VANTAGE GROUND

A Cycle of Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

VANTAGE GROUND

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Vantage Ground is a collection of six closely related short stories. Each one is intended to be a complete and potentially independent work, but they are arranged as episodes of a larger story. Each piece concerns a stage in the development of a common central character, George Winters, who is portrayed in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

Raised in an insular English-speaking suburb of Montréal, George becomes intrigued with the mysteries of the land beyond its boundaries. Eventually repelled by the city, he is drawn into the outlying Québécois society. The stories focus on this transition and its complexities.

VANTAGE GROUND

CONTENTS

LANDFALL

The day began in turmoil. Lise was still asleep and George was sitting by the bedroom window leafing through an issue of *La Voix du Nord* when he heard the noise outside: the crunch of tires in the gravel of the yard, the revving of an engine, someone shouting his name in French. Alarmed, he parted the curtains to see Luc Chauvin's pick-up — a gang of men — and for a crazy instant he felt a scare as if a mob had come for him, as if he should slip back out of sight, run for it....

The neighbours had spotted him already and were waving up as the old truck idled in the dooryard. "*Ey, Georges!*" they were yelling, "*Viens-t'en! On y va! Dépêche! Amène ta scie mécanique!*"

Before he knew what it was all about, George was down the stairs and into work boots and a jacket, stuffing half a sandwich in his pocket while he called back up to Lise, "Bye! *Je sors!*"

"*Où tu vas?*" she asked him, yawning.

"J'sais pas," he called back, grabbing the chain-saw from the back porch.

In a moment he was out the door and up over the tail-gate of Luc's truck, and they were blasting north along the Côte Placide, churning up a wake of gravel dust. Serge Laurin had risen to face him, struggling to keep his balance as the truck jounced along. "Monsieur Winters," he began, with great mock ceremony, hamming it up while the others grinned, "C'est un grand plaisir de vous faire savoir, par ces présents..." and he went on to announce that George was thereby appointed to le Comité de la Fête Nationale, that they were on their way to build the biggest bonfire the parish had ever seen.

"Bon," George replied, laughing, nodding, "Bon... parfait...pas d'problème..." The wind was in his hair now and he was cradling his chain saw against him as the truck lurched onto the main road then swung east toward the centre of the township. He was trying not to show the utter glee he felt at being pressed into this special job, this ritual.

When they reached the site, it was decided that George should be le foreman anglais, comme d'habitude, and so he was installed on the hill behind the church with half a case of Molson's Laurentide, in charge of constructing

the fire. The others hauled up brush and scrap lumber, pulp lengths of spruce and maple.

As George worked, he felt that he was being watched. The others had gone off for another load of wood; the church below was empty; he was alone.

His old fascination for fires took hold and he worked on with a kid's delight, arranging logs just so, packing the centre with tires and straw and stove oil; it would go up like a bomb.

Once again, he sensed eyes upon him. He spun around in time to see a small boy's head duck behind a clump of weeds. It looked like the little Miron boy from down the road. "Hello!" George called, "Viens-t'en! Donne-moi un coup d'main!" But the boy had fled, darting silently from his hiding place to scramble down the hillside, disappearing toward home.

Oh well, George thought, he would probably have done the same at that age. As a kid, he'd always hidden from strange men. He'd always played alone, fearing intrusions to his games.

It was nearly lunch time when he finally got home. Lise was at the kitchen table doing some translations when he came in all worked up about le feu de la Saint-Jean Baptiste. "I built it," he proclaimed, "C'est comme un rite — un rite québécois — et je l'ai fait!" Poking in,

the fridge for food, he could still feel the triumph of it. "C'est pas mal, ça," he said, "Not bad for an English kid from Montreal."

"Tant mieux," Lise said, smiling calmly as she always did when she indulged him in these notions, then carrying on with her work.

"And I get to light it," he went on, "Me and Luc and Curé Lachance —"

"Attends-minute," she interrupted, frowning over at him curiously, "Toi et le prêtre?"

"Sure!" he laughed, calling back to her as he headed down the hall to wash up, "Tous les chefs de la paroisse!"

When he reached the bathroom mirror he hardly recognized himself. His hair was a tangle of wild curls dampened with sweat. There were spruce-needles and sawdust in his hair, an odd-shaped smudge of earth across his forehead; no wonder the Miron kid had run.

He washed his face then leaned toward the mirror to comb out his moustache. It was only June, but his face was already tanned. Windburn had deepened the creases that crept up from his eyes and from the corners of his mouth as he smiled at his reflection. It was a new face: like everything else, it had changed so much in the past year. It was a different world he lived in now, vitally different from the suburb where he'd grown up — that

tidy, peaceful, English-speaking place that had seemed worlds apart from everything around it.

Back there, back then when he was small, he must have figured that the whole world was made up of green back-yards and quiet streets, of fathers who worked in offices in clean white shirts, of moms who played bridge and phoned for groceries and read magazines; there had been no reason to doubt that everyone was much the same. He could still remember how the older kids from up the street had warned of alien threats. There had been rumors of different kids who spoke a different language, who started wars with snowballs, dirt clods, rocks.... Just stories, he had figured at the time — lies devised to scare him. He was often teased.

After lunch, George was up in the back pasture, intending to get some work done on the fences, but it was turning into one of those bright windy days when he could never get much done. He puttered for a while, but his mind was on the evening — the fête — his bonfire. Finally, he headed up toward the summit of the hill, to the stand of cedars where, during his first trek of the property, he had discovered a weather-beaten chair. He'd left it there for his private use. It was in a perfect enclosed vantage point — a knoll of bedrock surrounded on three sides by

the trees, open to the south.

He sat down, sighed, and stretched his legs out. He peered down for a minute at his work boots, deciding that they bore, in all their scars and stains, a sort of history of his recent life. He looked south then, squinting off into the distance as if to look back to his earlier life. The span of ridges before him faded from green to bluish grey, sloping down into the broad Saint Lawrence Valley. It was clear enough to see Montreal quite well, its mountain a low mound on the horizon, its suburbs barely visible as clusters of beige specks merging with the sparkle of the river. At that distance, shimmering through currents of summer air, the city seemed remote and still. Suspended just above it, hardly noticeable in the bright sky, was the pale disk of the moon. The daylight moon had fascinated George since childhood: he had always found something curious and attractive in its pallor, its frail translucent-looking face....

It made him feel old beyond his years to look down at the city where he'd grown up. He found that he was thinking back to the sunny back-yards of the Town of Mount Royal, back to when he was a timid kid no bigger than the Miron boy. He could still picture the secret place between the hedges where he used to play alone, devising his elaborate games.

It was not just his life that had changed so much since those days. The city was different now; Québec was surely different; the world seemed to have changed so drastically. Even the moon was different now that the Americans had been there and so much of the mystery was gone. He could remember how the moon had haunted his imagination as a child. He could still call up that image in his mind, that scene from some cheap picture book — the yellow lunar surface and black sky, cheesy-looking crags and craters everywhere — a new world to explore. Moonscapes had loomed in his dreams; he'd longed to go....

George smiled when he remembered the event that had put an end to all that. He shook his head. It had been one of the first great fiascos of his life. It had happened ages ago. Maybe '56 or '57. He'd been too young to be sure of what was real and what was just pretend, a kid with rocketships and sputniks on his mind, a chronic daydreamer playing at escaping from that tidy world of his and ending up with a shock that he would never forget.

He sat back in the old chair, enjoying the hilltop breezes as he gazed into the distance trying to reconstruct the whole adventure in his mind.

He had been so devious at that age; there had been days of secret preparations, the assembling of props.

Matches had been pilfered and carefully hidden. He had gathered inflammables in a coffee tin: turpentine, floor wax, nail polish remover; anything that smelled funny would blow. A moonship was readied. It was, in fact, a dusty baby stroller outfitted with some old TV components from the basement, rigged with wires and old switches.

On the day of departure, the craft was rolled out of the garage, pushed across the back-yard to the seclusion of the spot between the hedges. He shook the tin of rocket fuel and removed the lid. It was dark and potent, reeking of combustibility. He positioned it beneath the stroller seat. There was nothing to fear from explosions. In TV cartoons they seemed to propel people around quite well. No one got hurt; at worst, the victim might end up with a blackened face, a funny grin when the BOOM cloud had subsided. There was no reason to doubt what he had seen a hundred times on Channel 5.

At zero hour, the daylight moon was visible, attainable-looking above the neighbours' treetops. He adjusted the angle of his ship, picturing that alien land mass curving into closer view, into his reach. If his visions had included moonmen, he must have assumed they'd be hospitable and English-speaking. But such details were unimportant to the game.

He arranged the electronic junk about him. Gazing

upward, he foresaw the thrill of propulsion, the airy trajectory that would carry him aloft, up and up above the shingled angles of the rooftop. The enclosed world of his back-yard would shrink beneath him as he soared with sky wind in his hair, rocketing toward a wondrous overview of everything. He threw toggle switches recklessly. From his deepest pocket he drew a match. He held onto it a moment, stalling, frightened by his own imaginings but maintaining faith in the mysteries of fire, in the magic of the electronic scrap about him, in the realness of his secret games.

He struck the match. Reaching underneath himself, groping for ignition, he was already forcing his imagination into flight, away from all he knew and into soaring fantasy, toward fantastic landfall in another world. His fingers found the tin, the rim; he let go...

It was confused at first: a poof and a curl of dark smoke — a dash of feeling through his fingers like a splash of ice — then pain — rising, ringing pain — shooting up his arm as the dazzle of chemical flame subsided in the blistered tin. Frantic, he was tearing at the shell of TV parts that held him, tearing away the remnants of the game to run. The burn had stunned him because he didn't run toward the house, toward his mother. He couldn't even cry. He just flew on the blind instinct to escape the

hurt. He burst through the hedge into the street, twisting with pain.

It was a shock when strong hands fell onto his shoulders, caught him, held him firmly. He opened his eyes to see strange soiled work clothes. There was a stranger's face descending toward him. It was a man, but not his father, not like any neighbour. The face was like none he'd ever seen up close before. It seemed dark and enormous, eclipsing everything behind it. The skin was rough, scarred and stubbled. There were strange grey eyes looking directly down into his own — a black moustache — a shock of curly hair beneath the brim of a labourer's cap.

"Qu'est-ce qu'y a, p'tit gars? Heh?" the man was saying, "T'es-tu fais mal, là? Dis-moi! Qu'est-ce qu'y a?

It was then that the wonder of his discovery broke, with all the strangeness and the fear of landfall in a world beyond his own; it was only then he cried.

The long-awaited feu de la Saint-Jean Baptiste got under way at dusk on the hill behind the church. The whole parish seemed to be there. Guys were hauling coolers of beer up from the cars and there were teenagers in Québec T-shirts, dozens of little kids as well with miniature flags and flashlights. There were even a few of the old habitants from the back farms with their overalls and pipes

and white hair. George and Lise knew almost everyone by sight; they were all neighbours, les gens de la paroisse.

When the time came and Curé Lachance had said a few words to open the festivities, Luc Chauvin went first, stuffing wads of newspaper here and there around the base of the fire. The old priest went next, circling slowly, anointing each spot with a splash of kerosene. It was George's privilege to follow with a book of matches, igniting each prepared place in turn.

It caught fast; George had to step back as the small flames suddenly converged, surging upward in a crackling shaft of fire that sent a stream of black leaves twisting up into the sky. Kids were cheering the rising flames, and someone got them singing:

Feu, feu, joli feu;
Ton ardeur nous réjouit,
Feu, feu, joli feu;
Monte dans la nuit...

Someone touched George on the shoulder. He turned to find Serge Laurin handing him a beer and saying, "Sacrament, mais ça marche, ton feu!"

"Bien," George said, shrugging, "C'est pas pire, j'pense."

He was heading over to join Lise when there was a tug at his sleeve. He looked down to see a small face bright in the firelight. It was the little Miron boy,

grown bolder now with the excitement of the fire and his flashlight and his flag. He looked straight up at George and said, "Bonsoir, M'sieur! Bonne Fête!"

RECONNAISSANCE

August

Sometime during that uneasy summer, George must have realized that his bike was a vehicle instead of just a toy. He toured the Town of Mount Royal where he lived, investigating quiet avenues and crescents in the shade of maples. He explored Hampstead and Westmount, English suburbs that were so much like his own.

One morning he ventured downtown as far as Saint Catherine Street, cycling carefully in dangerous traffic. On the way home he pedalled, sweating, up steep park roads to a vantage point on the mountain where he rested and looked east. It was a fantastic view, the whole eastern sprawl of the city. There were ranks of walk-up flats out there, a few high-rises and thick steeples. Beyond, obscured in a haze of distance, there seemed to be strange towers and chimney stacks. That part of Montreal was so immense, so remote from West End suburbs. It seemed to be the source of all the grimmest headlines about underworld

acts and crimes of passion, rings of prostitution, sinister groups conspiring against the English. It scared him; it seemed so alien, a vast French section of the city — core of the vast French-speaking province that surrounded him — unknown and unknowable to an English kid like him.

During the next few days, stray thoughts of the East End aroused him. Something was luring him to go; something had sparked urges to penetrate forbidding regions, to see forbidden things. The back-to-school ads had started on TV and the dread of September hung over him, tempting him to be off on some last adventure before it was too late.

He set out the next day after lunch with an old street map concealed in his back pocket. He'd removed the telltale suburb licence from his bike because this was to be a secret mission — reconnaissance — espionage. He liked the twinges of nervous fear that touched him as he cycled east toward dangerous territory.

Pedalling on and on for miles, he found it all so plain. There were apartment blocks and shops and taverns, plain-looking people about their business, nothing but bland urban August on Jean Talon Est. George began to feel that things were not so easily seen by an outsider. All sorts of things might be masked, latent behind a façade of ordinary doors and store fronts. He allowed his

mind to picture hidden things. Passing sunny churches, he imagined the inside. Dark gilt statuary; waxy dusk; an undertone of whispered Catholic sins.... Underneath the neat church lawns with their French bingo signs were charnal vaults. All about him, there might be undergrounds, dark hide-outs, bomb-makers at work. Beneath the very streets, in cavernous trunk sewers, there could be sealed chambers, lethal caches of grenades... Thrilled with fear, he pedalled on and on, turning down a street with a curious name.

It was somewhere on rue Saint-Zotique that the nature of his spying changed. Original schemes were dropped as he began to wander in spontaneous detours, bolder now, cruising the tenement side streets to follow women. He approached them from behind, cycling close to the curb, secretly watching their shifting hips, the motions of their legs, until he sped past unnoticed — an artful spy passing for a local French kid on his bike.

Far in the distance, he glimpsed a special girl. She had dark hair that seemed marvellously long, a fitted jacket of tan leather; her legs were wonderfully exposed under a short skirt. He was drawn toward her, speeding, forgetting to navigate. He raced past a French sign that he failed to understand, following her down a cul-de-sac. Just as he had almost reached her, she climbed the spiral

steps to an upstairs flat, her skirt hem flipping, her purse bouncing lightly back and forth against her hip. Twisting a key in the lock, she vanished.

Winded — breathing hard — George stopped his bike before the block of East End buildings with their identical spirals of black stairs, their rows of brown doors shut. He found that he was near the end of a blind street, exhausted, lost.

It was starting to get late. He tried to read the map, but it only confused him; he had no point of reference. Thirsty, starting to get hungry, he began circling, looking for some landmark to guide him, abandoning any pretense of adventure. He was too afraid to ask directions, scared to speak to anyone in English, incapable of even trying to speak in grade-eight French. Mute, panicking as rush-hour traffic increased about him, he just kept searching till at last, by chance, he found his way.

It seemed as if daylight was already beginning to wane into dusk. Here and there, sunlight was glancing off plate glass, flaring into tones of red. He could feel the dark edge of the east extending, threatening to overtake him. He peddled toward the English section of the city, racing homeward toward the sinking sun pursued by his own shadow, a weird gangling form on elliptic wheels. It had become a blind retreat — a rout — the alien East

End closing on him with switch-blade fears, French neon words blinking on about him as he fled, pedalling full tilt for home, blowing his cover like a spy in flight.

September

George had been daydreaming again and he was almost late. When he got back to school after lunch, the first bell had gone and the halls were a madhouse of kids with books and food trays. He threaded his way through all the shoving and the noise, yielding to stampedes of loud grade-eights, dodging mock fights. He side-stepped carefully around the knots of talking girls.

His homeroom was downstairs. The basement was secluded and he liked it down there, away from everything. He unzipped his windbreaker as he walked the narrow corridor toward Room 3. The basement peace was broken only by the sound of muffled laughter and the distant smash of steel doors from the Boys' Locker Room at the far end. As he reached his homeroom, George got a whiff of the unsettling odour that was always souring the air, the musk of limp T-shirts and fungicide. He had gym that period; there was no escape.

When he reached the Locker Room there was a lot of stupid scuffling going on among the rougher guys. The noise was deafening. There were thuds and shrieks, yelps of echoing laughter. George retreated to the far corner to get changed among his friends. He belonged to a quiet fellowship of outcasts; there were a few smart kids who flunked phys ed, a handful of pale timid kids who seemed to fail at everything. At times, it scared him to think that he might be trapped forever in that circle of ball-shy, girl-shy boys. This year, though, he imagined that things would be different. He had resolved to change. It was all part of a master plan. He would force himself to do better in gym; he'd improve his shameful marks in maths and French; somehow, he might try to get to know some girls.

Kneeling to lace his running shoes, he was listening to the guys across the room. They were cracking jokes about some party, laughing about certain girls from Ville Emard and about scoring and doses of disease, but a lot of it was masked in slang, coded in language that George feared he might never understand.

There was a basketball game that period. He was lost at games; he never seemed to know the rules, but this time he was trying to act involved. He pretended to pursue the ball, trying to keep from getting in the way

of real players. He was more nervous than usual because there was a group of girls up in the balcony. If he did anything stupid they would see. If he did well, though, they might notice; it might be a first step....

Everything went fine till suddenly — with no warning, no escape — the ball had flashed right toward him and was in his hands. The opposing captain, Merrick, rushed him, stamping hard to panic him. He shot the ball away in a blind toss toward the basket. It looped onto the rim, wobbling into balance. For a second, it just seemed to hang there with everybody watching it until at last it curled along the lip and dropped through. George glanced up at the balcony. The girls were looking down to see who'd scored. It was just one of those freak triumphs that happens now and then all by itself. His captain slapped him on the back and said, "Way-t-go, George," and flashed a grin at Merrick just to razz him.

Then he really began to play. There was something stimulating in the rough action. For a moment, the other awkward kids seemed underfoot. Maybe, he was thinking, maybe things really would be different this year.... He was lunging into scrimmages now, blocking, zigzagging with his gym shoes squeaking on the hardwood, imagining that he might even score again.

He never actually knew who got him. It was a quick

hard stroke from underneath. The pain stung between his legs, welling through his groin into a sickening spasm that spun his vision in a whirl and sent him, white and trembling, to the benches. He didn't dare look up; he feared the girls had seen it all, that they were probably whispering about it, probably giggling.

He was still dizzy when he got to history class, but he recovered as the period wore on. Mr McDonald assigned some notes on New France and the fur trade and everyone was scribbling down names and dates and details. A lot of it was boring stuff, but stories of the voyageurs had always fascinated George. He liked the images of birch canoes and strapping muscles and endurance; he liked tales of expeditions into unknown lands. Often, lately, he would look up at the faded map of Canada above the blackboard, wondering about the huge unknown expanses of Quebec. Its sheer size and its northern reaches intrigued him; it was another of those things that troubled his imagination sometimes, one of the things that drew his mind away from things around him, away from all the stupid games and the stupid girls that didn't really interest him anyway. He pictured ranges of endless mountains, the forests and cold rivers, tough French lumbermen and trappers, awesome isolation from everything he knew.....

"Well," Mr McDonald said, looming out of nowhere, "All done?"

"Yes, Sir," George said. He showed his page of notes, trying to conceal a patch of doodlings with his hand.

Mr McDonald was frowning down at it. "Fine," he said at last, "Fine. Go ahead to Chapter Three." And he was gone.

In a moment, George's thoughts were wandering again. He was looking out the window this time, gazing along the boulevard toward the far end of the suburb where the new French high school had been built, toward the East End of the city where he'd gone the month before. His pen was straying through the margins of his notes, curling into wiggly outlines of canoes and fir trees, of stars and hearts and crosses.

As soon as the bell rang at 3:15, the halls were jammed. Everybody was in a rush to leave except George, who had taken up unusual practices that term. His afternoon was carefully planned, precisely timed; there was twenty minutes to wait. Bumped and jostled in the din of slamming lockers, he made his way upstairs against the flow of kids.

It was a relief to reach the library. Its heavy door shut out the noise. Seated at a reading table in

the calm hum of the fluorescent lights, he checked the clock, then flipped an atlas open to kill time.

On a city map, the suburb of Mount Royal stood out as a square of regularity, its streets appearing like a neatly structured maze. There were diagonal boulevards converging on the centre that contained the public buildings and the school in which he sat. Odd, he thought, that they'd put the French school out at one end; it seemed to throw the whole scheme out of balance. With his finger, he traced the secret route that he'd be following soon.

He examined the map on the next page. It showed Quebec with its unimaginable span of northern wilderness, the south dotted thick with names of Catholic saints. It was hard to believe that the Town of Mount Royal was a part of it, that he himself was part of a place that seemed so foreign.

The school was finally stilled. Beyond the frosted glass of the library door, there was the passage of an indistinguishable blur, a trace of woman's footsteps in the bare hall. It was time for him to go.

Precisely at four, he turned the corner onto the far end of the boulevard, windbreaker zipped up, his fat brown brief case bumping back and forth against his thigh. It was breezy out. Above his head, boughs of leaves were

filtering the light, dappling the sidewalk at his feet with shade. As he walked, he was wondering about this daily excursion. Sometimes it seemed pretty pointless, pretty stupid, but it was something he looked forward to. It was a private game, a spying game at which he was the master.

The boulevard was quiet at that hour. Suburb moms in station wagons were gliding past him as the French high school slipped into view through shade trees. It was a modern building of rough brick and tinted glass. George had investigated and had found out everything. It was a girls' school. Most of its students travelled back and forth from areas outside Mount Royal. They got out at four.

Today he was right on schedule: the sidewalk ahead was thick with girls in blazers and grey skirts. As usual, they were massed about their bus stop gossiping and laughing. He imagined that his pace was stiff and tried to alter it. Pushing his glasses straight, he prepared to walk the sweet gantlet of Catholic girls. With cautious glances, he studied them as he approached. He was beginning to remember certain ones by sight — certain brunettes with long hair and eye shadow, certain tall girls who wore their school skirts short. They were oblivious to him, of course, busy talking back and forth in indecipherable

French, busy watching for their bus. Passing among them, he caught images and stored them in his memory: close glimpses of serge blazers and white blouses unbuttoned at the throat, tiny crosses dangling near shadowed clefts of flesh beyond the arm loads of stacked French texts....

Then he was past them and on his way along the boulevard, to circle home along the wide streets of his childhood. It was home for now to homework and TV.

October

Centering the sheet of foolscap on his desk, he inscribed as neatly as he could: George Winters, History 9C, October 25. Mr McDonald's back was to the class, a loose expanse of chalky sports jacket moving back and forth as he scribbled test questions on the board. George wasn't very well prepared; his mind had been on other things.

Before he could get started, his thoughts were drawn to Francine Moreau as they had been every day since she'd appeared. She was a transfer student who'd arrived at the beginning of the month, the first and only French kid in the school. She was petite and dark-eyed, deeply tanned, unique among the ordinary Cathys and Joannes. She

spoke English with an accent that was rich and alluring, exquisitely French, with an odd inflexion that made George think she must have come from some distant region of Quebec. McDonald anglicized her name; it was a travesty and a private joke to George — Franscene, Franseen.

Midway through the test, stumped and trying to think back to his notes, he was staring down the aisle toward her desk. Her feet were stirring into idle motions. They were rising from her loafers, flexing backward as she leaned ahead to write. Her knees seemed tawny, perfectly formed, shadowed by the dark pleats of her tunic hem.

A tapping noise alerted him; Mr McDonald was looking at him from the front desk, motioning to him to keep his eyes where they belonged.

George tried to concentrate on dates and trade routes, on the exploits of <u>coureurs de bois</u>, boundless forests, distance, flowing waters. To jog his memory, he had to glance up at the map above the blackboard. Francine was busy at her work, her hand moving in light undulations as she wrote. That tan of hers was so deep.... He found that he was picturing her bathed in sunlight on the shore of some uncharted lake. In the vision, she was almost naked, lying on some rough shelf of rock, her breaths in rhythm with the lapping flicker of the water, alone in northern stillness, sheltered by surrounding woods. She

was faintly smiling in sleep, dreaming in French....

He was still scribbling answers when the bell rang. By the time he finished, the others had handed in their papers and were gone. Francine's chair was empty. Mr McDonald was back at the blackboard, his arm swinging in dusty arcs, erasing.

George headed downstairs. He was supposed to have gym that period, but instead of going to the Locker Room he was stalling by the Music Room door, waiting for the halls to clear. In a halfhearted imitation of a private eye, he glanced both ways, then slipped sideways through the door. It slid shut behind him with a soft, pleasing click. He was alone now in the safe isolation of the sound-proof room. He took a seat beside the windows.

He'd been skipping phys ed all month. So far, nobody had seemed to notice, but he lived in constant fear of capture. In his own defense, he spent the period at work. When they caught him, he thought, he would tell how he was sick of games that he could never understand, how he needed the time to work at more important things.

He got busy right away, trying to rewrite a French essay as the clock clicked off the minutes in the bright, silent room. With a pocket dictionary, he attempted to pad the composition up to the required length. It was supposed to be about Mes Vacances d'Eté, and he was trying to recount

the bike trip to the East End. He changed things around to make it sound like those happy French stories in the text book, saying that he'd talked to strangers to practise his French, that he'd met a pretty girl — but he couldn't get it to sound right. The language eluded him as always. He was hopeless with verbs; the mystique of genders confused him. He knew that he would never understand it all. Written work was not so bad though; it was the oral tests he feared. There were always questions that he'd never heard before, strange new words. Often he was unable to respond as he stood reddening in front of everybody, forced at last to mumble Je ne comprends pas, Mademoiselle.

He was scared of failing. Pausing, setting the dictionary aside, he thumbed through the stack of French papers in the back of his notebook. Every one was scored with red, the grades embarrassingly low. He always slipped them away as soon as they were returned so that nobody would see. They accumulated in his notebook all term — secret sheaves of tests and essays, out of sight and out of mind.

Once in history class he'd seen one of Francine's French essays on her desk. It had been perfectly neat, of course; no mistakes. There had been a line or two of teacher's comments at the bottom, phrases of indecipherable adult French. Her handwriting had been flawless. He looked

down at his own unformed style, its capitals improvised from the block letters of childhood. He crossed things out too often; his pens bled; his writing strayed hopelessly across the lines.

Messiness had always plagued him, but lately it was becoming chronic, ruinous. It had progressed beyond the doodling in text books and the pencils furrowed with bites. It was not just school things that he seemed so determined to destroy. He'd fiddled with his glasses until they were loose and ill-fitting. With constant picking, he'd chafed his scalp about the hairline till it cracked and bled. Even as he sat there in the silence of the Music Room, he found his fingers busy with the notebook before him. They were working at the spiral wire that bound it — uncoiling it, twisting it, bending it back into a sharp hook.

Footsteps in the hallway startled him. Scared of capture, he bent over his damaged notebook, scribbling away.

It was 3:30 by the time he got downstairs. The basement was quiet, but its air was tainted with those faint smells of deodorant and rotting towels from the Locker Room. The door of Room 3 was ajar behind him as he opened up his locker and slid the books onto the upper shelf. His calendar was scotch-taped to the inside of the

door. With minor mental ceremony, he extended the wobbly line through another date.

There were footsteps near him. When he turned to look he felt a tingle of surprise. It was Francine Moreau, hurrying along his familiar corridor toward Room 3. He watched from the corner of his eye as she approached, turned and vanished into his homeroom, drawing the door shut behind her. He could hear her speaking some muffled greeting to whoever was inside.

On his way out of the building, George checked the bulletin board outside the Office: CLUBS SCHEDULE: Wednesdays — 3:30 p.m. — Room 3 — Le Cercle Français.

Of course.

November

It was already twenty after three; Phase One would go into action in a moment. At his locker, George was straightening his glasses, slapping dandruff off his shoulders. He took a random bunch of notebooks just to carry for effect, then stationed himself in the planned spot and began to wait. Francine's meeting was to start soon. He watched the hall, ready to move at once to

intercept her. It was to be a first step. Down there in the quiet basement, in his familiar territory, he'd have the nerve to go through with it, to walk straight up to her and say hello. There was to be a campaign of incidental meetings till she got to know him, then one day he'd start a proper conversation. It was all planned out and scheduled; it had to work.

Minutes clicked past on the hall clock. A few girls had shown up at Room 3 but not Francine. George was pacing now, circling back to dim corners, always glancing down the hall. It was nearly half past; maybe she wasn't going to show. This plot that he'd embarked on as a sort of game had taken on strange urgency. At the slightest sound chills dove through his stomach. Maybe, he thought, he should forget the whole thing and go home. He tried to calm himself by looking outside, but there were banks of fall cloud and red leaves tumbling into flight. The season was changing fast and the dark sky just made him more uneasy. His palms were sweating now and he was twisting at the binder wires of his notebooks.

He tried to think of something pleasant, to imagine a real friendship with Francine. Maybe it was really going to happen; maybe this year things would be truly different. With her help, he might even master French. Then he could laugh at the bullying clowns in the back row of his French

class; he could smile at their incomprehension and their stammering because he would know the language in all its dark complexities, its inflexions and nuances.

He allowed his mind free rein, picturing himself with Francine at the Christmas Dance. She would cling softly to him as they drifted back and forth across the gym. The rest of the school would be as quiet as the empty Music Room; even the Locker Room beneath them would be stilled, padlocks hanging in their even rows, odours settling in the moonlight among those hacked-up benches and the swollen bags of towels. Above, they'd be dancing on the lacquered hardwood with eyes shut, crossing and recrossing painted foul lines — forgotten boundaries of forgotten games — her delicate feet in perfect time with his....

Somebody was coming now. It was Francine; it was now or never. On the impulse of a rush of nerves, George moved, forcing himself to act before there was time to falter into some retreat. The whole thing had blown away out of proportion. His heart was pounding with heavy double thumps — but in that same instant, it looked like everything was ruined. There were two girls with her. It was almost a relief — an excuse to ditch the whole thing — but he was already in motion toward her. It was vital not to balk, not to give himself away by looking stupid. He kept going, trying to force a casual walk, allowing the

stack of notebooks to swing lightly with his stride.

They were approaching too fast. They seemed oblivious to him, talking to each other as they walked, crossing into the wrong side of the hall. Francine was on the outside, tunic pleats flipping against her knees, a blue sweater drifting out behind her as she hurried, her loafers slapping on the concrete floor. George looked straight at her, but she didn't notice. He had to shrink toward the wall to avoid colliding with her, still forcing a casual expression, a loose stride, notebooks swinging. As they converged, he caught the slightest scent of skin and hair. She passed so close that her sweater brushed him....

There was a tug — a quick elastic tug at his left arm — a soft French cry...

He swung around to see his notebooks flopping to the floor. One was hanging, snagged by its unravelled binder coil in the wool of Francine's sweater. The book was dangling, loose papers sliding out and gliding to the floor in curling zigzags.

"Mon doux!" she said, "What happened?"

George's mind was racing. He could feel the redness flooding across his face. The falling papers were landing face up — sheets of his untidy writing, test papers Xed with red, failed French essays scattered at her feet. Stammering, trying to apologize, he began fumbling with her

sweater. It seemed that he was watching someone else's hands from a great distance. The coil seemed to work deeper into the wool, and Francine was asking him to please try not to tear it.

"I sit," he said, swallowing, "behind you in history class —"

"Oh yes, George," she said, "I know." She smiled.

The binder coil had finally come free. The other girls were waiting with relaxed expressions, as if everyone knew each other, as if nothing dreadful had happened at all. Francine was saying that it was all her fault for being so clumsy. She knelt down then and began collecting George's papers. She was very close to him. Her tunic was sliding up across her thighs and at that range, he could see that her legs were flecked with pale hairs, chafed and scarred about the knees. Her heels were lifting from her loafers as she leaned ahead retrieving foolscap sheets.

"Bien," she said at last, "There we are," and handed him a tidy stack of papers.

As they stood together, a tall figure appeared along the hall. It was some grade-ten boy on his way to the Locker Room, swinging a pair of running shoes at his side. As he passed, he seemed to be looking curiously at George and the three girls. On a sudden bold impulse, George looked straight back and nodded hello. There was no response. The boy just

kept on walking, swinging his gym shoes, glancing back at George with an odd smirk.

"We had better go," Francine was saying, "Our meeting — We must be late by now."

In parting, George was able to look right at her, still unusually bold. "See you, Francine," he said, and it came out well; he'd managed to give her name its proper French pronunciation.

She looked back, smiling, with those dark French eyes of hers and said, "Yes, I'll see you, George." And she was gone, hurrying along the hall toward Room 3, the others trailing like a pale entourage behind her.

Once more, George was alone in his quiet basement. The corners of his mouth were set in a tight grin. It had all worked out in spite of everything. It was a stroke of blind luck. His thoughts were impelled into a spin. Maybe, he was thinking, maybe... Striding back along the hall, he let all his fantasies roll back through his mind, but this time they were shaded with realities. If things <u>really</u> worked out, it could open up so much to him, so many things that had always seemed to be remote and frightening. Francine might open up the whole sphere of French Quebec, the mysteries of the language, all the mysteries of the city beyond the English suburbs, of the enormous northern land beyond the city.

Back at his locker, ready to head home, George was slipping homework books into the brief case at his feet, listening to the murmur of le Cercle Français, the pleasing sound of French emerging through the door of his homeroom.

All of a sudden, there was someone close behind him, a tap on his shoulder; he turned, startled to see Merrick: Brian Merrick in gym shorts and an old Mount Royal T-shirt with the sleeves torn off, his freckled muscles bared. There were two others behind him, watching. "Hey, Winters," he was saying, his face embarrassingly close, leering; "Whatta you got to grin about?"

George's mind was blank; there was no answer. "Wh— what?" he said, backing up against a cool wall of locker steel.

"Listen, Winters," Merrick went on, "You've been seen talking to Fran-seen —"

Stricken, George felt the redness welling across his face again. "Who?" he asked, stalling, struggling to seem at ease, "Oh — Oh, yeah, Fran-seen..." He attempted to laugh then, to deepen his voice, to make the whole thing sound like a locker-room joke. "It was really funny, see? My binder coil got —"

Merrick's hand clamped onto his shirt and twisted up into a fist. The others stepped back. "Look, Winters," he said, and George was yanked close to him, so close that

he caught the scent of sweat and gym dust off his shirt. Suddenly, the basement halls were as dangerous as some back alley; where were the teachers? the prefects? Merrick was still talking. "I don't like creeps like you bothering my women," he said, pressing even closer, tighening his grip, "Understand?"

George felt himself suddenly drawn forward and shot back. He slammed the wall of lockers with a flat whack that drove the breath out of his lungs. Everything flashed out of focus, out of shape, and he was trying to speak but nothing would come out; wide-eyed and mute, he was gasping for air.

"Cummon, Merrick," somebody was saying, "Leave the kid alone." Someone had picked up George's glasses and had tucked them into his shirt pocket.

"See ya, Winters," Merrick had said, and the three figures were dissolving down the hall toward the Locker Room. They were shoving and yelling as they went, scuffling in the distance. George's head was spinning now. It was as if the visions that had been in his mind before were spiralling into collapse, elaborate fantasies tumbling away. Everything about him seemed to dance in wobbling circulation, contracting and expanding as he caught his breath in awkward gulps and tried to shake the dizziness, tried to tell himself that he was OK.

Outdoors it was bright and windy; the air seemed as cold as winter air. He breathed it deeply and it helped to clear his head. The suburb streets were empty except for a few delivery trucks, a few children straggling home from school with plastic school bags. They were yelling, chasing each other through piles of dead leaves in some futile game. To the east, the city sky was edged with a mauve smog. Looking north, George thought that he could see faint ridges of hills on the horizon. As he walked on, hurrying, he was thinking about the unknown land that lay in that direction, about the cold mountains that stretched a thousand miles beyond the borders of Mount Royal.

Before he knew it, he was rounding the corner onto the far end of the boulevard. He'd made it in time; ahead of him was the crowd of girls in blazers and grey skirts, waiting for their bus beside the Catholic high. Passing among them with a strange absence of fear, he glanced from one face to another until a pair of dark French eyes met his. It was now or never; he smiled, nodding. "Bonjour," he said. It was to be a first step.

REVOLUTION TRANQUILLE

At first, George wasn't sure whether the sound was real or not. He'd been cramming for a history exam; his mind was clogged with names and dates and causes and effects, and he didn't need interruptions. But the distant siren was growing louder. Probably some cop show on TV downstairs. Distractions.

He got up and shut the door and went back to the tidy lamp-lit corner of his room. But the siren sound grew louder.

He got up again to look outside. There wasn't very much that he could see because the window pane was frosted over. Things seemed quiet though; there seemed to be no motion in the snowy suburb streets, just normal winter evening and the normal greenish glare of street lamps. But the siren sound was quite loud now and it seemed to come from all directions. At last, a streak of red appeared, blinking, twinkling for a second through the grey frost crystals, slipping past along the boulevard. And then another blinking streak slipped past behind the first one, and the sirens grew fainter.

George set the text book face down on his desk and went downstairs to get his coat, to take a look up the street and see just what was going on up there.

Always distractions.

In the dim front hall, he slipped into his winter coat. His parents, watching TV in the living room, probably hadn't heard him come down. Quietly he stepped outside and shut the door behind him.

It was cold out. Everything had frozen up. There must have been some freezing rain, he thought, because there was an unusual glaze of ice all over everything, a glossy film on the snow and a rippled grey gloss on all the tree trunks and the lamp posts, and on all the cars parked in the driveways. He had to stop for a minute at the foot of the front walk just to take a look around. On all the decorated evergreens up and down the street, the Christmas lights were blurred and softened, reflected in dull ice. All the other trees were incredible-looking too because every twig was glistening in the street-lamp light, and all the wires overhead were strands of silver ice. It seemed as if the world had been coated in a shell of crystal plastic. Damn it, he thought, this is really beautiful.

The sidewalks were treacherous though. They hadn't been ploughed all season because the guys who worked for

the municipality had been out on strike for three or four weeks now, and the snow had been packed down into rough grey ice, unsanded, unsalted, and now it was slick with this fresh film of ice and if you weren't very very careful walking you could slip and break your neck. George hadn't bothered to put on his boots. His shoes didn't seem to have much traction, so on his way up to the boulevard he was walking cautiously with carefully-placed steps. He had to keep his hands stuffed in his pockets because he hadn't bothered with gloves either.

When he got up to the boulevard he had a shock that stopped him in his tracks; he stepped backward in surprise and almost lost his footing on a patch of ice. A mass of people was moving toward him — spread right out across the boulevard — with white placards sticking up at all angles and drooping red banners hung on sticks. Confounded, he just stood there for a minute, frowning down that quiet residential boulevard that he'd known all his life. Suddenly it was like some place he'd never seen before; there was that weird ice coating on the trees and hedges, the strange effect of all those glowy Christmas lights, and in the middle of it all came this weird jostling parade of people with French placards poking up all through their ranks with union symbols and words about <u>solidarité</u> with <u>les grévistes</u>. It looked as if it had to do with the blue-collar workers

strike because out front there was a sort of scarecrow with the mayor's name pinned to it, and it was dangling from a noose. The cops weren't interfering.

George didn't know quite what to do. He knew he had to see where this outfit was heading and what would happen when it got there. Not wanting to look like a dumb bystander — a bit afraid, in fact, of what might happen to him if he made himself conspicuous to these people — he felt that maybe he should just slip into the procession as it passed. Right in there — inconspicuous, undercover — he could tag along and see all he wanted to see.

So a moment later, he found himself shoulder to shoulder in that outlandish troop of people from outside the suburb. There were older guys and kids his own age and women in skidoo boots, all moving in a steady progress toward the centre of the suburb, tramping down the middle of the street. Everyone was laughing and talking and shouting back and forth. It was so cold that everybody's breath was showing in the air. Meanwhile, the Mount Royal cops were just patrolling up and down the march, waving buses onto side streets and rerouting other traffic and keeping an eye on things. George was glancing back at them now and then, a bit afraid of what might happen if they decided to bust up this operation.

There was one old guy in the march who was really

something, with a full grey beard and blue eyes and a bright red tuque with a fleur-de-lys stitched to it. He was in an army surplus parka and construction boots, and he had a canvas knapsack stuffed with pamphlets. He was always on the move, running up and down the line, ducking in and out, laughing, organizing chants, whumping his woollen mitts together in time to slogans about le Québec and révolution. He was always on the go, popping up all over with those fantastic curly whiskers and those blue eyes of his.

Before long, the march was getting close to the centre of the suburb. There were a few onlookers now — middle-aged guys in overcoats and housewives with fur coats draped on their shoulders — out just for a minute to see what the hell was going on. Some men were standing in their driveways with their hands on their hips, looking pretty stunned about the whole thing. There was one couple out on their terrace holding up a little kid to see the march go past as if it were the Santa Claus Parade or something, and in a funny sort of way, George felt better to be in there where he was.

The old character was still circulating through the crowd, clapping his big mitts and shouting slogans in the night air, with his voice rising in gusts of vapour, his eyes flickering in the street-lamp light.

By this time the march was moving around the traffic circle that led toward the Town Hall. Over all the heads and placards and the drooping banners, George could see the red lights blinking on the cop cars as they circled around the other way. It was hard to believe that all this was happening on what was supposed to have been a normal winter school night that was supposed to have been spent at home, at his quiet bedroom desk, cramming for that history exam.

In front of the Town Hall the whole procession fanned out in the street and stopped. There was a line of cops in front of the building — suburb cops in blue-black overcoats — standing six or seven feet apart, wearing some sort of white plastic helmets that looked an awful lot like hockey helmets. They had their hands in front of them, folded into wide gloved fists. They also had mean-looking four-foot riot sticks and most of them were tapping them, very lightly, on the ice between their feet and looking straight ahead. It seemed to George that no one knew exactly what to do next. He himself couldn't figure out the safest thing to do, so he just hung back at the fringes of the crowd, observing, trying to plot some avenue of escape in case things should get hot.

A few young guys were hooting at the cops now, shouting catcalls at them, but it was all in French that

George couldn't really make out and the cops pretended not to hear it anyhow. All the time that old guy was passing back and forth, trying hard to get some proper slogans going, working to get everybody organized enough to make some kind of point.

There was movement behind the glass doors of the Town Hall and just then the doors swung open and some kind of head cop came out. He was in a regular police uniform with brass buttons and a regular police cap. He had a bullhorn with him and he stood there on the steps and tuned it till it gave a feedback whine; then he tuned it down a bit and started giving some long spiel in French. It sounded as if he ended up by commanding everybody to break it up and to clear out of the area or else, and then, of course, there was all kinds of whistling and heckling from the crowd. The chants about les ouvriers and révolution were getting louder now and clearer, and the cops in those odd plastic helmets were glancing back and forth while the head cop up on the steps was shouting through crackling static on the bullhorn, yelling Circulez! Circulez!

A quick blur caught George's eye and he looked up in time to see a hunk of ice or something cruising through the air in a long silent arc. It clunked with a tinkling of broken glass through some upstairs office window, and

there was an isolated cheer off to the left. Just then a jolt shot back through the crowd and everybody bolted in a panicked mass of arms and ducking heads and placards dropping in the snow; everybody was crashing into everybody else, swearing like hell, trying to take off in all directions at the same time. Up toward the front, white helmets were bobbing in the crowd and riot sticks were slicing through the air.

George froze; he held his ground for some reason, with people pouring past him left and right. Ski-jacketed elbows bumped him hard and some heavy woman ploughed straight into him, cursing away a-mile-a-minute about _les maudits chiens_. It was all he could do to stay on his feet. His heart was hammering like crazy. All of a sudden, he got a clear view through the whole mess and saw a kid about his own age running for it, and the kid got clipped in the back of the legs with a riot stick. George saw him go down on the trampled snow among all the scattered picket signs, doubling up and trying to cover up his head because the cop was over him now, whacking at him with the club, trying to jab him in the ribs. Then out of nowhere there was the old bearded guy with the red tuque and the pack of pamphlets. He stepped right up to the cop and gave him a quick shove. The cop slipped, skidded on the ice and went dancing backward with his arms flailing like crazy and the

riot stick swinging in wild loops, and he landed in a slapstick pratfall smack on his rear end in the middle of the street. Meanwhile the kid was up and running, and meanwhile all the other cops converged on the old guy and he never really had a chance to save himself. The whiskers and the army parka and the red tuque slipped out of sight behind a wall of blue-black overcoats.

It was so strange; there was no sound. Away off in the distance, there was faint shouting — demonstrators trying to regroup — and there were even some weak attempts at slogans filtering back, strange French echoes in the winter darkness, but from the ring of cops' backs, there was no sound. All that George could see of what was going on inside that circle was cops' elbows and cops' black shoes jerking in and out, glimpses of some rough thrashing motion at the centre.

Then the ring of cops had broken, as suddenly as it had formed, and the two cops that had been bending down had backed off too. George found himself staring out across a wide expanse of trampled street snow. The old guy was just lying there. It looked like he was out cold because he wasn't moving at all, and because he was in a strange position, legs every which way in the snow, arms drawn back behind him, linked at the wrists with handcuff chains.

His head was rammed down face first on the ice and his face seemed all twisted out of shape and there was blood. The red tuque was missing. The old guy's hair was wet, matted down across his eyes. There were pamphlets scattered under him and over him, all about him in the snow. All George could do was stand there as if he were somehow anchored to the ground. The distant shouting of the dispersed people had faded out and the edges of George's field of vision had seemed to frost up in such a way that everything except the image of the old man had blurred out. For the moment, he wasn't afraid of anything, but his head was spinning and his heart was still hammering and his throat was going dry.

He took one slow step forward, paused, then took another step ahead, moving gradually closer to the unconscious man, seeing nothing but that calm bleeding face and the mound of dirty snow on which he lay. Blood from the old man's split lip had formed an odd-shaped blot against the snow.

At that moment, it occurred to George that he had no special neutral status, that he wasn't invisible, and that if he didn't come to life and get a move on he was going to get clobbered as sure as hell because to all intents and purposes he was just another isolated demonstrator and a sitting duck. But his mind was still reeling from

it all and he was feeling mad and scared and out of place, yet somehow he was right where he belonged. He was feeling at once like a routed demonstrator and like some dumbfounded onlooker, and it was just beginning to sink in that everything he'd witnessed had been very very real — nothing like those fake fight scenes on cop shows — even more real than all those demonstration film clips on the TV news. And it occurred to him again that a very real riot stick might be bouncing off his head before long if he didn't take off out of there. Sure enough, just then a cop had shouted something and had started toward him.

George ran for it; he bolted for cover, trying to watch his footing on the icy ground — glancing back — winded — scared. But the cop hadn't come after him. He kept going though, just to be safe. He ducked through an alleyway behind some old apartment buildings, then cut across the Arena parking lot and headed home because he was tired and cold and he'd seen enough for one night.

On the boulevard, he tried to walk as casually as he could —still breathing hard — prepared to give his name and address to the cops if they should grab him. It was late, past eleven. His parents would be in bed when he got home; he'd have to go in quietly. They'd probably not heard him leave the house; they might never know that

he'd been out that evening. Halfway home, he was thinking that in a few minutes he'd be going in, stepping softly up the stairs, turning down the dark carpeted hallway toward his bedroom. He would see that strip of yellow light glowing through the crack beneath his door. He had the strangest feeling for an instant that when he opened that door he might find himself seated in the pool of lamp light at the desk, hunched over the history text, never having gone outside at all. It was eerie: a weird thing to imagine. It gave him an icy shudder as he walked, but he laughed it off because it seemed to be a pretty stupid thing to think about, and anyway, he was so tired that he wasn't able to think straight any more.

It was getting colder all the time. He was walking with his hands jammed tight in his pants pockets and his ears were freezing because he hadn't thought to bring a hat. He was already starting to mull over the things he'd seen, recounting all the facts, trying to put things in perspective, but his thoughts were muddled. He couldn't sort out causes and effects; so many things confused him that he thought that his whole viewpoint might be starting to shift around in an unusual way. It was as if he was no longer even sure if he had actually been a neutral onlooker, or a sort of counterdemonstrator, or in fact a demonstrator himself against his own municipality.... But he was far too

cold to think out complicated things, and he was so distracted by all the twinkling Christmas lights and by the trees that were still outlined in glittering ice so that their smallest branches caught the street-lamp glare. It was so beautiful, so very peaceful that it was nearly impossible to realize that what had happened there that night had ever actually happened after all...

In a flash of shock the ground had shifted — whipped out from under him — and the boulevard and street lamps and silver treetops had slashed up in a flash of black sky...

...and flat out on his back on the quiet suburb sidewalk, George was looking up and feeling kind of dazzled by the shock of having fallen on the damn ice.

It was funny; when he'd gone down he hadn't been able to get his hands out of his pockets in time to break his fall, so he'd gone straight down like a bound man, which was probably just as well, he thought, because he might have sprained a wrist or something. Still just lying there, trying to compose himself, he determined that in spite of the sudden upending violence of his fall, he could still move everything, that as far as he could tell, no bones were broken. But then again, he couldn't be sure until he tried to rise. The shock had jolted him wide awake, slamming him straight back to his senses, and it was

perfectly clear that everything that he had seen that night had actually happened.

Almost ready to get up and brush himself off and continue on his way, George lay a moment longer on the cold sidewalk ice, with a stark white street light flaring in his eyes and the flat-black sky beyond. He wouldn't really know until he tried to stand, but he was pretty certain he was OK after all.

REVÉILLON

When George finally got off work on Christmas Eve he felt dead tired. The drive home was miserable. The streets of downtown Montreal were thick with hectic shoppers, the intersections clogged with slush. His apartment seemed more cheerless than usual that evening. As he prepared himself a bite to eat, he was thinking that he could have put up some small decoration. Now that he was on his own, he never bothered with religious holidays. There was nothing to mark the season except two cards that stood beside the toaster. His parents had sent a nice one from Toronto, a scene of winter in some mountain forest. Beside it was the small card that Lise had sent. It showed a country church engulfed in darkness and blue snow, windows glowing, titled Messe de Minuit.

Setting the alarm, he lay down for an hour. He needed some rest for the long drive to Lachute, for this réveillon affair with Lise's family that was supposed to go on half the night.

It was hopeless though; he couldn't get to sleep.

There was a party going on upstairs, discordant jazz booming through the vent shafts of the building. The traffic noise outside tormented him. He tossed and turned and thought about this strange night that awaited him. He was wondering how he'd get along up there, an outsider in the midst of the Brisebois' family rituals, a stranger whose French was faltering at best, who wasn't used to small-town ways, who had always celebrated Christmas in the light of day.

In the end, he left early. He was fed up, glad to get out of the city, anxious to be with Lise. It was a tiresome drive over miles of highway caked with grey snow. He had to use the radio to stay awake. He drove the last few miles with drowsy eyes, carols and Christmas hymns blaring through his mind until at last Lachute appeared ahead, a mass of lights across the snow-bound fields, twinkling in the cold with the black ridge of the Laurentians rising just beyond. It had begun to snow.

In a minute he was at the Brisebois house, standing in the blue glow of their Christmas lights, knocking.

No answer.

Lise had warned him on the phone; they might be out when he arrived. Family visits — their tradition. He was to let himself in by the back door, to make himself at home.

He opened the door that led into Madame Brisebois's bright kitchen. "Bonjour?" he yelled, just in case, "Hello?" but the house was empty. He stepped in. It felt very strange to be there alone. There were pots on the stove. He went over and lifted each lid to see immersed potatoes, wedges of turnip, peas. In the oven there was a fat turkey, browning nicely. Everything was so much like his mother's Christmas dinners that it made him feel a little more at ease, made him think back.

He hung his coat in the front hall, combed his hair, sat down in the living room. He waited. Their Christmas tree was elaborate, a bit spindly but richly decorated. Lise's work. He got up and took her gift from his coat pocket, examining again the tiny jeweller's box done up in white and gold. He placed it underneath the tree among the other gifts.

In the corner behind the tree, leaning up against the wall, there seemed to be some odd oversize present. It was not wrapped in the usual way, but was shrouded instead with white cloth, topped with a mass of yellow ribbons and a dangling tag. He stretched his arm in and flipped the tag over to read it. It was Lise's gift to him. He couldn't imagine what it was — something tall, flat-looking, a couple of feet high — a mystery. Alone in the house, there was a great tempation to peek. He'd

always been too curious for his own good. But he restrained himself; it would hardly be fair to ruin her surprise.

Just then, a second label caught his eye. It was attached to a small package sealed in tissue paper. It said à Georges de Mme Brisebois. God, he thought, what would she choose for me? He picked it up, squeezed it, shook it close to his ear, but it was as much of a mystery as that tall shrouded gift behind the tree.

Once more, George sat down to wait, but he was restless in the strange house. He wandered upstairs and along the hall, snooping idly. He peered into Lise's brother's room. Through dim light he could see Armand's guitar, a dark quilt on his bed. He recognized the poster on the far wall: the colours of the old Patriote Rebellion behind the outline of that gaunt habitant with his cap and clay pipe and his rifle, striding off to fight the British.

He moved on along the hallway, feeling like an intruder now, like a burglar or a spy. He looked into the mother's room. It was sparely furnished, tidy. The bureau was like a little shrine arranged about a statuette of the Virgin Mary. There were candles in cups of blue glass, family photographs.

The door of Lise's room was shut.

On the way downstairs, he paused before the crucifix that hung above the landing. It was a massive one. He

reached up and lifted it down, weighing it in his hand a moment; he'd never seen one up close before. It was a brass casting, quite well made, nicely finished. He was tired now and his thoughts were ranging. He was imagining how these things were manufactured, thinking that somewhere there was a die caster turning them out by the thousands — multitudes of agonizing Jesuses to be trimmed and electroplated, to be bolted onto varnished crosses by bored assemblers.... He replaced it carefully.

Returning to the sofa, he yawned and lay back, thinking that he should come more often to this house where Lise had grown up. In the past few minutes he'd come to know her better. In the calm of her mother's house, he looked back at their months together. After all, the year was ending now; it was time to reflect. He was recalling all those things he'd poured out to her at certain times. Poor Lise; she'd always listened. Her English was so good, but sometimes he'd rambled on so fast that he had lost her, going on and on about priest-ridden societies, the absurd magic of religion, all the evils of the past and all the foolish superstition. Delighting in harsh logic, he'd ridiculed all sorts of other things as well — things that she might still have faith in. When he'd argued that the whole idea of romantic love was nothing but a myth, she'd seemed suddenly hurt; he'd had to stop, to explain, gently,

what he'd meant.

His eyes were heavy now. He lay back looking at the Brisebois Christmas tree, watching its softly blinking lights. It made him think back to Christmas mornings when his tree had been a mass of ornaments and lights. He remembered the family rituals: the brittle wreath of holly that his mother had always wound around the miniature crèche, the mystery of sealed parcels — the sudden right to tear them open....

He stretched out for a moment, just to rest his head, just to close his tired eyes a moment....

He was jarred awake by laughter — a deep French voice above him; it was Armand, joking, yelling: "Ey! Maman! Un voleur dans l'salon! Va chercher le fusil!"

And George was stumbling to his feet, saying, "Bonsoir! Comment ça va? Joyeux Noël!"

Armand clapped him on the back and said, "Joyeux Noël, mon-Georges!" and was off up the stairs.

Madame Brisebois had come in now, struggling out of her fur coat and talking rapidly about Armand being pas civilisé, that his craziness should be ignored. She was a tiny brisk woman with quick eyes. She spoke far too fast for George to follow, though she never seemed to notice that he couldn't understand. She had wished him

Bienvenu! and Joyeux Noël! and was speaking over her shoulder as she put her hat away. She had switched subjects now and George was utterly lost, smiling and nodding, wishing that Lise would hurry up and rescue him.

At last she came in the front door in a gust of wintery air. She was all bundled up against the wind, her face hidden in the deep hood of her parka.

"Salut!" she called to him, "Joyeux Noël!"

He stood by, feeling a bit awkward, rubbing sleep out of his eyes as she unwound her scarf and flipped her hood back. George was surprised; he hardly recognized her. In the few days that she'd been home she'd changed remarkably. Her hair was styled in a short feathery cut, lightened a bit. And she was in a dress, a long dress of some beige fabric, intricately patterned. He was used to seeing her in jeans and flannel shirts, in hiking boots. Suddenly it seemed as if they'd been apart for ages, that they no longer knew each other.

In a minute, though, Madame Brisebois was off to the kitchen and Lise was beside him on the sofa asking about his day and the drive up and whether he really liked her hair like that — demanding the truth: same familiar Lise.

"So," George said, "Who were you visiting tonight?"

"My grandmother," she told him, "at le Foyer de Charité."

"Ah," he said, "That's nice. How was she?"

"Très bien," Lise said, pausing, "But — did I ever tell you? — she's... pas toute là. She was talking about her angels again tonight, pauvre Grand-mère. 'Mes beaux anges,' she said to us, 'ils viennent samedi pour m'amener au grand-nord.'"

George was confused, sure that he'd misunderstood. "What?" he asked, "Au grand-nord?"

"She has everything confused," Lise explained, tapping gently at her forehead to show what she meant, "She's very old."

"Oh—" he said, embarrassed, lowering his voice, "Oh. I see. I didn't understand."

"It's OK," Lise told him, smiling, patting his hand, "She's well there. The sisters look after her. She's very happy waiting for the angels."

"Sure," George said, "Of course," and he tried to stifle a deep yawn.

"You look so tired," she said, reaching over to push a lock of hair back off his forehead, "You can lie down in my bedroom while we go to the Mass."

"Um...Well,.. " He was stammering now, feeling a bit awkward again, a bit shy. "I thought I might go along, if you want — if it would be OK..."

"Mais oui, it's OK," she said, frowning slightly,

"But you won't like it. You don't like things like that, remember?"

"I'd _like_ to go," he said, "It would be...interesting..." and he realized that he was on the verge of confessing his secret tolerance for pageantry, for rituals.

"_Bon_," Lise said, "I'll tell _Maman_ we have _un converti — un nouveau croyant!_"

"Hey, hey," he said, "You sound more like your brother all the time."

She briefed him about the Mass, what to expect. She didn't know all the English terms, but George could understand. There would be a gospel reading, a sermon, then _la sainte communion_. As she spoke, George could hear talking upstairs. It was growing louder. It was Madame Brisebois's voice, quick and angry-sounding, now and then, Armand's voice answering. Family matters. He pretended not to notice.

Lise went on, trying to explain about the wafer and the wine — the magic transformation — how it was changed but actually stayed the same, but her mother's voice had risen and could no longer be ignored. She was mad for sure, scolding. George had to interrupt Lise, pointing upward, whispering, "Um... I think there's some kind of argument up there...."

"_Bien oui!_" she said, exasperated, waving her fist

toward Armand's room, "It's my brother, le niaiseux! Every Christmas it's the same thing! At the last minute he decides that he won't go to the Mass." She got up and shut the hall door, but her mother's voice was shrill now, ringing through the house, and George could hear it all as clearly as if she were yelling down to him, "Dieu existe, mon garçon! Dieu existe! Ne l'oublie pas!

"Hey," Lise said, smiling, "Don't look so scared. They're not really mad — just têtes dures, both of them. It's the same argument every year; it's... traditional."

"Who wins?" George asked.

Lise laughed as if it were a silly question. "La mère," she told him, "In the end she cries; he goes — c'est tout."

She was right. By the time they left for church, her mother was as cheerful as ever and Armand was jovial again. As they walked together up rue Béthanie, converging with all the other family groups, he kept telling George in stage whispers that they should ditch the women and make a break for the tavern. Madame Brisebois kept scowling back at him, muttering, "...pas civilisé, lui...même à Noël..." In the distance, George could see the church, its windows bright with yellow light. It was so picturesque among the silhouetted elms and the drifts of clean snow; he was glad that he had come along.

He followed Lise up the broad flight of stone steps and through the massive church doors. Inside, he imitated her every move, touching the bowl of holy water, crossing himself, but she whispered to him, laughing, that he had done it backwards, that he didn't have to bother with all that.

The Mass wore on slowly. The priest's French was as rapid as Madame Brisebois's, and the sound system was acting up, so most of it went over George's head. He tried to follow in the little booklet, but they seemed to keep skipping ahead/then jumping back. He was too tired to find his place. He told himself that he must stay awake, that this ceremony was central to traditions that he hoped to come to understand. He was afraid of dozing off and missing it. Besides, the réveillon itself had not even begun yet. But his eyes kept drooping shut; his head kept nodding.

Trying to stay awake, he looked around, studying the masonry and the sculptures. He devised mental games, trying to dream up secular uses for these vast church buildings. He scanned the congregation, calculating what percentage of them were there to please their mothers.

But it was all no use. A few more minutes and he was struggling to stay awake. His mind was sinking into darkness, straying into senseless dreams. Dozing, he

imagined he was somewhere in the church...lost in a corridor of dark rooms...searching for Lise...finding only statues and strange women, men with guns...then the hall was somehow tilting upward...widening into a wilderness of snow and blinking Christmas trees...

The sharp ding of a bell alarmed him. His head jerked up — eyes open — to see everybody else with heads bowed. The bell dinged again, and he realized that this was the magic instant of the Mass that Lise had mentioned, that no one was supposed to look. Even Armand's head was bowed, but George had gaped straight at the elevated chalice — a blundering faux pas — a sacrilege. He bowed his head just as the third bell dinged and everybody else looked up. It seemed no one had noticed, but he still felt foolish, like an imposter with no business there. He should have listened to Lise and waited at the house; he should have gone down to Toronto to spend Christmas with his parents.

He watched Lise from the corner of his eye. She looked wide awake, at ease, so familiar with these rites that he could just barely comprehend. He envied her; she knew so much about the language and about the people, about all the old traditions and the modern-day Québécois trends. She seemed to understand so much and yet she never talked about what she believed in.

People around them had begun to file toward the front to take communion. Madame Brisebois brushed past George to join the others in the silent rows before the altar. He was confused again.

"Doesn't everybody go up?" he whispered, and Lise explained, whispering back, that her mother was the only one in the _état de grâce_.

"And you..." he said, "You're not?"

"_Bien non_!" she told him, smiling as if she enjoyed his naïveté and this funny curiosity of his.

Sitting down again on the hard bench, he watched the circulation of the lines. He watched communicants returning to their places with reverently downcast eyes as he waited between Lise and Armand, among all the others whose various sins were unconfessed and unforgiven.

By the time the Mass had ended, the snow had let up. Lise offered to take George for a walk so that the cold air could refresh him for the _réveillon_. They left the others and headed off into the dark streets. As they went, she showed him a few points of local interest — a new laundromat, the _salon funéraire_, her aunt Marie-Reine's place. They went past her old school, past the convent next to it. Pointing with a mittened hand toward a corner of the convent grounds, she said that if he looked closely

he would see a niche that had been carved into an outcrop of rock. He finally managed to make out the dark hole in the stone. It was empty, drifted in with snow. As they walked on, she told him that there had always been a statue of *la Sainte Vierge* in that space, but it had been smashed, vandalized.

"Really?" George said, "Who'd do a stupid thing like that?"

They were back onto rue Béthanie now, heading home. As they were passing the dark, lettered windows of the *casse-croûte*, she whispered a secret to him. "We used to hide in there," she said, "when we were kids, when we were supposed to be at Mass. I'd meet the other girls there and we'd have *des hotdogs steamés* and chips and we'd talk about the boys. The windows were always full of steam so no one would see us."

"God!" George said, as if this revelation came as a great shock. He was glad of the chance to kid her for a change. "I always thought that you'd been brought up to be so devout, innocent...."

"Ah..." she said, peeking out from her parka hood and putting on a strange ethereal voice, "I have many secrets; *je suis pleine de mystères*!"

"I see," George said, and they turned up the walk of her mother's house and went inside.

He had nearly forgotten about the curious gift that was waiting for him. As he sat down in the living room with Lise, she was offering clues about it, but he could tell that she was just misleading him, trying to fool him. Armand was seated opposite them in the armchair, smiling down at his guitar, eavesdropping as he strummed random chords. They had to wait for Madame Brisebois to preside over the opening of presents.

At last she came in from the kitchen, drying her hands with a dish towel. They could begin.

"Bien," Lise said to George, "Vas y. Go ahead."

He tried to stall, but finally he had to get up in front of everybody and approach the Christmas tree. Gingerly, he pulled at the white cloth and the crown of ribbons, and from beneath, a pair of snowshoes clattered to the floor.

"Great!" he was saying, "Parfait!" He was sure that he was blushing as he picked them up to look them over. Madame Brisebois was smiling intensely and Armand was grinning, yelling "Mets-les! Mets-les!" At the same time Lise was trying to tell him that tomorrow they could go up to her friend's chalet at Saint-Sauveur; they could go snowshoeing together in the bush; it would be beautiful.

The others were opening their presents now. Lise had found the tiny package and was rattling it, looking at George curiously, as if she were wondering if he'd

really give her anything as sentimental, as impractical as jewellery. She unwrapped it slowly. When she raised the lid she looked surpised — delighted — and she rushed toward him and was hugging him in front of everybody, saying, "O, qu'c'est beau! Merci!" She held it out for her mother and Armand to see: the delicate chain, the pale gold pendant twisting in the air.

"Ah," said Madame Brisebois, leaning forward, "Une belle petite croix!"

"Non, Maman," Lise said, "Regarde!" and she carried it closer, displaying it against her hand, "C'est une belle fleur de lis!"

George braced for a barrage of jokes from across the room, but Armand just leaned forward to see it and said, quietly, "Oui, très belle."

Lise handed George the small gift from her mother. Shy again, he released the tabs of scotch tape and unwound the tissue paper. It was a calendar — a desk calendar with Laurentian scenes for each month. It showed spring streams and old bridges, ploughing, sugaring, woods blanketed in snow.

"Great!" he said again, "Merci! Merci, Madame Brisebois," and automatically he rose and crossed the cluttered floor as she leaned toward him to receive his ritual kiss.

"C'est rien," she was saying, "C'est juste une petite chose."

Before the feast began, he found himself alone again in the Brisebois living room. Lise was in the kitchen helping with the gravy. Armand —the man of the house — was carving turkey. The house was quiet now and George felt another wave of sleep come over him. He was roaming aimlessly among torn wrappings, among the empty envelopes and boxes. He picked up his new calendar to examine it. The months and days were all in French. Looking down at the days of the coming year, he thought ahead. One day he would have to rise before this family to announce in the traditional way, in his weak French, that he and Lise were planning to be married. For some reason he no longer feared Madame Brisebois's reaction — her formal blessing, the tears that Lise had warned him to expect. He flipped through the calendar pages again. On one of those dates he might find himself before the altar of that enormous church, up there with Lise in front of everybody — both families, both mothers — in the ritual of Catholic marriage, everything in French.

He stepped over to the window and drew the curtain back. For a few minutes he kept a bleary watch across the unfamiliar town. The snow had begun again; he watched it descending from the sky onto empty streets, rooftops,

silent train tracks. He was thinking of Lise's grandma at the Foyer de Charité, probably dreaming of her angels. He looked at the wall of dark hills that rose beyond the town. Tomorrow morning he'd be up there with Lise, up at Saint-Sauveur to try out his new snowshoes in mountainous country that he'd never seen before.

He was overtired now, staring out at tumbling snowflakes, suddenly dreamy and lightheaded — suddenly awed by the mysteries of fate. Things could have been so different: he could so easily have moved down to Toronto with his parents...have never known Lise...have changed his destiny and the destinies of his children's children.... But something in the vital spirit of Québec had held him; there had been a vague, gradual revelation that he belonged there. For so many years he had felt traces of a haunting faith in the separateness of Québec — a sense of its isolation from the hectic world of North America. It was a sense of sanctuary — all a bit irrational — romantic — not like him at all.... He felt a sudden urge to tell all this to Lise, to confess to her that he'd deceived her when he'd let on to be so free of spiritual dreams. She might understand; she knew much more than he did about faith and mysteries, about Québec....

Her voice startled him; the dinner was finally served. He left the cold window, shaking the tired musings

from his head as he joined the family at the table.

Armand had filled each glass with wine and was at the far end of the table, serving. Lise was telling her mother that George had never tasted a real Québécois tourtière.

Armand looked up from his work, astounded at such a thing. "Crime!" he cried, "Sont des vrais païens, ces anglais!" and as if to remedy this long-standing wrong, he cut a huge slice of his mother's tourtière and with great ceremony passed it down the table. "Tiens, mon-p'tit-Georges," he announced, "Mange ça, et deviens un Québécois!" His eyes twinkled as he enjoyed his joke.

George was hungry now, but he paused with his plate before him. The meat pie was inviting, steaming lightly with an aroma of rich pork and savoury, but he waited for Madame Brisebois to say the grace, just like his own mother would do every Christmas. At last, she looked across the table toward him. He bowed his head and reverently shut his eyes, waited...

"Ey! Georges!" she cried in her shrill cheerful voice, "Réveille-toi! Commence!"

DES SACRILEGES

George eased the car across the gravel lot of the Fromagerie Saint-Onge. He paused to let a Datsun zip past glinting in the sun, then steered onto the highway, heading north. The car jogged up onto the asphalt and in a moment the speedometer needle was floating up toward sixty. Outside, the fence posts flicked past faster, engulfed in spring hay. That Friday, for once, they'd managed to get away early. As the Saint-Scholastique cutoff neared and flashed past, Lise was looking back across the fields. George glanced back too, trying to spot the village — the old town that was condemned to demolition. He thought he glimpsed the steeple tip of its doomed church, a fleeting spire of silver among distant treetops, lost in the level blur of the horizon.

"So," he said, nodding toward the pack of curd cheese in her lap, "Should we eat those now or should we save them?"

Lise decided they should eat them while they were fresh. She tore the package open with her teeth and gave it a shake to separate the moist bits. She took one.

"Mmm," she said, poking in for one to pass to George, "Ça goûte bon."

"We might as well enjoy them while we can," he told her, leaning over to receive the lump of pale cheese.

"The fromagerie — it's expropriated too?"

And George nodded, chewing, eyes on the road. He saw Lise look back and heard her mumble something to herself in French.

"Eh?" he asked.

Frowning slightly, scanning the sunny range of ploughland that was rolling past, she repeated, "C'est dommage, ça."

Ahead, Route 8 swung west toward Saint-Hermas. The old Côte Saint-Roch began there, just before the checkered yellow hazard sign that marked the curve. It ran due north, cutting into a slope of pasture in a short, vertical-looking rise. It was their usual short cut to Lachute.

Easing off the gas, George made his turn and felt the tires catch the rougher texture of the old road. Its pavement was gravelly, scored with cracks and splits. He accelerated for the hill then let the car drift into the steep climb. He always took special notice of that rise; it was the first stage of a slight foothill ascent of the Laurentians. He liked to picture things with a geographer's eye, to imagine looking down from great heights. At the

top of that first grassy ridge he felt that he had left the vast tract of flat land that surrounded Montreal, that extended down into Ontario and the States. Ahead, beyond a five-mile plateau of farm land, stood the first range of true hills, southern boundary of the real core of Québec.

Lise was trying to find some decent music on the radio. She was leaning toward the dashboard with her hair spread forward in a veil of light strands, soft and auburn in the windshield glare, shifting with the motion of the car. Glancing over, George could see the fine strand of gold that was dangling forward from her neck. Through her window, ditch weeds and sagging page wire were streaking past, close and dusty in the sun. There didn't seem to be much on the radio at that hour. There was some baseball game and a garble of French and English talk shows, but Lise finally picked up one of those old-time jigs with a squeaky fiddle in the background and some chansonnier singing in a rapid backwoods joual that George couldn't really follow. She turned it up and sat back. She smoothed her hair, then passed the bag of curds to let him dig in while he drove.

The road was in worse shape than ever. The tires were bumping on ruts and rough spots. Everywhere, the pavement had been scarred and broken by steel treads of

earth-moving machinery.

All the land along the old road had been expropriated for the jetport. Glancing left and right as he drove, George surveyed it all: a doorless house, breached fence lines everywhere, muddied spears of wood about a mound of toppled stone where a house had stood the week before. It all slid past in bright glimpses — still, fleeting scenes, one after the other — like colour pictures framed in windshield glass. A few old places were still standing. There were antique field-stone houses with their twin chimneys and their curved-out eaves; there were grey, tilting barns and empty sheds. Every building had a number now. The yellow plaques were nailed to the veranda posts and barn doors. Everything that stood was scheduled to come down, like the village of Saint-Scholastique. The land was posted; George could see the notices tacked up to doors and gateposts. Passage Interdit.

The bag of cheddar curds was nearly empty. He took a piece and chewed it slowly, enjoying its faint flavours and the salty undertastes that seemed unique to local cheese.

Lise rolled her window down halfway. She stretched and sat back, yawning something about her long day at the Polytechnique, about the strong sunshine that had made her so sleepy. With mild wind blowing through her hair and

blowing at the open collar of her shirt. She shut her eyes.

As George drove on, watching his speed, watching for potholes in the streaking surface of the road, he thought back to the fall when all the trouble over this expropriation business had been in the news. There had been sit-ins at the government field office, extra police brought up from Montreal. At the ground-breaking ceremony men had marched out from the village. The newspaper pictures had seemed so weird — cops with riot shields and tear gas in a cornfield. God, George thought. Even now, that made him feel a twinge of something that winced up his spine like fear. It had seemed like some distorted echo of the past: a skirmish and the rebels put to flight, but that pathetic battle of Saint-Scholastique had lacked the antique drama of redcoats and cannon fire and heroes fleeing into exile. It had seemed more like some history pageant with the costumes and the props all wrong — a bloodless fight in some expropriated field with network TV coverage and no shots fired. It had been played up in the French tabloids for a week or two, then forgotten.

George smiled and shook his head as the vacant houses and the vacant land rolled by. He stretched, pushing back from the steering wheel, pressing back against the seat to ease the stiffness of his spine. His thoughts

were going back to bits of history that he'd reread in Lise's books, things that he was just beginning to get straight. Along the Côte Saint-Roch the battered mailboxes went by him one by one, old names roughed on in paint, tilting open, and...

"Hey!" he yelled, "Wait a minute!" and he was braking, pulling over to the side and Lise had blinked awake — startled — asking "Qu'est-ce qui s'passe?"

"Back there," he told her, "Something in front of that last place. I'll show you." He shifted into reverse and swung his arm across the seat to back up. The car swerved in and out of weeds and gravel until he brought it to a stop in the overgrown farmyard.

He cut the engine. The radio went off. The windy silence of the land seemed closer as the dust settled. The farmhouse was half-demolished. Its wood interior had been torn out and heaped in the dooryard in a pile of beams and plastery boards. All that remained was a shell of stone, doorless and roofless, with gaping windows. Beyond the house, across a meadow slope, some access road had been gouged out by bulldozers, but everything was quiet now, dead still, as if the crews had knocked off early for the weekend.

"But what did you see?" Lise was asking.

"There." George leaned over, pointing through her

window toward the ground. "Down there; look."

Her lips parted into a crooked smile. "Bien, sacrifice!" she said, as George got out and walked around the car to get a closer look.

It was a cross — one of those huge white crucifixes that you used to see all over Québec — and it was fallen. Its stump remained, ending in a V-shaped chainsaw bite just above the grass heads. The shaft, a smooth beam thick with whitewash, lay close beside it like a felled tree, ending in a splintered converse V. George stood above it for a while, inspecting it, one hand on his hip. "Hmph," he said. It was so odd to see it like that, face up in the grass instead of up against the sky where it belonged: it was odd to see it from above.

Lise had come over and was standing next to him, tucking her hair back against the gusty wind. Together, they took a long look at the fallen cross, white beam and crossbeam stark and desecrated in the weedy grass. It had wooden replicas of implements of crucifixion nailed on. The crosspiece was supported on one side by a mock spear and on the other by a miniature ladder. There were some fake spikes on one arm and opposite, a mallet with its handle broken off. At the head of the main beam was a crooked shingle that must have once been painted with INRI but was now as blank as barn wood, scathed and greyed.

At the centre of the cross was the Sacré-Coeur. It was as big as a man's head, rounded and artificially shaped like a Valentine heart. Traces of its paint remained in streaks of faint red, the wood itself withered with age, veined deeply and eroded into fibrous splits by generations of exposure.

"Hmph," George said again, "Maybe we should try to salvage something."

"Ey, attends-minute..." Lise said, backing off and glancing toward the No Trespassing sign, "We're not even supposed to be here."

But George was thinking to himself that this whole Terrain Privé business was pretty stupid. "Don't worry," he told her, "Look at it this way..." and he grinned and proclaimed that this was, after all, a sacred duty — the rescue of these relics from the advance of infidels with chain-saws...

And she interrupted all his niaiseries, laughing lightly that "C'est toi, l'infidèle —maudit incroyant anglais!"

"OK," he said, "OK. Anyway, the Ministry of Transport will just have to forgive us our trespasses — remember? — as we forgive those who trespass against us..."

"Remember?" she said, "Are you kidding?" and she slipped her arm about his waist as she recited, in a

lowered voice, a soft cant of Catholic Latin: "Pater noster qui est in cælum..." It flowed with the rhythm of deep rote memory. As she spoke, her eyes were set in a calm gaze across the land as if there were some solemn ritual taking place off in the field grass. As the prayer ended in the name of the Spiritus Sanctus, her hand brushed from her forehead to her chest, from shoulder to shoulder in a light, automatic tracing of the pattern of the cross.

"See?" she said, turning back to face George, blinking in the sunlight, "Je l'sais par coeur."

"Good" he said, impressed with the Latin and all, "Great memory."

She was looking down at the cross again. "Maybe they're going to put it in a museum or un village historique or something."

"Nope," George said, "I don't think so," and he kicked at that profane chain-saw scar to show her what he meant.

"But what do you want with it?" she asked him as he walked over to the car and flipped the trunk lid open, "You don't believe in anything."

"Whoa!" he said, "Wait a minute now; I never said that." He was foraging in the trunk among the dusty tools, the booster cables, the deformed flaps of cardboard, telling

her that this thing was an *oeuvre d'art* — an antique. "It's a cultural relic," he exclaimed, "part of *your* culture — your heritage. We can mount it somewhere," and with that, he drew the tire iron from the trunk and brandished it toward the devastated house, kidding her about finding the True Cross and the Incorruptible and Most Blessed Heart of —

And laughing again, wild-eyed in pretended fervour, she attacked, raging against him: "*Incroyant! Sacrilège! Maudit Orangeman!*" and she wrestled into him, striking him a sharp blow in the ribs for all his blasphemies.

"Ow!" he shouted, laughing, struggling to fend her off, "That hurt!" but then, before he knew it, they were silent, holding each other off at arm's length, breathing hard in the windy quietude. George felt an odd depth to the stillness of the farmyard and the fields around it — a hollow ghost-town stillness on the open land — and he imagined there was something softly awesome on the wind, as if they might be standing on some ancient haunted battleground, or in some zone of no man's land in the dead lull before a storm of bombs; it was *too* quiet.

"Well," he said at last, to break the silence, "If you promise not to jump me, I'll see if we can get ourselves a souvenir, OK?"

"*Bien, vas y*," she said, "but if the cops come, I

don't know you." She walked back to the car to wait, shaking her head at these peculiar tête-carrée notions of his.

"Just let me know if you see anybody coming," he said, "OK?" and with a slight wave, she agreed to act as lookout.

George straddled the fallen cross and knelt toward the heart. He looked around at the empty road, the posted warnings fluttering. He felt uneasy in the staring silence of the ruins of the house. He rammed the tire iron in a short thrust at the base of the heart. It didn't catch. Aiming more precisely, he jabbed again and eventually it penetrated the joint. He began to pry, levering it gently, but the old square-headed nails seemed bound to hold. They were sunken deep in contracted grooves, fringed with rust stains that had bled into the wood.

He forced it, prying harder, nervous for some reason, glancing back at Lise and at the road. Finally, there was a gritty squeak. The nail heads had pulled right through the wood; the heart had come free, leaving behind its form in black dust at the centre of the cross, its ring of nail heads. He could tell right away that there was something wrong. It felt too light. When he turned it over in his hand, he saw that it was badly rotted. The underside was shrunken into papery black vestiges of wood...

"George!" Lise called, "A car!" and quickly —just in case — he rose, dropping the tire iron, tossing the heart away. It clunked and bounced off the crossbeam, tumbling into the deep grass beyond. He pivoted to face the road. The car was approaching fast. It wasn't local traffic; it was a GM station wagon with Ontario plates — official-looking — steel-blue. Thinking fast, he figured that in his faded army shirt and jeans he'd pass as some harmless local guy. All he'd have to do would be to grin a hick grin— But wait a minute, he thought, to hell with that, and as the car neared him he faced it boldly with a calm expression, as if he had every right to be there. He could see the printing on the car door — Department of Transport — and that patch of scarlet emblazoned in the imitation of a leaf. He was ready now for confrontation...

But the car had passed, its whip antenna jouncing. Its brake lights had flickered through the road dust; it was gone. George had glimpsed the driver: short neat hair, sunglasses, as steady as a pilot; he hadn't even looked.

He turned to Lise and she looked back at him. "See?" he said, "Pas d'problème."

"Can we go now?" she asked, and he told her he'd be with her in a minute.

The tire iron had speared the earth where it had fallen. He found it standing in the grass beside his feet

like some forgotten bit of farm junk. He picked it up and tapped the soil off it. Parting the grass with his foot, he looked for the heart. He finally found it in two halves. The frail wood had split along its grain when he'd thrown it; he might have known.

Turning the fragments in his hands; fitting them back together like puzzle pieces, he was wondering if the thing could be restored — mended with epoxy...packed with Polyfilla...Varathaned... He dug with his thumbnail at the rotted core. It crumbled into flecks that sifted down into the grass between his shoes.

"What happened?" Lise asked, appearing suddenly behind him, watching over his shoulder.

"It was no good," he told her, "Rotted out. I guess we don't get our souvenir."

He didn't quite know what to do with the two scraps of wood. It seemed wrong to just dump them anywhere. He carried them over to the heap of salvaged lumber by the house and placed them on top of the pile, where one rough beam clotted with plaster lay across another.

Meanwhile, Lise had wandered over to the ruins of the farmhouse. She was standing at the threshold of its gaping doorway, peering in but keeping a cautious distance, as if she were afraid that the old mortar might give way at any moment, that the field-stone shell might collapse

on her.

There was a loud boom then — a thunderous boom— deep and resounding. Lise leapt back from the building. George looked left and right then up into the sky as the booming sound was rumbling away, echoing across the empty fields, fading into windy silence.

"Seigneur!" Lise was saying, "C'est quoi ce bruit-là?"

Blasting? he thought —but it hadn't sounded right. It had been more like thunder, but the sky was clear blue — clear except for a single marring streak. A puffy column stemmed up from the west horizon, narrowing across the sky into a tight strand of white that ended in a silver speck.

George pointed it out and together, hands cupped above their eyes, they watched the progress of the jet. It was a military plane —a fighter — high-flying, supersonic. Soundlessly now, it was transecting the block of sky framed by the chimneys of the roofless house, tracing its widening white scar above the countryside.

Lise had gone back over to the car, but George had to stand a moment longer with his neck craned back, squinting up into the heavens. That plane was so far up — so incredibly high above all the lots and ranges of expropriated land — soaring across the whole southern expanse of developed country. He was trying to imagine that celestial view —through a tinted plastic canopy, with a pilot's cool

eye — a vision of the whole geography below: Montreal and Ottawa and glinting rivers, all the interwoven strands of roads and railroads to the south...

"We have to go," Lise was saying, "We'll be late."

George blinked and looked back at the ground about him. Taking one last glance at the farmyard and the gutted house, he slid in behind the wheel and slammed the door.

As they drove on past acres of pasture strewn with stone, he reached down to turn the radio back on. It was some fast-talking DJ with le-super-weekend-de-CJMS—la musique-solid-gold... Lise was leaning toward him with something in her hand. It was a curd of cheese.

"The last one," she said, "I saved it for you," and he smiled and opened his mouth so she could pop it in. It was warm from her hand and the warmth seemed to bring out those odd undertastes. Pressing it against his palate, he imagined that it held flavours that were present on the summer wind.

Lise was saying that it was a shame about the loss of the Fromagerie Saint-Onge.

"They'll rebuild somewhere," George told her, swallowing, watching the road.

"Penses-tu?"

"Oui," he said, "J'pense."

Up ahead, the first ridge of low mountains had come

into view. It was a rough wall of rock and trees up on the far side of the Rivière du Nord, beyond the expropriation line. It had always caught George's eye because it thrust up from the farm land in such an abrupt rise — a barrier of weathered stone as wide as the horizon. The sky above it was unbroken blue.

Monday morning was damp and overcast. George — alone and in a hurry to get back to Montreal by nine — was speeding south along the wet Côte Saint-Roch, tires splashing through the potholes, wet fence posts streaking past. He was really stepping on it, but he had to slow down when he passed the place where they had stopped on Friday afternoon. There was a bulldozer there; it was one of those huge ones — a Komatsu — yellow plate steel slung on muddy tank treads, armed with an enormous blade. It dwarfed the wet rubble of the house. In another glance, he saw the empty yard, then brought his eyes back to the road where they belonged. He hit the gas. The cross was gone; its stump was hidden somewhere in the yard grass. The lumber heap was gone as well, and in its place there was a jagged crown of charcoal butts and ash.

VANTAGE GROUND

In pitch darkness, in the dead still of the winter night, George awoke disoriented. He reached toward his wife's side of the bed, but his arm fell on an expanse of rumpled, empty quilt.

His eyes blinked open but he was not yet fully awake. His mind had begun sorting facts from fragments of a bad dream, and reality was crystallizing for him stage by stage: who he was; where he was; that he was saddened and alone.

He rolled over. On his back, he sighed and squinted upward. The bedroom was the loft of the old farmhouse, its ceiling the inside of a peaked roof — rough beams slanting down on each side, the gaps between them sealed with white-washed planks. Through the darkness, George could see the beams. He gazed from one to the other, apex to shadowed apex. Then, with his chin pressed to his chest, he looked across the dark patchwork that blanketed his body toward the gable window at the far end of the room. He believed that he could see the faint glow of city lights among the trees of the south fence line.

Restless now, he tried to lull himself to sleep by picturing his first bedroom — a suburban child's room down in the city — worlds apart from this rough Québécois attic. It was getting harder to recall his childhood, but he could still see that blank plaster ceiling, pastel walls, the maple bureau. The window faced the boulevard, and he remembered how the headlights of turning cars used to send panels of light shifting across the walls, distending as they vanished. Those lights had comforted him then, as he went to sleep to the noises of the city, worlds away from these dark, silent woods.

There was no hope of sleep now. He got up, taking the quilt with him. Pulling the rocking chair up to the south window, he sat down. It wasn't cold, but he wrapped the quilt about him anyway. It enfolded him, comforting him in his insomnia as he thought through, for the hundredth time, the things he should have tried to explain to Lise before she left. He still didn't understand it all himself, but he could at least have admitted to her that at times the changes in his life seemed overwhelming — that it made him so unnaturally timid and withdrawn — that sometimes he felt as panicky as a child lost in darkening, foreign woods. But he'd been unable to explain, as if deep down he'd wanted her to leave him while he thought things out.

Just to break the silence, he whispered aloud,

"Pauvre Lise —" She had endured it for so long. She'd tried to cheer him, tried to cope with the fearful moods that had made him impossible to live with. At last, fed up, she'd begun to ask exactly why he wasn't able to look for work in Saint-Jérôme, why he seemed afraid to go down to the village dépanneur alone, why he shunned the neighbours. He'd refused to talk about it.

In the end, she'd slammed a stack of books down on the kitchen floor, yelling in rapid French that he could scarcely follow: he'd changed too much — become a hermit; all he wanted to do lately was hide. "Tu te caches—" she'd cried at him, "dans la maison, dans les bois— mais pourquoi? de quoi?"

When he turned away that time she had followed, had gripped him by the shoulders with a strength he'd never felt before. She'd yanked him around to face her, screaming, "Es tu malade? Es tu paranoïaque?" — questions to which he had no answers, but he was confronted now, unable to retreat into his usual silence.

"Time—" he'd said at last, "I need time— "

"Bien!" she'd interrupted, her voice firm with resolve, "Bien! I'll give you time—"

He'd relived that final fight a hundred times.

Yawning, he looked out the window at the dark dooryard. The day she left, he'd carried her suitcase down and

set it by the door. Then he had retreated on snowshoes up the slope of the back field just in time, just as her brother's Renault had appeared along the road. From the grove of cedars near the hilltop — his favorite vantage point — he had watched her cross the yard, looking down solemnly, tiredly, as she left him. He had stayed up there a while, staring down at the pattern of tire tracks in the empty yard.

It was still hard to believe that she had really gone. Feeling jumpy in the dark loft, George was glancing over his shoulder at the bed, as if he expected her to be miraculously returned, asleep beneath the sheets.

He shook his head. A trial separation — how up-to-date — how North American. They were right in step with everything that he had hoped to leave behind. He had always believed that <u>here</u> he could escape all the mindless trends and stresses, all the social blight; he had dreamed that things would be so different here, isolated from the mainstream by the different language, the different spirit. It had always seemed that these cold hills above the city — above all the cities — would be a sanctuary where he could look back, detached and safe, at all the ruinous confusion below.... But his mountains had failed him; the clean air and the cold had failed to purge him of the tensions that had finally driven Lise away.

Gazing at the trace of urban light that showed through black tree branches, brooding, George tucked the quilt tighter about his shoulders. For now, he was on his own in this Laurentian parish, in this farmhouse that was of a people greatly different from his own. He had learned so much through Lise — the new language, new ways — but so many things betrayed him as an alien, as an English suburbanite transplanted into the Québécois bush. He was still like a refugee in a new homeland, never certain that his manner or his clothes or his ideas weren't noticeably foreign, slightly wrong. He studied his dim reflection in the window glass. His unease was familiar; sensations like it had seemed to haunt him all his life — a troubling sense that he was an outsider who belonged elsewhere.

Feeling a sudden need for company, he reached toward the radio and snapped it on. It was tuned to the French station in Sainte-Adèle. He twisted the dial urgently until he found an English voice. It was some all-night talk show— American accents— some powerful station down in Boston or New York. It didn't matter; he wasn't listening to what was being said, just listening to the sound of his own language for the first time in weeks. He rocked slowly in the chair, cocooned in the thick quilt, looking back toward the world that he had come from, wondering if he would sleep at all before the morning.

The next day, George got up shamefully late, still tired. After breakfast and after a heartless effort at tidying the kitchen, he went out. It was a bleak day; it was overcast and damp, but the snow was fresh white and the cedars gave some colour to the hills behind the house. He fastened on his snowshoes and struck up across the pasture, into the woods.

He followed his usual trail along the fence line. It was a circuit that he made often, a sort of perimeter patrol. There wasn't much left of the old fence. The posts that were still standing leaned at crazy angles, rotted and green with moss. Most of the barbed wire was down, hopelessly buried. Here and there he stopped to tug at it, but it was pinned in ice and frozen earth. Maybe Lise was right; he had always had an antisocial love of fences, a hermit's dream of walling everything and everybody out.

If she came back — if they went ahead and bought this piece of land that they'd been renting — he would build a new fence. Sighting a line through the trees, he pictured a string of straight new posts, taut page wire, a strand of precision through this forest of gnarled trunks and deadfalls. There was always the chance that she would not come back. It was her translator's salary that paid the rent. Without her,

he would have no land and build no fences. If she were gone for good, he'd have to go back to the city, look for an apartment, try to readjust....

There was one detour on his trail around the property. It led off across the fence line, through woods belonging to the next farm. It led him to a spot where he could look across the overgrown fields to a small stone house much like the one he lived in. It was the Valois place, home of Bonhomme Valois — an old widower — a wizened, white-haired habitant who lived back there alone. George had made it his habit lately to pass by, just close enough to see if there was smoke in the chimney, if everything seemed to be OK. Anything could happen to an old man like that — a fall, a seizure of some sort. Maybe some day he would have to go down to help. At least in this small, secret duty, he was beginning to act like part of his new community.

That morning, even before the Valois place came into view, it was clear that the old man was fine. As George came up the last hill he could hear the whack of an axe. When he got closer he could see the small black figure near the house. Monsieur Valois was placing blocks of stove wood on a stump, splitting them apart with deft strokes. George stood watching for a while. It looked so effortless. When he split wood it was an awkward chore. He didn't seem to

have the knack or the strength. His aim was off; his axe sometimes glanced wildly off the wood, sometimes missed completely, often lodged immovably in knots. Monsieur Valois's pace was steady. Even at that distance, George could tell that there was a remarkable strength behind each blow. It took a strong man to live alone as he did in this cold back country. He felt an impulse to snowshoe down across the old man's fields, to hail him, to talk with him. Maybe some day soon, he thought, he'd do just that.

On the way home, he emerged from the bush at the summit of the hill behind the house. He looked down right away to see if there were any fresh tracks in the yard, but there was nothing, just his own snow-covered car. There was no sign that Lise had come home while he'd been out. On clear days, Montreal was visible from that hillside but on that day the closest ridge of grey trees merged into the greyness of the sky; you could see no more than a mile or two.

The rest of that dreary afternoon, thoughts of the city haunted him. It had been months since he'd been down at all, years perhaps since he'd been by his old home in the Town of Mount Royal. By twilight, he was feeling more desolate than ever, again in urgent need of any sort of company.

He left suddenly, fleeing the empty house. The

car hadn't been started in days. Its windows were encrusted with snow; inside it was dark and frosty. When he turned the ignition key, the starter made a sluggish growling. The dashboard lights dimmed away to nothing. He was trapped, marooned there in a frozen car in the darkening yard. Pumping the accelerator desperately, he tried again. The engine revved suddenly, faltering into life.

He drove slowly down the Côte Placide, turning west onto the main highway. In twenty minutes, the car was warm and comfortable, cruising on the Autoroute at sixty. He relaxed, following the broad span of salty concrete that led him south, milepost by milepost, toll by toll, down into the sprawl of lights, into the suburbs and the city. He was approaching the last exit before he gave much thought to exactly where it was that he was going.

He ended up in Mount Royal, in a spontaneous tour of the suburb that took him past the old school and the familiar shops and parks. But the moment he entered the streets of his old neighbourhood he found that nothing was quite as he remembered it. It was as if things had been subtly rearranged in some deliberate effort to confuse him. Mailboxes had been moved, road signs shifted, trees cut down. It was like some troubled dream in which everything is convincingly real, yet somehow faulty or askew. Even the people that he saw seemed strangely different, out of

place. On the boulevard, there were bands of little girls dressed in denim and bush jackets; there were cars driven by boys who seemed no more than children.

As he drove on, George began to realize that it was he who was out of place there, that he had been away far longer than he had imagined, that he had grown far older than he felt. He knew there would be no one for him to visit, no one to wave to. All his old friends were dispersed, moved downtown or to West Island condominiums, gone off to Calgary or Toronto or the States. They had lost touch years ago. Families never seemed to stay for generations in Mount Royal. His old house, his old school were repopulated now with total strangers.

He circled the block where he used to live, slowing down in front of the old house, trying to see into his old back-yard. It was too dark though; he couldn't see much at all. He circled again for one more look, but it occurred to him just then that he was acting quite suspicious, that he was liable to be stopped by the police. In his battered car, he was conspicuous as an outsider, cruising like some small-time burglar out to case the residential streets. At any moment, a patrol car might turn silently off the boulevard to intercept him. He'd be pulled over, frisked, taken in for questioning — a nervous suspect with a laughable excuse for being there. He had no business in Mount Royal.

When he arrived downtown, George felt a rising excitement. He was glad he'd come. He found that his city skills had not been lost; he still knew how to drive in heavy traffic, how to ease the car through crowds of jaywalkers in Saint Catherine Street intersections, how to maneuver expertly into a tight, snow-clogged gap between parked cars.

Leaving the car on a side street, he hurried toward the busiest areas, where he knew that he could wander unnoticed and unmolested, lost in the rushing crowds.

But even among all the people on Saint Catherine, he felt conspicuous. He was looking up at flashing signs, gazing at the tall buildings like a country boy on his first trip to the city. In the middle of the first block he stopped suddenly. Something across the street had caught his eye. He had to step back a bit to see above the heads toward the second storey. Up there above the store fronts, cast on some sort of opaque window, was the shadow of a dancing woman. It was a strange, alluring image — ghostly grey — gyrating to an unheard rhythm with red lights pulsing and shifting in the background.

He had to laugh. He must have been away in the bush too long; here he was gaping like some lonesome backwoods farmer, as if he were enticed by this cheap strip-joint come-on.

Heading east, he was pausing here and there to glance at movie posters, to look at clothes displayed in boutique windows. He was sight-seeing cheerlessly now, like some tourist who'd arrived in the wrong season and was lost in icy unfamiliar streets. He was watching the people hurrying past him in the cold. More than once he was startled to recognize a face — a cousin, an old teacher, a long-lost girl friend — but each time he was mistaken. The crowds were laced with ghosts out of his past that would magically change or vanish as he neared them. He was no longer used to crowds. There were more strangers on one downtown block than he might meet in a year on the back farms.

He had wandered out beyond rue Saint-Denis and had stopped for a minute to read some peeling posters on a fence, when down the block a blur of lurching motion caught his eye. He looked to see a distant figure reeling backward, collapsing into a dark mound across the sidewalk. For a moment, he just stood there watching as cars glided past the sprawling body. Couples on the sidewalk were side-stepping the fallen man. George felt his pulse quickening. It was all true: all those sick reports of passers-by ignoring trouble — city people stepping over stabbed children, raped women, dying men.... The horror of it struck him. As he ran forward to help, he wanted to scream

at everybody: "Are you all crazy? Etes-vous si malades, vous autres?"

Rushing up, he knelt to find an old man in a rough black overcoat. In the bleak neon light, he could see the purpled lips, the man's thick mask of stubble, nothing in the face to say if he were dead or living. George knelt closer. "Monsieur— " he said, his voice quivering in the damp air. "Monsieur! Qu'est-ce qu'y a?"

The old man tried to move his head. He opened his eyes slightly and his lips began to tremble. There was a gurgle of sound. Awkwardly, George rolled the old man toward him, cradling the limp head in his hands.

"Monsieur!" he cried again, hope rising in his voice, "M'entendez-vous? Pouvez-vous vous lever?"

With an unexpected surge of strength, the old man swung back. His head reeled as he laboured to shout. His voice was thick and slurred, but very loud.

"Get yer hands off me!" the old man yelled, "Ya goddam pepsi! Goddam friggin' Frenchman!" and he was struggling now, trying to get up to fight.

George jumped back; he rose to his feet so fast that the blood drained from his head and he nearly blacked out, the lights about him glaring abnormally bright, the traffic and the buildings strangely darkening, contracting...

The old man at his feet was punching weakly at the

air. George felt like kicking him, like striking down at him with all his strength and screaming at him... But he sensed that there were strangers watching now. Sure enough, people were staring as they passed, glancing at him from across the street, slowing down in cars. They might be laughing at him, at his naïveté, his foolishness. They might suspect him of beating the old man, of trying to rob him. Afraid and shamed, suddenly feeling very weak and very tired, he turned and fled.

The drive north was a flight. Speeding on the Autoroute, George kept glancing backward to see the broad expanse of lights receding in the distance. He was putting it all behind him mile by mile — the old neighbourhood, the noise, the strangers. North of Saint-Jérôme he had the highway to himself. There were just a few scattered lights behind him, and ahead, the dim lanes of concrete leading through the winter darkness in a gradual rise between the shadowy forms of wooded hills.

Driving the last weary mile up the Côte Placide, he had a faint premonition that Lise would be home. He imagined he would turn into the yard to see her at the loft window, watching for him, rocking slowly as he had done the night before. It was as if he expected her to have known by some intuition or by some telepathy that it was time now to come back, that things were going to be alright.

But the window was unlit.

He went inside and turned the light on in the kitchen. He searched the fridge for something quick to eat, then tried to find a usable plate among the heaps of dirty dishes. Everything in the room was out of place.

Angered by the mess, George felt a rush of energy. He began restoring order, rinsing dishes, putting things away where they belonged. Lise's things were everywhere, haunting him as he worked. There was still an inch of scummed coffee in her breakfast mug, a sweater draped across her chair. In the far corner of the floor was the stack of books that she had slammed down the night before she left. He had left them there deliberately, as if it might be a jinx to touch them, as if he had wanted them there as a reminder. Kneeling down, he picked them up, dusting each one off, straightening a bent cover. They were translator's handbooks, a volumn of her Harrap's Standard French and English Dictionary. He stacked them on the table where she liked to work. He hadn't realized before that she had left so many of her things behind.

At last, the kitchen was returned to order, but the woodbox was empty. His routine of chores had been so thoroughly disrupted. Now he was bound to have the whole house organized again. He took his jacket and pulled on a tuque and stepped back out into the winter night to split some

wood.

It was still overcast. There were no stars visible, no moon, no aura of city lights — just grey treetops looming in the damp night sky. Working in the weak light cast by the windows, George set a stove-length log of maple on the chopping block. Taking up his axe, aiming well, he struck at it. The wood was frozen and straight-grained. It split easily. He went on working, striking harder and harder blows that sent the splintered sticks twirling away into the snow. He was warmed up now, no longer tired, invigorated by the cold air and the work. He split block after block, striking them apart with all his might, sending ringing echoes out across the hills like a signal resounding through the sleeping parish, letting everybody know that he was home.

By the time he got to bed, his deep exhaustion had returned. The day's events were troubling, but they seemed so far away as he stretched out in the bed, sighing, relaxing. The deep silence was pleasing. He was looking up at his familiar ceiling beams, feeling more and more at home in that loft, that antique house. He knew that he'd be staying there no matter what. It would have to work out somehow. This back country felt less and less foreign, and more like the sort of sanctuary he had sought for such a long time. It felt like safe high ground — vantage ground — where he could look back in peace at the world he'd left. There was

no such thing as absolute escape; there would always be stresses that no mountains and no fences could wall out. He couldn't isolate himself from everything, but at least he might never again feel surrounded, besieged on all sides by the things he feared. So much of the turmoil was before him to the south. Behind him was a thousand miles of Québécois forest...beyond that, tundra and scoured rock... silent Arctic ice....

His head was buried in the pillows when the noise wakened him. He looked up in time to see a patch of bright light flash across the beams above him. There were French voices outside — the slam of a car door.

He was halfway down the stairs, tripping on the quilt that he had flung on to hide his nakedness, when he heard Lise coming in the kitchen door.

"George! J'suis revenue!" she called, "Where are you?"