.”

Somewhat mollified, I had to brace myself to go down, a lump in my throat, short of breath, my knees shaking. Leaving the powder keg to its fate.

“Good day, Miss. May we ask you a few questions?”

There were two of them, one tall and one short, packed into the tiny entranceway. The stolen boots, the pinched candles, the forbidden smoke! They mustn't come up to my room. Even if they were not linked directly to her, this was no time to be apprehended by the evil queen's minions. I squeezed myself in between them and the stairway.

"Uh, yes. But I have friends up top."

"In that case we can talk here, it won't take long."

To my surprise they left very quickly, after asking me a few innocent questions, none of which I can remember. I was too busy imagining that my ambiguous declaration might have suggested to them that I had friends in high places.

That it had succeeded in surrounding me with a protective aura which existed only in my clouded brain.

When I returned, I saw Gaby and Steffi turn in unison toward the door, well, toward me. Gaby gave me an inquisitive look.

"Your friend has been telling me about how you arrived in Montreal and why it is that you haven't seen your father in a long time. Why didn't you ever say anything?"

I sat down cross-legged on the bed.

"I don't know... when we met, I didn't even want to give you my real name, remember, I told you I was called Janis. I'm trying to live a different life. And it's hard to talk about it all without seeming to exaggerate:

'My mother kidnapped me when I was ten years old, I only knew we were leaving a few days in advance, I couldn't even say goodbye to my father, then I spent most of my time shut up in my room except for going to school where I was registered under a pseudonym. What is more, because of that, there is no way for me to continue my studies. Officially, I've received no education here, and to top it all off, during all those

years my younger sister and I were subjected to threats, intimidation and violence every day at home.'

But that's the truth. I'm not inventing anything."

I'd murmured those words amid a weighty silence that had taken over the room, just like every other time I'd told my story. Afterwards people didn't know what to say, and it was up to me to clear the air with whatever came into my mind:

"So, are we going to smoke that joint?"

Steffi and Gaby surrounded me at once with a comforting bubble that I would willingly have made my nest for eternity, but Steffi was expected for supper, Gaby had to study, and I had a pool of tears to spill, all by myself in my bed, just like the nights when I was a child. Those were the only times I allowed myself to think about my Papa, my friends, the life before. I drenched with tears the teddy bear that had slept with me since I was very young, and that on fleeing I'd left behind with everything else. Except that today, I was saved. I was found. But that, my grandfather would never know.

And then one morning the telephone rang three times.

"Hello?"

"Hello my dear, it's Papa."

"Oh, hello, my Papa!"

"It makes me very happy to hear you call me that, you know. Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, it arrived yesterday. Thank you for the money! Gaby took me to a currency exchange, it all went well."

"I hope it will be enough for you to pay your rent and everything, until... well, look: I've decided to come and get you."

"..."

“Hello, can you hear me?”

“Yes. Yes... you’re coming to Montreal?”

“That’s right! I reserved my ticket today, I’ll be there in a week. Do you have something to write on?”

“Wait. I’m going to get it and I’ll be right back!”

I took the staircase in three bounds, was back in an instant, not even out of breath.

“Here I am.”

“Good, I’ll give you the flight information... I don’t know if you remember Pierre, my lycée friend. Well, it turns out that his little brother lives in Montreal. His name is Patrice, take down his number and get in touch with him. He’ll come and get you in his car and you’ll meet me at the airport. Okay?”

“Oh la la, but that’s amazing... you’ll be here next week?”

“Yes I will. Is that all right?”

“Of course, I’m so happy. I’m pinching myself.”

“Me too. Well, then I’ll see you next week. Much love.”

“Yes, all my love.”

I hung up, bemused, aghast once more at my failure to communicate the intensity of my feelings over the phone. I climbed the stairs, slowly this time, almost in slow motion. My bed seemed the only stable place in the midst of a world that was moving far too fast.

Curb my vertigo, watch the snowflakes floating down outside the window, let well up in my eyes the intense emotion that has taken possession of me.

Breathe.

Never forget to breathe.

A Gentle White Snowfall

The luxury car mounted the curves of Ridgewood Avenue, unique in Montreal. Carved into a hillside on the mountain, it's lined with apartment blocks whose monetary status is pegged to their elevation. They don't even have to be attractive. In front of me, on the right, was my papa, who I was drinking in, wide-eyed, and on the left, Patrice, his friend's brother, who pissed me off from the get go. It may have had something to do with the fact that he'd found nothing better to say to me than to call me Sausage, doubtless because I was dressed like a bum.

Having no venom to spare for so little, I'd not bothered informing him that I'd found my duds in the 25-cent pile at a church bazaar, and was very grateful to have done so. He wouldn't have known what I was talking about.

No kidding, he lived close to the top. With a flourish he rolled up the garage door wielding an infrared remote and we plunged into a basement packed with late model machines, one more eye-catching than the other. Trunk, baggage, elevator, corridor: and here we were in his home-sweet-home, on the highest floor, of course.

"So how do you like my view?" Patrice exclaimed, while my father sank onto the couch, rubbing his eyes.

I sat beside him, still a bit incredulous. Indeed, through the big bay window you saw the entire Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood, as far as Jean-Talon. With binoculars, I could have picked out the house I fled from.

Little brother must have enjoyed Olympic-calibre sunsets.

"Lisa will be here any minute" he announced, opening up a vintage writing desk that concealed a mini-bar. "Do you still like scotch?"

“Still do,” confirmed my father, before tilting his head toward me.

“Ah yes, and you, Sausage, what do you want, a Perrier, some apple juice?”

“A beer,” I replied.

A bit taken aback, he turned to my father, his mouth agape. My father nodded yes, and he popped me open a Carlsberg.

“So,” said my father, “Here’s to our reunion!”

“To us!”

I clinked my green bottle against his wine glass as if we were all alone in the world, and we both drank. I hadn’t waited this long to have our moment spoiled by a jackass. In any case, a key had turned in the lock and Patrice went to meet Lisa in the entryway, leaving us alone with one another.

“My papa!”

“My darling! After all this time, can you believe it?”

We smiled at each other like two happy idiots.

“You must be hungry, no?” exclaimed Patrice, coming back into the living room along with a pretty dark-haired lady with a luminous gaze. “Lisa’s brought us some really good food from a nearby take-out, it’s good, you’ll see, you’d think you were in France. Just stay put, we’re taking care of everything.”

And the meal proceeded amid memories of youth, high school pranks, holiday trips... as if I weren’t there. It didn’t matter. I drank it all in like a thirsty desert. The tiniest drop made me sprout green shoots And Lisa’s smiles compensated for the arrogance of her... fiancé, as I learned. But what on earth did she see in this buffoon?

It was getting late. Lisa prepared the guest room for my papa, exhausted from the trip and the time lag. I was sent home in a taxi with several dollar bills in my pocket, a

lengthy Harmonium track on the radio and on my lips, a hint of cream from a chocolate éclair, something I hadn't tasted for ages. Who was complaining? Not me.

It was him knocking down below, at least I hoped so! If I'd only known, in fabricating this little sign, that two weeks later he'd be reading it...

"Come in, come in! You're all right, you didn't have any trouble getting here?"

"Not at all, you explained it very well. But this is quite a climb! It's true, your house seems very old... it's older than the Ritz, in any case. Quite a difference."

"I'm very happy here. Come, I'll show you my room. Give me your coat... would you like a coffee?"

"Yes, that would be nice. Oh, look at that, there really are squirrels at your window! I have to confess that reading your letter, I thought it was a poetical fancy on your part."

"Really, why?"

"You'll see, in France... I think it goes back to the war. You know, everything was scarce. Anyway, they would never survive like that, in the middle of the city. There is always a little rascal with a slingshot."

"Oh, how sad!"

"That's not going to change your mind, I hope."

"Don't worry."

How to get through to him how happy I was that he'd crossed the ocean to come and get me? In my gratitude I would have given up much more than my little room with its wavy floor, its wobbly chairs, its faded wallpaper. The refuge that I'd loved so much with all its flaws... my heart was full of contradictory emotions. I would have liked to smoke a little joint, but there was no sense now even considering it. I'd have to say farewell to that too, at least for a while.

I had no idea how to find pot there, if it was as simple a matter as in Quebec.

“Knock knock, can I come in?”

“Yes, do! Papa, this is Gaby, I told you about him yesterday.”

“So you’re the guardian angel! I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for my daughter, really.”

With a kind of beguiled tenderness I noted the rather high-flown style my father adopted when he became emotional. The evening before, he’d declared himself “very moved to set his foot down on Canadian soil,” and “overwhelmed to at last hold me in his arms.” To which I replied *Yes, yes, yes, me too, me too.*

In any case, Gaby was pleased.

“I’m very happy, sir. But let’s not exaggerate! The room came free at just the right time... they say that coincidences are only a means for God to remain anonymous,” he added, bobbing his head, as if to excuse himself for talking about religion.

“Yes, that’s one way of looking at things, “my atheist papa replied, a smile at the corner of his mouth, as if to apologize for not being a believer.

I was happy to see them so quickly getting along.

“Josée, I wanted to tell you that I’ve had news from the synagogue: the police have found the thieves, they’d got in through a half-open window. We’re going to recover some of the instruments, they didn’t have time to unload them.”

“Oh, that’s great, so you’re going to be able to go on playing?”

“Yes, but we’ll miss our singer!”

“Oh, you’ve also lost your singer?” said my father, astonished.

“It’s me, papa. I’d just begun when they stole all our equipment.”

“What a shame. And this happened in a synagogue?”

“Yes, but the thieves aren’t Jewish,” Gaby explained. “They live just nearby, that’s how they saw the open window.”

“So Sam was right,” I exclaimed, then turned to my father: “You see, he said it was impossible for us to have done it because the robbery took place on a Saturday night!”

An amused nodding of the head from my begetter, who rose and moved toward the door:

“Gaby, can you show me where the bathroom is?”

I took the opportunity to empty the ashtray. Pricking up my ears, I seemed to hear some softly spoken words in the hallway, but it was perhaps just Benjamin’s radio on the other side of the wall.

“Good,” he exclaimed on his return. “Should we have a bite? I’d love to try the burgers at that deli you talked to me about, on Sainte-Catherine Street. Is it far?”

“Not at all, we’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Face to face with my papa on that bench, facing the enormous menu and the correspondingly ample servings... time folded itself into space. I was a bit dizzy. That didn’t stop me from devouring my cheeseburger, nor from bursting out laughing, seeing the grimace on my father’s face when he bit heartily into a pickle.

“How awful... is it sweetened?”

“Ha ha, I don’t like it either, but I find it full of vinegar, no?”

“Yes, but what is this vinegar? It’s not at all like the little *cornichons* with tarragon...”

“You miss French cuisine already?”

“I’ll survive.”

We removed the tops of the rolls that were as large as our hands, we took out the slices of pickle and we piled them on the rims of our plates, laughing like a couple of long-time conspirators.

When we emerged, a gentle white snowfall was stippling this early December and our new-found calm. His Parisian ankle boots slipped about on the shiny sidewalk. He passed an arm through mine to profit from my stability, due entirely to the non-skid soles of my super laced-up boots, and we strolled along Sainte-Catherine Street, gazing into the lighted windows, like two ordinary tourists.

A Fabulous Pink

“All right, my darling, we still have to get you out of here and for that we’ll have to find you the right documents, which won’t be easy, sighed my papa over the telephone the next morning. You say that you became a Canadian citizen two years ago, is that correct?”

“That’s right. Pledged allegiance to the queen and everything,” I replied, rolling my eyes heavenwards to show him what a big deal it was, though this he couldn’t see.

“Fine. As we’re on the spot, we’ll start with that. Come and join me at Patrice’s and we’ll work as a team, okay?”

“Oh, goody!”

I had to take three lines, one after the other: the 24 along Sherbrooke to Guy, then the 165 up Côte des Neiges to a garage doubling as a pricy corner store, facing the cemetery. This is where the number 11 bus that left from the Mount Royal Metro Station, and emerged after having crossed over the mountain, negotiated the strenuous ascent with wheezings of the engine punctuated by a grinding of gears. I was the last to

step down onto the crunchy snow. When the vehicle stopped in the middle of the turnaround, I almost heard it exhale all its steam at one shot, like the trains entering the station near where I grew up.

From papa, I accepted a glass of Perrier without complaint. He, with avid eyes, prepared himself a strong espresso that he drank very hot, in four or five sips. Then he got up and went to bring a sheet of paper out of his bedroom that he put down next to the telephone, on the coffee table:

“Good. Patrice left me a few numbers to start with.”

He folded the paper several times in one direction then the other to soften it before tearing it in half, handing me the part that was blank.

“Here, take this and a pen, and make notes, okay?”

And the calls began.

“Hello, Passport Canada, I’d like to know how to submit an urgent application... it’s for my daughter, a minor. No, I’m a French citizen. Need proof of Canadian citizenship? Very well, thank you.”

“Hello, Immigration Canada? Okay, first name Joëlle, last name Vin-ce-not. Like wine, yes. Wait a moment? Of course.

Yes, I’m still here. Can you give me her certificate number? Written requests only? For confidentiality? You can’t accelerate the process? You say I should address myself to the French authorities?”

“Hello, Consulate of France? Yes, good day madam, I need to obtain a passport for my daughter, it’s urgent... yes, I’ll wait.

Yes, it’s a matter of issuing a passport to my daughter who has been living here for several years without registering with the consulate, let me describe the situation...

Minor, yes. No, she does not appear on my family record, because after our divorce her

mother was appointed the children's guardian. Except that, as I've said, they left French territory without my authorization. No, there's no question of asking her for a signature, please try to understand! A special dispensation? The ambassador? Our only chance? I see. Good evening."

Papa hung up, furrowing his brow. End of the first inning: the army of bureaucrats one – the Vincenot team, zero. I'd not written down very much:

proof of citizenship

concern for confidentiality

special dispensation

He patted my hand.

"Don't worry, we'll make this work, you'll see."

As for me, I bit my lip, raised my eyebrows. Surely life wasn't going to cheat me all over again by suddenly taking away what had just been offered? Leaving me all alone with no documents? What if someone were to tip off the ogress that I was trying *to leave the territory without her authorization?*

"Listen. In any case, at this hour the offices are closing. There's nothing more that we can do today. So I suggest we take time off until tomorrow."

All things considered, he wasn't wrong. What do vacationers do? They watch the sun set. A procession of fabulous pink clouds was parading across the sapphire blue backdrop of the sky. We admired the spectacle for several minutes, without speaking. Then we looked at each other with tiny incredulous smiles: this shared serenity, this easy silence.

Patrice arrived soon after. Papa got up and brought him up to date in the entranceway, talking low, I don't think he wanted to traumatize me even more. But the buffoon had something of his own to announce:

“Tonight we’re going out on the town, my friend. We’re going to have a ball. I want your stay in Montreal to be unforgettable! Lisa has gone to get ready at Françoise’s, her friend who’s a flight attendant. Cute as all get out, you’ll see. We’re meeting at seven o’clock at Thursday’s, it’s both a bistro and a bar. Really fun. All of Crescent Street is super. Great atmosphere.”

Suddenly I no longer existed.

“All right, I’ll be on my way, see you tomorrow?”

“No, we’ll give you a lift back, it’s right nearby. Give us half an hour.”

They took turns in the bathroom. A shower for Patrice, a shave for both, a haze of aftershave everywhere. As my father had always worked in perfume, he’d brought several vials in his baggage and my olfactory nerve was given a workout. He’d offered me a young girl’s delicate honeysuckle toilet water, and I set him back on his heels when I asked him if he didn’t have *Eau sauvage*. Dorothee, the friend who supplied me with pill samples, used to rip some off for herself, and I found that truly daring. But no.

Left to myself, I took the opportunity to forage in the drawers, the wallets, the purses, and by the time they’d come back into the living room with pink cheeks and a perky look in their eyes, some forty dollars had found its way into my pockets. I had them leave me off in front of the parking garage entrance with all the kisses they asked for. I pretended to disappear into the dark and icy passageway, but first I turned around one last time. My little papa was joking with his *dear friend* and ignoring my existence. In a dark mood, my heart chilled, I gave the car enough time to go down the hill toward the ostentatious flashy streets where money freely flows. Then I left on foot for Old Montreal to see what colour acid I could come up with. I had a little idea in mind.

I was the one who had to call the next day, after having waited until one o’clock in the afternoon. Patrice answered with a voice so hoarse that it was only equalled by my father’s.

“Yes, what can I tell you, my head is splitting, it’s the price you have to pay. But we really enjoyed ourselves. Listen, why not join us for an aperitif, okay? Around five o’clock?”

“But... the teamwork?”

“I’ve thought of something, don’t worry, I’ll explain later.”

“I see, ‘til tonight, then.”

I went back up to my room, still glum. Just when I thought I was forging a deep bond with my father, he’d slipped through my fingers to go partying with adults. And what was this business of a flight attendant? Was he not remarried? He’d even had a son with his second wife. I wondered how old my half-brother was... seven or eight? He was still a baby the last time I’d seen him, just a few days before my abduction. All of that was waiting for me on the other side of time, but I still didn’t know whether I’d make it past the frontier or not... I knocked on Gaby’s door.

“Do you have something to smoke?”

“Here’s a little, but go and roll it in your room, okay? I can’t study when I’m stoned.”

He just about shut the door in my face. What was wrong with everybody?

My god, they’d all been together since the day before. They were munching hors d’oeuvres, all four sitting around the coffee table. Some 1930s jazz was playing low. Their eyes were a bit bleary, but shining. The much-vaunted Françoise was indeed *as cute as anything*, though rather artificial: hair bleached and bobbed, fuchsia lips and matching eye shadow.

Henri handed me a beer without making any comments, at least that was progress. And they’d left me a bit of everything to snack on. Afterwards, Lisa and Framboise cleared up and began to natter in the kitchen while my father moved on to serious matters.

“So. We have no choice: if we want to obtain this dispensation, we have to approach the French embassy, which is in Ottawa.”

“Well, at least it’s not in Vancouver or Moncton, otherwise we’d never be out of the woods...”

“Don’t be silly, Scruffy, embassies are always in the national capital.”

I would have liked my father to defend me against this shameful nickname, especially since I was wearing the brand-new clothes he’d bought me the night we went walking on Sainte-Catherine. But I was starting to realize that I couldn’t ask too much of him.

“All right, so tomorrow I’ll make an appointment, reserve a car, a hotel room, the next day we’ll leave for Ottawa, and if all goes well, as soon as you have your documents, we can leave.”

I opened my eyes, dazzled, but it wasn’t just at the idea of flying off so soon on his arm: the little plan I had in my head would be playing itself out the following night. For once life was on my side, and I was determined to show it how happy it was making me.

Rolling Thunder

The Rolling Thunder Revue! For weeks the centre of town had been plastered with sepia posters proclaiming, in Wild West characters, the arrival in Montreal of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Jack Elliott, and Bob Neuwirth, the last two utterly unknown to me. But to see together on the same stage a mythic couple that I adored? There was not a moment to lose. After leaving Patrice's, I took the bus as far as the corner of Sainte-Catherine, then I continued on foot to the Forum. I didn't want to risk finding the box office closed the next night. Just as well: there was already a long line snaking its way to the ticket window. No problem. I had all the time in the world.

Dylan's aficionados were thick on the ground under the hockey temple's neon lights. Among the fringed jackets and fumes of patchouli, I felt that I was at home with my own kind. Especially in my long lambskin Afghan coat, embroidered from top to bottom, which my papa had consented to offer me as a premature Christmas present. Best of all, there was a rumour circulating through the crowd: Joni Mitchell had now joined the troupe!

As soon as I emerged, I threw myself into the first available phone booth:

"Steffi, it's me! I have a surprise!"

"Hey, you're all out of breath! Have you been running, or what?"

"Yes, I was in a rush to talk to you. Are you free tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow's Thursday, I couldn't stay out late...what's on your mind?"

"Bob Dylan! At the Forum! With Joan Baez! And Joni Mitchell! I have two tickets!"

It all came out in little bursts of enthusiasm.

"Gee, I don't know... I have exams next week..."

“Come on! Listen, I have to tell you that the next day I’m going to Ottawa with my father. We have an appointment at the French embassy for my passport, and then...”

“You’re leaving?”

“If it all works out, yes. This will be our last chance to see each other. You don’t want to miss that?”

“Of course not, only you might have chosen something more... quiet...”

“No, but Joni Michell! Joan Baez!! Bob Dylan!!!”

Steffi had never been a big fan of Dylan, she didn’t like his nasal voice. I heard her letting out a great big sigh.

“All right, but it’ll be more to see you than all those others.”

“Great, I’m so happy! The show starts at seven o’clock, we should meet in front of the Forum at six, okay?”

“That’s much too early. Say six-thirty, and not just in front, there’ll be too many people. How about the corner of Maisonneuve and Atwater, okay?”

“Okay.”

What I’d not told Steffi was that I had in my possession two microdots of Tangerine neatly wrapped in a bit of aluminum foil. I hoped that I’d be in luck and that she would agree to take it along with me. That’s why I wanted to meet her an hour before the show began, when the high would have already set in. But for her I was prepared to delay things for half an hour.

Around the besieged Forum, the whole block was swarming with manic music lovers. But we found each other without too much trouble. We embraced, then I thrust my treasure under her nose:

“Look! You want some?”

“What is it?”

“Well, it’s acid.”

“Not again! Do you really need it to have a good time?”

“It’s not that... I just want to get the most out of things, that’s all.”

“Anyway, take some if you like, but I don’t want any.”

So, in an act of defiance, I swallowed both of them while looking her right in the eyes.

In the end, it was a good idea not to have taken the acid earlier. It was hard to navigate through the crowd, the noise, and the confusion. Our seats were quite high up, pretty far to the right, but I wouldn’t have surrendered them for anything in the world. Taking our neighbours’ lead, we removed our coats and spread them under us before sitting down. My first really big show! Waiting for it to start, I stood up, the better to take in the public I’d already glimpsed the day before. The beautiful people Melanie had been singing about ever since Woodstock. My tribe. My peers.

For the first time I experienced those famous vibrations, or at least that’s how I felt: they were like waves of glowing energy streaming from one row to the next, pulling everyone together into a pulsing network. They came to life too in my solar plexus. All of a sudden. And they were amazingly potent. It was the first time I’d taken two tabs of acid at once. I was getting scared. I sat down, weak in the knees. That was when Steffi seized my hand, held it gently, and I knew then that nothing bad would happen to me. I just had to settle myself comfortably, open wide my eyes and ears, *to be there*. Hand in hand with my blonde angel.

The light began to dim in the arena and to brighten on the curtain, decorated to suggest a Wild West touring show. It lifted slowly, revealing a guitarist who began to play softly, then louder, backed by an offstage band. Doubtless one of the two illustrious unknowns

who interested me less. The stage was covered over with warmly coloured carpeting, whose geometric forms began dancing to the music's charged pulsations. The tension grew, and then grew some more. Suddenly he was there, Bob Dylan, standing at the microphone, a pale grey Stetson on his head, adorned with feathers and flowers and perched over his brown curls, his face Pierrot white. The limpid mask of truth. Urged on by the ecstatic ovation from his public, he began to sing... I'd be hard pressed to remember what song it was.

I was too mesmerized by the spectacle of the show: the fairground atmosphere, the choreography and constant movement, the sharp glances, pregnant with meaning, that he flashed toward the end of each song. Dylan's precise diction, which contrasted with the melodic roaming of his voice when compared to the recordings I knew by heart. The elegant way he had of raising the neck of his guitar between two verses. And next to him that silhouette with the flowing dark hair, dressed all in black, weaving with her violin the long haunting phrases that she sent snaking through the group. The intermission took us by surprise.

"Are you staying put?" asked Steffi, getting up. "I'm going to try to get to the bathroom... will you watch my coat?"

I whispered *Yes* without taking my eyes off the constant cavalcade: roadies coming and going with various instruments, the swarming of the motley crowd. The lights were already down by the time my friend slid in beside me, out of breath. *How many roads...* two voices were melding in the darkness. This time it was me who, overcome with emotion, clutched her hand. A celestial light illuminated them bit by bit. We were sharing a historic moment.

Her face bathed in white as well, Joan Baez sang several songs, followed by Joni Mitchell, and then Bob Dylan returned... swept away by this whirlwind, I was no more than a muddled accretion of magical impressions. At the end, all the artists came

together as a chorus to perform a hymn to the human spirit. A joyous song of hope. An apotheosis hailed by the thunderous tribute of a standing ovation.

On the empty stage, the circus wasn't over, far from it. The curtain, half lowered, was still run through with long, ecstatic eddies. Coming and going in an intricate ballet, the clan of technicians took away the instruments one by one, to the very last.

It was then that I saw that the hall was empty. We were the only two left in the seats. I turned to Steffi with a bedazzled smile.

"Well, it's about time. I thought you were never going to come out of your trance."

"What trance?"

"You haven't budged for I don't know how long. You were staring at the stage as if you were seeing angels or fairies."

"Yes. Performing angels. Wayfaring fairies."

"If you say so. Come on, let's go. I'll take you home, I can't leave you alone in this state."

She took me by the hand and we moved down the rows still steeped in echoes and magic. Suddenly, on my left, my hand stretched out toward a black form left behind in the half-light: a wide-brimmed felt hat that came to rest most naturally on my head. It suited me perfectly.

"Don't tell me you're going to wear that, you don't know who left it there!" Steffi exclaimed. "It might have lice."

I didn't reply. I was imagining a crowd of masked lice dancing a farandole to the tune of an enchanted violin. I followed her obediently to the street and into a taxi that headed north to Sherbrooke, then turned east. The spectacle of the streets laced with snow, glowing red, orange, and green in tune with the traffic lights, prolonged the magic. But seeing that we were coming to the Ritz, part of my brain reconnected with reality. Just what it took for me to slip my last five-dollar bill into Steffi's hand.

Once at my building, she asked the driver to wait, and we got down from the car together. We gazed at each other in silence for a moment. Then we hugged. For a long time. Before opening my arms, I whispered into her neck in a hoarse voice:

“I love you, you know.”

She answered, *I know*.

She got back in the taxi.

And I never saw her again.

Door to Door

I hadn't gone to bed. With the acid flowing in my veins, sleep was out of the question anyway. I began by lighting all my candles. The prancing flames made for a marvellous re-enactment of the show's high points. Sitting on the bed cross-legged, I let them burn into my eyes until they snuffed out. Then I watched the ceiling fade to blue and once it had cooled I peeled away the wax in the half light. And I installed myself in my little chair to watch this day of departure as it dawned, saw the surrounding buildings emerge from darkness, and the walls of my little room take on colour. The sun was at the hub of the world. My gaze as well, bewitched despite my fatigue.

It must have been eight o'clock when my father knocked on the door down below, closely shaved and freshly perfumed. He was holding out a suitcase.

“Here. Françoise has a whole collection, she's offering you this one with her compliments.”

“Ah. Okay.”

It was pink, naturally. I took it from his hands and we climbed the stairs. Hearing us arrive, Gaby came out of his room and my father cried out:

“Ah, Gabriel, that’s perfect, I wanted to see you to seal our little deal. My dear, start packing, I’ll be with you straight away.”

Pretending to obey, I put the suitcase down on my bed, but I went back to the half-open door just in time to see my father counting out bills that he piled up on Gaby’s held-out palm:

“Sixty...eighty... ninety. That’s right?”

“That’s perfect. Thank you very much, Monsieur Vincenot.”

“Not at all, I should be thanking you for your kindness toward my daughter. Without you, I don’t know what would have happened to her.”

“It was only normal. You know, you don’t need any help to fall down, but to rise again, you need a friend to give you a hand.”

I slumped down next to the suitcase, my mouth agape. So I owed all that money to Gaby? That was a lot of bread, butter, and coffee! I must have skipped several weeks of rent in my destitution, my confusion, my lack of organization. And he’d said nothing... if my papa hadn’t come looking for me, what would have happened? Gaby wouldn’t have been able to bail me out in secret forever. The starving grasshopper, when the wind came along, would she have found herself once more on the street?

“So you’re making progress?”

“Um, sorry. I’m a bit tired, I didn’t sleep all night.”

“Poor dear, you’re nervous, are you, about our visit to the embassy? Don’t worry, an official called me yesterday after you left. He knows the whole story, it should all go well. Here, let me give you a hand.”

In five minutes, all my meagre possessions were transferred from the closet to a pile on the bed. My papa began handing me one object after another, but I didn’t have the strength to fold everything neatly. All I wanted was to be able to close the suitcase. He

was wise enough not to say anything. He may have dressed very conventionally, but I began to sense on his part a non-conformist tendency that pleased me.

“Take a good look around to be sure you haven’t forgotten anything. Are you leaving your books behind?”

“Not all of them. I’ve already read those.”

I’d slid the I Ching and the Dhammapada edge-up against the inner walls of the suitcase.

“And for the plane?”

Good thinking. Even if I didn’t yet entirely believe in our imminent takeoff, I stuffed a San Antonio into my backpack. I was going to have to learn some French slang.

It was a cloudy day. My father had rented a sedan that was burgundy all over, inside and out. We stowed my suitcase in the trunk next to his, with my guitar case on top. Then I turned around; Gaby was there with his lovely sad smile. I threw my arms around him.

“Thank you... thanks for everything.”

He just nodded his head, he was too moved to speak.

“It’s not goodbye, eh? You’re going to write each other?” interposed my father, breaking the silence.

I nodded my head in turn, then I opened the car door and sunk into the passenger seat, one hand on my black hat, my backpack in the other. The car backed up onto Drummond street and my father headed west, while I looked for a radio station that was not too soporific. CHOM was still the best choice.

“You’ll be my navigator, okay?” my father proposed, handing me a road map. Tell me how to get to the highway.”

It took me a few minutes to familiarize myself with the map. The brightly coloured paper was covered in butterfly-shaped motifs that gave it a strange aspect. But you get used to anything, especially when the success of your trip depends on it.

“Stay on Sherbrooke until Atwater... good, now turn left.”

I wanted to see the Forum one last time. It was asleep under the pale sky. No trace of the previous night's splendours. But I harboured them within myself.

“Left again on Dorchester, then right on Fort, there we go.”

Just as we entered the Ville-Marie autoroute's ramp, big flakes started to fall.

“Damn,” my little papa exclaimed. “I'm not used to driving in that... but together, we'll make it there, eh?” he went on, seeing my startled expression.

On the highway's surface, trails of snow whipped by the wind looked like little devils fleeing before us. They allowed us to pass, one after the other, until we entered Ottawa. There we switched maps. My father had even thought to acquire a plan of the centre of town! We found a hotel without any trouble.

“So here we are, three hours from door to door, not bad, eh?”

He was very proud, my little papa. My stomach in a knot from nervousness, I gave him a tight little smile in response. We had just enough time to pocket the room keys, carry up our bags, and leave for the embassy, where we were expected.

Impressed by the guards at the entrance, by the thickness of the carpets, then by the authority exuded by the gentleman who greeted us in a hushed office, I let my papa do the talking. In any case, no one thought of talking to me. The official began by studying the passport my father handed to him.

“Good. On the basis of the information you gave me yesterday, I had mademoiselle's birth certificate telexed to me, which confirms both your paternity and her nationality. Nothing stands in the way of a passport being delivered immediately. On the other

hand, I'll need two photographs. Here is a short list of photographers we recommend. The best would be to find one not far from your hotel. Where are you staying?"

"At the Swiss Hotel, on Avenue Daly."

Papa pronounced everything in the French style, it was amusing, but of course the embassy official found that normal.

"Ah yes, it's perfectly fine, you'll see. So here is what I suggest: on my end, I'll give the green light for the preparation of the document, so that when you come back, all we'll have to do is attach the photo. We can meet at... let's say three-thirty?"

"At three-thirty then, cher monsieur, and thank you again."

Papa got up, I did the same. Handshakes all around. Carpets, guards. We drove the car back to the hotel.

"You see, it's all going well. You feel better, no?" my father asked as he installed himself across the two beds.

"I'm starting to."

"So, make yourself beautiful for the photo!"

I shut myself into the bathroom while he channel flipped on the colour TV.

"My gosh, so many commercials!"

I once again had lots of knots in my hair. Fortunately, I'd become expert in untangling them with my fingers. Then I smoothed the hair down on each side of my face, pulled on my least wrinkled blouse under my afghan coat, and we went down to get directions at the reception desk.

An hour later, photos in hand, paid for at the rush rate, we stepped out into the unfamiliar neighbourhood. We had an hour and a half to eat before returning to the embassy. We strolled a little through small streets lined with boutiques.

“Oh, a brasserie!” cried my papa. “Look, they have a French menu. I confess I’d really like a steak-frites.”

Coming down from acid, the very idea of eating meat made me nauseous. But the fries were another matter. I ordered a mountain of them served with mayonnaise, a childhood delight that I’d forgotten in the land of ketchup.

“Oh my, I’m so sleepy. Couldn’t you pick up the passport without me?”

“No, you have to be there, that’s the law,” replied my father, finishing his coffee. “But after, we’ll go back to the hotel, and you’ll sleep peacefully, now that everything is done?”

“Oh yes.”

Luxuriously stretched out on my bed-for-one-night, I could not stop staring at the little blue book that officially confirmed my existence. Under my real name! Vincenot, Joëlle. Sex, female. Eyes, green. On the photo I had dull hair, pale lips, a weary gaze. But I had never seen anything so beautiful. I even think I slipped it under my pillow just before dozing off, like the books that kept me company in my sleep when I was a child.

I still had it in my hand when I opened my eyes the next morning. A glorious sun was pouring its light into the room. Breakfast had just arrived on a huge tray set down across my father’s bed. He was already dressed.

“Well, what do you know, you’ve almost slept around the clock, my little dormouse. Eat first, then get your clothes on. After that, we’ll take the car and I’ll leave it at the airport before buying the tickets. The croissants taste like cardboard, but the toast is very good. Do you put milk in your coffee?”

I was touched. A parent who talked to me affectionately in the morning. I’d forgotten that existed. He was even kind enough to let me call Dorothée to say goodbye. I wasn’t

as close to her as to Steffi, but all the same. Impossible to tell her everything over the phone, but we'd write each other, that was a promise.

"So we weigh anchor?" declared my father, a former naval officer.

"Full speed ahead!" I replied, just as nautically.

It was only when we were approaching the departure terminal that a thought occurred to me.

"Papa, what date is it?"

"December 6, why?"

"Because today's the anniversary!"

We looked at each other wide-eyed, nodding our heads.

And that is how, seven years to the day after I was spirited away by my mother on an Air Canada plane, I returned on an Air France aircraft with my father.