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ABSTRACT

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Bettina Grassmann

In this novel, Shimano, a cycling enthusiast and mechanic, leaves his home in Vermont to seek his estranged Quebecois father in Montreal. He cannot find his father, or anything familiar, as he confronts a culture radically different from his own. Eventually, Shimano begins to form an identity and values independent of the father he craves to connect with. After passively enduring a series of adversities, he learns to become an active participant in his life, dedicating himself to environmental activism in response to the ice storm of 1998. The central metaphor of the novel is the bicycle wheel, how its cyclical structure propels us forward, and how its interlocking spokes combine to make something that can bear hundreds of pounds of weight and travel thousands of miles. This novel is part environmental manifesto, part bicycle manual, part coming of age story, and part love song for Montreal.

Dedicated to Robert Silverman

"When I go biking, I am mentally far, far away from civilization. The world is breaking someone else's heart"

– Diane Ackerman

"La cause du cyclisme a besoin d'une nouvelle fournée de cyclistes enragés. Faut brasser la cage, dire qu'on en a assez d'être traités comme des parias de la circulation alors que nous utilisons héroïquement le moyen de transport le plus bénéfique pour notre ville. Je ne parle pas d'une agressivité articulée, ciblée et tenace, utilisant la parole et le paradoxe. Notre sort est encore et toujours scandaleux."

– Claire Morissette, late activist, journalist, and member of Le Monde à Bicyclette

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Chapter 1

When Shimano realized the car on his left was turning right into the bike lane, he knew that it was probably already too late.

Oh, God. Not now. Not today, were his first thoughts.

But this was no time for regrets; he had to make a decision. Time stretched out like taffy. Everything came into sharp focus: the rush of wind, the tiny darts of rain bouncing against his face, his quickening breath and the urgent drumming of his heart.

In those elongated milliseconds, he weighed his options. Brake? No. Then the car would hit his front wheel and he would be flung onto its hood. Turn right alongside the car? No, the curb was too steep. *Don't touch the brakes then,* he told himself. *Keep pedaling.*

He accelerated until his bike was slightly ahead of the vehicle. *Oh, God, oh God, oh God . . .* For a moment he thought he would get away unharmed, felt jubilation but – the car smacked his back wheel. Shimano's bike tremored. He gripped the handlebars, pumping his brakes with little stuttering pulses as he tried to steady himself. But his bike was a skittish horse. He was thrown over the handlebars and torpedoed onto the wet, hard concrete, skidding into the middle of Viger Street. His helmet hit the ground with a dull *thunk*, his ankle twisted under his thigh, and his U-lock jabbed into his ribs, dribbling like a basketball.

He heard a moan and realized that it came from his own mouth – a guttural, disembodied wail. He looked up stunned into the headlights of oncoming cars that

swerved to miss him and blared their horns. Shimano stood up, colt-legged, and hobbled to the sidewalk, dragging his bike as he limped in the direction of a bench. Some people rushed over.

"Ça va, monsieur? Ça va?" they asked. He had difficulty focussing; their faces looked smeared.

He caught his breath. "Oui – oui." His breath was laboured. He could barely talk "Ça – ça – " He trailed off, distracted by a loud slam a short distance away.

"Arête! Crisse de tabarnac!"

Across the street was a scowling, dreadlocked bike courier, standing squarely in front of a car. She slammed the hood of the car with her hand and the car gave an impatient lurch, so that it almost rolled onto her toes. But she stood firm.

What's she doing? She's going to get herself killed.

She detached her U-lock from her bag and held it up. The driver rolled down his window and yelled at her. She shouted back. Shimano couldn't make out what they were saying, but there was a lot of "tabarnac" and "merde." She drew a cell phone out of a sleeve on her bag strap and waved it in front of him tauntingly. Then she held the phone to her chin, and he nodded, waving for her to move aside.

She jumped onto the sidewalk as the car, a burgundy Audi, pulled up to the curb and parked. A blustering man in a suit emerged from the Audi. He did not look at either Shimano or the courier. His attention was fixed on the car, as he walked around to the other side of it to assess the damage. Shimano was too dazed, too incredulous, to be angry.

Voices twittered beside him.

"He had the right of way, didn't he?"

"Yes, of course. He was on the bike path."

"Was it a green light?"

"Was it a green light?" someone asked again. "Hello?"

Shimano realized that a woman was talking to him.

"I – ah – don't know." *Pffe. Pffe*, went his breath. He felt like he was coming up for air. "Yes, I – think."

"Yes, it was a green," said a man beside her.

The woman's brow wrinkled.

"What date are we?" she asked him.

Before he could respond, the courier yelled at him from across the street.

"Avez-vous besoin d'une ambulance? Do you need an ambulance?"

This sounded expensive and Shimano didn't have much money.

"No!" he yelled back.

"What date are we?" repeated the woman beside him.

"October – twentieth – I think. Not sure." *Pffe, pffe*. "The twenty-second, I think. Or the twenty-third?"

"What year?" said another woman. It was the courier, who was now standing a couple of feet away from him. Her eyes were dark and piercing and her hair looked even larger and more matted from close-up.

"What year are we?" she asked again.

"1997."

"Okay," she said. "You think you break anything?" She had a strong French accent, but she spoke with confidence.

Shimano shook his head. "No – I – I think I just twisted my knee," he said. "It's a weak knee. And I'm bruised on the side," he said, claspings the right side of his torso. It smarted to the touch. He yelped, then recovered. "Well no – it's – it's not so bad."

The courier cocked her head to the side and squinted, as if trying to read him. She had all the get-up of a typical bike courier. Slung over her shoulder was a blue Cocotte bag, its strap laden with clips, waybills, pads of paper and a pen on a string. She was lean and buff. But for the small swell of her chest, she could have been a man of the trade.

"I'm alright. Just – just bruised." *Pffe. Pffe*, he heaved.

"You sound like you have trouble breathing."

"Maybe I'm – just a bit out of breath."

She studied him. Her phone made a little beep. She checked the screen of her cell phone on her strap without removing it from its plastic sleeve.

She looked back at him contemplatively. Finally she said, "I have to go." She swung her bag around and opened it. There were so many packages inside that they almost tumbled out as she rummaged through them.

"I give you my card, okay? I can be your witness, so if anyone calls – the insurance or something – you give them my number, okay?"

Shimano nodded and took the card. It said "Gabrielle Dumais" in cursive writing. Under that was her number and the word "artiste," encircled by an abstract picture of a

bicycle; its wheels twisted into infinity loops.

She said, "I have to go. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, sure. It's okay."

She smiled tightly. Preparing to go, she gripped the horned handlebars of her bike, an unlabeled track bike – a "fixie," as they were nicknamed. It was the exact colour of spinach and the frame was trim and tidy, unencumbered by gears or back brakes. Her dreads flopped lazily around her head as she turned, swooped her leg over the frame and merged with the traffic.

Shimano gazed at his bike from where he sat, a few feet away, lacking the strength to get up and move it nearer to him. Lipstick, he had christened it, because of its colour. Lipstick's red frame seemed healthy enough: the old steel Schwinn frames were practically sturdy enough for NASA. The wheel, however, had taken a beating. It was warped into the shape of a horse saddle.

The police arrived shortly after the courier left. They pulled up to the driver without checking in with Shimano first. The driver waved them over and pointed at the damage on his car, gesticulating frenetically, face reddening. For a minute Shimano wondered if he was at fault. *No, it can't be true*, he thought. *Cyclists have the right of way on the bike path. Don't they?*

As his awareness began to stabilize, regrets began to haunt him: *I should have crossed when I had the green arrow. I should have looked left. Maybe he had the right of way.*

The driver finished with what appeared to be a long tirade, stormed back into his

car, and called someone on his cell phone.

The police crossed the street and one of them asked Shimano what had happened.

“Well, I was riding down Berri. Down – on the bike path. And I got to this intersection. To this street here – Viger. Sorry, I don't know how that's pronounced. Anyway, I guess I didn't look left before crossing. I had a green light and – and, well it was solid green – it had just changed from a straight arrow, and I didn't think to look left. So the driver – I guess maybe he didn't see me. He was on my right, and he turned and – ”

The policeman interrupted Shimano. "I see. Well, accidents happen," he said, jotting something down in a notebook.

“Is he – is he going to make me pay for the damage on his car?”

The policeman looked up from his clipboard and smiled. An ambulance pulled up across the street and Shimano swore under his breath. Hadn't he told the girl not to phone the ambulance?

The ambulance paramedics got out and asked him if he was okay.

Shimano told them he was fine, didn't need an ambulance, but they seemed skeptical. He was starting to get spasms of pain, worse than when he was hit.

“Are you sure you don't want to go? We are here anyway,” said one of them.

“Just for a check-up,” the other continued.

"You look like you're in pain."

"You sound like you have trouble breathing."

“Yeah – yeah, kind of. Okay. Alright,” Shimano said. Each paramedic took an arm and limped Shimano over to the ambulance. “Good luck!” called out one of the cops.

Shimano peered across the street so he could get one more look at the man who hit him, at least to look at him, if not to glare. But it was too late. The driver was already revving up to go, oblivious to all but the road ahead.

"Nice to meet you too," Shimano mumbled. He didn't know if he should be angry. He was still questioning himself: *Did I really have the right of way? Maybe I should have crossed on the arrow . . .*

Chapter 2

"Nom de famille?"

"Excuse-me?"

The hospital intake woman pursed her mouth, rolled her eyes slightly, and huffed,

"Last name?"

"O' Keefe."

"First name?"

"Shimano."

"Pardon?"

"Shimano. Like the bike parts company."

The slight twang on the "i" gave him away.

"American?"

"Yeah. From Vermont. But – but my dad's from here. From Verdun. I have dual citizenship."

"Do you have a Quebec health card?"

"No, I don't."

She looked up from her computer and faced him. "You have no Quebec insurance?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He tipped his head down. "I haven't gotten around to it yet."

Her eyes shot disapproval at him. She reminded Shimano of his mother.

"Can I get insurance right now, maybe?"

She shook her head. "How long have you been in Quebec?"

"Ah – one and I half months, I think. Almost two."

"Then you can't have insurance now, because you have to be resident of Quebec to apply for insurance. To be resident of Quebec, you have to live here since at least three months."

Shimano lifted his eyes up, feigning contemplation. "Well, it's been – I think I've been here since the beginning of July, so actually it's been – actually, it's been over three months."

Shimano was a lousy liar.

The receptionist gave him a sharp look over her bifocals.

"What if I show you my Canadian passport?" he offered.

"Sir, you can't do like that. You have to have a Quebec health card. If not, you have to pay up front."

Shimano felt as if all the blood in his body was draining down and collecting in his shoes.

"But I don't have much money on me. Just \$20 cash. Well, there's also more in my bank account. Do you accept American bank cards?"

"Yes. What's the matter? Why you come to see a doctor?"

"I think I may have broken something."

"Then you probably need X-rays. That will be a few hundred dollars."

Shimano was crest-fallen. A few hundred may not be a lot of money for a radiologist, but this was what was left of two years of saving, while working only slightly above minimum wage. He had hoped the money would stretch all the way to the west coast, to Whistler, BC, where he had planned to snowboard and fix winter sport equipment through the winter.

He decided. "Never mind. All I've got is a few bruises. I don't need to see a doctor."

"You won't see a doctor?"

"No, I won't."

She paused, and scanned him up and down. She looked as if she could see right through his skin to his bones, some of which were surely broken. He tried to suppress a pained grimace that was starting to rip across his face.

"But sir, you may have something serious. You sound like you have trouble breathing."

"Yes – no. Well yes, but – well, it's probably not serious."

"And your teeth are tapping together – "

Shimano realized then that his teeth were chattering. He still hadn't changed out of his wet clothes after the downpour earlier that day. "I'm just cold. I need to change my clothes. Can I use your washroom?" he asked.

"Down the hall and turn left."

Shimano couldn't walk very well on account of the knee, so the paramedics had set him in a wheelchair. He wheeled himself down the hall and turned left into the

washroom. When he heaved himself out of the chair, he felt something pierce on his right side and shouted out involuntarily. As he peeled off layers and his body contorted into different positions, different varieties of pain. He was gasping for air. Yes, something must have happened to his lungs. He squeezed his eyes shut and the sides of his eyes began to moisten. Naked to his underwear, he shivered even more. He sneezed. He felt like his whole torso would burst from the pain. He lost control over his body and it banged against the wall. He felt another sneeze coming on, and he tried to suppress it, shoulders lifting and neck muscles twisting into tight ropes, but he couldn't suppress the sneeze. Someone outside the bathroom yelled out, "Ça va?" And Shimano yelled back, "Ça va," two of the only French words he spoke with any confidence. He heaved his way back into a wheelchair, and emerged from the bathroom. *Shit*, he thought. *I can't just go home. I need crutches. X-rays. Drugs. Especially drugs. How am I going to get drugs without a prescription?*

Shimano wheeled back to intake.

"Alright. I guess I'll see a doctor."

"Okay. That's probably a good idea," she said, pronouncing the word "idea" as if it began with an "h." Shimano could never understand why some Francophones seemed to consistently omit h's that were there and put them in where they weren't.

"I give you the form."

Shimano took the form and wheeled to the waiting area. He hated forms. He had never done taxes because the form scared him. Whenever someone gave him a form, it would take him three days – two to procrastinate, and one to actually do the work.

He looked at the form. It was all in French.

He went back to the desk, and said, "I can't understand this form." She looked impatient and annoyed as she grudgingly translated it for him.

After intake, he waited for a long time in the triage section. When he got into the triage office, he was asked to rate his pain from one to ten. Shimano was no stranger to pain. Compared to what he had suffered in the past, he decided this was a seven.

Then there was a long wait. With nothing to read but pamphlets. Shimano read about heart disease, lung disease, yeast infections and menopause. He read the latter two because he thought they would help him understand women more, but they didn't help at all. When he had exhausted all the literature that was available in English, he thought about the messenger girl. She was completely unlike the high-heeled, spindle-legged fashion princesses he kept meeting, the kind that Montreal was famous for. Like the woman who took him home from Barfly last weekend, for example. A slender beauty with dazzlingly curly hair and jeans that clung to her butt, and expanded into bells just over her red platform shoes. The heels were about four inches tall, and she clutched onto him when they hit an icy patch on the way to her place. Her limbs seemed so brittle, he was afraid he would break them.

Not like the courier girl. There was nothing particularly exotic about her face – it was oval-shaped, and of an average width and length. Most every feature on her face was medium in size. It was what she brought to that face that made it so arresting. The self-sufficiency of her.

Shimano reached into his bag to find her card. It wasn't in his front pockets and

for a moment he worried he had lost it.

He was awakened from his reverie by the woman on his left, who had also been waiting awhile. "You know," she said. "You know, I just realized, in French, the word for intake is 'triage,' and the word for 'lottery' is 'tirage'. That fitting, huh? This could as well be a draw." She chuckled to herself.

The triage nurse came out of the office. Shimano wheeled hastily up and intercepted her as she paced down the hallway.

"Excusez-moi?"

She looked like she was in a hurry and wanted to ignore him. It seemed to pain her that she was obliged to be polite.

"Je pense que – " he tried, then didn't know how to continue, so he switched to English instead. "I think my pain is an eight now," he said. He squished his eyes closed and frowned, just to make the point.

"Okay, okay," she said.

Ten minutes later he was sitting in the doctor's office. He begged the nurse for drugs, but he replied that Shimano would have to wait until the doctor had assessed his pain.

"My pain is an eight," Shimano said.

"Yes, I know. But the doctor has to be able to feel where it hurts."

"Pretty much everywhere on my right side."

"Sorry. You'll just have to wait."

Wait? He had been here for at least three hours. He wanted to start screaming.

When the doctor came, she wouldn't give him drugs either, but instead tortured him further. She made Shimano lie down, which raised his pain from an eight to a nine. She poked him in various places and asked him where it hurt. Nearly everywhere.

The doctor told him he needed X-rays, and the nurse came in with a hospital gown. Shimano hated hospital gowns; they brought back bad memories from childhood. The gown was pastel purple, with a number scrawled on it in marker. It held together with bows in the back. He looked at its colour with some disgust. Lavender was a colour that never touched his skin. *So they gave me the cross-dresser's gown*, he thought. *And can't they finally figure out how to make gowns that don't expose your ass?*

Then the nurse asked, "Would you like some pain-killers?"

"Oh, God, yes," he replied.

She gave him a glass of water and a pill. Shimano threw the pill into his mouth, and gulped it down. Soon Shimano felt smooth and relaxed, like he was gliding through the air. There was still pain, but at least there was pleasure too, which distracted him. After the X-rays, the doctor left Shimano in the office by himself. Through the frame of the door, he saw hazy, grayscale images pop up on her computer. A set of curves linked together in the middle. His ribs, evidently. She zoomed in to a section on the left of the image. There was an irregularity – an interrupted line. So it was true: he had broken something.

At this knowledge, his rib – and now he knew it was his rib – seemed to hurt even more. And not only that. He suddenly longed for company, help getting home perhaps, or just help in general. He wished there was someone around who wasn't on government

payroll.

Noticing the phone, he picked it up and called his friend Sheldon. The answering machine kicked in right away with Sheldon's lackadaisical voice.

"Bla, bla, bla, bla, bla, Sheldon. Bla, bla, bla, bla, bla, leave a message bla, bla, bla, bla. Bla, bla." Sheldon had changed his greeting. His voice sounded bored, condescending. Shimano felt almost personally insulted. He put the phone down without leaving a message.

Who else could he phone? He had some other friends in the city, but none of them were close enough that he had bothered to memorize their phone numbers. The realization hit him then – he'd been here since August and yet he had hardly a friend. Not that he had made much of an effort. He had never meant to stay this long. He had wanted to ride from Montreal to Vancouver, but now that was out of the question. And the doctor's bill was probably going to do away with most of his travel money. He was stuck in Montreal. What does a bike mechanic do in late October in Montreal? Especially an American Anglo, in a city where you had to be bilingual just to work at a gas station? He felt as if the Quebecois, even the Anglo-Montrealers, wanted him to learn French immediately, or get immediately out of Quebec. But he didn't seem to be picking it up very quickly.

No money. No job. Few friends. He had never even found his father. In all the time he'd been here, he'd never caught a glimpse of him, not even a word of where he might be. He wondered to himself if things would be different if he had a massive injury – so serious that he'd be in the hospital and the papers. Maybe then his father would hear

about it and come to visit him. He would at least do that much, wouldn't he?

Shimano felt a droplet creep down his chin, tickling it, like a small insect. The tear dripped off his chin and made a small splat as it dropped onto the cover of a magazine that was lying on the desk. The wet splotch expanded slowly, making the ink on the magazine bleed.

Chapter 3

Shimano had not seen his father for over ten years, but for the first half of his life, his father filled his young world. While his mother worked 50 hours at her graphic design job, his father took care of Shimano, although the word "care" did not always describe his brand of parenting. Gerry had three great loves, and they didn't always mix well.

After Shimano, Gerry loved bicycles, and his son had inherited the bug. Shimano grew up in Gerry's bicycle work-shed. Amid the wrenches and the grease and the cogs, he was more at home than in a playroom. His second word was "bike," which he learned right after his first: "Daddy."

Shimano's mother nagged Gerry to keep Shimano out of the workshop. "It's too dangerous for such a young child," Gail kept saying, and Gerry kept denying. But he was often too distracted by bike paraphernalia to prevent it from doing harm. His carelessness was exacerbated further by his third great love – drinking.

One time, Gerry dropped a hammer on Shimano's leg by mistake. Another time, the boy fell into a bucket of sprockets and got a dozen scrapes. After Shimano sampled a bit of solvent out of curiosity, Gerry promised Gail to keep him in the house, but he'd often bring bits and pieces of scavenged bikes to show Shimano, until almost the entire shop was transplanted into their living room. Gail cursed as she stumbled over the rubble and finally convinced Gerry to bring all the bike parts and tools back to the shop. Shimano argued, with child-like logic, that he also belonged back in the shop: since his name was Shimano, like the bike part manufacturer, he must be some sort of bike part

like a hub or a derailleur. His mother did not yield, but neither did Shimano. Whatever she said, he could not stay away. His Fisher Price toolkit could not possibly replace the grime-coated, sharp-edged delights of the bike work shed.

Shimano's dad showed him how to pry a tire off a wheel rim, how to remove an axle from a hub and change the little ball bearings, and how to adjust a drive-train so the gears were always at his command. He taught Shimano that the French word "*clé*" means both "wrench" and "key" and most problems are half solved when you find the right tool for the job. With the right key, you can unlock treasure chests. Shimano learned how a wheel's shape is controlled by spokes all laced together in an interdependent relationship and every spoke's tension affects every other spoke. He learned that critical adjustments of no more than a millimetre can make the difference between a sweet ride and an inevitable breakdown. For Shimano's father, almost no problem was irresolvable. A stubborn bolt, a wheel mangled into the shape of a potato chip and a seat-post jammed into the frame weren't grievances but intriguing puzzles. Gerry could make a bicycle sing and dance. Shimano thought he was a genius, a virtuoso, a magician.

In other ways Gerry was not so gifted. At garden parties, while his mother fluttered around from person to person, his father would lurk around by himself, drinking and looking for things to fix. The party hosts found their doorknobs lubricated, their lamps functioning and their bicycle wheels straightened.

Gerry also lacked organizational skills. The shop was always in a disarray, constantly compounded by "foundlings" rescued from the trash, "adoptees" that his friends gave him, and abandoned bikes he "liberated" by breaking through locks.

One day, when Shimano was about nine years old, his father came stumbling into the shop with a foundling atop his shoulder. He was a bit tipsy. Shimano could already recognize the signs: his clumsy enthusiasm, his excessive gushing. "Shim, ya – ya godda see this. See? Vintage Ritchey. Hand-made. Just *check out* these dropouts!" Gerry turned the bike frame around for his son to see as he exclaimed, "Isn't this . . . "

But he never finished his sentence. What finished the sentence was a loud crash. The Ritchey caught the tail of one of the bikes leaning against the wall, which slammed into four bikes leaning against it, which bashed into the bike stand holding his bike, which crashed into him where Shimano stood poised with a mallet, ready to pound on a five-pound headset tool. That torpedo-shaped monstrosity jabbed into Shimano's right knee as a total of five bikes and a stand fell on top of him. His head banged on the concrete floor and he faded into a long, sluggish dream that every bike, tool and key in the room was apologizing to him, while a choir of angels beat on pots and pans with wrenches.

When he woke up, he was lying in a blanched white hospital room with hushed voices in the background. In intense pain.

He howled. He swore. His mother sat pensively on the edge of a chair beside the bed and stroked his hair gently, her face in pleats, saying over and over, "Oh, Shim. My dear Shim." Behind her, in the corner of the room, his father peeked at him through his fingers as he dug their tips into his forehead.

There were many days of this. Shimano had a fractured knee, a broken arm and a concussion. He remembered little of it besides the pain. Pounding, gripping, wrenching

pain. During all of this, his father just sat there helplessly, every now and then walking over and giving him a vapid, awkward rub or pat on the back. It was his mother who cradled him in her arms and rocked him back and forth, assuring him, "You'll pull through it, Shim. Soon this will be all over. You're so brave."

When Shimano finally came home, nothing was ever the same again. His parents indulged him so much that he began to resent it. They let him watch TV and play video games whenever he wanted. They bought his favourite foods all the time, no matter how unhealthy or expensive. Whatever Shimano asked for, it was his. To each other they were not so kind. They fought constantly and Gerry drank more than ever. But worse yet, he never stopped apologizing prolifically.

One day Gail bought a car. As soon as he saw it, Gerry ranted, "So now you want the American wet dream, huh? Life, liberty and ownership of a vehicle. What about all those values we used to talk about?"

Gail snapped, "Until you're the one who has to single-handedly support this family, you reserve judgment about how I'm getting this injured boy around after an accident that was all your fault!"

His father's face crumpled. His hands clenched as he dropped his head down to stare into his glass of beer. At first, Shimano refused to get into the car and wheel-chaired to school instead. But the kids taunted him; they got in his way and tried to push the wheelchair. He couldn't take the embarrassment and eventually resigned himself to riding in the car.

After a few weeks in the wheelchair, Shimano had to hop around on crutches and

he still couldn't play sports with the other boys. They called him Gimp-mano. So he spent the long hours alone. With nothing else to do, his mind inevitably wandered back to the wondrous shop he had not entered for over half a year. One day, his fear succumbed to his desire, and he walked over to the shed and squeaked open the door.

Before Shimano even came through the door, he heard his dad's sharp voice: "I'm sorry, Shim. You can't come in here."

"Why not?" Shimano said, entering the shop and walking up to him.

"Your mother will be upset."

"I won't get hurt this time."

"Come on. Time to go."

"I'll be careful!"

Shimano's dad pointed toward the door.

"Out!" He tried to scare up an authoritative voice, but there was an uplift at the end of the "command," so Shimano knew it wasn't one.

"Out!" he said louder, looking straight at him.

"Okay, okay, I'm leaving." But as Shimano neared the door, he caught sight of a chunky, mysterious axle.

"What's this?" he asked.

"A bike part."

"I know that!"

"A wheel hub."

"But why does it have wires coming out of it?"

"Time to go, Shim."

"I'll go if you tell him what the wires are for."

Gerry paused and inhaled tautly, so tautly that the veins of his neck protruded. Then he looked down at his clenched hands, squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. His neck smoothed out as he exhaled. He walked over to his son and took the axle out of his hand.

"You don't see too many of these anymore, but when the wheel turns, it powers a headlight."

"How does it do that?"

"Well . . ." Gerry began, and folded open a volume of his seemingly inexhaustible mental encyclopaedia. He launched into an explanation, his voice reflecting the wonderment he felt for any bit of mechanical ingenuity. He unlocked the hub, the little universe, showed him all the fine springs, interconnected cogs, magnets and wires, and explained how they ignited the light.

In the evening, Gerry whispered in Shimano's ear, "Don't tell your mother." But at dinner, when Shimano was reaching for the mashed potatoes, his mother asked sternly, "Shimano? Did you go to the workshop today?"

"No."

"Look at your hands."

Shimano slowly looked down. They were smeared with grease, and there was grit under his fingernails. His head began to pound.

"You're lying to me!"

"I'm not."

"He was in the shop today, wasn't he?" Gail asked Gerry. He waited too long to reply – long enough confirm her suspicions.

Gail turned to Shimano and commanded, "Go to your room!" Shimano promptly obeyed; he didn't want his father to get into worse trouble.

From his room, Shimano heard his mother yelling, "You're encouraging him, Gerry."

"I didn't! I don't even need to encourage him."

"But you let him inside. I call that encouraging."

"But – Gail, I mean, what are you going to do? Bar him from bike shops for the rest of his life? When he's got a natural talent, a natural love . . ."

"I'm not saying that. But he's a child. He's not even 10 yet. I can't bear to see him get hurt again."

"Look, he wants to learn. If he's willing to take the risk, I'm willing to take the risk."

"But you haven't even cleaned up the place, for God's sake. Anything could fall on him!"

"I'll clean tomorrow. I promise."

"And no drinking in the shop. Absolutely none."

"Okay, fine. I'm sorry." Shimano heard a bottle hammering onto the counter.

Gerry claimed he was trying to keep the place clean and uncluttered, but it hardly showed. He couldn't part with all those beauties that crowded the walls and he often knocked them over when he was looped. There were days when Gerry and Shimano

could hardly move around in the shed, and Gail would stand at the doorway, mouth pursed, unable to convince her son that this place of enchantment was also a place of danger. At night she scolded Gerry and he promised again and again to be careful, to keep the place clean, to stay sober in the shop. As the months went on, Shimano's parents spent most of their time together fighting and the dinner table became a battleground.

Both of Shimano's parents, however, agreed that he should try doing some other things with his spare time. His mother tried to interest him in drawing, but she didn't know anything about mechanical devices and that was all Shimano ever wanted to draw. She took him swimming, which was one thing he was able to do, but he was always insecure that one of his classmates would see him and torment him for swimming with "Mommy."

When he finally got out of the crutches, Dad asked him, "Why don't you try mountain biking again?"

"I'll be really slow. The kids'll laugh at me."

Gerry sighed and dropped his eyes into his mashed potatoes.

"Maybe you could just do a little bit of biking by yourself?" Gail suggested tentatively. "Or you could go with some of the kids we met in the hospital."

"Those kids are gimps."

"Shim! Don't say that word," his mother berated. "They're not gimps. You're not a gimp either. You are a strong, young boy who will recover and ride with the bike team again."

"Aw, Mom, I'll never make the team. I won't be fast anymore."

“You don’t have to be fast. You just have to try,” she said.

But in front of the other guys, it was more humiliating for Shimano to try and fail than not to try at all.

The next time Shimano came to the work shed, his dad said, “Sorry, Shim. Shop’s closed today.”

“Oh, man. Just 'cause Mom said so?”

“No. Because today – we are going for a bike ride.”

“But I suck at biking!”

“I won’t laugh at you,” he said with a smile that tugged Shimano out of the shed, into the countryside.

They rode slowly down the highway alongside autumn-painted trees and thicketed cornfields, to some woods nearby. When they got to the mountain bike trails, Shimano was like a young colt on new legs. He kept shaking and tumbling into the dirt. His father got off his bike and spotted him, catching the bike as it wobbled, though Gerry wasn’t very steady himself. When they got to a big drop, Gerry slipped on the mud, his hands pushing against the bike. It lurched forward, stormed down a gravel-strewn hill and rammed into a tree. Shimano fell headfirst onto the cold metal frame, his left knee crunched under his torso. He felt something twist fiercely.

“*Shhhhit*!” he yelled.

“Oh, my God. What have I done?” Gerry rushed over to him where he sat swearing and crying, grasping his thigh near the throbbing knee.

“You hurt me again!” Shimano gasped between wails. “Why are you always so

stupid?"

"You're right, Shim. I'm stupid. The stupidest father ever." Gerry looked so pathetic, like he was in more in pain than his son was. Shimano was embarrassed by this naked vulnerability. He wished that he could turn back time and edit out his words.

Gerry put his arm around Shimano shoulders and supported him as Shimano limped out of the woods. Then Shimano waited at the side of the road while his father biked to the nearest phone. Soon his mother came with her car and all her wrath. She glared intermittently at Gerry through the rear-view mirror all the way to the hospital. This time Shimano only had a sprain, but it was serious enough to put him back in crutches. And now he had two bad knees instead of just one.

At dinner, his parents were icily taciturn and his father slipped out without any explanation. Shimano didn't hear him come home until early, early the next morning. From their room, Shimano heard his mother explode at Gerry like a storm breaking.

"You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"So what if I have?"

"What do you mean 'so what?' How dare you say that! With your drinking – your – look what you've done to your – our – child!"

"Fuck! It was an accident, Gail. An accident!"

"And it was your fault. You're an unfit father. You can't take care of anyone. Can't even hold down a job."

From his bedroom, he heard a loud, ferocious bang, like a mallet hitting the wall.

His mother screeched, "How dare you push me! I want you to leave this house

now. This minute."

"Fine. Fine," he yelled. "Who wants to live with a bitch like you anyway?"

Shimano heard scuffling, things being thrown against the floor and the creak of a suitcase falling on its wheels. He crawled over to their room on his hands and smarting knees. His parents turned to him and froze. Finally, Gerry tottered over to Shimano and crouched down so his face was level with his son's

"I'm sorry, kid. I'm moving out."

"But Dad . . ."

"I'm sorry," he said and stood up.

"Don't go, Dad. Please don't go." Shimano grabbed onto his father's leg. He wanted to clamp it with vice grips, so it wouldn't go anywhere. Gerry shook his leg gently.

"Please let me go, Shim." He looked at him sombrely, with the same expression on his face that Shimano saw in the hospital after the first accident.

"Your mother and I don't get along. It's better this way."

"Please don't go! Please, Dad, Pleeaaaaase..."

"I gotta go," Gerry whispered. He reached down and pried Shimano's arms from his legs.

As Gerry headed out the door, he said, "Bye, Shim. I'm gonna miss you. But maybe you're better off without me around anyway." Shimano wanted to say it again: "Why are you always so stupid?" But he didn't. He just watched him leave. The door made barely a sound as it closed: well-oiled, as usual.

Chapter 4

All week, Shimano expected him to come back, but he didn't. On Saturday morning, Shimano heard some scuffling in the shed and ran out to see if it was him. In the driveway were a couple of teenage guys piling frames and parts into a truck. He scrambled over to the shed. His mother was there, hoisting the inauspicious Ritchey bike onto her shoulders.

"That's our stuff!" Shimano yelled, grabbing her arm. "Dad's and mine! What are you doing with Dad's stuff?"

"Giving it back to him," his mother said.

"You can't do that!"

His mother leaned the Ritchey against the wall, bent down to look Shimano in the eye, and said, "Shimano, listen to me. I know this is hard for you to accept. Your father's not coming back and he needs his tools and bikes. I'm not a bike mechanic. I work all day and I can't watch you during the day to make sure you don't hurt yourself."

"I *won't* hurt myself."

The teenage boys entered the shed and carried out parts by the armfuls.

Gail started stripping the benches of tools and throwing them into a box. Shimano took some of them out of the box, gripping them in his fists.

"Shimano, give me those tools back," she said.

Shimano made for the door, but with his limp, she easily caught up to him and grabbed his arm. Shimano hid the tools behind his back.

"I'll tell Dad!" he said. "He'll be mad!"

"Your father – your father *agreed* to this. He *needs* these things."

"You're lying."

"You want to talk to him? I'll call him and he'll tell you."

"Then I'm gonna tell him I wanna live with him!"

"You can't live with him. He has a drinking problem. He doesn't know how to take care of you. Do you really want to get hurt again?"

"I *won't* get hurt again! I wanna live with Dad. I don't wanna live with you. I hate you!"

"Shimano, please – please just give me those tools and leave the shed." Shimano's hands were holding the tools so tightly that they hurt his hands. Gail spun Shimano around and tried to yank the tools from his clenched hands.

"No!" he yelled. His leg shot out and kicked, and he didn't realize what he'd done, what his body had done, until he saw his mother doubled over, grabbing her leg.

"You – you kicked your own mother!" She lurched at him with her arms, and withdrew. "Now you're going inside the house, and you're going to think about what you just did."

The teenagers were poking their heads through the doorway.

"Um, can we come in?"

"Yes," Gail said. "You can come in and see what a rotten child I have."

Shimano covered his face; it was covered in tears. He ran – limped – back into the house. He was terrified of what he had done, of what he was. Maybe now his own

father wouldn't want him now.

Gail made Shimano stay in his room all day. When she finally released him the next day, the first thing he did was go to the shed. He hardly recognized the place. Stripped of its bikes, the shop looked shoddy and exposed. Shimano had never realized how dented the walls were, and how dramatically the paint was peeling. Tangled, limp cobwebs dangled from the ceiling.

Shimano's mother got full custody of him. The court allowed his father two visits per month. Shimano looked forward to every visit, the way one would look forward to spring in the middle of January. But every time he came to visit his father, both Gerry and his living space seemed to be breaking down. His new shop was unnavigable. One time when Gail brought Shimano to Gerry's apartment, Gail smelled whiskey on Gerry's breath. Despite Shimano's protestations, Gail wouldn't leave him alone with his father. She told Gerry that he would see his child sober or not see him at all. After that, Shimano and Gerry saw each other less and less frequently, and some months they didn't see each other at all. Two years later, Gerry returned home to Canada and the visits ceased altogether.

But Shimano's passion for mechanics remained. Gail eventually let Shimano set up his own workshop in the shed. A year or two later, Shimano got a job at the local bike shop before he was even old enough to legally work. He was given a raise two months after he started. By the time he was 16, he could build a wheel from scratch in less than an hour, change a tube in less than five minutes and change a cable in one minute flat. Name any popular bicycle make and model, and he could list from memory all its

component parts, right down to the size of the bearings. There was almost nothing he could not fix. When he had the right tools.

Chapter 5

When Shimano got back from the hospital, he barely moved for three days. He had no TV, so he just stared at the wall. Lipstick, Shimano's beloved Schwinn, lay idle across from him, its wheel still mangled from the bike accident.

There wasn't much he could do with himself. His collapsed lung healed quickly, but the broken rib didn't. Shimano had never realized how central the rib was to his body functioning. It hurt to lie flat, so he slept sitting up. Getting up hurt. Sitting down hurt. Laughing hurt. Coughing and sneezing were excruciating. It even hurt to breathe.

By day three, he was so sad, lonely and bored that he decided to brave the pain long enough to take his wheel off his bike and try to straighten it. He set the wheel in a truing stand he had made a month ago out of an old bicycle fork and a pair of hangers. It was a crude piece of equipment, a far cry from the sleek Park Tools specimens, with their knobs and dials everywhere and calipers that could be set within the precision of half a millimetre. But all he really needed was a "swish, swish" sound of the wheel rubbing against a protrusion, which told him there was a deviation in rim alignment. And hangers did the job quite nicely.

Shimano spun his wheel. It wobbled dizzily from side to side, veering sharply to the left opposite the valve. The hanger against the rim sounded like a scratching mouse.

Shimano picked up his butterfly-shaped spoke wrench, and slipped it around a spoke nipple, a small bolt that holds the spoke to the rim and controls the spoke's tension. He worked methodically, starting at the valve opening and tightening and loosening

spokes appropriately as he rotated the wheel slowly. Since every spoke was connected to all the others, either directly or indirectly, Shimano usually turned the spoke nipples only by small increments at a time, so he could watch how the spokes interacted. A change, even a small change, in the tautness of one spoke inevitably affected the others, so it's best not to turn too much at one go. No spoke can go about it on its own. Sometimes he had to adjust the same spokes several times, getting a little closer and closer to perfection with every full rotation. There was scarcely a mechanic that didn't call the process of truing a wheel "zen." Truing, aligning, balancing – these things required patience, control and careful observation, an almost oneness with the wheel. Thirty percent science, seventy percent black magic, was what his boss in Randolph used to say.

Shimano had trued literally thousands of wheels, so he barely needed to think over the process anymore. However, he did like to puzzle over their idiosyncrasies every now and then. With few exceptions, wheels were mostly composed of the same stuff. Each had a circular rim and an axle in the middle. Every wheel had spokes, usually 32 or 36, woven together in triple cross patterns, fastened to the rim with spoke nipples. He liked seeing all these parts disassembled on the floor, all these insubstantial bits of metal, that combined to make a structure that could bear hundreds of pounds of weight. When they were all assembled together, they were perfect, their mild eccentricities only added to that perfection. Shimano still couldn't believe how individual wheels all were. After they'd been ridden for a while, one, two years, they all had a story to tell.

Shimano liked to puzzle over the ones that had clearly been through some sort of trauma, and there was no shortage of those. People in Montreal seemed to be extra

careless with their bicycles. Maybe it was all that partying. They didn't have time even to oil their chains. But there were all sorts of other hazards: potholes, psychopathic snow plough drivers, raging drunks who vandalized bikes for kicks, literally, on Saturday nights. Shimano had seen it all. He could often tell what kind of trauma the wheel had been through and what kind of rider had owned it. Big cogs worn out: definitely a hill climber. An egg-shaped wheel: probably one big gaping pothole. Wheels with more broken spokes than not: probably a snow plough. Then there were the rusty, frowning wheels that had suffered from a winter of neglect. Those were the toughest, because often they were so corroded that Shimano couldn't even tighten or loosen the spokes anymore.

But regardless of what kind of shape a wheel was in (including literally), Shimano rarely abandoned a repair job. Perfection was the object, of course, that holy, glowing orb that floated about Plato's world of forms, but infinity was on the side of imperfection, not perfection. For all the imperfect wheels, from dented and demented, to microscopically crooked, there was only one single perfect wheel, and though Shimano twisted and wrenched and banged his way to that elusive goal, if the truth be known, it was the imperfect wheels that he liked the best.

Shimano soon realized that his wheel was too far gone for spoke wrenches. The nipples couldn't be torqued enough to pull the rim back into shape. Exacting tools were of no use. This was no time for negotiations. It was a time for brute force.

Like so many of his tricks, Shimano had learned this one from his dad: inflate the tire, then whack the wheel against the ground, so only the tire contacted the ground. Then, as his dad used to say, the tire will say to the spokes around the area of impact, "We

strongly suggest you all move over. " Once a bend in the wheel was a little less severe, he could start with the spoke wrenches again.

Shimano took the wheel outside where he could whack it against the ground without ruining any hardwood. He held the wheel over his head. He felt a pain in his ribs, but he was so fixed on his intent that he chose to ignore it.

He banged the wheel against the floor. Pain exploded into his side, and he fell next to his wheel, rolling in pain.

He hobbled back to bed and downed more morphine, enough to lull him into the semi-dream world where everything in the world seemed to be floating on a river. Little bubbles of thoughts that came to the surface – the memory of his mother, after his first bad accident. The warmth of her arms.

He longed for her, to be a boy again, as much as he resented this longing. He hadn't called to tell her about the accident yet, and he didn't want to. He knew what she would say: *What the heck are you doing in Canada? Come back home.*

Chapter 6

For Shimano, the countryside around Randolph, Vermont, was as uneventful as it was beautiful. While he lived there, Shimano went cycling whenever he could, long rides, his feet registering the texture of the ground as he raced up and down the hills. He often lost track of time and distance and would venture so far that he didn't get home until midnight or one. He never got lost. Even in the dark, he managed to avoid every pothole; he knew the road that well. Too well.

For eight summers he worked at Cyclo-stravaganza in Randolph. Shimano loved talking to the cyclists on tour. They weren't the boss's favourite clients. He'd gripe about how cheap they were, just buying parts, cables and the like, and doing all the labour themselves. Some of them even had the audacity to ask to borrow tools. Shimano didn't argue, but inwardly he thought, *What does he expect? If you're travelling from San Francisco to New York, you're going to save whatever way you can.* The cycle-tourists were poor, but most would not exchange life on the road for anything. Their clothes and saddlebags were dishevelled, but their faces were radiant and bronzed. Shimano got a vicarious thrill, which gave way to a nagging jealousy. The shop owner could not spare him during biking season, not even for a week. Midway through another summer of same-old, same-old, he thought to himself, *I'm a mechanic, aren't I? Why keep this job when I could go anywhere?*

The first anywhere he wanted to try was Montreal. He told himself he wanted to go because Montreal was the place to party, and he almost believed himself. It was one

wicked city, after all. He'd only been there a few times, and he loved it, basking in the big city lights. As a teenager, especially, when he shared a van with friends barely old enough to drive, let alone drink. They had a wreck of a time, hollering out the window as they drove along the rows of lights and clubs on St. Laurent, "the Main." But he knew there was more to Montreal than that. It was European, cosmopolitan. You could see African drummers on the mountain, and tango-dancers in the park. Big name performers, like Robert Plant and Radiohead, performed in free outdoor concerts. There was nothing like that in Vermont. He'd heard that Quebec had more bike paths than nearly any province or state in North America. This was where his father grew up, in this lively, complex fine mess. Maybe he would find his father riding around somewhere.

He bought a second-hand Schwinn frame, a classic, with the welding innovations that had made bicycle history. He built wheels with aluminum rims and titanium spokes, outfitting the back one with a seven-speed internal hub. A Shimano Nexus. Bought some sturdy saddle bags, a small stove and a foldable saucepan.

When the summer tapered down at the end of August, he headed Northwest to Lake Champlain. He made good time, considering how much baggage he had and how hilly the road was. Randolph to Burlington on the first day. A distance of about 75 miles, 120 kilometres, 120 clicks, as the Canadians say. The first night, he slept between the lake and a bike path. The area was full of glass, so he etched out a circle in the sand with his foot, marking where he'd put his tent, and cleared the area of broken bottles. In the middle of the night, he was awakened by a motorcycle pulling right up to his tent. His heart pounded so hard that it was almost audible. To his relief, the motorcycle drove

away. He woke up at six. Dawn was like a different country. A new-born sun glowed under a pale halo of mist. Lake Champlain sparkled like jewels. The sea gulls began to caw.

A few hours later he crossed the border. On the American side was a thin strip on the highway. On the other was a paved bike trail, straying far from the road, into the trees, the palaces of green. Over a thin canal to Chambly, where he saw a sign that read: "Ville de Québec: 284 km." He smiled. That's one hell of a long bike path. He was home.

He loved Montreal right away. The pretty girls strutting down St. Denis in their Le Château fitted shirts. The greasy spoon resto-bars where you can get poutine and other sloppy plates of mush. Right next to cafés that didn't even have drip coffee on their menus, just espressos and cappuccinos and the like. Serving upscale clientele, all sophisticated and French, smoking clove cigars on the terraces on St. Denis. Parks with large fountains in the middle, that were lit from the bottom at night, water splashing out in Technicolor.

The third day in Montreal, he got up the courage to go on his first, and central mission. He'd brought an envelope with him, the one that contained his last child support cheque, and a barely legible return address scribbled in his father's hand.

He rode up to Bernard Street, in Mile End, a pretty, quiet neighbourhood which appeared to be home to a peculiar mix of Hasidic Jews, Latinos loitering around sports bars, and eccentric artists in mod haircuts.

His heart pounded as he rang the doorbell. The door creaked open and behind it was a 50ish woman with green eyes.

“Oui, allô?” green-eyes asked.

“Allô. Um – je suis Shimano O' Keefe.”

“Oui?” she asked, her face blank.

“Je – I'm looking for my father.”

“Qui? Father? No, I don't think you have the good house,” she said in faltering English.

“There's no one else here?”

“No. Me. Only me here.”

“Do you know where he may have gone?”

“Excuse me?”

“The guy who lived here before?”

She shook her head. “But – a moment...” She disappeared into the back and returned with a few envelopes.

She gave put them in his hands and he flipped through them. There were a few different names and then – *ah!* “Gerald 'O Keefe.” Several envelopes with his name and the Bernard address, behind plastic windows.

He turned to her and muttered, “Thank you. Ah, merci.”

She smiled, nodded and closed the door.

He rode slowly around until he found a park, sat down on the grass, and tore open the envelopes. All bills, obviously unpaid for many months. Hydro Québec: \$646.73 Bell Canada: \$839.45. No wonder he had stopped paying child support. *Now what?* Shimano thought, staring at the sparkling fountain spouting exuberantly in the middle of the park.

The view started to get blurry.

Fuck this, he thought, crumpling the bills up and throwing them into the garbage.

He turned his bike upside down and started working on his wheel, although there wasn't really anything wrong with it.

Chapter 7

Wheel.

Shimano was haunted by the memory of how his father sighed out the word, out of the blue sometimes, for no reason at all: "Wheel." He said it in a hushed voice, almost religious in his reverence for this, the mother of human inventions.

Shimano remembered one of the last conversations he had had with his dad. He was around 12, and had just learned about the number π . The number began like this: 3.1415926535897932384 . . . and kept going forever, because there were an infinite amount of digits. Shimano had learned how this baffling number could be used to calculate the area of a circle, the volume of a sphere, or nearly anything that curved, looped or spiralled. The number π seemed so odd and arbitrary to Shimano. He had started memorizing the digits, but had given up at around 30 when he realized that there was nothing to be gained by it. Shimano had many questions about π that his teacher couldn't answer, so he saved them for his next weekend visit with his father.

Gerry had never been to university, but like every mechanic, he had some rudimentary knowledge of trigonometry. He knew, of course, that $2\pi r$ was the circumference of a circle. All wheel-builders knew that, but Gerry could also calculate spoke lengths without using a computer program or even a calculator, an ability few mechanics ever mastered.

So Shimano thought Gerry might have an answer to his most pressing question about the number: "Are the digits of π totally random?"

"As far as I can tell, yes," Gerry replied. "They're completely random."

Shimano was disappointed. He had wished that his father would show him the way through the messy garble of digits, would demonstrate somehow that there was order in there after all. Shimano had thought that π might be like some of his mother's paintings: from close up, all you saw was a jumble of accidental brush strokes, but from far way, you could see mountains, rivers, people.

"Well, come to think of it, they aren't *really* random," Gerry said by way of reassurance. "They're the digits of π ."

This seemed a puzzling statement to Shimano, until he had reflected on it for awhile. Probably what Gerry meant was that meaning was just a matter of perspective. Perhaps, for a person who had never had to count anything, the sequence of numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 would appear just as random as the sequence 3, 1, 4, 1, 5, 9.

Still Shimano could not fathom how all π 's gibberish digits, a sequence so utterly lacking in order and symmetry, described something so symmetrical and orderly as a circle. Maybe if Shimano knew all the digits, it would make more sense, but no one could possibly know all the digits, because the number of digits was infinite.

And what did that mean that π had an infinite number of digits? Gerry agreed: it meant that it was impossible to be 100% accurate. If you wanted to draw a truly perfect circle using the formula $2\pi r$, you would have to know every single digit of π . The first, the six billionth, and all the way up to infinity.

And *no one* could hold so many numbers in their head, no computer either, so no circle drawn by human or computer could possibly be perfect. A circle would necessarily always be a little jagged or wobbly, or wouldn't close completely. The deviations may not

be so severe that anyone could tell from far away, but if you zoomed in really close . . . and the thought of being that close made Shimano's head loop around and around.

There was something else Gerry liked to say. He would say it as they completed a project or a repair job: "That's as close to perfection as things get in this world." That was his way of reminding himself, and Shimano, that there was a time to stop.

But Shimano was not ready to stop yet.

He called Canada 411, but they only had Gerald O' Keefe's old address on Bernard. He called scattered relatives in Quebec and Ontario. The only person who'd heard anything from his father recently was Uncle Paddy, Gerry's only living sibling. Uncle Paddy told Shimano that he'd got a call from Gerry a year ago. He was in Vancouver, wanted to ride east again, but had run out of money. Uncle Paddy had grudgingly wired money, but hadn't heard any word from Gerry since: "Where he is now is anyone's guess," Paddy concluded.

Shimano finally called his mother.

"I always suspected that was the reason you went to Canada," was the first thing she said after he asked.

"Well, it wasn't the *only* reason," Shimano said.

"Shimano, I haven't heard from your father in almost 10 years. You probably know more than I do."

"Do you know someone I could call – one of his friends – in Montreal, maybe?"

"I'm not really in touch with them, and besides, he never did have that many friends."

"Yeah, I know, but he must have had a couple. Someone must at least know if he's alive."

"If he was alive last year, he's probably alive now. He's resourceful. If he didn't contact you, then it was probably his choice . . ." Gail trailed off, realizing her words held the edge of a knife.

"I'm sorry, Shimano, but I think this is a foolhardy mission. I know this is unkind, but all this searching is more than he deserves."

"Mom – "

"I'm sorry. I'm pissed off at him for how irresponsible he is. I realize he's got an alcohol problem, but can't he at least put the bottle down long enough to pick up the phone and call his son? Shimano, why do you want to break your heart over and over again? Come back home."

"I want to travel."

"Why don't you go back to college, finish your degree, and then you can travel? You may even have some money left in your education fund for – "

Shimano cut her off before she could reiterate the speech he'd heard so many times.

"I flunked out of college," Shimano said.

"Oh, come on. That was just English and Philosophy. You were fantastic at Physics and Math."

"It's just not for me. It's not practical. All this talk, talk, talk. I don't like sitting at a desk all day."

"So go into engineering. That's more practical. Mechanical engineering, say."

"So I can work for the oil and gas industries?"

"Oh, please Shimano, you know full well that's not what I envisioned for you."

"But that's what college is for – just – moulding minds to feed the industrial-military complex."

"Oh, now you're just parroting your father. You know you can do better than that."

"Better than Dad? Is that what you're saying?"

"You know I didn't mean that."

"He did something important – he fixed things. And just because fixing things doesn't make you rich, doesn't give you status or – "

"Good, God, Shimano. You don't realize at all, do you? You got me all wrong. Why do you think I tolerated that shed, and let him tinker away the day while I went out and earned all the money to feed us? So one of us could devote himself to the cause. I kept my ideals, Shimano. Remember how I designed costumes for that anti-fossil fuel play at the Bread and Puppet Festival? I kept my ideals, but there's only so much a person can do when they have to work 50 hours a week to support an alcoholic husband and young child." She paused for air.

Shimano had never realized this. Had never seen the bike work shed from where she stood, indoors, working overtime on the kitchen table.

She got a second wind and started up again.

"You don't think I value what you do, what your father did – does – but you're wrong. Bikes are very important. More people should be riding bikes. It's better for the

environment, better for the air. Hell, *I* should be riding my bike more. And we need people who can fix bikes so we can reuse things instead of buying new stuff all the time, and all the production costs associated with that – hidden costs – I know all about it – if I don't rant as much as your father, it doesn't mean that I'm not concerned about these things too."

"But why then are you so – why do you keep going on and on about how I should go back to college when – "

"You said it. Society doesn't value things like fixing bikes. I think it's tragic, but that's the way it is, and it's not going to change overnight. Mechanics just don't get paid well enough."

"I live modestly."

"And what happens when you try and start a family?"

"Well, maybe I don't want to start a family."

"Well, maybe you'll change your mind."

"Look, I just want to travel right now, okay?"

There was a sigh at the other end of the line. It was a resigning sigh, but Shimano knew her too well to think she'd given up on the battle for good. Her wheels were unstoppable.

Chapter 8

For the next few weeks, Shimano explored the bike paths that radiated from Old Montreal many miles into the countryside. He followed the Lachine canal to Verdun, and then 20-some miles past Verdun, to the western tip of the island. All the while, he looked around for a bald, well-built cyclist in his 40s. Once he was sure he saw his father, recognizing the faded red and blue panniers that were practically a permanent fixture on all of Gerry's bikes. Shimano sped up, and called out as he tried to overtake him. The cyclist who turned looked nothing like his father.

Shimano recalled that in the years before he left America, his father was degrading farther and farther. His apartment looked like it hadn't been cleaned in months. On his kitchen table was a nauseating collage of dirty bike parts, mouldy pizza and empty beer cans. Had things got even worse?

As his suspicions grew, he even began to look carefully at panhandlers, checking if he could make out his father's features under masses of dirt and facial hair.

Shimano tried to settle in and enjoy his trip. Found a tiny 1 ½ on St.-Hubert that he could rent by the month. Strung together a few friends, mostly people he knew from Vermont, like Sheldon, who was now studying at McGill University. They went out often: strip joints, jazz clubs, sleazy bars on St. Laurent. He couldn't believe how forward the women were. They busted easily through the bastion of his New England reserve. He had his first one-night-stand the third night after he got to Montreal, and in the first month alone, he slept with more women than he'd ever slept with in his whole life. But it

was an expensive lifestyle. The women expected him to buy them drinks; the waiters expected big tips, and he was drinking a lot. When he found himself drinking to the point of puking for the fifth night in a row, he knew he had to slow down, or *he* would be that panhandler on the street. And he was already in need of money.

He dropped off his resume at several bicycle shops. They all told him it was too late. The season was over, and besides, they preferred bilingual mechanics and more than one shop owner said curtly, "You want to stay in Montreal, you have to learn French." Shimano was trying, but he didn't seem to be picking it up that easily. Before he had arrived in Montreal, Shimano hadn't realized it was so important to know French. His father was English-speaking. It seemed that in the area where he had grown up, Anglophones were in the majority. Now it seemed that they were the minority almost everywhere.

Finally, Shimano got an idea. He made fliers that read:

TUNE-UP - \$20

Call Shimano at (514) 845-7776

He taped the fliers to bicycles parked on St. Denis Street. Later he found some of his fliers lying on the street, tossed around by the wind among the leaves. Some of them had the numbers "101" scrawled on them in big marker. When he asked Sheldon why someone would write "one hundred and one" on his flier, Sheldon rolled his eyes and said, "Americans."

“First of all,” he continued. “It’s not ‘one hundred and one,’ it’s ‘cent-un.’ And second of all, you don’t write ‘tune-up’ without also writing ‘mise au point’ above the English, and technically, it should be twice as large.”

Shimano already got the idea.

He printed out another set of fliers, and soon had a small, but appreciative clientele. The money didn’t pour – but at least it trickled.

He spent 14 hours a day fixing bicycles. With the luxury of time, it was difficult not to get carried away. Unlike his days at Cyclo-stravaganza, where the long queues forced him to do a slapdash job.

But working for himself, he couldn’t resist the temptation to spend three hours on a single bike, doing the things the bike shops rarely bothered with – repacking bearings, greasing cables and loosening seized barrel adjusters. He’d assess the size of a rider’s hands, and adjust the brake levers to Goldilocks perfection. As a result, he was barely eking out a living. And now the leaves were dropping and so was his clientele

Chapter 9

Gabrielle Dumais

Artiste

514-842-9967

For a week after the bike accident, he kept the courier's card beside his phone. He wanted it to be ready for when the people from the insurance company phoned.

And the insurance company called only a day after the accident. *I guess the guy really wants his car fixed*, Shimano thought, as he heard a stranger on the other end of the line say, "J'appelle de Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec . . . [something, something, and something else]."

Shimano asked her if she could speak English. She huffed a bit, and said, "Okay, we speak English but my English not so good. I call because of accident. What exactly – happened?"

"I was heading straight on a green light and . . ."

"Heading?"

"Going straight."

"Sorry?"

"Going straight. Not left or right. Just going ahead. Um, I think the French word is tout droit," he said, pronouncing both the t's.

"What?"

"Tout droite, I think. No, tout droit."

"Ah, tout droit! So you was going straight."

The conversation continued in this exasperating way.

She kept asking something about "priority." Shimano didn't have a clue what she meant and they were both getting frustrated.

"So the driver have priority?"

"Priority?" Shimano thought, *Yeah. His car. That was his priority.*

"Sorry? No, I mean, does – did – he have priority or does – did – you?" Then Shimano understood.

"I had the right of way. I was on the bike path. I was going straight on a green light. He was turning right. I had the right of way. I mean, I had priority, whatever. I was on the bike path."

"Bike path?"

"Um, look, I have a witness. Ah – somebody was there and witnessed – saw it happen, I mean. She speaks French. You can call her." He picked up the card and read out Gabrielle's number. The agent thanked him and said good-bye.

When he got off the phone, he studied the card carefully, as if he could make out her face in it if he looked hard enough. Or some essence of her. He drew his fingers over the card's textured letters. He wanted badly to speak to her, to thank her. He wished she'd stayed longer.

The card seemed like it was his only connection with the outside world. He had hardly left his apartment for the last few days. He couldn't do much with a broken rib, knee badly sprained. It seemed to him that all he did was take morphine and stare at

walls, watching dancing story book figures emerge from the holes, cracks and blisters in the paint. He thought of calling her. Maybe asking her out somewhere. It had been a long time since he had a real date with a girl.

Shimano was good-looking, handsome even, by most people's standards, but his looks were more a source of insecurity than confidence. When people told him he was cute, he didn't believe them, or if he did, he worried that tomorrow he would not be cute anymore. Whenever he looked at himself in the mirror, he was preoccupied with some perceived defect: a pimple here or there, a cold sore, the slight Dracula effect on his hairline which already, at 22, was starting to recede.

So he looked at moments like these – these moments of longing – with a certain sense of doom. He tried to talk himself out of it. *You'd think any girl was cute who'd help you in those circumstances.* And when that didn't help, he tried to talk himself into calling her. *It wouldn't be that weird. Just call and thank her. That's all. She might even expect it.*

So finally, he picked up the phone and called. The answering machine greeting was all in French. Shimano liked how sophisticated her language sounded, her gargling r's, her flattened vowels. He admired her language as if she had invented this all herself. After the beep, (which was the only part of the message he understood), he said, "Bonjour. Mo no est Shimano 'O Keefe."

He cringed at how Anglo and provincial – pretentious – he sounded trying to speak French. He switched to English. "Yeah. This is Shimano 'O Keefe." His voice was shaking, and he tried to steady it, but it only shook more. "I'm the guy you helped, the one who got hit by a car. I wanted to see if you could call me back. Just so I could – well,

just call me back. 845-7776," he said hastily, and put the phone down. His heart was still pounding. He chided it: *What are you getting so worked up for? You don't even know this girl. She may be a real bitch. She may have a boyfriend. She may have a girlfriend.*

A few more days passed, and there was still no word from the girl who might be a bitch or have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Shimano worried that the insurance company might not get a hold of her either, and called them to make sure everything was okay. He spoke to a friendly agent who spoke English much better than the other one. He told Shimano that they had spoken to Gabrielle, and had decided Shimano wasn't at fault. He wouldn't have to pay anything. The insurance would even cover the cost of the ambulance. Shimano was deeply relieved.

And had even more reason to feel grateful. He *had* to see this girl, he decided. *Had* to thank her. It was natural, wasn't it? Maybe he'd said his number too fast. He hadn't even repeated it. It's tricky to understand numbers when they're in a foreign language. They always seem to go by too fast. He remembered that from his trip to Mexico. He tried calling Gabrielle again.

The French again. He could hear his heavy, nervous breath in the receiver and thought, *She's going to get sleazed out.* Before Shimano could think over what he would say, there was a beep.

"Hi Shimano. I mean, hi Gabrielle. This is Shimano." He cringed. *God, I can't even keep our names straight.* "I wanted to say thank you. I know I already said that in the last message I left. I thought maybe I didn't have a right number, since you didn't call back. But then I called the Society d'assurance – Société d'assurance de whatever – sorry,

my French sucks. Anyway they said that they had gotten ahold of you and you told them what happened. The reason I'm phoning – well, I really just wanted to thank you. In person maybe. It turned out I was pretty badly hurt, I know I said I was okay, then, but I realized later – at the hospital – the ambulance did come – I guess you called one even though I said I didn't need one. Well, thanks for that, because, when I got to the hospital, it turned out I'd broken a rib and one of my lungs collapsed. So – good of you to call the hospital. Sorry, this is getting really long-winded. Anyway, I just was just hoping maybe we could meet in person. Can you call me back please? Anyway, so it's . . . Eight. Four. Five. Seven. Seven. Seven. Six. Um – I'll try French, okay? Huit. Quater. Cinco. Oh, no that's Spanish. No, sorry. Cinq. Se – seize. Something. I don't know, my French is bad, but you understand English well, so here it is again. 845-7776. Call back. If you've got the time. Yeah. Okay, bye. Salut."

In the morning, the phone rang. Despite the morphine, Shimano's heart began to do cartwheels. He almost stubbed his toe on the wall as he turned the corner into the kitchen. He picked up the phone. "He-hello?"

"Sorry."

That was the first thing she said.

Chapter 10

"Sorry, I – this is Gabbi."

"Hey Gabbi!" he said. Shim barely recognized his own voice. It sounded high-pitched and squeaky.

"I'm really sorry I don't call you back before."

"That's okay."

"But I – I don't know you were hurt so badly. I heard you – on my phone machine, you said you break your rib and your knee and –"

"Oh, no I just sprained my rib. I mean, my knee. The knee was just sprained. No big deal."

"But your *lung* collapsed. You almost died!"

"No, no, nothing like that. It healed right away."

"But I feel bad I don't stay and make sure you was really okay."

"Oh, don't worry about it. You were busy. I understand. You're a courier."

"But I should have stayed. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay. You were busy. I really did appreciate it that you helped me. Called the cops. Thank you. Really. I wanted to say that."

There was a pause and finally there came a weak, "You're welcome" on the other end.

"Are you okay now?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yeah, just – well, recovering."

"That's good. I'm glad."

"Thanks to you."

"It was nothing."

There was a long silence, and Shimano tried to find his words. The words to ask. But other words intruded. *Should I ask? No, she'll think I'm weird. But, no, why would she? But, she's probably too busy. But I really have to do something to thank her.*

She started, "Well" Her "well" had the subtext of finality, of wrap-up. He had to leap in now.

"Hey, I was thinking. If you're not too busy. I'd like to take you – I mean, can I buy you coffee?" Too cheap. He modified things. "Lunch, maybe? Just to thank you."

"Well, I" Her voice sounded tentative. "I guess. You don't really have to but"

"Hey, it's the least I can do."

"Well, I – maybe coffee then."

*

They arranged the next evening at a café Gabbi had suggested. It was only a few blocks from Shimano's place, but the few blocks seemed like miles. His ribs ached with every impact of the crutches against the hard pavement. He had not taken any morphine that day, because he didn't want to lose his ability to speak. As he was hobbling across St. Laurent, an impatient car raced right in front of him, barely a foot away. His heart rapped against his ribs and he was angry and frightened, still recovering from the scare as he sat down at the café. *Relax. Just relax*, he told himself.

Gabbi was over 15 minutes late.

He tried not to stare at her as she walked through the door. She was not as attractive as he remembered her. But she had the same commanding presence. She wore a raggedy jean jacket, with a black tank-top underneath. Her unruly dreads were gathered together in an elastic on the top of her

head, giving her hair the appearance of a large squid. There was more hair to her than face. She looked at him as she smiled. When her lips curled back, he could see a thick layer of gum above her mouth.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said.

"Don't worry about it. It's fine."

He smiled at her, an anxious smile because he didn't know what to say next.

He decided on, "How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Fine."

"But your ribs . . . ?" She started suddenly, as her eyes fixed to the crutches that were leaning against the wall. "Are those yours?"

"Yeah."

"So the sprain – was really bad?"

"Oh, well, it didn't kill me."

There was a pause again, and Shimano asked, "How are you?"

"Fine. You already asked me that."

"Did I? Sorry, I have a bad memory." He laughed uncomfortably but she didn't laugh with him.

There was a silence. Shimano tried to think of what to say, but everything he thought of didn't seem clever enough.

"So –" she said finally, drawing out the "so" as if she was giving them both more time to think.

"So, your accent – are you from the States?"

"Yeah. But don't hold it against me." He laughed nervously and she smiled politely. "I'm from Vermont. You from here?"

She shook her head.

"Chicoutimi."

"Chicou-ti--"

"It's by Lac St. Jean."

"Oh, yeah," he said, feigning recognition.

"It's where they have the traverse. The big swimming competition."

"Oh, right," he said, pretending again. He didn't want to reveal how ignorant he was about Quebec geography.

"So was this the first time you were hit by a car?" she asked.

"Yeah. You ever been hit by a car?"

She nodded nonchalantly, exuding an air of worldliness.

"More than once?" he added.

"Four or five," she said, her back and neck upright.

Four *or* five? Shimano couldn't fathom how someone would not remember how many times they had been hit by a car.

"Wow, really? While you were messenging?"

"Yeah. All since I became a messenger. Since six years."

"Wow, how old were you when you started?"

"Twenty," she said.

"You're 26? Older woman. Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to --"

"Yeah, how old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Little baby," she said and smiled. He couldn't tell if she was being serious or not.

"First two accidents were not serious at all. Then on the third . . ." (Shimano liked how she said "third" like it was "turd") " . . . I broke my collar bone. Look."

She swung her arm around, and jut her right shoulder around, revealing a large protruding bulge

next to her shoulder. It looked like a tight little fist punching out her skin. She looked as if she were showing off her battle wounds. Or trophies.

"Wow. Nice work."

"That gets you, how you say in English? Credentials?"

"Credentials?"

"That's it, credentials."

"Yeah. You should do that at job interviews."

She laughed, and Shimano was so relieved that she had laughed at his joke that he laughed too.

"What do you do?" she asked.

"I'm a mechanic. A bicycle mechanic. But I quit my job and was planning to travel a bit around Canada, but, well – " he said, motioning toward his crutches. "I don't know what to do with myself now."

"Where are you staying?"

"Near here. Just on the corner of St. Hubert and Duluth. I found a place I can rent month by month."

"Must be expensive, no?"

"It's not bad. Well, yes. Four hundred per month."

"For Montreal, that's expensive."

"Yeah. Well, I wasn't planning on staying another month, but now I guess I'll have to."

"You don't speak French, do you?"

"Un peu. Mais très mal. I know, that's a bit of a problem. But I was never planning to stay here this long. I wanted to leave in October, after bike season, go traveling more, but now I'm running out of money because of this accident. Shit, it's expensive to be injured. I can't even cook, really, and so I'm ordering pizza nearly every night. I'm sorry to load this all on you."

"It's okay."

"No, really. You helped me enough. I shouldn't have said all that. How's your life? How's the messaging?"

She didn't answer, but looked into the air as if contemplating something.

"Maybe – maybe you could stay with me and my boyfriend for a little while. Until you feel better. I'm sure he won't mind."

Shimano was overcome by a stew of emotions – gratitude, excitement, disappointment. Mostly disappointment.

He managed to get his tongue out of his throat long enough to chirp, "Yeah, that would be amazing."

Chapter 11

Shimano followed Gabbi up to her studio loft, on de Gaspé, a little north of where he lived, but still in the Plateau Mont-Royal area. She lived on the third floor of a stout old apartment building that looked to be a converted factory. The loft was large and seemed to have more windows than walls. The windows provided a fine view of the the mountain, Mont Royal, and the cross on top. The floors of the loft were hardwood, stained golden, but roughed up and dented. Many of the slats were loose and squeaked as Shimano walked.

The room was populated by sculptures, twisted bars of scrap metal crudely welded together in haphazard, skewed angles. Shimano gathered that this was supposed to be art, but didn't understand it at all. The paintings on the walls, however, were magnificent. Giant florid canvases of faces melding into swirling colours in the background. The most striking was a highly realistic depiction of a young, good-looking man, busting out of a tornado of colours, angles, and shackles. His mouth was open in a scream. It was labelled "Boîte de Pandore. Pandora's Box."

"Is this all your art?" Shimano asked.

"Most of the paintings, yes, and the sculptures are Mark's."

Before Shimano had a chance to compliment her work, she called out, "Mark, we have a guest."

Mark emerged from behind the fridge on the other side of the loft. He looked about 28, tall, lanky, with a waspish appearance – light skin, brown hair, brown eyes, a large smile. He placed a spatula down on the counter, washed his hands and walked over up to Shimano.

"You must be the victim."

"What?"

"The accident victim."

"Oh, yeah. Right. That's me."

Mark invited Shimano to sit down while he finished cooking. A few minutes later, Mark served them linguini and tofu soaking with wildly garlicky home-made pesto: *pasto*, Mark called it. Mark was vegetarian, like Shim, but Gabbi wasn't and she ate some cold-cut beef on the side. She told them it was nearly impossible to be a messenger without eating meat, but she sounded guilty as she said it. Mark came from Edmonton, yet spoke nearly perfect French, as far as Shimano could tell from listening to him chat with Gabbi. He told Shimano that he went to French immersion school in Alberta.

Shim didn't know anything about Alberta except what his father had told him – that it was a greedy, oil-rich province with homogeneously white steak-eaters who didn't know – or care – about the outside world.

Mark listened attentively as Shimano told him all about the accident, every once in a while interjecting an empathetic comment like: "And you'd expect to be safe on the bike path." "Here you were, hoping to have this fun holiday in Canada, and then this happens to you. Well, that driver's going to hell. Then get reincarnated as road kill."

When Shimano asked Mark why he moved to Quebec, Mark said that he was frustrated by politics in Alberta. "Conservative government. Premier Ralph fucking Kline. He's amputating social programs left and right. It's absurdly short-sighted. It's not like we're in financial need."

"With all the oil, you mean?" Shimano offered.

Mark grimaced and Gabbi turned to Shim and shook her head: "Bad subject."

"Jesus, don't even get me started on that. Talk about short-sighted. The oil sands industry is growing at a rate you would not believe. The government's practically giving the shit away. They wanted to attract oil companies, so they exempted them from taxes, and well – well, now fuck, it's the people of Alberta who have to pay for all the shit that the tar sands produce. These big fucking tailings ponds. Shit. And then there's greenhouse gas. I swear, with the way this industry is going, the tar sands will be *the* major producer of greenhouse gas in Canada in a few years. Thank you, Syncrude, for

making our world just a little hotter. Fuck, well, I guess we need all this oil. Oil for the tanks. Cars are more important than people, right? Ask that ass who hit you."

Shimano tried to respond to this, but Mark wasn't done ranting. A look of outrage and contempt crossed Mark's friendly face, "There's been no impact studies. No one has a fucking clue what the whole cost of this operation is. They just race in, gouge the stuff out of the earth. American investors have a huge stake in it. NAFTA's bringing Canada to its knees. God bless America, life, liberty and ownership of a vehicle."

Shimano shifted around uncomfortably. He had never realized that the oil from Alberta was shipped to the States. And he had never thought to blame himself for it either. Gabbi cleared her throat loudly.

"I'm sorry," Mark said, his face softening. "I guess you're probably American, aren't you?"

"Yeah, kind of," Shimano said. "I'm from Vermont."

"Oh, Vermont. That's not really part of the states."

Shimano shrugged. Despite his dual nationality, he had not thought of himself as anything but American.

Mark said, "Well, let's not talk about this anymore. Cheerier subjects. Cheerier subjects. So, tell me about Vermont. I've never been there. What's it like?"

Shimano considered this question. Where could he even begin? Mark might as well have asked what it was like have Gerry and Gail as parents. He didn't have anything to compare it to. Shimano's default life in the Vermont countryside. Rochester, the pretty mountain town where he grew up, Randolph later, near the Green Mountains, in the Appalachian chain, where there were almost more paths and trails than there were roads and highways. He could tell them about the Bread and Puppet festival in Glover, where his parents first met and took him every year when he was a child. The colossal papier mâché puppets, some as high as 40 feet. How they looked like living things, giants from

another planet. As a child he was impressed by the spectacles and later he was impressed by the political and environmental messages behind them. What would outsiders see in Vermont? The icons. Robert Frost. Holstein cows dining in expansive fields of grass, their milk whipped into Ben and Jerry's ice cream. There was more to Vermont than that, of course.

He felt a pang of homesickness, for that land where there was land enough, not like Montreal, where you could hardly go anywhere without being breathed on.

"Green," he said. "Vermont is green."

"So, are you going back now? After you recover, that is," Mark asked.

"I – well, I don't know. I wanted to travel. I was hoping to travel all year, and now – " Shimano sighed.

"I was thinking Shimano could maybe stay here," Gabbi said tentatively.

"Oh, sure," Mark said, his eyes lighting up.

"But I don't want to – impose on you, if – "

Mark looked up and huffed dismissively, flapping his hand down to show that Shimano needn't worry.

"As you can see, we have plenty of space. Stay here for a bit."

"Thanks. Sure. Thank you very much. I'm really, I don't know what I can do – is there something I can do?"

Mark closed his eyes and flapped his hand down again. "What goes around comes around."

Gabbi said slowly, "Mark, Shimano is a bike mechanic."

"Really?" Mark said, opening his eyes widely with a light-bulb-in-the-head expression on his face.

"Can you fix my bike?"

"Sure. Where is it?"

Mark led Shim to a small cubby-hole near the kitchen where they kept their bikes. Mark's bike was an old 3-speed CCM, heavy as a barge and rusting so badly that you couldn't even make out its original colour. The front brakes rubbed on the brakes and only worked "if the Lord heard your prayer," as Mark put it. Shimano adjusted the brakes and trued his wheel in less than 20 minutes, using the multi-tool he usually carried with him.

"What about your bike?" Shimano turned to Gabbi once he'd finished with Mark's bike.

"Yeah, there's a bit of a problem. It's knocking in the front. It's hard to keep balance because goes right and left. I think it's – how you say? The headset?"

Shimano nodded contemplatively. He straddled her green track bike, and engaged the brakes so he could better test whether the knocking was coming from the headset, which held the bearing assembly upon which the fork turned. But it wasn't the headset. Shimano peeled back some electric tape that covered the steer tube, from the top of the fork to the handlebar stem. It was as he feared. There was a crack in the frame.

"*This* is your problem," he said, pointing at the crack.

"Oh, shit. Fuck," she said lowly. "Chris de tabarnac. So the frame – can it be fixed?"

"No, I'm sorry. You need a new frame."

"Fuck, I can't afford it."

Shimano almost felt guilty.

"You can borrow my bike until you find a new frame."

"No, I can't do that."

"Sure, you can. It's not like I'm going to be riding it for a while."

"But I'm a courier. We ride bikes hard. *Hard*."

"No worries. I'll fix it. Just ride it. Believe me, this bike is not safe."

Gabbi paused, considering. "But I've been riding it for weeks."

"You've been *lucky* for weeks," Mark said sombrely. "Take the offer."

She darted her eyes toward him. "I'll be okay. Don't *worry*."

The two held each other's eyes for a few minutes, and finally Mark shrugged, turned away, looked at Shimano and rolled his eyes surreptitiously.

"Thank you, Shimano. But I'll find a new one later."

When was "later"? Shimano thought. *After accident number five or six?*

Chapter 12

Mark and Gabbi offered Shimano their hide-a-bed and hung curtains around it so he would have some privacy. Mark made Shimano a big plate of space cakes as painkillers. They even cooked and cleaned for him until he was well enough to take care of himself.

On one of his better days, Shimano repaired their toaster, replaced their doorknobs, and fixed the burner on the stove that Gabbi and Mark had taken for dead. Still, Shimano was having trouble keeping up with the altruistic arms-race, and decided to just give up and let them be nice to him.

After two weeks, the worst was over. He was almost sorry about this, because there was no excuse now. He had to decide what to do. Whether or not to leave Montreal. But how? He had hardly any money. So he would have to find a job. But what?

The doctor told him he should walk for an hour each day so his bones would heal properly. As he walked, he sometimes stopped to fix stranger's bicycles. He liked to muse about what it was like for those people when they returned to their bikes. They'd get out of the grocery store, get on their bikes, and find out that mysteriously, their brakes had stopped squeaking and their wheels turned smoothly. The thought of that made him smile inside.

One day, he found a bike whose front quick release brakes had been completely disengaged so that they hung to the side uselessly. Shimano soon realized why the bike's owner had done this. When he attached the quick release cable again, he noticed the brakes were not centred at all, and one side was practically glued to the wheel's rim, to the extent that the wheel barely turned. They were of a peculiar old school model of calliper brakes. You had to take them off the bike to centre them. Off the bike, with no wheel as a reference, it was a trial-and-error process that took years of experience to gauge accurately. Shimano used the pliers on his Swiss army knife to unscrew the back nut that held the brakes to the bike fork. As he held the brake body in his hand, tweaking its nuts to the right and the

left to find the optimum spot, he heard someone yelling behind him.

"Eh, eh, arrê! Qu'est-ce que vous faites là?"

Shimano's heart began to beat hard, as if he was caught in the act of doing something bad. He turned, and saw a red-faced man running awkwardly toward him. The man was around 40 or 45, and his vinyl jacket and scratched up helmet looked nearly the same age. Shimano held up the brake to show him that that was the only part of the bike he had touched.

"I'm sorry. Excusez-moi. I was just trying to fix it."

"But how? I tried to fix that and – "

"Well, it's a tricky little thing. Bad design. Or just annoying design," he said. "But it's done now. Here, I'll put it back," Shimano said, almost dropping them as he screwed them onto the frame, he was so nervous.

Shimano motioned for the man to try out his brakes. The cyclist eyed Shimano skeptically as he wrapped his fingers around the brake lever and squeezed. "Oh! They work great. Thank you very much." The man spoke with an accent that Shimano couldn't place. It was a singsong, alternating in pitch between high and low at nearly every syllable.

"Yeah, no problem," Shimano said, and turned around, making to go.

"Wait!" the man said, touching his arm. "Do you have a job?"

"No, not really. Not now. I mean, I'm from Vermont and – well, I couldn't find a job. And I don't speak French, so..."

"But do you speak Spanish?"

This struck Shimano as a rather odd and arbitrary question, and took him back for a moment.

"Actually, yeah. I can speak Spanish. Well, not really *well*, but I spent some time in Mexico, and ..."

"Ah, Mexico. ¿Adónde usted entró en México?"

“Del sur. Del este. Sobre todo. En el sureste. El península de Yucatán.”

“Que bonito. ¿Usted ha estado nunca al Cuba?”

The man’s Spanish was nearly impeccable, but he also spoke with as much a sing-song as he did in English.

“No. No, pero – pero yo quiere ir allí.”

The man suddenly burst into laughter, and Shimano wondered if his Spanish was really that bad. The man had a hearty laugh, unabashedly so, and somewhat hokey “Har, har, har,” it sounded like.

“I’m Kaspar Stockli. Call me Kaspar,” he said, holding out his hand.

The man seized Shimano’s hand so hard that it was almost painful.

“Stockli. Is that a Swedish name, or . . .?”

“Swiss. From the German part. I’m president of Vélos Sans frontières. You heard of our organization?”

“No, not really.”

“We send donated bikes to Cuba. We need another mechanic down there right now.”

“Well, thanks, but I’m sorry, I can’t really afford a trip to Cuba right now.”

Kaspar’s mouth started to twitch in amusement. He chortled, throwing his head back. Then he leaned into Shimano and clapped him on the back.

“What a joker. Yeah, *you* can’t afford a trip to Cuba. But *we* can afford to take you to Cuba.”

Chapter 13

Two weeks later, Shimano was packing for Cuba. He didn't have much to pack, just what he brought with him to Montreal. His stuff barely even filled the old backpacking packsack that Mark lent him for the trip. Fixing the packsack was a bigger job than packing it. Shimano was still at it on his second-last morning, struggling to sew a patch onto the knapsack as Gabrielle prepared for work.

"You are *so* lucky," Gabrielle said as she peered at him over her cup of coffee. "I would do *anything* to go to Cuba." Gabrielle rarely talked in the morning, beyond a few grunts and groans, followed by curses at the morning for its existence. Startled, he looked up at her. There was a tinge of resentment in her voice and her eyes. For a moment, Shimano was oblivious to what his hands were doing, until a sharp prick reminded him.

"Ow!" he cried as the needle pierced his finger.

"Watch out. Don't get hurt again. On your last day in Montreal."

"Knowing me – well – yeah, well, that wouldn't be very lucky." *Then you wouldn't have to feel jealous of me*, he wanted to add.

She smiled tightly, lifted her bike over her shoulder, and headed for the door.

"Gabrielle?" he called after her. "Mark and I were talking about all going for a drink tonight."

"I know. He told me. I'll see you then," she said, without even looking at him or wishing him a good day.

Shimano studied the little bobble of blood on the tip of his index finger. It was a perfect, tiny scarlet bead. He wanted to preserve it for a little while, so he held his index finger up so the droplet wouldn't smear, and tried to sew with his other fingers. That made him even more clumsy, and eventually he gave up and went out for a walk.

He only meant to stay out for a half-hour or so then return to the sewing, but soon he found

himself walking up through Mile End, across the train tracks into Little Italy, where he had some pizza for lunch. By the time he'd reached the Plateau again, it was dark.

Clearly garbage day was coming up. There were sloppy plastic bags sitting in front of every home. When he first arrived in Montreal, Shimano was surprised, even shocked, that people just left their garbage on the sidewalk. The garbage trucks seldom got it all, and there was always a banana peel or a plastic bag full of dogshit that got left behind. Once he got over his annoyance at how dirty Montreal was, compared to Randolph or Rochester that is, he began to realize the piles of trash were gold mines. He once found a working three-piece stereo, a rust-free cast-iron wok and a broken chair which he fixed with bicycle spokes.

He paused at the corner of Duluth and St. Hubert, in front of a pile of detritus. It looked like a dump truck had vomited on the sidewalk. Most of the stuff was trash to even the most desperate hobo. There were scraps of beaver board, a blender with a broken chord, and an Ikea lamp that drooped sadly. But amid the debris were two bicycles.

Surprisingly, they looked fully intact, except for a cable or two and other easily replaceable items, nothing that would daunt an experienced mechanic. One of the bikes was a rarity. A red Robin Hood bike – it had even kept its "Robin Hood" plaque on the steer tube. That plaque alone would sell for 30 bucks at least on eBay. Shimano thought to himself that that would make a fine new track bike for Gabbi. Maybe that pretty antique could persuade her to give up that bag of bones she was riding before it turned *her* into a bag of bones. The other steed was a black Diamondback mountain bike with a long top tube; it was about Mark's size. Shimano waded into the piles of rubbish toward the bikes. It took some yanking and twisting to liberate them from the tangled rubbish. He lifted one bike, then the other, out of the debris, holding them high above his head to keep them aloft of the truly trashy trash. Once he was out of the mound, he gripped the handlebars of the Robin Hood in his right hand, and the Diamondback on his left, and wheeled the bikes down the sidewalk. He smiled to himself at his luck.

He had wanted so much to give Gabbi and Mark a present, but he had almost no money left at all. They were good bikes, both. They'd had some rough times, obviously, but most of the abuse was from neglect. Both chains looked rusted almost solid. The Diamondback had no seat, and the seat post appeared to be seized, judging from the dents on it where someone had ineffectively clamped it.

After he had walked several blocks, guiding a bike with each hand, two well-built men blocked his path. One of them stopped right in front of him. He folded his arms over his chest, accentuating both his paunch and his biceps.

"Ces vélos, sont-ils à toi?"

Shimano blinked, startled.

"Are those your bikes?" said a slim, dark-haired man who stood beside the paunch.

Shimano was stunned for a second. "No," he replied.

"Then you're under arrest for bike theft," said the other man.

"But – that's – they were in the trash!" Shimano sputtered.

"Did you ask the owner if they were trash?"

"The owner wasn't there. But – it was – I swear – they were trash!"

"If you didn't ask the owner, then it's theft."

"I mean – it was so obvious! Really! I mean – it was a pile of crap!"

"You're coming with us!"

"But I – oh, c'mon!" Shimano yelled. "They were trash. Honestly! I mean, I could, I could show you. It's just a few blocks away."

"You'll give us the bikes," the dark-haired man said, reaching forward to grab the Robin Hood. Shimano wondered if these were really cops or savvy thieves who knew what the bikes were worth. Whoever these men were, Shimano wasn't going to surrender the Robin Hood so soon. He grabbed its steer tube with his right hand. He couldn't hold on hard enough, so he let go of the other bike and

concentrated his effort on the Robin Hood. The other man promptly took the Diamondback and wheeled it to the other side of his body. Shimano struggled to free the Robin Hood from the man's grip, until the two were playing tug-of-war. Shimano huffed as he struggled.

Someone nearby said something in French which ended with the word "identification."

Shimano looked up and realized he had an audience.

"You should ask them for ID," the spectator repeated, in English.

"Exactly. Yes. I'd like to see some ID."

Both men behaved like they hadn't heard him. Shimano was still hanging onto the Robin Hood. The chubby cop dropped the Diamondback and grabbed Shimano's shoulders from behind, in an effort to pull Shimano's arms off the Robin Hood.

At the touch of the man's hands, something in Shimano came to life and began to snarl. No longer his bumbling, stuttering self, Shimano straightened and yelled, "Get *away* from me!"

The chubby man grabbed his torso, clamping his arms around Shimano's arms, until he had to release the bike. Shimano thrashed back and forth, trying to throw off the stranger's arms. The dark-haired man faced him and held his palm out in front of Shimano, as if he were trying to placate a dog.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Calm down, sir."

"I want to see ID!" Shimano yelled.

"Come to the car," snapped the fatter man.

"Show me ID!" Shimano yelled louder.

Shimano hollered and writhed as the portly man dragged him toward a unmarked navy blue Toyota Corolla. He pushed Shimano against the car and frisked him brusquely. The hands moved up Shimano's legs, his waist, then his torso. His ribs were still tender to the touch and he cried out, "Stop! Fuck!"

"Alright, alright. Just stay calm now."

The man opened up the car door while grasping Shimano's left arm.

"But – I'm going to Cuba tomorrow."

"Well, I guess you'll have to cancel your flight."

"You can't make me – " With one push, the man proved Shimano wrong. The man slammed the door shut. Shimano fumbled around the car for an escape route, but there were no handles on either of the back seat doors. The dark-haired man stood there with one bike in each hand, as the other man got in the car and drove away.

The windows were so darkly tinted that Shimano could barely see through them. The view outside was blurred and hazy. There were no badges or other police accouterments anywhere in the car. *Who the fuck are these guys and what are they going to do to me?*

Finally the car pulled up to a curb and stopped. The driver got out and opened the door for Shimano, clasping his arm as he pulled him out of the car.

Shimano froze. Above him, on a blue and white was written: "Police. Montréal."

Chapter 14

"They didn't read my rights," Shimano told the woman at the desk.

"You're American, huh?"

"What, do Americans not have rights?"

"Ha, ha. No, you have rights, but this is not like an American cop show. We don't read them to you. But you have the right to talk to a lawyer."

"I don't have a lawyer."

"Are you applicable for legal aid?"

"Probably. I'm unemployed."

"You can phone an on-call lawyer." She took a phone from behind the desk and swung it around so it was in front of Shimano, untangling the chord as she did. She scribbled a number and left it beside the phone."

Shimano dialled the number on the sheet.

"Maître Bouchard. Can I help you?"

With a trembling voice, Shimano told him about everything – the bikes in the trash, the struggle with the police officers. The arrest. How he had to get to Cuba the next day.

"Why do you have to go to Cuba?"

"I work for Vélos Sans Frontiers. It's an organization that . . ."

"I'm well aware of Vélos Sans Frontiers. So I guess you must be a bit of a philanthropist?"

"Um, well –"

"No I guess. You are a philanthropist. You were hired to fix bicycles in developing counties. How many foreign aid bicycle mechanics steal bicycles? Unless you wanted to steal bikes from the rich and give them to the poor. Ha, ha, ha. This case is ridiculous. Were there witnesses to the fact that the

police didn't show ID?"

"Yeah. There was one guy there. He said, 'Ask them to show you ID' and I did. I didn't think of it before, and – "

"Any witnesses to the fact that the bikes were in the trash?"

"No, I don't think so. That is, I can't remember."

"Nor, probably, would the witnesses. Well, you're definitely going to want to find witnesses if you can. For now, I can only give you only one word of advice."

"Keep my mouth shut?"

"Exactly. The police will question you, try to get you to confess. And they won't like to hear that the police who arrested you didn't follow protocol. If anyone tries to get you to sign something that contains inaccuracies, don't sign it."

"Is there any way they'll release me?"

"At this point, I can't say."

"What happens if they don't release me?"

"You'll be there overnight and in the morning, they'll bring you to court for a first appearance."

"What happens if I find witnesses by then?"

"Nothing. It would just be a first appearance. That's pretty much exactly what it sounds like. You're not going to have a trial with a grand jury. You get up, say 'not guilty,' give an address. An address in Quebec. Where are you staying?"

"Well, I was staying with friends but – "

"Then you give the address of your friends."

"But I don't know if they will let me stay now that –"

"I don't need to know about it. You have an address. Give them your friends' address. You can work out the rest later."

"So I'm not going to Cuba?"

"No, you're definitely not going to Cuba. Even if they release you tonight, I certainly don't recommend you go to Cuba. But when it comes to the rest – don't worry about it too much. This case is ridiculous. They have no case."

"What about a lawyer? Will you be my lawyer?"

"You'll have a lawyer assigned to you when you get to court."

"Will I – will the court be in – um – English or French?"

The lawyer laughed. "Not only will you probably get off, but you can address the court in English."

Shimano exhaled.

Chapter 15

Shimano was escorted to a questioning room by another two cops. He was told to sit down and one of the police officers locked the door behind them and stood next to it, folding his arms around his chest. As he did this, his biceps flared up and flexed.

One police officer took a seat directly opposite to him. He leaned in and gave Shimano a hard stare.

"Tu as résisté à ton arrestation. Tu sais que c'est un crime dans notre pays, n'est-ce pas?"

Shimano could no longer stand the force of her gaze and he dropped his chin and eyes down, staring at the wall behind him. The walls were a generic grey. There were some scrapes and smears in the area about five feet from the floor – the signs of struggle, perhaps a violent one.

She moved in toward him and her eyes found his and locked on again.

She spoke again, slowly, loudly, as if talking to a naughty child.

"Tu sais. Que c'est. Un crime. Dans notre pays, n'est-ce pas?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tu ne parles pas français, toi?"

"Un peu. No, not much."

The cop lifted her chin. Her eyelids dropped slowly and then opened again, in a look of supreme condescension.

"I'm sorry, is that a crime too?" Shimano asked.

"A moment."

Both cops left and locked the door behind them. Shimano looked around the interrogation room. No attention had gone into interior decorating. He traced the edges of the table, and found a chip. He picked away at it, until some of the beaver board peeled off.

After what seemed like three hours, another cop entered the room. He sat across Shimano.

“Sergeant Tremblay.”

“Ah – Shimano O’ – well, I guess you know.”

The sergeant stared at him for a good minute, until Shimano had to look away.

“Do you know why you’re here, Mr. O’ Keefe?”

“At the advice of counsel, I choose not to answer that question.”

“Tell me what happened. From the beginning.”

“At the advice of counsel, I choose not to answer that question.”

“Fuck that. Are you just going to say that all night until your throat goes hoarse? Tell me what happened.”

Shimano felt he had to say something. The truth. *There was no harm in telling the truth, was there?*

“Well I was just walking down the street with a couple of – I had found a couple bikes in the trash and – ”

“How did you know they were trash?”

“Well, it was obvious. There was this big pile with – well, there was lots of broken stuff in it, and it was garbage day so I just assumed – ”

“Why didn’t you ring the bell and ask the owner?”

“People do that?” The policeman gave him a hard stare. “I mean, no. Sorry.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t think – well, sorry, it was just really – a big pile. Huge. Lots of stuff. Dirty, broken crap. I – just – well normally people don’t – ”

“Okay, okay, and then what?”

“So I found these bikes – in the pile of trash. They were really buried, but they were pretty good

– worth salvaging – well, I took them and I was wheeling them down the street. For four – maybe five blocks – maybe a bit more, and then, well these two cops – I mean, I didn't know they were cops. They were undercover, I guess. There where no distinguishing – nothing to tell me – well, no badges or anything. So, one of them asks 'Are those your bikes?' And I wasn't really thinking clearly – they surprised me – so then I said, 'no.' And I was – well, I guess I was thinking – they weren't my bikes a few minutes ago, but they were now. They were trash, like I said, and – "

"Can you please get to the point?"

"Okay. Yes. So – one of them said, 'Then you're under arrest for theft.' And then I said I didn't steal anything. I told them they – the bikes – were in the trash. And I said I could show them were I got the bikes, that it was trash, but they didn't seem to care, or something. And so one of them took away the bikes, and they told me to get in their car. And well, they didn't show ID."

"What?"

"I asked them to show me their ID, and they didn't."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes."

Suddenly the sergeant reached out and smacked him in the face, so hard that Shimano saw stars.

Holy shit. Shimano was so stunned he couldn't speak. He stared up at a surveillance camera.

Please record this, he thought.

The sergeant stood up and leaned in, so his nose was only a couple inches away from Shimano's, close enough to spit at. Shimano imagined gathering up saliva in his mouth and . . . no, he couldn't. God knows what would happen.

Sergeant Tremblay's eyes bunched up. "I said Do you actually expect me to believe that?"

"Christ, that's what happened. Jesus," Shimano swore.

The cop punched him again and Shimano was so angry he had difficulty breathing.

Shimano fixed his eyes at the camera so he wouldn't see where Tremblay's arm was, and said, "I asked twice. 'Can I see ID?' And they didn't show ID."

Sergeant Tremblay moved forward, as if moving to hit him again. Shimano's face was still smarting from the last punch, so he drew back involuntarily. The sergeant's hand stopped mid-air, then dropped.

"Wait here."

The sergeant left the room. Shimano could hear the click of his boots as he walked down the hall. He heard murmuring in French. Then for the next ten minutes, nothing happened. Shimano waited in the baited silence. He shuffled his feet, took a breath, and exhaled slowly. *Fuck, what a scary cop. I have to get out of here.* He got up and started pacing, eyes darting about the room, as if seeking an escape hatch, a trap door. That was when it occurred to him that the camera was not following him. *Don't those things usually detect motion?* He walked over and inspected it further. It was switched off.

Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit.

The door opened and Shimano whipped his head around. "Sit down," the sergeant said. "I have something for you to sign." Sergeant Tremblay threw a police report across the table.

Shimano read:

"Suspect was seen walking down Duluth with two bicycles in his hands. He was approached by two undercover policemen, and asked if the bicycles belonged to him. Suspect said no. The two policemen showed their identification badges and . . ."

"I'm not going to sign this," Shimano said.

Sergeant Tremblay punched him again.

"They didn't show ID," Shimano said. "It's true. There was a witness."

"Oh, yeah? Where is he? Who do you think the judge is going to believe?"

Shimano's voice was meek, sotto voce. "I'm not signing this."

The sergeant sat down and stared at him. Shimano returned his gaze, fighting the impulse to look away.

After about a minute of staring, the cop got up. "Okay, then. You're in the pen tonight, you'll have your first appearance in court tomorrow."

"What time?"

"What, are you in a hurry?"

"Yes, actually. I was supposed to be on a plane to Cuba tomorrow morning."

The sergeant laughed. "Well, well, well. Not too much we can do about that, can we? That'll teach you not to steal bikes the day before a flight."

"I didn't . . . I . . . Can I use your phone please?"

The sergeant opened the door and motioned for Shimano to leave the interrogation room.

"Yeah, sure," Tremblay said. "Knock yourself out."

Chapter 16

"I'm really sorry, Kaspar. I don't think I'm gonna make that plane tomorrow."

There was a grand pause on the other end of the line. Finally Kaspar asked, "What's going on?"

"I'm at the police station. I've been charged with bike theft."

Kaspar started chortling cheerfully. "No! You're . . ." *Har, har, har.* Kaspar's laughter picked up momentum, to the point that he could hardly get the words out. "You're kidding me."

"No. I wish I were."

"Wow, so I hired a bike thief to help bring bikes to the developing world." Kaspar exploded into giggles again.

"I didn't do it."

"Of course you didn't."

"The bikes were in the trash."

Kaspar sounded like he was going to croak over from laughing. "Shim, we have plenty of bikes. Why did you go steal some from the street? Or are you being Robin Hood?"

"One of them was a Robin Hood bike."

Kaspar laughed again. "This gets better and better."

"Not for me." Kaspar's laughter stopped immediately, as if it had been canned.

"Are they making you stay there overnight?"

"Yes."

Kaspar exhaled loudly.

"And tomorrow?"

"I'll have a first appearance."

"Do you have any witnesses?"

"No."

"*Were* there any witnesses?"

"There was – when the police arrested me. They were undercover. I wasn't sure they were police so I resisted arrest. They didn't show ID."

"Oh, lord. We got to get you witnesses. If I only had time . . . this is the worst possible time. Million things to do. Haven't finished packing. My wife is – no, I'll make time for this. I'll go down to where you found the bikes – where did you find the bikes?"

"Around where I used to live. St. Hubert and Duluth."

"Look, I'll go down and knock on doors. We'll find someone who can testify. You'll get out of this. Don't worry."

"Okay," Shimano said.

When Shimano got off the phone, a police officer walked up to him with a McDonald's bag. The bag had a set of golden arches and a smile on it.

"I got you a couple hamburgers," the officer said, putting them on the counter beside Shimano.

"Thanks, but – I'm sorry – I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you aren't one tonight. I'll lead you to your cell," he said.

Shimano was escorted down the hall into a room just slightly larger than a broom closet. Everything in the room was made of concrete, including the "bed." The cop left and Shimano sat down on the concrete bed and stared at the surveillance camera above him. Someone was watching him in an office somewhere, some bored someone.

There was a knock at the door, and a few seconds later, a cop poked his head through the doorway. "You forgot this." He put the McDonald's bag beside the door and closed it again.

The McDonald's bag smiled at Shimano. He frowned back. He had not touched meat in over a year. He had not eaten at McDonald's for over five years. He hated where the cows came from, how

they were all squashed into tiny pens, so that ten square feet was all they would ever see of the world. How they were fed cow brains, chicken manure. These thoughts usually succeeded in turning his stomach.

But hunger hit him with a powerful force. He had not eaten since the pizza he had for lunch, and the smell of hamburger was rising from the bag. That rich, full-bodied umami. His mouth was watering.

He grabbed the bag, opened it and bit into a burger, letting the grease drip down his arm. It was delicious.

Chapter 17

When Shimano awoke the next morning, he felt as if he had been flattened into concrete. Some parts of his back felt almost bruised from the irregularities of the "bed." He had a painful crick in the neck. An officer opened the door and told said, "Rise and shine. Pretty yourself up. You're going to court."

The Palais de Justice was a large, black, sombre-looking building in Old Montreal. From its lofty heights, it seemed to stare down passers-by with an imposing disdain. Inside, the decor was grandiose in a dark, grim sort of way. There was a large atrium with 55-foot ceilings. Light filtered in from skylights at the top as in an ancient cathedral. The floor was all made of black marble and the people were dressed in black too, as if this were some elaborate funeral. Many of the lawyers and judges wore archaic robes and white ruffles.

Shimano was marched into a small room where he was to await the reading of his charges. It was a long wait. A police officer gave Shimano a white styrofoam cup half full of coffee. When Shimano had finished drinking it, he bit pieces off it, and tore them into little pieces the size of nail clippings, which he arranged into small piles. After about ten minutes or so of doing this, he put the half-chewed styrofoam cup and put it in the middle of the table, and flicked pieces off his thumb with his index finger, trying to aim them so they fell right into the cup.

Finally, Shimano was led to a room in the basement and the charges were read out to him.

"Mr. O' Keefe, you have been charged with theft, resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer."

Shimano stared incredulously at the police officer in the conference room.

What? *Assaulting a police officer?* Shimano yelled, "But – that's not possible. I didn't assault anyone. I want to talk to the lawyer!"

"Your lawyer is in the courtroom. Which is where you're going now. You can tell him about it

then."

Chapter 18

Shimano was herded into a courtroom, into an enclosed area supervised by an unenthusiastic police officer, who commanded Shimano to sit. On Shimano's right was a teenager with an electric green Mohawk - a sulking, lugubrious figure with clothes held together with patches and safety pins. He had a skull tattoo on his neck and "fuck" tattooed to fingers of his right hand, one letter per digit. On his left was a fifty-something woman who wore mismatched clothing: an oversized green sweater, a pink shirt with buttons missing and a purple dress. She rocked back and forth and muttered to herself.

The four of them were all boxed into a rectangular area, seven by three feet at the most. The walls of the enclosure were just low enough to see what was taking place in the courtroom – and not much was happening at the moment. It appeared that the judge had not arrived. Neither, apparently, had the defense lawyer. Across from him was another table where another two people sat. The crown prosecutor wore a grandiose black robe with a white lacy collar. Two women Shimano guessed were secretaries sat at another table between the other two. They were whispering to each other and giggling.

There was almost nothing Shimano hated more than having to wait, especially when he had nothing to busy his hands with. His heart seemed to beat faster with every passing minute, and the ticking clock made him acutely aware when a minute was passing. It was a digital clock that operated by means of several rotors that contained numbers on placards, which flipped with every changing number, making a loud thwacking sound. The noisy contraption reminded him of a clock radio he had had when he was a child. The clicking of placards flipping with every minute was so loud that he had difficulty sleeping. He asked his mother for a new clock, but she said it would be too much of a waste and he would get used to the sound. But he didn't. He threw clothes on the clock to muffle the sound, but that also muffled the sound of his alarm, and he often slept through it.

He scanned the courtroom. The only "audience" members were two teenagers who looked they

were part of Green Mohawk's gang. They also had hair dyed in Kool-Aid colours and wore safety pins as accessories. Kaspar was nowhere. *Thwack!* went the clock. It was 2:35. Kaspar was Swiss. Weren't Swiss always supposed to be on time? Shimano worried that he had given Kaspar the wrong time.

Shimano felt as if he were in a zoo cage. There was a rail just above the wall that contained him and the other detainees. On the rail was a Bible. Its red cover was faded from the contact of many hands. The word "tabarnac" was scribbled in pen on the edge of its pages. Shimano wondered how anyone had managed to draw on the Bible, when you weren't even allowed to bring so much as a pencil in the courtroom. The Bible was bound to the rail with two zip ties that hadn't been trimmed and both had little tails that stuck up in the air. This annoyed Shimano. For aesthetic reasons, he routinely trimmed the loose ends of zip ties whenever he strapped one onto a bicycle, to make things look tidy.

Thwack!

Finally a judge entered the room.

"Levez-vous!" said a security guard in the back of the room.

"Stand up!" said the cop behind the wall, motioning for Shimano to stand.

"Sorry," Shimano muttered and stood.

The judge shot a stern look at him as she mounted a raised platform at the back – a stage – and sat behind a desk. Another lawyer ran into the courtroom seconds later and sat down. He was a jovial-looking African-Canadian gentleman, hair with tufts of grey here and there.

Shimano called out, "Excuse me, are you my lawyer?"

"Quiet!" the cop next to him.

Thwack! went the clock.

The woman on Shimano's left was the first up to bat.

"Français ou Anglais?" was the first question the judge asked of her.

"English," she replied.

"Are you aware of the charges?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a lawyer?"

"I'm her lawyer," said the African-Canadian, standing.

"Ah, Maître Gagnon. Do you have a date in mind for the preliminary hearing?"

"Yes," he said, and suggested a date. His English was proficient, but he had a strong accent that reminded Shimano of Jean Chrétien.

There was a general shuffling of papers and opening of agendas. Then the robed prosecutor read out a long list of conditions of release: "You will be abstained from going within a 100 metre radius of Mme. Alain. You will be abstained from drinking alcohol . . . "

Thwack! There was still no Kaspar.

"Do you have a fixed address, Madame?"

"No."

"You have no fixed address?" the judge asked, leaning in.

"No."

"We cannot release you without a fixed address, Madam."

"But I don't have one."

"After you are released, where will you go?"

"I've been sleeping in hospital emergency rooms. Second Cup sometimes, and – "

"Madam, you will have to find a fixed address before Monday."

"How am I supposed to do that? I'm a sick woman."

"You will see a social worker tomorrow."

"But how am I going to find a place before Monday?"

"Madam! That's enough," the judge snapped. He closed his eyes and opened them again slowly,

in a gesture that struck Shimano as deeply condescending.

"You will see a social worker tomorrow and they will help you. Next!"

The police officer grabbed her arm and she pulled her arm away. As she continued to protest, there was the swish of the door opening.

"Shimano!" someone called out.

It was Mark. Shimano was so relieved and moved to see Mark that he almost wanted to cry.

Mark called out, "Why didn't you . . . ?"

"Sh!" the security guard said, and motioned to the chairs.

Mark sat down, mouthing the words, "Why didn't you call me?"

"I couldn't," Shimano mouthed back.

After some jostling, the police officer managed to push the homeless woman out the door, but they could still hear her call out, "But what am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go?" reverberate from the hall.

Someone in the room let out a high-pitched giggle. The judge smirked.

"Monsieur Shimano O' Keefe?" she called out.

Shimano stood and moved forward toward the rail.

"Parlez-vous français, Monsieur O' Keefe?"

"Yes, a little. No, I mean, no. A few words, but – well, I'm American. Part American. And part Can . . ."

"Do you want to have this appearance in English or French, Mr. O' Keefe?"

"English."

"Do you have a lawyer, Mr. O' Keefe?"

"Yes," said Shimano and Maître Gagnon at the same time.

"You are aware of the charges, Mr. O' Keefe?"

"Yes. No, actually. I think there was a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?"

"I mean – "

"Can you please read out the charges again?" Maître Gagnon said.

The judge shifted in her desk and exhaled slightly, as if this was a vast inconvenience. She turned to the prosecutor and said something. Maître Gagnon walked up to Shimano and murmured, "They don't usually do this."

"What, but I thought they were required by law to . . . "

The ruffled prosecutor looked Shimano in the eye and began.

"Mr. O' Keefe. You have been charged with theft of two bicycles, with resisting arrest and – hang on a minute – " She flipped a paper as the clock thwacked 2:50. The lawyer collected herself again. "Yes, here. And you have also been charged with assaulting an officer of the peace."

Shimano yelled, "But – that's not possible. I didn't assault anyone. I swear. There's been a mista"

Mr. Gagnon shook his head at Shimano sternly in an effort to shut him up. " I would like to request a brief recess so I can speak to my client privately."

"Granted," the judge said.

Shimano could barely feel anything but his own heartbeat as he was led to a small conference room and left alone with the lawyer.

"Mr. O' Keefe. Did you have any idea they were going to charge you with assault?"

"No, no. I had no idea. I don't understand. I didn't do it. I swear. I'm not sure how they – I didn't do it."

"Mr. O' Keefe, I want to tell you a story. A young man walked into my office one morning. Told me he was charged with armed robbery. 'What weapon did you use?' I asked. 'A 38 magnum.' So there.

I know right off the bat that he's guilty."

"But – "

"So I tell him, 'Let me give you the name of my colleague. He'll do a much better job than me.' That way he wouldn't chase *me* down with a 38 magnum. You may find this hard to believe, but I don't enjoy defending people who are guilty."

Shimano had never heard that lawyers were so fussy.

"But I'm *not* guilty."

"I didn't say you were."

"Then, why – ?"

"Mr. O' Keefe, you have to pull yourself together. Do you know the minimum sentence for assault of a police officer?"

"In Canada? No."

"Five years."

Shimano dug his fingers into his scalp and pulled his hair back. Some strands came out and he stopped abruptly.

"That's why you have to keep your cool, Mr. O' Keefe."

Shimano squished his eyes closed. Keep his cool? How?

"Open your eyes."

Shimano opened his eyes. Mr. Gagnon looked at him squarely. He squinted slightly, and Shimano looked away.

"Hm. Mr. O' Keefe, if you are innocent – "

"I am."

"That's the first thing. If you're innocent, don't keep *saying* you're innocent. What was that line from Shakespeare again? That one with Hamlet's mother?"

"Don't ask me. I failed English."

"'She protests too much, methinks.' Ah, that was it. Do not protest too much. And you have to learn how to sit straight. To look people in the eye."

"Okay," Shimano, only realizing then that he had averted his eyes again.

"All right, then. Pull yourself together. You've been charged with theft, resisting arrest and assaulting an officer of the peace. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty. I plead not guilty."

Mr. Gagnon stared at him again. Shimano fought the impulse to look away.

"Okay, then. Let's go back."

Back in the courtroom, Shimano felt as if he were made of lead. He looked anxiously at Mark, suddenly worried about what his friend would think of him. Would he believe that Shimano had really hit a police officer?

Thwack! Shimano suddenly realized the judge was asking a question.

"Mr. O' Keefe?"

"Yes?"

"Do you understand the charges?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I do." His voice was choked inside his throat. He put his hands on the rails and dropped his head down.

"Take your hands off the rail," the police officer said.

He removed his hands from the rail and backed away from it.

"Yes, well then," Mr. Gagnon said. "We would like to suggest a date for the preliminary hearing."

"Excuse me," Shimano said, "I'm starting a job in Cuba, well – tomorrow – and . . . "

"Mr. O' Keefe, you know that this is not possible."

"Yes, of course not," Maître Gagnon jumped in. "But we hope he can fly to Cuba as soon as possible. What if we were to propose a date in late January. Let's see here, January twenti . . . "

"All dates in January are taken," a woman at the desk said. "I'm sorry. The earliest date is in late April."

April?!

"Excuse me," Shimano piped in. "Does that mean I have to stay in Montreal until April?"

"Yes, that's one of the conditions of release."

"But I'm – I'm not from here."

"Mr. O' Keefe is from Vermont," Maître Gagnon said.

"I'm sorry, but the earliest we have is April."

Shimano squeezed his eyes shut and covered his forehead with his hand. April? What was he going to do with himself until April?

"Do you have an address, Mr. O' Keefe?"

"I was hoping to be in Cuba tomorrow."

"Yes, we know and we also know that you are not going to Cuba. What is your address in Montreal?"

"I don't have one."

"Your honour, he's staying with me," Mark burst out from the audience. The security guard shushed him again.

"Is this true?" the judge asked.

"Yes. I – yes. I'm staying with him."

"The address please?"

"5234 de Gaspé, Apartment 306."

"Postal code?"

"I don't remember."

"H2W 5J8" Mark shouted out.

Thwack! went the clock.

"Very well. Thank you, Mr. O' Keefe."

Suddenly, the courtroom door flew open and Kaspar flew in, breathless and red in the face.

"Wait, wait, wait! Your honour, I have evidence."

The security guard, Mr. Gagnon, and the judge all shushed him in unison.

The judge began, "Sir, this is not the time for that – "

"But I have incontrovertible evidence that – "

"Sir, listen to me. This is not the time for that. You have evidence, it has to wait for the trial date."

"But he has to be on a plane for Cuba tomorrow. I'm his employer."

"Mr. – "

"Stockli."

"Mr. Stockli. Please be informed that Mr. O' Keefe cannot leave Montreal until after his court date."

"When?"

"April."

"But . . . "

"Mr. Stockli. You can speak to his lawyer later. For now, we really have to move on. Thank you, Mr. O' Keefe. You may go. Et maintenant. Monsieur Marc-Antoine Chirac . . . " she said, turning to Green Mohawk.

The police officer led Shimano out of the room. An hour later, he had his bail hearing. The bail was set at \$200 and Kaspar paid it.

When finally the police released Shimano. They left the courtroom, and Kaspar ran up to him.

"I'm sorry, Kaspar," Shimano said.

"Why? Good God. *I'm* sorry that you're in this situation."

"But now you'll have no mechanic."

"We'll have a mechanic in April."

"I'm not sure about that."

"No problem! We'll get you off easily. This is what I meant to say in the courtroom. I found the man who threw out the bikes. The Robin Hood and the Diamondback. He's a concierge. And he'll testify in court. This will be a cinch."

Shimano dropped his shoulders.

"If only – if only – it were that easy."

Chapter 19

Kaspar's optimism proved justifiable on one account: now that the concierge had surfaced, the police dropped the theft charge almost immediately. What's more, the concierge even gave Shimano the bikes.

Never had two bicycles meant so much to Shimano. And he was relieved to have some way to show his gratitude for Mark and Gabbi, especially now that he had even more cause for gratitude. They let him keep crashing in their loft and even offered to testify in court.

Shimano kept the bikes at Sheldon's place while he worked on them; he wanted to save them for a surprise. He spent two weeks working on the bikes. The Robin Hood was such a piece of glorious obsolescence that he had to order parts for it on eBay. Finding the headset bits alone took the better part of three evenings.

Finding a place to keep them was also a challenge. He didn't want Gabbi and Mark to see the bikes until they were ready; he kept them at Sheldon's place for a time. But then Sheldon got some new furniture and no longer had room for them. There were only some minor repairs left, so he decided to take them to his street and park them outside, until they were ready. It was a challenge to find a place to park them. His leg of de Gaspé had barely a street post, or anything of the appropriate size for a U-lock. The only option was a private fence across the street from his building. Just as he finished locking them, a woman ran out of the house and started yelling at him in French.

She gesticulated wildly and pointed at a weather-beaten sign on the fence. The writing was barely visible, but there it said: "Pas de vélos."

"Excusez-moi. I didn't see the sign."

"How? It say right here. How you not see?"

"Really. I didn't see."

She huffed and raised her chin in a look of grandiose condescension. "How did you not see? You can't read French?"

Shimano's heart began pounding and his temperature raised.

"Look, I didn't see it, for Chrissakes."

"What, are you blind? Didn't see it. Mon dieu."

"Okay, I'll move my bike, for God's sakes. See, I'm moving my bike."

"Adolescents!"

"I'm not an adolescent!"

"But you act like one!"

Shimano had a momentary fantasy of rushing at her, grabbing her by the neck and ramming her face into the "Pas de vélos" sign. He had to leave before he did anything that would put him back in jail. He hurriedly undid the lock, clumsily, because his hands were shaking.

As he wordlessly took her leave and walked across the street, she yelled out to him, "You should know better!"

Shimano couldn't stand it anymore. He raised his middle finger, without turning around. He heard her suck in her breath, still barking.

Finally, one day when Gabbi returned home from work, he greeted her with a shiny red bike outfitted with fixed gear components.

"New bike?" she asked as she hauled in her crippled green monster.

"Yeah," Shimano said. "New bike for you."

"What? Me?"

"It's one of the bikes I got put into jail for."

"What? You're giving *me* the bike? You should keep it for yourself!"

"What would I do with it? I don't ride fixed gear." Shimano didn't mention that the bike wasn't

fixed gear when he found it.

"I can't – this looks like – it looks – expensive."

"No, not really. But it's an antique. Well, yeah, some of the stuff is expensive. See this?" he pointed at the little embossed Robin Hood head on the steer tube.

"If you're ever hard up for cash, you can sell this plaque. Those fetch about 30 bucks on eBay."

"Take it then! You need the money."

"No. I took it for you. And Mark. That's his bike," Shimano said, pointing at the Diamondback, which leaned against the coach at the other end of the loft. "When I saw those bikes in the trash, I just had to salvage them for you. Didn't expect it to be this much trouble."

Gabbi stammered, "Shimano, you didn't have to – I had no idea. What, you picked them up because you wanted to give them to *us*?"

"Yeah," said Shimano, suddenly feeling bashful. "I'm just so grateful to you for all you've done. For letting me stay with you. For calling the cops and the ambulance when I was hit by a – "

"Please, Shimano. Please stop thanking me."

"Sorry," Shimano said, hoping that would placate her.

"You will – you would have done the same for me. But you would probably have stayed with me, until the ambulance came. Not run away, like I did. I should have stayed, and I just leave you there."

Shimano looked at her and shrugged, feeling responsible, and confused that he should feel that way.

"You were in a hurry. You didn't know how badly hurt I was. I told you I was okay."

"I should have known you was lying when you said you was okay."

Shimano could tell Gabbi was upset; she always made grammar mistakes when she was upset. He didn't understand what he'd done wrong.

"It wasn't that, Gabbi. I was just – I was stunned, that day. I didn't feel it at all at first. Honestly. The adrenaline or shock or something. It took me a long time to feel the pain."

She shook her head back and forth, "I know. I've been in many accidents. I should have known. I screwed up. I should have helped you."

"But you *did* help me . . . "

She just shook her head, and disappeared into her room.

Shimano stared dumb-faced at the door.

*

Things went very differently when Shimano gave Mark his new ride. "What, for me?" Mark said when he saw the Diamondback, and immediately gave Shimano a huge bear hug.

"Aw. Shit, Shimano. You didn't need to do that . . . Hey, was this – one of *those* bikes?"

"Yes."

"Aw, jeez. Shit. That's fuckin' hilarious. I'm going to cherish this all the more," he said, and hugged Shimano again.

When Mark released him, he looked at Shimano. "Is there something wrong? You look a little – I don't know –"

"Yeah, well. I think I may have made an enemy of your neighbour. I parked my bike on her fence and she came out of her house and flipped out on me. Then I kind of lost it too. Feel kind of bad about that."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Which neighbour was that? No, let me guess. That old hag across the street? About 60? Black hair and heavy makeup?"

"That's the one."

"Madam Pigeon. Madam Curmudgeon, I like to call her."

"I do feel kind of bad though. I didn't see the sign, and –"

"Oh, don't worry about it. She's a piece of work, that one. She's lost it on us many times. I've never heard anything come out of her mouth that wasn't her bitching."

"Yeah, and there's more. I got kind of angry. Gave her the finger."

"Really? Awesome. She probably deserved it."

Shimano smiled.

"Feel better now?" Mark said.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? You still seem a bit – I don't know – pensive."

"Really? I guess so. "Yeah maybe."

Gabbi was in her room sleeping, but still Shimano was afraid she'd overhear their conversation, so he asked Mark if they could talk on the fire escape. Mark nodded, and they stole out the back door. It was freezing cold, so Shimano got right to the point: "I think I've burdened you two long enough. I'm going to move out."

"What? Where will you go?" Mark asked.

"I don't know. Live in a tent somewhere."

"In December?"

"Maybe I'll find a nice little storefront."

Mark laughed and shook his head.

"Shimano, please stay. I insist. You aren't bothering anyone."

"I'm bothering Gabbi. She thinks I'm around too much, but she won't say so, because she feels too guilty."

Mark smiled. "Don't worry about it – Between you and me, I think she's going through another depression. If she wasn't annoyed at you, she'd be annoyed at something else. I know how she gets. I mean to talk to her about it. But hey, really, I've got no complaints about you. The occasional dirty dish,

but other than that – "

"Sorry about that. I mean to get better with dishes."

"Yeah, it's not a big deal anyway. You're a good roommate. It's the least we can do for you. I mean, I'm always helping people out – don't feel singled out. Besides, I wanted to tell you – we – actually – wanted to tell you – I'm heading to Calgary soon, to do some construction on my mom's properties." Shimano understood then why Gabbi had been so distant and irritable the last few days.

"Just a month or two. So you can stay. We'd like you to stay. Gabbi can't cover the rent by herself, and – well, do you want to stay?"

"Yeah, yeah. So Gabbi – she really doesn't mind?"

"Hell, no. She's just been a bit – well, she gets like this sometimes. It's not you. But once I'm gone, it'll just be the two of you and you won't be as cramped." Mark's teeth were chattering so hard, that it sounded like there was a motor running behind his words. "Look, I'll talk to Gabbi. If she's really uncomfortable with you being here, she'll tell me. But I doubt it. She's just moody these days. Feels guilty about the dumbest things. Jesus, it's freezing. Let's get back inside."

"Okay, okay."

When they got back inside, Mark gingerly opened the bedroom door, murmuring, "Gabbi?" in sotto voce. Shimano realized that over the last few weeks, Mark's voice had been getting softer and softer in her presence. He wondered to himself whether Mark didn't have a hidden agenda for going to Calgary.

Mark slipped into the room, and closed the door behind him. Shimano heard the sound of crying and words in French. Gabbi's words were in falsetto, stuttering and constipated, punctuated here and there by high pitched hiccups. Mark's voice sounded reassuring, but bored.

Chapter 20

Shimano had heard that the process of law was slow, but after a month in Montreal, it seemed as if the tectonic plates had made more progress than his law case. In the meantime, there were papers and documents, forms and affidavits. Shimano almost wanted to get a stamp of his signature; he was so tired of dotted lines.

In the meantime, he had to get a job. He was no longer a guest; he was a roommate, and one who had to cover half the rent. Opportunities were scarce for unilingual Anglophones. Just about the only option open to him was to work at a call centre. He answered an ad for a telephone surveys job. At the interview, he was asked why he had come to Montreal.

"To see the place," he replied. He realized immediately from the expression on the interviewer's face that this wasn't the right answer. "Well, at first I was just traveling. I only meant to stay a little while, but then, well – something kept me here."

"What, a girl?"

"Yeah. Exactly." Shimano realized then that it was partially true.

"So you're going to be here for a bit?"

"Yeah. I think this might be – a serious relationship." Shimano looked away instinctively.

"Well, I'm glad you're not transient. We don't usually hire people that are transient. So if that's the case, well, you can start on Monday."

"Oh, great. Thank you."

"I'm sure your girl will be glad to hear that. You won't have to be a kept man anymore."

"Yeeaaaah," Shimano said – to the floor.

The girl in question was neither happy nor happily coupled. While Shimano's fondness for Gabbi grew, she grew more and more distant. She seemed to be quarrelling with Mark. He heard her

cry on the phone with him. He could now make out a few words in French, not enough to follow the conversation, but enough to know it wasn't a happy one.

She was rude and blunt to Shimano sometimes, but instead of confronting her about it, Shimano blamed himself and thought her respect was something he had to earn. He cooked dinner, did extra chores and fixed everything that was broken in the apartment. Meanwhile, she seemed to be neglecting everything else. After work, she'd often go straight to bed for a two-hour nap.

As December kicked in, she complained about the frigid rain, the lack of light, the searing wind. On the rare sunny, warm days, she complained that she couldn't enjoy them because she had to work. Shimano suggested she try doing something else for a while, but she claimed that she liked her job, and besides, what else was there for her to do?

Shimano wished he could take her somewhere. Cuba, maybe. He felt trapped in his job, trapped in Montreal. He hated doing surveys. He hated repeated the same tedious script over and over. The people he called found him an annoyance, hung up on him, and sometimes even swore at him. The seven dollars an hour barely paid his rent.

One day he found Gabbi almost comatose on the kitchen table, her eyes red and dripping into her mint tisane.

He sat down next to her, expecting her to say something. When she didn't, he asked, "What's wrong."

"It's M – Mark." She could barely get it out, because she was hiccupping. "He – wants – he wants – " The tears poured again. "He wants to take a break."

Shimano patted her back. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to make his voice sound comforting, genuine.

Chapter 21

As December kicked in, Gabbi got very busy with work; and when she wasn't working, she was busy crying. Sometimes she also painted pictures, laboriously, meticulous with her strokes, only to paint over them the next day.

Shimano tried to distract himself by fixing things. He rode too, but the days were getting colder and the bike paths were closing down to make room for snowploughs and parking. He couldn't get very far anyway. Although there was little snow, there was lots of ice. His slick road bike tires slipped precariously, and he couldn't afford to buy knobbly tires.

Mid-December, he got a call from his mother. He had not told her the news yet – he had been putting off telling her, but when she asked, "Are you coming home for Christmas?" he had to give an answer.

"No."

"No?" She paused for air. "Shimano, why not?"

"Well, I – Uncle Paddy invited me to visit him in Thunder Bay, so – "

"So why didn't he invite me too?"

"Because he's got a full house and there aren't many rooms, so "

"Not even one for his nephew's *mother*?"

"We're not Christians. Why should it matter if we don't celebrate Christmas together this year?"

"But Shimano, you know we always celebrate Christmas together. What's happening? Am I just too old and square for you now?"

She definitely has a gift, Shimano thought.

"Okay, okay. I have something to tell you," Shimano said. "Are you sitting down?"

There was a baited pause at the other end of the line, then, "Shimano, what's going on?"

He sputtered out the whole story, trying to understate everything so she wouldn't swoon with worry. She was remarkably quiet as he spoke, not, probably, because she had nothing to say, but because she had a long speech to prepare. When Shimano had finally finished, she insisted on coming up to Montreal next week, as soon as her vacation began. Shimano could not dissuade her – and if the truth be known, he didn't want to.

Shimano's mother arrived in Montreal the day right after Gabbi left for Winnipeg to visit her father.

When Gail saw the loft, her nose wrinkled and the edges of her mouth turned down. An hour or two later, she had already filled up the dustpan to the brim. She was still cleaning the apartment when Shimano got home from work the next day. She was dropping a conglomeration of twist ties, screws, and broken tools into the trash.

"Wait, wait!" he called out, running towards her. "That's art!"

"Art?" she said, examining the whatchamacallit in her hands, and turning it over.

"See how it's welded together?"

"Is this your – work?"

"No. It's Mark's."

"Hm. Well, that's good news. The bad news is that I may have thrown away some other pieces of art."

Sure enough, she had. They rifled through the plastic garbage bags to find all the wayward sculptures. Shimano and his mother had to dig so deep that eventually they spread newspapers on the floor of the kitchen and emptied the bags. They picked through the trash wearing rubber gloves, rescuing piece after piece, wiping mould and slime from Mark's sculptures.

Gail removed a rotten apple core that had inserted itself neatly into the centre of a cassette of cogs, and said, "I hope this isn't part of the sculpture," she said.

They both suddenly looked at each other and laughed at how ridiculous they both looked, sitting on top of rotting food and scrap metal, both their gloved hands full of smears from unidentified and unidentifiable secretions.

Gail picked up a Barbie doll's severed legs, between which Mark had glued a broken screwdriver.

"My, my, my. This Montreal beaux arts aesthetic is *much* too hip for me."

"Ditto."

"I don't know. You look pretty hip in your greasy overalls."

Shimano looked down. He'd been wearing his blue jean overalls for so many days in a row that he'd forgotten that this was what he was wearing.

"Really?"

"Well, no. I hope that's not what you were going for."

"Not really."

"So – do you at least agree with me that these sculptures are somewhat – um – "

"Ugly?"

"That was the word I was looking for."

"Yes."

"Wow! Look at us!" she exclaimed. "We should frame ourselves and see if they'll hang us up on a wall at the Musée d'arts comtempor – how do they say that? The Contemporary Art Museum?"

"The what?"

"Well, well, well. Art's never been one of your great passions, has it? Let's clean up this mess and get some supper ready – is there anything in that fridge of yours that hasn't gone bad?"

"Hey, that's art!" Shimano said, marvelling at his own wit. As much as his mother drove him crazy, he loved her wry sense of humour, and especially how it seemed to be contagious.

Gail made dinner, a delicious improvisation that she threw together with an eclectic set of ingredients that included some wilting bok choy Gabbi had left, a bag of quinoa that had lain dormant on Shimano's shelf for almost two months and a jar of pesto sauce she had found while cleaning out the refrigerator.

As they ate, Gail admired one of Gabbi's paintings behind the kitchen table.

"You know he's a terrible sculptor – excuse me for being unkind – but he paints exquisitely."

Shimano turned to look at the painting. In the centre of the canvas was a circle that opened up on the bottom. Colour radiated from the circle's mouth, as if it was literally bursting with colour.

"That's not Mark's," Shimano said. "That's Gabbi's work. Gabbi's my other roommate."

"Oh, so she's also an artist?"

"Yes."

"Everyone's an artist in Montreal. Or thinks they are. Well, she has talent. She could work on her brushstrokes. They look over-worked."

Shimano didn't know what she was talking about. To him, the painting was perfect.

"She's probably unschooled, is she?" Gail asked

"She did a year at Arts School, but she couldn't afford to continue."

"Such a shame."

After they had finished eating and stacked all their dishes next to the sink, Gail began the inevitable discussion.

"Tell me the truth, Shimano. Did you hit those cops?"

"No! God, no."

"I'm sorry. It's just – I know what your temper's like." Shimano was afraid she'd pull up her pants and show him where he'd kicked her as a child, the marks that had never completely faded, because of her varicose veins.

"Mom, I didn't hit them. I swear. I resisted arrest, but I didn't – I wouldn't have, Mom."

"Do you have a lawyer?"

"I have a legal aide lawyer. He's good, as far as I can tell. I kind of like him."

"I can pay for a better lawyer."

A better lawyer? He considered. How much do good lawyers cost these days? \$100 an hour? \$200? No, he didn't want to be in her debt. She would never let him forget it. But if it was that or jail . .

But, he *did* like his lawyer. He liked how Maître Gagnon didn't only give him legal advice; he gave him advice on how to behave. He didn't want to start over with another lawyer. All the paperwork, the hassle, and was there really any guarantee that another lawyer would be better, would work harder.

"Just – think about it," Gail continued.

"Okay. I will."

"I'm very worried about you." She sought his eyes and tried to hold them. "Really worried. This is very troubling."

"I know," Shimano said, averting his eyes. He studied the stack of plates as if they were the only interesting things in the room.

"So now you have to stay in Montreal."

"Yeah."

"And now you have time."

He braced himself for what he knew was coming.

"Why don't you take a couple classes? I hear the English universities here are very good.

There's McGill – that's practically an Ivy League school – might be hard to get into, but – then there's that other one – that left-leaning university, the one with the really active PIRG and all the outspoken Palestinians – Com something. Com –"

"Concordia."

"Concordia. That's it. You might fit in quite nicely there."

"Mom, can you please drop it?"

"Don't talk to your mother like that!" Her eyes held his and wouldn't let up until his looked away.

"I just want what's best for you – " she began.

"Maybe you just want what's best for *you*."

"Oh, come on. I didn't go and abandon you or anything."

"I'm going out for air," Shimano said, leaping up and leaving the loft before he lost control of his legs and kicked her again.

Chapter 22

Christmas came and left and so did Shimano's mother. On New Year's, none of his friends were in town, so he skulked the bars on St. Laurent by himself. At twenty to midnight, he met a lovely young woman who kissed him just as 1998 streamers came flying across the air, then interrupted the kiss when she realized her boyfriend was at the other end of the bar. Shimano bolted out as quickly as he could, actually catching a cab home to be on the safe side.

Gabrielle was scheduled to arrive from Winnipeg on January 5th, so he decided to surprise her at the airport. He'd been indoors all day and although he'd heard the loud tapping of freezing rain, he was unprepared for what he saw when he stepped – slid – outdoors. He'd left his bike, Lipstick, outdoors by mistake and now it was coated in a thick layer of ice. He tried to chip off some of the ice, but couldn't even get enough off for the wheels to move. Around him, motorists seemed to be having similar problems. He heard sounds of scraping, interspersed with frustrated moans and profanities in both official languages. The drivers almost needed chisels to make any kind of a dent in the ice. Shimano decided to take the bus. He waited and waited. The freezing rain was a shock to the skin. He felt like he was being jabbed with little daggers. Soon his jacket was caked in a layer of ice, as if it had been shellacked. Finally the bus arrived, and he rode it down to the metro. Shimano had never seen so many people crammed into Place des Arts Metro. The platform was as densely packed with bodies. When the metro train arrived, people nearly clobbered each other to squeeze inside, to the point that the door could barely close. Shimano was out-elbowed and had to catch the next train. After he arrived at his stop, he had to wait twenty minutes for the bus to the Dorval terminus. But that was nothing compared to the delay at the terminus as he waited for the bus that would take him to the airport. Shimano sat in the shelter as the freezing rain drummed against the glass roof above. It was cold and

Shimano had to blow on his hands. They were so red that they looked as if they had been skinned.

Shimano could see the lights of the airport just a short distance away, the bright cylinder of the control tower. *So close, yet so far*, he thought.

So close. A walkable distance. There was nowhere to walk though. No sidewalks, only highways and freeways and the desolate stretches of featureless land between them. But he was impatient and wanted to keep warm. As he left the shelter and made his slippery way to a field, someone yelled out at him. "Qu'est-ce que tu fais? T'es fou!"

The ground was barely navigable. Mottled ice. His feet slipped back with each step and he held his arms out like a rope walker. He wobbled back and forth, then fell onto his side. It was then that he noticed the sound. An eerie creaking, like a door swinging off its hinges, only louder, more phantasmal. He looked up. Caked with ice, the power lines were clinking against each other in the wind. There was a sudden torrent of wind, and an electricity pole bowed as if it were no more substantial than a blade of grass.

He heard cracking and knew then he had to get out of that field as quickly as possible. He ran, slipping precariously. He heard something crack behind him. He turned and saw the pole snap in two, sparks sputtering in all directions.

When he got back to the bus stop, he was shaking, and it was not from the cold. Finally a bus arrived: a small moving haven. The moment it pulled up, there was a stampede of jostling bodies, and Shimano didn't even try to work his way through the crowd. When most of the people were safely inside the bus, he poked his head in.

"Is this going to the airport?" he asked the bus driver.

"No. Downtown," the driver replied.

"How long do I have to wait for the bus to the airport?"

"Hard to say. All the buses are slow today. There's been many accidents because of the ice."

Shimano paused, staring at the broken electricity pole. It was only then that he realized the ice had seized control of the city. He contemplated what it must be like downtown, with the cars slipping around helplessly, like bumper cars. There was nowhere to escape.

The bus driver asked, "Well, are you coming in?"

Shimano checked his watch. Almost 10:30. By now it was way past Gabbi's arrival time. She was probably home already, safe, maybe even lounging in the easy chair with a mug of tisane warming her hands. Why stay here and watch more electrical poles smash to the ground? Would the bus to the airport even arrive?

"All right, I'm coming," Shimano told the driver and hopped onto the bus, where there were many wide, scared eyes. They whispered in hushed tones. When he got back to the loft, there was no Gabbi. He wrapped himself with blankets and tried to sleep, but kept waking up, worried that Gabbi had not arrived yet. Finally, at three in the morning, he heard the door open, and Gabbi's breath. He ran out to the door.

"Câlisse! I am so glad to be home. That was the fucking scariest plane ride I had in all my life."

Without so much as taking off her jacket, she reached her arms out to him, and he folded her inside him. Ice melted off her jacket and dribbled down her hood onto the bare skin under his T-shirt.

Chapter 23

In the morning, Shimano went down to get coffee and a newspaper. His jacket had no hood, so he pulled it up over his head to protect himself from the falling pins and needles. The trees were all coated in ice. The smaller branches looked like bobbles of glass, or chunks of agate with fossilized wood inside. They made an eerie chiming sound as the wind drove through them. Swinging chandeliers.

The dingy *dépanneur* had practically become a shelter. People loitered around the shop. Some even sat in chairs in front of the TV. On the cover of the newspaper were pictures of fallen trees, crushed cars and smashed windows. The headline read: "C'est l'enfer!" Shimano didn't know what that meant, but he could guess.

When he got back home, he found Gabbi in the kitchen, wearing biker shorts and preparing herself a bagged lunch. Shimano froze. *No. She can't be serious.*

"Are you – *working* – today?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Gabbi, there's – there's a major storm out there."

"Une tempête du verglas. I know."

"Look, you can't – well, I doubt the courier office is even open."

"Oh, they're open. I called. There's not enough couriers, so the boss said he pay me more."

"Jesus. Fuck. I –"

He tried to collect himself, looking out the window for some inspiration. The ice was beating like bullets against the windows, forming bobbled patterns that distorted the view outside.

"You're crazy. This is crazy. Have you even been out there yet?"

Gabbi shrugged nonchalantly. "I rode in storms before."

"Jesus, Gabbi. This is not just a storm. It's a mother fucking storm. It's – *l'enfer*," he attempted, pronouncing the first syllable like the "en" in "engine."

"What?"

"Enfer."

"Oh, you mean *enfer*," she said, nasalizing the "e."

"Yeah, enfer. Mother fucking *l'enfer*."

"It's okay. I know what I'm doing."

She turned her back and left the kitchen.

He stared nonplussed as she walked away, remembering how Mark complained about how "damn stubborn" she was. Mark told him that Gabbi insisted on messaging only three weeks after breaking her collarbone, then came home crying in pain, only to go back out again the next morning. Short of chaining her to the door, there was nothing Mark could do to stop her.

But this was beyond anything. While she was in her room, Shimano got out his tools and made the brakes so tight on her Robin Hood that Gabbi wouldn't even be able to wheel her bike out of the apartment, let alone ride. Then he hid the tools in his sock drawer.

When she got out of her room, he returned to the kitchen so she wouldn't suspect anything. It didn't take long. He heard her shuffle, mumbling, "Eh? Quoi?" Then her volume raised, "Shimano!" She stomped into the kitchen. "What did you do to my bike?" Her face was red and livid.

"I fixed it," he said.

"Bullshit! Tu me fais chier!"

"You can't go out there. *Please* don't go out there." He looked at her, eyebrows squeezed toward his nose, his forehead wrinkles arching inwards.

"I do what I goddamn want!"

"Why are you so angry?"

"Because I don't need you to protect me. I don't need anyone tell me what – "

"It's a fucking natural disaster out there." Shimano felt his voice rise. His eyes met hers, and he felt a shot of brazenness. He felt giddy and powerful, as if some superior force had taken over his body.

"Okay, fuck. No games. You're not going out there," he said, his eyes so focused on hers that he didn't even blink.

Gabbi fell back, her eyes still duelling with his, but seemingly alarmed by the authority in his voice.

As if on-cue, there was a large crash outdoors. The side of Shimano's mouth twitched up. *So I've really become possessed by a god.* He was almost amused.

Gabbi ran to the window.

"Chrisse de tabarnac!" she cursed under her breath. He came over and stood by her side. A tree had fallen onto a parked car. The car's hood was dented and its windows had smashed. Ice and shards of glass were spilled all over the ground, pellmell to the point that the two could barely be distinguished.

He didn't need to say a word more. Even with all her tenacity and obstinacy, there was no way she could stand up to that.

"Okay. Fine," she said, then sighed and plopped down on the easy chair.

Shimano exhaled.

"I'll make you breakfast," he said.

Chapter 24

By late afternoon, many of the trees on the north side of Mount Royal had turned into timber. The trees were so brittle from the weight of the ice that it only took a huff and a puff for the wind to blow them down. Their trunks had thwacked in two, forming sad teepees. Trees 50, 60, 100 years old.

"It's so *sad*," Gabbi said, looking melancholically out the window. "Do you think they'll grow back?"

Shimano shrugged. He wished he had something reassuring to say.

"We get ice storms in Vermont, but nothing like this."

"We never *had* an ice storm like this," Gabbi said.

They turned on the radio. The ice storm was on every station. As power lines snapped and towers tumbled, Montreal blacked out, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. The metro had stopped running. People were flooding into schools and public buildings that had been converted into temporary shelters. In Montreal, the army had been called in. Fifteen thousand troops had been sent to Quebec and Ontario.

"People are behaving like this is a fucking major catastrophe," Gabbi said. "Like we're all going to die. But it's just *power*. We were fine without power for hundreds of years. It's not like we're losing food, or water. It's just *power*."

They flipped stations to a scientist discussing whether or not the storm was in consequence to global warming.

"Well, weather systems are enormously complex and I would be cautious about attributing any single weather event to global warming alone. However, severe storms, including ice storms, are exactly the sort of meteorological events we would expect as global temperatures rise. What we have here is an unseasonable mild and moist flow clashing with an arctic high pressure system, which is

further exacerbated by a sub-tropical jet stream, again unusually warm. Warm air can hold more water, therefore more precipitation, and the temperature volatility creates a recipe for storms."

The scientist fielded a question for a caller.

"I don't see why Dr. McLeod thinks he has to reference exotic, unproven theories like global warming when the ice storm could easily be accounted for by a normal weather system – El Niño."

"Blaming the kid again," Shimano said.

"What?" Gabbi asked.

"El Niño. That means "the child." The Christ child, actually. Blaming Jesus again."

"Sh," Gabbi said.

The scientist said, "Well, I would agree with you that El Niño plays a significant role, but I would like to reiterate what I said before – weather systems are complex, and although we cannot conclusively attribute one weather event such as an ice storm to global warming alone, the overall trends show that we have a rise in severe weather events. Yes, El Niño plays a role, but this doesn't discredit global warming – which is a well-proven theory, by the way. And I'd also like to point out that one thing global warming does is augment weather systems like El Niño effects."

"But ice storms are normal."

"Yes, certainly, but ice storms of this magnitude are highly unusual and we have to turn to other explanations besides El Niño effects to adequately explain the recent significant rise in severe weather events, such as ice storms. We have seen, in recent years, a rise in hurricanes, in unseasonable heat waves, floods, landslides. The glaciers are melting at a dramatic rate – this all seems to point to global warming, global warming that can only be accounted for by the rapid accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere ever since the beginning of the industrial age."

"Is this just the beginning?" Gabbi asked. "Are things going to get a lot worse?"

Shimano didn't know what to say. He had always believed in global warming, ever since he

learned about it in college, but it had seemed like an abstraction, remote, far into the future, something that wouldn't drastically affect anyone's lives for many decades. Could it be that the storm was already rushing towards them?

After the caller had finished a long rant about how global warming was "junk science," the radio interviewer began a new topic: "What can we do?" The scientist didn't say anything Shimano hadn't heard before: drive less, buy local, conserve energy and turn to renewable sources. The radio interviewer invited people to call in and report whether or not they were considering making changes to their lifestyles in response to global warming.

There were mixed replies. Some people said they were thinking of buying more fuel-efficient cars. Some talked about lobbying the government to ratify Kyoto.

"Maybe things will change," Shimano said.

"Maybe," Gabbi said.

He got up and looked outside. The window panes were positively smeared with ice now. He could barely see outside, and there were no signs that the ice rain would stop anytime soon. Was this global warming banging on their windows, demolishing the electrical pylons, snapping trees like matchsticks? And the scientist said things would get worse.

They interrupted the call-in program for the news, and there appeared to be only one news item.

"Reports have estimated that almost one million people in Montreal and its environs are currently without power."

"What the fuck? That's half the population of the Montreal Island!" Shimano exclaimed.

Gabbi shushed him, so she could hear the rest.

"Thirty-five thousand utility poles have crashed as a result of the now 20 mm of ice rain that has ravaged Montreal in the last three days. As the ice storm continues, Hydro Quebec is just praying for it to stop, but meteorologists predict that things will get even worse. As utility workers race to repair the

damage, their efforts seem futile, as locality after locality falls to darkness. Most suburbs on the South Shore have completely lost electricity, including Longueuil, Brossard, St. Hubert. Here on the island of Montreal, most of the eastern districts have lost electricity including . . . " The news reporter sounded like a sports announcer: Côte St. Luc! Hochelaga Maisonneuve! Mile End! Most of Plateau Mont-Royal!

Then suddenly the radio went dead. Gabbi and Shimano each other and laughed, knowing full well that it wasn't the radio that was broken.

After an hour or two, Shimano said, "I'm not saying this is a major catastrophe or anything, but I think we're going to need some candles." They ran out to the *dépanneur*.

It was really coming down. The pins of ice felt like crystals, glass tearing down and piercing their skin. They ran across the street, skirting back and forth on the icy roads, holding each other for support. Just working their way up the mound of ice that was the sidewalk seemed an athletic feat. The *dép* was even more stuffed with people than it had been earlier that day.

"Cinq dollar," the store clerk said when he wrung up the candles.

"Quoi?" Gabbi started. "Cinq? Pour *deux* chandelles?"

"Cinq."

"Five fucking dollars? What, you charge \$5 for two stupid candles just to – "

"Gabbi, let's just go somewhere else," Shimano said lowly, nudging her arm.

"You bastard, trying to make money off – "

"Look. Everybody want candles. Supply and demand."

"Let's just go somewhere else. This isn't worth it," Shimano said.

"Mange de la marde," she snapped, glaring at the clerk as they left the store.

The next *dépanneur* didn't have any candles at all, for any price. They had to walk for a half an hour down St. Laurent to find some. Then they decided to go out for dinner. It seemed the whole

neighbourhood was on the same mission. Shimano had never seen so many people on St. Laurent. Not in winter, anyway. There were hardly any vehicles on the road except army trucks.

After a half-hour walk, they finally found a restaurant that had a spare table. It was unpopular for a good reason. The food was insipid. But not what was coming from the television. Shimano stared at the TV.

On screen was a colossal electrical pylon – a mighty troll with metal arms and legs. It was laden with ice. Monstrous icicles hung from its buttresses. There were loud cracking sounds, and then the whole pylon buckled and fell to the ground, sending pulses down the wires that connected the fallen pylons to its siblings.

"Turn around. You gotta see this," he told Gabbi.

Seconds later, another pylon fell, then another. For a minute Shimano thought he was watching a Hollywood movie.

"But it's not possible!" Gabbi said.

Gabbi and Shimano stayed there for almost two hours, until the manager asked them to leave so he could make room for more customers.

Shimano checked the telephone message manager when they got back to the loft. There were over ten new messages: from Mark, Shimano's mother, both of Gabbi's parents and several Montreal friends asking if they had power. Mark phoned again a few minutes later. Gabbi refused to talk to him, so Shimano did, assuring him that it wasn't yet so cold that they had to go to a shelter.

"Are you sure you're all right? I mean, on the news, they're saying it's like Sarajevo without the bullets."

"What the hell? Sarajevo? It's like Gabbi says. It like – everyone thinks we're all going to die or something. No, we're fine. Don't worry."

"Yeah, good. So no bullets. Great."

"Well. Come of think of it. We've got the army here so maybe . . . "

"Maybe they'll try and bomb away the ice?" Mark laughed.

"Well, for now, we're all right."

"Hey, keep warm."

"We will."

"All right, well. Just tell Gabbi to take care of herself. What am I saying? No, don't say that. Tell her – my thoughts go to her. Tell her that."

"I will."

When Shimano conveyed the message Gabbi just shrugged.

Then Shimano's mother called again.

"Oh, Shimano. Where have you been? I was *so* worried about you!"

"We were just getting some dinner."

"You actually *went outside*? On the news, they were saying that Montrealers are advised not to go outside."

"Oh, it's not that bad."

"But they say it's like a *war* zone."

Shimano burst out laughing. He could hardly stop long enough to assure her he was all right.

Gabbi and Shimano played cards and drank wine. They took out Mark's guitar and accordion tried to play them, even though neither of them knew how to play a musical instrument.

Eventually their fingers started to go numb from the cold and they put away their instruments. Shimano took out his camp stove and they made tisane. Shimano stretched his fingers around his mug, holding his face close to the rising steam. He gulped down too much at once, and the tea scalded his tongue.

Gabbi hung blankets and carpets over the window to keep out drafts. Shimano set up his tiny

tent in the middle of the room, so he'd be better insulated. They were both shivering as they prepared for bed. They could see their breath.

As Shimano saw Gabbi retreat into her room, he asked her, "Is it warm in your room?"

"Yes," she said, lingering in the doorway.

Shimano paused, feeling awkward, not knowing if he should say it.

"Um, Gabbi, I – don't take this the wrong way."

"What?"

"Um, I'm not coming on to you or anything, but maybe we should sleep together – I mean sleep beside each other – tonight, to – to stay warm. I'm – well, you don't have to, but – "

He couldn't read the expression on her face. He was never good at reading faces, and the lack of light didn't help. Shimano couldn't tell if she was pensive, ambivalent, thoughtful, offended, or just surprised.

"I'm – I won't touch you or anything, I just thought – well, never mind. Good night."

"No. I mean yes. That's a good idea."

"Really?" His voice gave him away. Too enthusiastic, he thought. He looked away from her, inwardly grimacing.

There was a pause but she was still standing here. He looked at her again. Her face had shifted, and now the shadows so obscured her face that he couldn't see anything of it. "Yeah. Just let me get into pyjamas."

Chapter 25

Shimano was hard when she got into the tent, although her pyjamas weren't the least bit arousing. She wore a loose, floppy brown shirt and baggy sweatpants. He had had no agenda or expectation when he had invited her into his tent, but now he wanted her so badly – brown sackcloth and all. She just lay down about a foot away from him, squirmed into her sleeping bag and said, "Bonne nuit."

"Bonne nuit," he squeaked back, hoping she wouldn't hear the depth in his breath.

"Fais de beaux rêves."

"What does that mean?"

"Make beautiful dreams."

"Make dreams? Not 'have' dreams?"

"Make dreams. We make dreams."

"So the French make dreams? All we Anglos do is *have* dreams. We don't make them ourselves."

"Well, it's a good thing we're around then," Gabbi said, and then fell silent. A few minutes later she was already snoring loudly. She sounded like a horse. His erection slackened, but he still couldn't sleep. He left the tent, left the loft, and took the staircase down to the main floor. He opened the door to the building.

It was so eerily dark outside. Barely a light was visible. Chillingly quiet and still. There were a few people milling about, but most of the multitudes that streamed through the streets earlier that day had gone back to their homes or, presumably, to shelters. The ice rain was the loudest sound there was. Shimano was amazed that such a big, eventful city like Montreal could just be turned off like this, as if it had a light switch. No lights, no action.

He stepped onto the sidewalk, which was buried under a layer of ice a few inches thick. Evidently the city hadn't even bothered to salt or sand the sidewalks. Immediately his foot slipped and he fell on his ass.

"Ow!" he cried, straightening up awkwardly.

The streets had more dirt on them, so he made his slow way to the middle of the road. A few minutes later, he heard a grumbling motor and what sounded like a fog horn. He turned to see an army truck right behind him. He scrambled to the sidewalk, nearly falling right in front of the truck as it passed. The ice rain fell harder and the wind was blowing it all in his direction, to the point that it hurt to keep his eyes open. He turned around and headed back home. When he crept back into the tent beside Gabbi, she was still motoring away.

The next day, they got a visit from Michelle, one of Gabbi's friends. "So I take it you don't have power?" was the first thing she said, even before "hello."

When they told her they were out, she said, "Me too. Just about everyone I know in the Plateau has lost electricity by now except – except – except – get this – the clubs on St. Laurent. Yep. The Main is bright. Pretty much from Sherbrooke all the way to Mile End. What do you say we go party tonight?"

"Oh, yeah, great idea," said Gabbi.

"I'm meeting some friends at Mondo Fritz and then we're planning to boogie at the Belmont until it closes. Given the circumstances, it may not close at all. Do you guys want to come?" Michelle said.

"Definitely," Gabbi said.

"Maybe I'll join you for a drink later, but I think I'll skip Mondo Fritz," Shimano said.

"Why not?" Gabbi asked.

"I don't really like the food." Actually Shimano loved the food at Mondo Fritz. It was high class grease.

But also high priced grease. He barely had enough money for candles, let alone drinks, and with everyone overcharging for everything – well, he decided he would have to content himself with rice and beans cooked at home over a camp stove. He didn't say this to Gabbi and Michelle because he didn't want them to offer to buy him dinner, didn't want to be a charity case.

Michelle and Gabbi left together, and Gabbi said she would phone Shimano when they were ready to go to the club.

As evening came, the temperature dropped dramatically. Shimano put on his parka, gloves and toque, and prepared a pot of slop on his camp stove. He held his hands in front of the stove every now and then to warm them. He tasted the food. It was practically devoid of flavour. He was not a good cook even in the best of conditions, and suffice to say, these were not the best of conditions.

A few spoonfuls into his insipid dinner, Gabbi called.

"Shimano, you *have* to come down here," she said.

"What, to the club?"

"We're not going to the club right away. We're at Mont-Royal. The mountain has turned to ice. Total ice. We're going – how do you say that in English – luge?"

"Luge? Sledding? You're going sledding?"

"Yes! Only, we don't have a – luge."

"Sled."

"But we just go on pizza boxes."

"That sounds kinda dangerous."

"I think it's going to be really fun. You should come." Shimano considered. Yes, that would be fun. And free.

Shimano left his beans half-eaten and left the loft. It wasn't raining anymore so Shimano walked to the mountain. Mont-Royal Street and Parc Avenue provided a fantastic view of downtown Montreal.

Normally Centre Ville glittered in the dark like tinsel, but not now. Place Desjardins was unlit, as was, eerily enough, Hydro Quebec itself. As he crossed Parc to the foot of the mountain, he noticed that something was missing, and then realized that the cross on the mountain – so iconic for Montreal – was nearly invisible. There were no lights lining its edges.

He headed up the stairs beside the tobogganing hill, which looked smooth as an ice cube. The steps themselves were hazardously slick. Gabbi yelled at him as he neared the top. He scrambled over to her and Gabbi kissed him on both cheeks. Moments later, a laughing group of girls came and circled around them. Gabbi introduced them: there were two pretty Francophones called Nathalie and Julie, in addition to Michelle. They got on pizza boxes, jumping on top of each other, giggling.

Shimano went down by himself first, hollering joyously as he accelerated, then slid over a bump that propelled him two feet into the air.

Then they went down in twos and threes, skirting all over the ice, turning in dizzying circles, then falling into a heap at the bottom of the hill, where a wall of straw bails was the only thing between them and one of the busiest streets in Montreal.

He got onto a pizza box with Gabbi and Nathalie, who was the second-prettiest of the girls, in Shimano's estimation. She had soft, delicate features and large eyes. He felt Gabbi's and Nathalie's arms lock around him as they went tearing down the hill. *I'm beginning to enjoy natural disasters*, he thought. The freezing rain started up again, and they held the pizza boxes over their heads and and they raced to the club.

The Belmont had a line-up that extended almost half a block down St. Laurent. Considering it was only 9 p.m., this was an unusually long queue, even for a popular club on the Main.

They took their place in line. It was still raining ice, and they were getting less and less enthusiastic about waiting.

"Hey," Michelle said. "I just got a call from a friend downtown. She says that Foufoune's is

open – they've got a generator or something. Or maybe they're paying off Hydro Quebec. Who knows. Anyway, she says there's no lineup there yet – you know how big that place is. Oh, and Ste. Cat is a riot, apparently. There are no cars and the pedestrians have totally taken over the streets."

It was easy for them to reach a consensus: Off to Foufounes. Fufu, as they called it.

A bus ride later, they were nearing the club. Michelle was right. Ste. Catherine was teeming with pedestrians. There were no cars in sight on what was usually the most traffic-infested street in downtown Montreal.

They entered the club just as it neared maximum capacity, going in through a door that was crowned by a massive tarantula with an open maw and diabolic eyes. They were playing loud techno and there were already people dancing.

The girls ran to the floor almost as soon as they got there.

"Viens! Come on!" Nathalie called out to Shimano, smiling at him as she cocked her head to the side in a simpering expression that reminded Shimano of secretaries in black and white movies.

"I'm not drunk enough yet," he called back.

"Then *drink*. And then come."

Shimano was shy about dancing, but for Nathalie and Gabbi he might be able to overcome his bashfulness. He ordered a beer, and swayed to the music a bit, testing his sea legs. He watched the girls, almost transfixed by their vivacity, their grace.

Nathalie wore a pair of purple sparkling pants which accentuated her small hips as she waved them demonstratively from side to side. She glanced back at him. Her bangs were trimmed into a precise arc across her forehead, and her cheeks dimpled when she smiled and laughed, which was often. But it was Gabrielle he couldn't stop looking at. Her strong body was controlled and poised, but wild at the same time. She swept back and forth in circles, hands streaming like ribbons, drawing elegant, generous spirals into the air. She danced as one without pretension or need to impress.

After a few hours and several drinks, Shimano glanced at his hand where he had scribbled the bus schedules so he wouldn't forget. He realized that the next one was at 1:30 and if he missed that one, he would have to wait a full hour. He didn't want to drink away his money and he didn't want to take a cab home and so he announced to the girls that he would be leaving. "Wait," Gabriel said, fetching her coat. "I'll come home with you." Nathalie looked disappointed. Her eyes wandered off with Shimano as he and Gabbi left the bar.

"That was soooo fun!" Gabrielle said, when they arrived at home.

"Seriously! The tobogganing especially. I'm sorry I made you leave the bar so early. I thought, if I stayed there longer, I'd miss the bus and have to take a cab up."

"Don't feel sorry. *I* decided to come home with you. Right?"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you did." He had somehow not realized this. He had assumed Gabbi had come up with him just to be nice or just to make sure he didn't have to be alone on a Saturday night, but it wasn't like Gabbi to be so obliging. She had left the club with him because she had wanted to.

Shimano considered this as he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, getting ready for a shower. His butt rubbed against the sink and he felt something pinch. "Ow!" He pulled down his pants. He had an enormous purple blotch on his left butt cheek.

"Jesus, I got a really wicked bruise!" he yelled out to Gabbi.

"Oh, really? Show me."

"It's on my ass."

"Oh, really? I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Shimano froze. He looked at his astonished face in the mirror. He heard her footfalls as she walked up to the bathroom. The door opened behind him, and he felt the cold air shiver through his body. He saw Gabbi in the mirror, moving in behind him. She was wearing a fuzzy green bathrobe.

He was still naked from the bottom down. "Ah, nice," she said, looking at his ass. He was hard

and he could tell by where her eyes were that she had noticed.

"That *is* a great bruise," she said. She moved in closer to him. Gabbi hiked up the bottom of her bathrobe to reveal a large purple bruise. She rubbed her thigh up to his. She manoeuvred him around, so Shimano could see his bare ass in the mirror next to her leg, his bruise side by side with hers.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Nice and red – and purple."

Slowly, he moved his hand down and traced her bruise with his hand. He realized then how dirty his hands looked against her skin.

"Sorry," he said. "They're – my hands – they're not as dirty as they look. The grease just gets in there. Won't come out."

"Mechanics' hands. Les mains d'un mécanicien," she said, cupping one of them in hers and guiding it down.

She was soft to the touch. Despite all her angles and prickles, she was as soft as any woman.

Chapter 26

"Who needs heat?" Gabbi panted as they rolled over each other in Shimano's tent.

"We can make our own," Shimano said.

"Ooh, yeah," she said, her head diving under the covers.

They played for hours, learning the mechanics of each other's bodies, their likes and dislikes and how to fit together. After they had tired each other out, they fell asleep in spoon position.

In the middle of the night, the lights suddenly turned on there were loud, blaring voices in the other end of the room.

Shimano's body shot up. "What was that?" Gabbi asked. He could feel the heavy beating of her heart against his hand.

"Sh," Shimano said. "I'll go out and look."

Shimano fumbled open the tent door, grabbing a book as he left the tent, so he would have something to throw at potential intruders. His eyes darted around, skittishly. Then he realized where the voices were coming from and laughed.

"It's just the radio," he called out. "Power's back on," he said, as he got back into the tent.

"Too bad. I was actually beginning to enjoy this," Gabbi said, yawning.

"Me too," Shimano said, lying down and embracing her. "Me too."

They had barely gotten through their coffee before Gabrielle got a call from Nathalie. She had run out of power and asked if she could stay with them. An hour later, Shimano got a call from Sheldon with the same request. The news spread fast. Soon more of Gabbi's friends phoned.

"Let's have a party!" Gabbi said. "A sleepover. What do you think?"

"A mass slumber party?" Shimano considered.

Shimano was disappointed that Gabbi even wanted to have a party, when he wished to have her

to himself. Still he was torn. His friends didn't have heat, and on the radio, they were predicting bitter cold weather that night. They should help people any way they could, he decided – this was a crisis.

"I guess. Yeah, let's invite everyone. Might as well make a night of it."

"Well, then, let's go out and get some stuff. I want to get some 'Fin du monde.' That's Nathalie and my favourite beer. Appropriate, huh? La fin du monde. The end of the woorld!" she cried.

She sang an REM tune: "It's the end of the world as we know it.."

Shimano joined in: "It's the end of the world as we know it. I feel fine."

Gabbi interrupted with: "Okay, I'm going to write a shopping list for tonight and then we can go get groceries."

She picked up a piece of paper and jotted down "the end of the world" at the top.

As they were walking to the grocery store to get beer, they ran into the curmudgeonly neighbor, Mme. Pigeon as she was scattering salt on her walkway. She ignored Shimano altogether, except to give him a hard stare over her bifocals, and started talking to Gabbi in French. Given the context, it was quite easy for Shimano to guess what they were saying. Mme. Pigeon was complaining that the sidewalks were slippery, that her car door was iced shut, that Hydro Quebec only took care of the rich people, and they certainly didn't care about her. She asked Gabbi if they had power and when Gabbi said "yes," she grunted, and went inside to get more salt.

Gabbi looked at Shimano. "She has no power."

"I gathered that."

"Right across the street, and she has no power."

"And Hydro Quebec won't help her because she isn't rich enough, huh?"

"Oh, you caught that. You're getting better. Funny she isn't going to a shelter. She must be getting cold. Especially at her age. I was thinking, as she was talking – maybe we should – invite her?"

She looked sideways at Shimano. Shimano laughed, "Nah!"

"Nah!" she mimicked. "God, I don't think I could stand listening to her for twenty minutes. A whole evening would be impossible."

By evening there were 25 people in the apartment. Most of them brought offerings: chocolate and a fondu set, ingredients for mulled wine and some board games. After a couple hours, Shimano was surprised at how much fun he was having.

He told everyone the story about his confrontation to the police, and people listened without interrupting. Nathalie and Julie tried to teach him some French, delighting in his grammar when he said, "J'ai reçevu une bière," instead of "J'ai reçu une bière." Michelle liked his drawl and kept asking him to say words like "hot" and "Vermont."

Michelle told them all a long-winded story about how she was rushing off to work the second day of the storm, and discovered that the front lock had frozen to the point that she could not get her key into it. Too frustrated to try any more, she took the fire escape down.

"That was the scariest thing I ever did in my whole life. My fire escape: it's kind of like yours. It's outdoors, winding, only I'm three floors up instead of two. And yeah, it was bloody covered in ice. I saw my life flash in front of me more than once on the way down. I was walking in really tiny baby steps, gripping the rail for dear life. Then when I finally got to terra firma and realized the courtyard door was *also* frozen shut. *Fuck!* I yelled. I had nothing sharp in my bag except a pen. So there I was, trying to hack away at the ice with my pen, but that stuff is like *granite*. I felt ready to cry when realized there was no way I was going to get the ice off the door and I would just have to get up those stairs again. Holy shit, it was even scarier getting up them than getting down them. So then – I'm finally safe in the apartment. I call my concierge. 'I got a problem.' 'Yeah, everyone's got a problem.' See, at that point, I didn't even realize this was a natural disaster. I described the problem and pleaded – I actually had to plead! – and he finally came over. He couldn't fix the lock either, so he told me to unscrew the entire lock mechanism. He said he couldn't do it from his side. 'But I don't have a

screwdriver!" I said. So he opened the mail chute and pushed a screwdriver through it. Anyway, so that eventually got sorted out, but by then I was about an hour late to work, and the bus took *forever* to arrive and then when I got to the office, guess what?"

"There was no one there and the power was out," Sheldon said.

"There was no one there and the power was out," she parroted. "God, was I pissed. Got home, there's this massive tree that fell onto our power lines. I can't believe happy, beautiful things like trees can turn so *hostile*. Christ, talk about a catastrophe. There was this scientist the other day, talking about global warming, and how this is just a sign of things to come."

"I *heard* that. That's scary shit," Shimano said.

"Wasn't it? That made me really think – God, Mother Nature's got to be pissed off right now.

"Or that kid El Niño," Shimano offered.

"Yeah, that kid El Niño. Came from a dysfunctional family, that one. Jesus, I can see why the Greeks thought that gods were responsible for weather. It's hard to look at this and not think it's all some sort of personal expression of wrath."

Sheldon started singing, "We're all going to die."

"Oh, shut up. It's not that bad," said one of Sheldon's friends.

As if on-cue, Gabbi said, "La fin du monde!" She popped open the beer bottle. The cork popped out and banged against the ceiling. The beer head spouted out of the bottle, as foam and liquid dribbled down the sides and dripped onto the ground. Gabbi licked the beer off her hands and passed around the bottle.

At 11 p.m., they turned on the radio for the news.

The reporter announced, "Good evening. We are now one power cable away from losing power on the entire island of Montreal."

A chorus of "Shit, Crisse, câaalisse," overcame the room.

"Sh!" Gabbi said.

"Almost a third of the residents on the Island of Montreal are without power, and with the mercury dipping down to -20 tonight – "

"Holy shit!"

"Sh!"

"People without power are strongly advised to seek shelter. Signing off on Black Friday."

"We are luuucky!" called out Michelle, as they turned off the radio.

"Damn right!" Gabbi said, and they all drank to that. After several more rounds, and trips to the déj to get more, people started pulling out sleeping bags in the main room. Gabbi invited Nathalie and Michelle to crash in her room. Shimano was not invited. He drank another round with Sheldon to distract himself, until he was so drunk he had the spins, and could barely make it to his bed behind the curtain in the loft.

As he spun from consciousness into unconsciousness, he heard the ice rain sandblasting the window. He made dreams of ice.

Chapter 27

"How's this for a quote of the day? 'Hell frozen over is still hell.'"

"Ha, ha. Nice one, Michelle," Gabbi said. Michelle had been making observations on the weather all day, to the point that Shimano was finding her a little tiresome. Extreme weather may be more interesting than ordinary, wallpaper kind of weather, but to Shimano it was still – well – weather.

The evening after the party and there were still almost 20 people in the loft. They had been playing cards all day, and no one showed any signs of wanting to go home. It was becoming increasingly likely that no one *would* go home. Shimano was conflicted. *Of course they should stay*, he tried to tell himself, berating himself for his selfishness in wanting Gabbi all to himself. *Are we going to just let them go home and freeze?*

"Thanks a lot for letting us stay here," Sheldon said, in between gulps of beer that Shimano and Gabbi had bought.

"Yeah, I really appreciate it," Michelle said.

"Moi aussi, je l'apprécie," Nathalie said.

"Nice when people really get together in times of crisis like this," Michelle added.

"To Gabbi and Shimano!" said Sheldon suddenly, lifting his bottle.

"Oui! Gabbi et Shimano!"

"To our gracious hosts!"

"Merci, merci," said the gracious hosts. When Nathalie fixed her gaze on him as she drank, and Shimano, sheepish, looked away.

"Eh! Tu dois me regarder pendant que tu bois," Nathalie said.

"French tradition," Gabbi explained. "After a toast, we look at each other when we drink."

"Oh, sorry," Shimano said.

"He's an Anglo," Sheldon said. "Anglos don't like to look at people."

"You look at people," Gabbi said.

"That's because I've realized I'm in Rome."

"I know I'm in Rome," Shimano said. "I just didn't know that was a custom."

"Pas de problème." Nathalie flashed a smile.

"Merci pour ton . . ." Shimano began. "C'est quoi 'understanding' en français?"

"Compréhension."

"Comp-pre . . ."

". . . hension."

"Comprehension."

"Très bien."

"Merci."

"C'est pas 'mircy'. C'est 'merci'."

"Merci."

"Non. Tu dis 'mircy.' Écoutes. Mer –"

She made a rolling sound at the back of her throat.

Shimano tried to imitate her. "Merci. Is that it?"

"Not quite. It's like . . . in German you have the 'ch' sound. Like in 'Bach.' Say 'Bach.'"

"Bach."

"It's like that, only more like an 'r'. 'Mer.'"

"Mer."

"Bach. Mer."

"Bach. Mer. Bach . . ." Shimano repeated. The "r" just kept getting stuck at the top of his mouth and wouldn't move back any farther. It was a little like trying to move a stuck bolt.

"Hey, Nathalie, don't correct him. His accent's cute!" Julie said.

Shimano didn't want to be cute, and he was engrossed now, feeling something give way as he repeated the word again and again. Nathalie nodded in encouragement, now repeating with him,

"Bach. Mer. Merci."

"That's it! C'est ça!" Nathalie said, eyes lighting up.

"Merci!"

"Excellent."

Everyone clapped and said "bravo." Shimano felt his face turn red.

"Okay. Now, Shimano, you can teach Nathalie how to say 'terrorism.'" Everyone burst out laughing.

The laughter tapered off and there was a long pause, the kind that typically follows a crest in conversation. The silence was broken by an alarmingly loud siren. It seemed to be going at a fair clip. Shimano could tell by the doppler effect that raised its pitch as it came closer: *Wee-ah-wee-ah-wee-ah!* The high notes screeched. Gabbi was mouthing something, but he couldn't hear a thing. "What?" he yelled and Gabbi yelled back, "That's close." It was only then that Shimano noticed the smell of burning wood. The smell had drifted into the back of his conscious mind earlier, but he had assumed that it was just a wood stove. They stared at each other momentarily, then ran to the window and drew back the wool blanket that was covering it. Everyone in the loft, all 20 of them, crammed around that small triangle of uncovered window. Where Madam Pigeon's house was, a blazing yellow fire belched out a fat column of smoke into the night sky. An electrical pole nearby caught fire and began to collapse.

"Does that electrical wire connect to ours?" Shimano mused and a moment later, the lights went out.

"I guess so," Sheldon said. Laughter again.

"So . . ." Michelle began. "Who's going to phone Hydro Quebec?"

"Hydro Quebec, we lost power, we lost power," Sheldon said in a whinny voice.

"Quelle horreur!"

Julie replied in a mockingly bored and annoyed tone, "Yeah, like fuckin' tout le monde à l'île de Montréal. So deal with it, tabarnac!"

"But I'm *cold*," continued Sheldon.

"So light a fire!" replied Julie, and everyone laughed, except Gabbi, still staring transfixed out the window.

"Shut up!" she said. "Shut up! It's not funny. There's an ambulance coming."

Shimano stared into the black. Sure enough. What seemed like a veritable battalion of emergency vehicles were pulling up to the house: three fire engines, an ambulance, then even a police car. Two of the fire engines proceeded past the house to make room for the ambulance to park right in front of the door. The ambulance blocked the view of what was going on behind it, beyond the blast of flames.

It took barely minutes for Gabbi and Shimano to get their coats and race downstairs, their friends trailing behind.

When they got outside, all the vehicles were still there and the ambulance paramedics were pacing around. They watched for a few minutes, but nobody was coming out of the house, either on foot or on a stretcher.

"What are they waiting for?" Gabbi said under her breath. "I'm going to talk to them."

Gabbi ran up to the paramedics and Shimano followed. She talked to them excitedly in French. They were talking too quickly for Shimano to follow, but he could read by Gabbi's face that the news wasn't good. Shimano shifted around and watched pieces of smoldering wood come crashing down.

Gabbi thanked them and one of the firemen turned to them and yelled, "You have to move back now. The fire is getting bigger."

"Okay," they mumbled and fell back a couple dozen feet.

"What happened? What did he say?" Shimano asked.

"She's dead."

"Mme. Pigeon?"

"Yes. They said there was a gas leak. The neighbors smelled it and knocked on her door and no one answered. So they called the firemen and they burst into the house. They found her in the basement, standing in front of the furnace, holding a candle."

Shimano heard himself laugh. It was involuntary, as involuntary as when a doctor banged his knee to make his leg come up.

"It's not funny!" Gabbi snapped.

"Yes, yes, I know." But he was fighting back the giggles. He couldn't help himself. It was the sort of thing that would win a Darwinian award. Go to investigate a gas leak with a candle in your hands.

"It's not funny!" she said again. "She didn't blow out the candle and she literally exploded. They didn't have time to save her. They don't even risk to take the body out until the flames have gone down."

In a flash, Shimano imagined what it must have been like for Mme. Pigeon, when the firemen entered and she realized what she had in her hands. Maybe they called out to her. "Madam, Madam! Blow out the candle!" He knew from experience how time slowed down in moments of crisis. That was a blessing when there's a way out. It's a window opening through which you can see your predicament with crystalline clarity, lucidly weigh your options. But how agonizing those elongated moments must be when it's really too late. Or maybe there was time, and she was just so frozen with fear that she couldn't even pucker up her lips to blow?

Despite the firemen and all the hoses, it seemed like a runaway fire. An enormous column of

smoke rose like a living thing, a big fat snake. It was the colour of sewage. What was there in that smoke? Upholstered chairs? Couches? A piano? Photographs in picture frames?

The firemen actually seemed to be enjoying themselves. They set up ladders and did acrobatics from one ladder to another, sometimes spraying each other and laughing. One of them actually drank out of his hose. Then the hose slipped out of his hands and bounced around like an eel on speed. From the other ladder, another fireman grabbed onto the hose. It continued its convulsions, until the fireman put it under his butt and sat on it, applying pressure with his body weight until the hose was defeated. Two other firemen raised their ladder and climbed up to the roof. They sawed off portions of the house so the smoke could escape, and it did, vigorously, in long, thick funnels.

There Shimano and Gabbi stood, for what must have been a full hour, wanting to turn away, but unable to do it, while the rest of their friends one by one retreated back into the building.

Gabbi turned to Shimano. Tears flowed down her face, leaving muddy trails of mascara down both cheeks. She said nothing, but he could easily read the look on her face, for the same thought was tormenting him. *If we had just invited her over, this might not have happened.* There was a pleading look on her face. She looked as if she wanted him to say, "No, it's not your fault. It's not *our* fault. It's really not our fault." But Shimano couldn't say it, for he was having the same argument in his head that he knew she was having in hers. At that instant, he knew what she was thinking, and knew she knew what he was thinking, and both knew they could not reassure each other. There was no comfort, but there was recognition.

Intellectually, he knew it didn't matter whether or not they were responsible. Here in the land of the living, time may slow down and speed up; it may even seem to stop completely, as Shimano felt it did right now, but whether quickly or slowly, time could only move in one direction.

Chapter 28

When Gabbi and Shimano finally got back upstairs to the loft, they found that the temperature had dropped dramatically, but nearly everyone was still there. Some were playing cards by candlelight. Michelle was idling on the easy chair, holding the phone to her ear.

"I'm on hold with Hydro Quebec," she announced as Shimano and Gabbi walked in.

"You're calling Hydro Quebec? I thought that was a joke," Gabbi said.

"Well, it's getting cold in here."

"We're not to phone Hydro Quebec. Didn't you hear on radio? Don't phone Hydro Quebec except in the case of emergencies, they said."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Oh," Michelle said, and put down the phone reluctantly. Michelle moved to the window and pulled back the curtain a bit. "I can't *believe* how ironic this is. Everyone on the island of Montreal is losing power because of *ice*, and we lost it because of *fire*."

"Yeah, pretty ironic," Gabriel said, pacing back and forth across the loft.

Shimano wished all the people would leave. He wanted his home back.

"I can't help saying," Sheldon said, "That that was pretty damn idiotic of her. 'Smells like gas. I think I'll go down and investigate – hm.' I mean, if someone's going to be that dumb – "

"Shut up, for God sakes," Gabbi said. "She's dead."

"I thought you said she was a bitch."

"That's not the point."

"Okay, sor-ry."

Gabbi parked herself at the edge of the kitchen, in front of a candelabra that had the effect of

dropping a lengthy shadow of her body across the floor. Gabbi put her hands on her hips. She looked like a camp counsellor. "Voyons. Look, guys," she yelled. Everyone hushed and turned to her.

She spoke French first, then switched to English, "Let's face it, the power's probably not coming back up for a while. We're not a priority for Hydro Quebec. You are better off in a shelter."

"So – party's over, huh?" Michelle said.

"Yeah, kind of."

"Well, let's help you clean up, at least."

"Why? There's no hot water."

"At least we can help pick up bottles."

Gabbi ejected a sigh. "Let me be honest – there's just too many people here right now. I kind of want to be alone right now. Except for Shimano of course. But for those of you who don't live here –"

"So, you're not going to the shelter?" Michelle asked.

"No," Shimano and Gabbi said in unison.

"But it's getting really cold," Michelle said, shivering demonstratively.

"We'll manage."

"Just don't start a fire," Michelle chuckled, then realized no one was laughing and trailed off.

"Okay, I guess – well, guys – let's go."

Michelle, Nathalie and the rest picked up their coats and began a solemn procession out the door. Only Sheldon lingered.

"Can I stay at least, Shim? It's your place too."

"Sheldon, I'm sorry. I just – " Shimano began. "I just really rather you'd left. Don't take it personally. I just – "

"Oh, nice. Really nice. So friends really stick together in natural disasters."

Gabbi turned to him and snapped, "That's fucking disrespectful. We just let you stay a full 24

hours and eat our food and drink our beer. Is it too much to ask for a bit of space?!"

"Alright, alright. Bye brother," he said to Shimano, but didn't acknowledge Gabbi at all as he walked out.

As soon as he left, Gabbi burst out, "How fresh! How could you let him talk to you like that?"

"Well, he's done a lot for me. He's given me a lot."

"Like disrespect and a whole lot of dishes."

"Gabbi – "

"I'm sorry. I just don't like to hear people talk to you like that. You're so nice and generous. You do so much to help people."

"I don't know about that."

"Yeah, really. Like the bikes. The Robin Hood had all the parts I liked. Handlebars that stick up. Black fenders. Campagnolo chainring. That wasn't cheap. You put all that on for me. It wasn't like that when you found it, no?"

"Well – yeah. No."

Her eyes studied his. He was afraid of what she might discover written there, and yet thrilled by that possibility. That she might read in his eyes that he would give her everything she wanted, would give her 60 Robin Hood bikes.

"But I'd do as much for everyone," Shimano said.

She smiled faintly, cupping the side of his face with her hand.

Shimano set up his tent in the middle of the floor and they cozied up inside, just holding each other. Neither could sleep, so they went outside to watch the fire again.

Where the house had stood were broken, charred planks. Veils of ghostly debris and ash floated around. Both the firemen and their hoses were idle. They appeared to have given up.

"Even with all that stuff they had, that's the best they can do?" Gabbi asked.

"Yeah. You wonder why they even bothered."

The only thing untouched was the fence, with its bars shaped like medieval swords. The "Pas de vélos" sign was also relatively intact, leaning drunkenly to one side.

Chapter 29

Shimano could not sleep, and Gabbi wasn't helping. She was asleep, presumably, but her sleep was so restless that she might as well be awake too. She rolled back and forth and mumbled things in French, moaning sometimes, even howling.

"Je l'ai tuée. Je l'ai tuée," she kept repeating.

When Shimano awoke the next day, at noon, it was as if he had never slept at all.

"Went out. Back soon," read a note on the table.

Shimano pulled back the curtain and looked outside. The sky was an opaque gray, with swirls of navy churning around in the southern sky.

A bad time to be out, he thought. He remembered then how she had wailed in her sleep: "Je l'ai tuée. Je l'ai tuée."

He picked up a French-English dictionary and looked up the words

Tuer: to kill.

Je l'ai tuée. I killed her. Why "Je l'ai tuée" and not "On l'a tuée"? Was he not responsible as well? Gabbi had asked him if they should invite Mme. Pigeon and he had said "nah." So blithe with his refusal. It was easy to save pretty girls and drinking buddies, but the world was full of all kinds of people.

He remembered what his father had said once: "It's not that it takes all kinds. It's that we're stuck with all kinds."

During his spat with Mme. Pigeon over the "Pas de vélos" sign, he had literally wanted to kill her. How the memory of those fantasies burned through him now.

Enough.

He turned on the radio: "In the news this hour – a mother and her two children were found dead

of carbon monoxide poisoning in a car in Longueuil. The father of the children told investigators that the wife took the children to the car when they complained of the cold, in order to warm them with the car motor.

"Another tragedy in the Plateau. A woman burned to death in the basement of a home on de Gaspé. Marie Pigeon had a gas leak in her basement and . . . "

Shimano turned off the radio.

He thought he was going to explode from the cabin fever. He knew it was probably going to storm but he had to bust out. He grabbed his rain jacket and headed out into the crystal city. He walked to Mount Royal, as the clouds thickened until the sky looked looked sick, nauseous.

He scrambled up the stairs beside the tobogganing hill up to the main path. All the trees along the path had been toppled. Some had heads pointing down, so their bodies formed reverse "V" shapes. The larger, thicker trunks had split right down the middle as if someone had hacked them apart with an axe. The branches were all caked in ice.

He recalled Gabbi's words: "Je l'ai tuée." Looking at it objectively, he knew it was ridiculous for him to blame himself, ridiculous also for Gabbi to blame herself, and yet they were so good at feeling guilty, he and Gabbi, that they could feel guilty for the most specious of reasons.

Then the sky began to rumble. Muffled, distant drums, but the sounds were enough to shock him out of his ruminations.

Thunder? In winter?

The wind began to hurl, knocking branches off trees which chimed and shattered to the ground. He started to run down the path, but realized he was only running into bigger and bigger trees. Only the tobogganing hill was free of them. He got on his back and slid down to the bottom of the hill, yelling out loud as the wind coursed through him. He banged into the hay bails, then climbed over them onto the sidewalk. Here the trees were not so tall, but they swung like chandeliers, clinking together. He

looked around and assessed his options. The Cartier statue was close by. It was solid stone and stood about four stories high. That, certainly, would not topple down, and it would shelter him from the wind. He stumbled the half a block down Parc Avenue and ran up the path to the statue, crouching into a corner between two blocks of concrete that met at right angles relative to each other. He looked up at the statue above. From directly underneath, the structure seemed gargantuan. Each of its carved personages seemed positively Titanesque in proportions. He was dwarfed by a group of four women carved out of stone, staring beatifically up at Jacques Cartier himself, who was positioned a few feet above them. His arm was raised to the height of his waist, and he held his hand palm down, as if poised to touch someone's head in blessing. Two stories higher, at the apex of the obelisk, was an enormous angel. Her wingspan measured about 14 feet across. She held a laurel wreath in her left hand, and her right hand pointed demonstratively up to the sky.

Way above her, a white rod shot across the sky.

Michelle was right. Weather really seemed like it was cooked up by gods. It was difficult to imagine that there was no conscious intent behind this.

Now the lightning seemed directly overhead. Barely a second passed between it and the thunder.

Craaaakakakakakaak!

God, this is beautiful.

He watched as a tree split in two, snapping like a tooth pick.

Psychotic. But beautiful.

He felt a manic ecstasy.

So this is what we get for thinking ourselves so mighty, huh? For driving our big cars, flying our big planes, heating our big homes. We've cooked up our own storm.

Take that! the sky seemed to say. And that!

Who killed Mme. Pigeon? The mother and her children, dead of monoxide poisoning? *If Gabbi should feel guilty, if I should feel guilty, then why shouldn't everyone?*

The image flashed into his head of what he saw in the metro, at the bus stop. The mob, the elbow jabbing. *This storm is severe, but it's not all that life-threatening, all things considered. Pretty much the only thing we've lost is power. Funny, that word – power.* If people panic this much about something like electricity, what will happen if we have really serious shortages? No water, no food? As his mother liked to say, "Only a thin veneer of civility separates us from rats and dogs." *No wonder we're in such a mess*, he thought.

Meanwhile, he and Gabbi wallowed in guilt, practically rolled over and over in it. Guilt over the most trivial things. Not doing dishes. Not calling soon enough. Not inviting Mme. Pigeon to their party.

Guilt. It kept them from moving forward, from acting. It was as if someone had stuck a stick in their spokes.

Enough.

If his actions were hurting someone, or some people, he had a responsibility to change, but didn't he also have a responsibility to stop other people from hurting him? To tell Sheldon to shut up when he was being insensitive? To report a cop who punched him? To curse the Audi driver for being more concerned about his car than the human being it had hit?

CRAAAKAKAKAKAHK!

"Yeah!" he yelled back up at the sky.

Kakakakakh!

"Give it to us!"

Crahkakaka!

"Give us everything you got."

There was a mighty crack, quick as a gunshot, but decibels of volume were crammed into that

shout, that lash of whip. Deafeningly loud.

Too loud for him not to wake up.

Chapter 30

Shimano was soaking wet as he reached the apartment building. His jacket, normally so impervious to whatever nature could hurl at it, had seemed no more protective than a bed-sheet as first rain, then ice rain, chased him all the way home.

Before opening the door to the loft, he took off his jacket and shook it out so it wouldn't leave puddles all over the cold bare floor of the loft. Before he managed to open the door, it flung open by itself and out came Gabbi.

"Shimano! I was *so* worried about you." She practically leaped on him to embrace him.

"You'll get wet!" he said, trying to back off.

"You'll get wet? *Voyons donc*. Where were you?"

"The mountain."

"In the *storm*?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus. *Câlisse! À cause tu fais simple de même?*"

"What does that mean?"

"Something we say in Saguenay. In Chicoutimi. It means 'Why are you being simple?'"

"Stupid?"

"No, not stupid. It's not supposed to be mean. It's just . . ."

"One of those things that doesn't translate well."

"Exactly. Well, come in. Let's dry your clothes over the radiator.

"We have heat?"

"We have heat! Hallelujah!" She took his jacket out of his hands, opened the door for him and leaped across the room toward the heat vents, singing from Handel's Messiah:

"Haaa-llelujah! Haaa-llelujah!"

"Hallelujah, hallelujah!"

"Halley-ey-lujah!"

Hanging on the wall in the main room was a new painting, sketched in parts, presumably newly begun. It was full of white and silver brushstrokes in haphazard angles. The features of the painting were abstract, but it was easy to guess what they represented.

"Oh, hey, look at this," Gabbi said. "I thought I save a branch now our freezer works again."

Gabbi opened the freezer and pulled out a small tree branch. That is, it was a block of ice, a good three inches in width, with a small branch buried inside.

Shimano picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

"Wow. Too bad this'll melt. We could sell these things and make a fortune."

"What a mess everything is. A terrible, strange, bizarre, wonderful mess."

"And that storm was fantastic."

"Oh, yeah? I guess I missed out."

Gabbi poured him some tea and gave him some, saying "tiens," instead of "here."

"Thank you," Shimano said. He sipped slowly. It was a real medley of aromas: mint, lavender and a licorice-like flavour that Shimano couldn't quite place. It tasted like comfort itself.

"Never underestimate the simple pleasures in life," he said, quoting one of his mother's favourite lines.

"We are *alive*. We are *lucky* to be *alive*," Gabbi said.

"Yeah, and there's something I wanted to tell you."

"What?" Gabbi said, looking at him pensively.

He fixed his gaze on hers, without flinching, without fidgeting. "You didn't kill her, Gabbi."

Gabbi's chin began to tremble and a large tear formed in her eye.

"I know," she said. Her voice wavered.

"Then why are you crying?" He put his tea down and held her hand. "*À cause tu fais* – how did it go again?"

"*À cause tu fais simple de même.*"

He held her, muttering into her elbow. "Tu n'es pas tuée."

"Tu ne l'as pas tuée."

"And I didn't kill her either."

"I'm correcting your French. Tu ne l'as pas tuée."

"Tu ne l'as pas tuée."

"Excellent."

"Teach me more. I need to work on my French. Now we've got time."

"Oui. Je vais t'enseigner le français. Ça va faire passer le temps. Le temps de la tempête."

"La tempête."

"La tempête de verglas. You know what that means?"

"Mais, oui," Shimano said. "The ice storm. La tempête de verglas. Mon amie."

Chapter 31

Shimano and Gabbi were finally alone again. Alone with a large mess. They listened to the radio as they worked. The ice storm death toll was up to 15, but most were on account of carelessness around generators, candles and gas heaters.

Outside Montreal, livestock died by the thousands as barn roofs collapsed from the weight of the ice. Pigs and hogs froze to death. Greenhouse produce was a washout. Agricultural losses were being counted in the millions of dollars.

At night, Gabbi and Shimano ate dinner together and drank up the last of the beer.

They slept in Gabbi's room, on her bed. Hers and Mark's.

It was the first time that they had made love in the light. After they were done, they both lay on their sides, just looking at each other. He loved her eyes: so deep and brown. He would do anything for her at that moment. Including telling her that. He drew in slowly and embraced her.

"I really care for you, Gabbi. I really do," he said, face muffled a bit by her dreads.

"What?" she asked, pulling back. She let her hands drop away from his neck and looked at him. He could not identify the expression on her face. Confusion? Astonishment? It was clear that something had moved her. He could tell by the way the sheet was moving that her heart was beating hard. This sight emboldened him.

"I – I have feelings for you," he said, his voice coming out as only a whisper..

Gabbi just continued to look at him. As he studied her face further, he could now discern her expression – it was unmistakable – fear.

"It's too early to talk about that, Shimano."

"Yeah. I know. I'm sorry. It's too early."

"Let's talk about this later," she said.

"Okay," Shimano said softly. He couldn't talk anymore anyway.

She turned around and slept. Shimano tossed back and forth. Finally he got up and crashed on his own bed, drifting into a dream that Mark and Gabbi were getting married and Mark wouldn't let Shimano into the hall. A dream that Shimano would never want to make.

Chapter 32

In the morning, Shimano awoke to find that Gabbi and her bike were gone. She had left a note on the fridge: "Boss called. Went back to work."

Outside the trees were dripping. Large droplets hit the ground. *Plunk, plunk, plunk*. The air had the acrid stench of a faux-spring day: an intermingling of festering trash, fermenting dog shit and melting ice. Shimano gloomily scrambled his last egg as he listened to the radio announcer declare that the worst of it was over and most people were able to return to work. Back to business. As usual.

Holiday's over. Shimano had work to do. He was feeling bold, and he thought he'd call his lawyer. He suspected this would be a slow time for the maître. Shimano reached Maître Gagnon right away.

"There's something I really need to tell you," Shimano said, after he had reminded Maître Gagnon of who he was and what he had been charged with.

Shimano continued. "When I was at the police station, there was a cop – a sergeant. Sergeant Tremblay. Anyway, when I told this sergeant that the cops who arrested me didn't show ID, he punched me."

"Punched you?"

"Yeah, twice actually."

"Hm. Now, Mr. O' Keefe. This changes everything. Why did you not tell me this before?"

"Sorry. I just – well, there wasn't really time."

"Okay, so next time there's something important like this, you tell me right away, even if I'm in a hurry. Have you lodged a complaint against the sergeant yet?"

"No. I thought it might get me into worse trouble."

"Actually, quite the opposite might be the case. If the sergeant gets charged with assault, he

certainly won't want that to go to court. It's bad publicity, and he'll do anything to avoid it. Including dropping your charges, or at least negotiating. So Mr. O' Keefe, I highly recommend that you file a complaint against Sergeant Tremblay, and I will represent you in court if need be. Fighting police violence has been a pet project of mine lately. I'm delighted for the opportunity to take another cop to court."

"Well, you're welcome, I guess."

"Let's talk about this right away. Do you work right now?"

"No, not yet."

"Neither do I."

"Really?"

"Ah, in a manner of speaking. Everyone's canceling appointments. If it's not the ice, then it's the floods. Our roof collapsed today, from the melting ice. Just when we thought the whole nightmare was over. Did you survive alright?"

"Yes, for the most part. I live in the Plateau. We were hardly affected at all."

"Good. Let's hope your luck holds. Can you come in tomorrow afternoon?"

*

The next day, Shimano headed downtown for his appointment. For the first time in two weeks, Shimano took out his bike. It was hardly worth the effort: downtown Montreal was chaos and many roads were blocked off, as huge sheets of ice began to fall.

Maître Gagnon's law firm was situated in a massive skyscraper on Square Victoria. The building had four sets of elevators, each set covering a decade of floors from 1 to 43. Shimano took the elevator to the 36th floor and found the door to the office, which had a list of about twenty names written on it. Shimano announced himself to the reception, who motioned for him to sit in a spacious waiting area.

The chairs were upholstered with red leather and had long backs, giving them the appearance of thrones. The view from the windows was magnificent. He could almost see the whole city: Mont-Royal, the St. Laurent, the Jacques Cartier bridge, even the mountains beyond the outskirts of Montreal.

After about 20 minutes, Maître Gagnon came out to the lobby and invited Shimano to follow him to his office.

"I'm sorry for the wait," he said. "Things are busier than I thought. With roofs caving in and windows getting smashed by falling ice, there's been some looting. I'll spare you the details. Come in," he said as he opened the glass door to his office.

Shimano sat down on a plush leather swivel chair, across a desk from Maître Gagnon. As the lawyer shuffled through papers, Shimano studied the room.

His office was roomy, and looked as if it had been newly painted. The paint job was impeccable, Shimano noticed. The cream and pale yellow of the walls did not overlap each other at the corners at all.

The desk was tidy and was decked with a matching desk set. The pens and their container, the wipe-board calendar, even the stapler, all had the same yellow-striped pattern. On the right side of the desk were wood-framed pictures of what appeared to be the lawyer's family. In one photo, he was sitting next to an Asian-looking woman, presumably his wife, and behind them were three teenaged children, whose skin was the colour of nutmeg. Next to this was a photo of them in what appeared to be an African setting. They all wore long skirts or tunics and his wife had a large, florid scarf wrapped around her head.

The lawyer asked Shimano to tell him exactly what happened on the night of his arrest. Shimano spoke more fluidly than usual; by now he had repeated the story many times.

Maître listened patiently, asking him to go over various parts of the story again as he took notes.

"When the sergeant hit you, was there anyone else in the room?"

"No."

"Were you aware of anyone outside the room, watching through the windows?"

"The windows were one-way."

"Of course, but they might have had holes or cracks?"

"No."

"And you're sure the surveillance camera was off?"

"Yes. Absolutely sure."

Maître Gagnon put his pen down and sighed.

"Well, this is going to be very hard to prove. It's your word against his."

"So should we even bother to – "

The lawyer held up his hand to stop him.

"It won't hurt. It could give you some leverage in the case against you. Tremblay is certainly not going to want to risk his reputation by letting this go to court."

"Why then did he risk hitting me?"

Maître Gagnon shrugged. "Maybe he thought, since you were American, you were unconnected. Were perhaps unaware that you could file a complaint. Maybe he disliked Americans. There are many Canadians and Québécois who dislike Americans."

"I've noticed that. I keep feeling like I have to apologize for being an American."

"Never apologize for what you are. We got some of our best ideas from the Americans. Well, some of our worst too, but that's beside the point. The point is – never apologize. We should expect better of people than prejudice. My mother came from Haiti and she had a tough time growing up in Quebec. At that time, there were very few people of colour at her school. But she decided not to be ashamed for what she was. 'I'm going to hold this black face up high until people get used to it,' she

used to say. Now Montreal is one of the most multicultural cities in North America. I like to think she had something to do with that. Well, Mr. O' Keefe, I have another client coming, so let's wrap this up. I'll send you an affidavit within the next few weeks, which you will sign. Here's a complaint form," he said, swishing it across the desk to where Shimano was sitting. He was relieved to see that it was fairly short.

"And what happens then?"

"We wait," Maître Gagnon said.

"Will it be a long wait?"

"After everything you have seen up to now, after everything you've been through, do you even need to ask that question?"

Chapter 33

Shimano waited for two months. He continued to work at the call centre. He continued to work on his French, both with Gabbi and at the Maison de l'amitié, a Mennonite organization that offered free classes to immigrants. He was surprised how quickly he could learn, now that he felt a sense of motivation.

His relationship with Gabbi continued, in an on and off manner. Typically they would get together after sharing a bottle of wine, barely speaking as they had sex, beyond the working out of logistics.

Almost every night, Shimano hoped she would revive the discussion he had started during the ice storm – would talk about the future, at least acknowledge that he cared about her, or perhaps, would say she cared too. But she didn't bring it up and Shimano couldn't seem to find the right opportunity. In the morning, she usually rushed off to work without even kissing him. When she came back from work, she was tired and didn't want to have any conversation that would prove too strenuous. On weekends, she worked on her art – she had had a burst of inspiration ever since the ice storm. Now she was painting a whole series of ice storm paintings: collapsed electrical pylons, buried cars, and other defeated emblems of progress.

Finally, when they were drinking coffee together one Saturday morning near the end of March, Gabbi said, "Shim, I hate to bring this up, but have you been looking for a place? Mark's coming back soon."

"He's going to stay here?"

"Of course. Where else?"

"But I thought you two had decided to take a break."

"Well, he's still going to stay here, and – and – I should tell you, Shim – we've been talking

about trying again. We're not committing to it yet. We just want to see how it goes."

"But – what about me? What about – us?"

"Shimano, you're – I hate to say this. You're young. You're just a kid"

"I'm almost 23."

"And I'm almost 27. Many women have school-aged children by my age."

"Then they would have started at my age."

"But – girls mature faster than guys. You know that."

"I – so that's it. You think I'm not mature."

"Shimano, don't make me – I'm sorry. Yes – you're – well, you're 23."

Shimano couldn't stand to meet her eye. He watched the steam rising from his cup, noticed how it swirled and eddied as it rose, then reached what seemed like an invisible ceiling, topped up almost and then fluttered into lateral directions.

"Shimano?"

"Yeah."

"I hate to say this. I should say it. I'm sorry. You're just – well, you don't assert yourself. You're – I don't know how you say this in English – *obséqueieux*?"

"I don't know that word."

"You go with what everyone else says. You always trying really hard to please people."

"That could change." He paused, then realized how this sounded, how he had just proved her point.

"Please, don't take this hard. You don't stand up for yourself, or if you do, then you totally lose it and have a temper tantrum."

"That's not true."

"But it *is*. Shimano, there's something that's bothering me. Did you hit those cops?"

"No. God, no. Of course I didn't. I'm not that stupid."

She searched his eyes. He resisted the urge to look away, but let her inspect him, the truth of his gaze.

Finally, she said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have doubted you, but I can't help it – "

"I don't hit people. I don't do that. Well, I did it once, but I was a kid then."

"I'm sorry, it's just – I can't help it. The point is – well, I love Mark," Gabbi said, drawing out the vowel in the word "love."

"Je l'aime. I don't want to leave him. I can't. And he doesn't want to share me and I don't want that either."

"But what about – what about what I want?"

"Shimano, I can't pretend."

"Fine," he said. He got up to fetch Lipstick, not looking at her as he said, "I'll find an apartment. I'll get out of your hair. You can find yourself another fuck buddy."

"Shimano," Gabbi called out as he neared the door. When he didn't respond, she repeated it again, snapping her words like a whip, "Shimano!"

Shimano headed out of the building, and set his bike in front of him. He clipped into the right pedal with his right foot, pushed on the pedal so the bike coasted, then swooped his left leg around the bike until he was in position. *Ride, ride.* He sped up de Gaspé, detoured through Mile End, past Van Horne and the small sculpture gallery right by the train tracks. He carried his bike over the tracks and sped down the bike path that ran alongside them – a stretch of flat dirt with no intersections breaking his rhythm. He rode to Iberville, then up to Montréal Nord, then back down again, all the way to Old Montreal. He found himself following the bike path along the Lachine canal, as he had done so many times in the summer and fall, but now it was full of ice and mud, and required careful navigation. He took the underpass into Verdun. The streets were full of potholes – there seemed to have been a new

sprouting of them, along with the spring flowers. He remembered someone on radio saying that Montreal had lots of festivals, but they were missing one: "The Pothole Festival." *Verdun would be a good spot for a pothole festival*, Shimano thought, as another one took him by surprise, causing his seat to pop up and knock against his nuts. The roads must have been even worse before Verdun started becoming gentrified – in the days Gerry lived here, for example. His dad said he grew up in a "cold water apartment." But which one was it? Shimano had no idea. He glanced at the apartments and houses as he passed them – apartments mostly – old ones, typically three stories high, with long, winding outdoor staircases and tiny patches of grass in the front. Most had small terraces where many people kept their garbage. They were somewhat similar to the apartments in the Plateau, only less individual. Here, they were painted somber shades of grey or brown, not at all as lively as the red, green and magenta homes in the Plateau.

Which of these generic budget buildings did his father live in? The few times his parents had taken him to Montreal as a child, Gerry had not wanted to visit his old apartment.

As the sun began to set, Shimano called Sheldon to ask if he could stay with him. Sheldon said, sure, but told Shimano he would need a sleeping bag. With no other choice, he rode back to the loft.

When he got there, it was dark. Gabbi came right to the door to greet Shimano as he walked in, as if he were a dinner guest.

"I cooked dinner – *pasto*. *And* I made some chocolate cake."

Her little uneasy smile pained him. It looked so – ingratiating.

"Smells good," he said, walking indoors and taking off his cycling shoes, as he gathered his courage. He stood again. "Thanks, but I'm staying with Sheldon tonight. I just came back for my sleeping bag."

Gabbi opened her mouth slightly. Shimano couldn't endure the vulnerable expression on her face – it was so un-Gabbi – so he looked away.

"Are you – moving out already?" she asked.

Shimano paused. He hadn't thought much past tonight, but why not take everything and make a clean break? That would be easier. Rip the Band-aid off in one shot.

"Yeah, yeah, I think I should."

"But – but just – I made dinner. Can you at least stay for dinner?"

He didn't want to stay, but he didn't want to disappoint her either. The words she had said earlier were still digging into him: "*You're always trying really hard to please people.*"

So he wouldn't, he decided. He could not just swallow all this down and enjoy her cake.

"I'm sorry, Gabbi. I just need some time."

"Can't we be friends at least?"

"*Please . . .*" he wanted to say, then stopped himself. *No please.*

"Give me time."

Gabbi nodded. Her chin was trembling.

She was blocking his way into the loft.

"Excuse me. I have to pack my stuff," he said. She moved back wordlessly. She just watched him as he packed. Every now and then, she asked if he needed help, to which he replied that he didn't. He had more things than he realized and didn't feel like staying any longer. Once he had filled a knapsack full of essentials, he turned to her and said, "I'll come for the rest later."

"Sure."

Shimano turned around and headed for the door.

"Shimano!" she called out. He turned.

She kissed him on the left cheek, then the right. She lingered on his right cheek, but he pulled away.

"Have a good night. Bonne appétite," he said.

"It's bon appétit," she said, not pronouncing the "t" at the end.

"Bon appétit."

"But I liked the way you said it first," she said. "It sounds like you're saying small."

"Good night," he said, annoyed now that this should have to drag on so long. He wanted to kick at the ground with his shoes, like a horse impatient to leave.

"Bonne nuit," she said. "Fais de beaux rêves," she added, just as he closed the door.

Chapter 34

Shimano moved back into the same building on St. Hubert where he had been living before he had met Gabbi, before his accident.

When Mark returned, he invited Shimano to come over for coffee. Shimano came out of politeness. It was already clear from the first few minutes that Gabbi and Mark were a couple again. Mark had put all his stuff in her room. While they were talking, he held her hand and called her "ma chouette." Mark invited Shimano to stay for dinner, but Shimano declined, pretending he had other plans.

As the day of his trial approached, he tried to distract himself however he could. He worked on his French. He became a hockey fan, cheering for the Montréal Canadiens, calling them the "Habs" just like the locals.

Kaspar came back from Cuba, and joined him for hockey matches, sometimes inviting Shimano to his home to chat with his wife and him and play with the kids.

Finally, Maître Gagnon called with news.

"The prosecutor gave me a call yesterday. They want to negotiate."

"Does this mean – ?"

"This is good news. But don't get your hopes up yet."

"Okay, okay, I'll try."

"I have some dates here for you. How's next week?"

"That soon?"

"Would you rather it be later?"

"No, God no. I'm just surprised it can happen so soon."

The day before the negotiation, Shimano had a last appointment with Mr. Gagnon, which

mostly consisted of signing papers and going over protocol.

After only twenty minutes, it was time to wrap up. Mr. Gagnon turned to him and said, "Well, Shimano. Do you believe in Jesus?"

Shimano shifted uncomfortably. The last time he had answered this question, he had been obliged to take a pamphlet and listen to a sermon.

"Don't worry," Mr. Gagnon said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm not trying to convert you to anything. Just curious."

"No. I don't really – well, I guess he said some interesting things, but – no. I'm not a Christian."

"God then. Do you believe in God?"

Shimano considered this for a minute. It was not something he considered often. He certainly didn't believe in the old man in the sky – that stuff belonged in the Sistine chapel, and not – well – the sky. Shimano liked what Carl Sagan called the Christian god – "a little god." Not the god of the universe and all its magnificence, but a god that could only fit in churches and small confined spaces.

But aside from that? There were times – times when he was coasting down a hill, wheels spinning, spinning, yielding to the unstoppable pull of gravity. He remembered his meditations on π when he was a child. The ghostly shivers that trilled down his spine as he thought about how π had an infinite number of digits. He had wondered what it would be like to see all those infinite digits, to see the thing in its entirety, to see – well – with the eye of God. To understand the circle in its multiple forms, the course earth charted around the sun, the sun around the milky way, the milky way around the ...

The circle. The modus operandi of the sky. The great mystery of how could go so far and still end up at the same place.

"Do you believe in God?" Maître Gagnon asked again, breaking Shimano's reverie.

"Maybe. Sometimes."

"You say your prayers tonight, Mr. O' Keefe."

Chapter 35

Shimano had never prayed by himself before. He could count on the fingers of one hand how many times he had prayed at all. Gerry had thought religion was the opiate of the masses, and Gail had believed that no child should be made to practice a religion until they were old enough to understand it.

However, she had sent Shimano to Al-Anon a few times and it was there that Shimano learned his first and only prayer. He remembered well that evening – aged nine – when he had heard the prayer for the first time. The meeting was in church basement. He wanted to leave as soon as he entered, because the place smelled of diapers and old, dusty carpet. The wallpaper had a dowdy flower pattern that repeated at regular intervals. Shimano was made to sit in a wooden chair that squeaked. There were about 30 people there and he didn't know anyone and was afraid people would make him talk in front of everyone.

But then they recited that prayer. The prayer seemed to coax out of him a well of sadness, then turn that well into a refreshing draught that satisfied and calmed him.

But now he was older and strangely self-conscious. Even here in his own home, even though he was alone – he felt embarrassed about praying out loud. He associated praying with crazy people on the street who talked to themselves and insisted that the end was nigh.

Shimano kneeled in front of his bed. He pressed the palms of his hands together and looked up, as he had seen in pictures of good Christian children. He felt silly in this position, so he clasped his hands together instead.

He began, "Oh God, grant me the . . . "

What was the word that came next? Patience? Strength? Sobriety? That would make sense for AA, wouldn't it? *Well, I'll go with that, or I'll never get through this prayer,* Shimano thought.

"God grant me the sobriety to accept the things I can't change."

No, that really doesn't make sense, does it?

This was like not having the right tools.

"God grant me the sobriety to accept the things I can't change,

"The courage to change the things I can,

"And the wisdom to know the difference."

He paused, then added a footnote: "I'm sorry, God. I know 'sobriety' isn't the word, but it's all I got. I'm in big trouble and I need your help. I don't want to go to jail. Please, God, don't make me go to jail."

He repeated the prayer again. He considered going out to get a bottle of wine from the *dépanneur* to calm his nerves, but he remembered then that this was what his father did whenever he was stressed about anything, and it just made matters so much worse.

He got into bed and tried to sleep. He was up for a long time, but eventually his mind wore itself out with its ruminations and he began to drift. Just as he crossed the boundary from consciousness to unconsciousness, he remembered.

Serenity.

That was the word. Serenity.

God grant me serenity.

Chapter 36

The next day, Shimano rode to Maître Gagnon's office, where the negotiation was scheduled to take place. He pedaled slowly; he did not want to arrive sweaty and smelly. Also he didn't want to ruin the suit which Kaspar had leant him for the occasion. As he rode, he regretted not having worn riding clothes, changing into the suit when he got into the office. He had not realized how many mud puddles there were, along with patches of ice and dirty snow. *Well, it's too late to turn back*, he decided.

When Shimano got to the law firm, Maître Gagnon invited him into his office right away and shook his hand.

"I hope you visited the wishing well this morning."

"Yeah," Shimano said. He considered telling the maître that he had prayed for the first time in years, but a shyness overcame him.

Maître Gagnon gave him some pointers, the most important of which, was "let me do most of the talking."

They waited in silence for the prosecution. Shimano dreaded seeing Sergeant Tremblay again, even though, this time, there would be witnesses. He could not remember his face, exactly, only those eyes: so hard and dark.

By the clock, it was 2:03, and the meeting what scheduled to begin at 2.

Shimano felt like over-compressed spring. How could such a large office seem so small?

The view out the window taunted him. It was a beautiful day, one of their first in a while.

Waiting, waiting.

At 2:13, the crown finally arrived. Shimano recognized the prosecutor from the courtroom. She was not wearing a robe this time, but a beige suit with a skirt that ended just above the knee.

He craned his neck out to the hallway to see if anyone else was coming.

As if she could read his mind, she said, "Sergeant Tremblay will not be able to join us today. He asked me to convey his regrets."

Regrets. I wonder if that was his choice of word.

Shimano was disappointed, but mostly relieved.

After some perfunctory greetings and handshakes, the prosecutor sat, extended her arms forward and clasped her hands.

"We are willing to settle for a lighter charge. We recognize that when it comes to the assault, there were – how we say it in English? Shades of grey."

"Shades of grey. Exactly," Mr. Gagnon said.

"We are still charging him with resisting arrest. That will stand. But as far as the assault, we are willing to settle for a lighter charge."

"What sort of a charge?" Mr. Gagnon asked.

"I don't know. Pick one."

"You want me to pick one?"

"Pick one and we'll discuss further."

"In that case, I would like to consult with my client in private."

"Of course," she said, got up and left the room.

When they could no longer see her through the window in the door, Maître Gagnon turned to Shimano and said, "Well, let's see what our options are."

"Is there any way we can ask them to drop all the charges? So I get off completely?"

"I wouldn't chance it. If we had evidence, that would be a different matter, but as it stands now –

well, let's see what I can suggest."

The maître pulled a large volume off his shelf and thought out loud as he flipped through it.

"Let's see here – mischief? Too heavy a sentence. Obstructing justice? Certainly not." It seemed like he was browsing the Sear's catalogue.

"Oh, I know. Causing a disturbance. Let's say you caused a disturbance."

"What does that mean?"

"It doesn't matter. It means you get a very light sentence. I think it's probably the best option given the circumstances."

"Causing a disturbance," Shimano said, testing out the words in his mouth.

"Well, did you make any noise when they tried to arrest you?"

"Yes, I yelled a bit."

"Good. Then you caused a disturbance. Let's invite her back in."

She came back in and Maître Gagnon made his suggestion. She paused for a long time, flipping through her folders and skimming through documents. Shimano gazed outside, looking down at the empty basin in Square Victoria, wondering when they would turn the fountains back on.

The prosecutor finally looked up from her papers.

"Yes, I think we can accept that."

Without even thinking, Shimano tipped back his head, closed his eyes and exhaled.

"Excellent," the maître said.

It took only a few minutes for the office clerks to prepare a document and for them all to sign it.

At 3 p.m. sharp, they had already wrapped everything up, and Shimano had officially caused a disturbance.

"I will see you in court," the prosecutor said, reaching out her hand.

Shimano started. "In court?"

Maître Gagnon explained, "The sentencing hearing."

"Oh, yes, of course," Shimano said.

After she had left, Maître turned to Shimano and smiled.

"So – how do you feel?"

"Incredibly relieved."

"And all you did was cause a disturbance."

"You know, I sort of like the sound of it. Causing a disturbance."

"Yes. It has a better ring to it than 'assaulting an officer of the peace,' does it not?"

"Definitely. It's kind of like being charged for being a shit stirrer."

"You should try putting that on your CV."

"Yeah, maybe."

"What am I saying? I'm your lawyer. You didn't hear me say that. Well, we will have to contact the courts and set a date for the sentencing hearing. In the meantime, there will be some paperwork."

"Of course."

"But that shouldn't cause much of a disturbance." Maître Gagnon winked. He got up and gave Shimano a generous, firm handshake.

"Well, Mr. O' Keefe, it's been a pleasure working with you so far. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon. And your night. I'm sure you'll sleep well."

Everything seemed slow and dream-like as he left the office, took the elevator to the first floor and got out into the sun. He mounted his bike and rode, humming "Hallelujah," by Leonard Cohen, all the way home.

Chapter 37

Shimano longed to ride far away, atop his bike, ride out to the country until Montreal was just a dot in the vanishing horizon. But he couldn't leave, for he still had to await the sentencing hearing at the end of April, and now that he was suing Sergeant Tremblay, there would be more hearings to attend and more affidavits to sign, more hand cramps.

March eased into April. The days got longer, so did Shimano's rides. He explored the impressive network of bike paths. He followed the edges of the island, along the St. Lawrence, the *St. Laurent*, as he now called it, inhaling the scents of marine life, admiring the first herons that balanced one-legged by the shores. He discovered that you could cycle the Formula 1 race track on Ile Ste. Hélène, that there were bike paths that led to every tip of the island and there was even a bridge built exclusively for cyclists and pedestrians that led to Ile de Notre Dame.

There was only so much work he could do on his own bikes and those of his friends, so he started volunteering for the very organization that he had planned to work for – Vélos Sans Frontiers. It was Kaspar's idea. Kaspar was convinced that Shimano would be able to pay at least part of his legal debt to the Canadian people through doing community work, "so why not get a head start on it?"

Shimano learned how to drive a truck and picked up donated bicycles – he found that the quality and character of the bicycles varied as much as the people who donated them. There were budget-priced commuter bikes that tenants left behind for their concierges to deal with. Forgettable department store bikes: Supercycles, CCMs, rusted and mangled, with frozen cables and malfunctioning brakes. Then there were the suburban bikes – high end, barely used, with accessories dangling like clunky jewelry. Dual suspension front and back, even a shock absorber on the seatpost. Not even a princess would find a pea about which to complain.

Shimano was working at Vélos Sans Frontiers one day when a young man came in with a state-of-the-art orange Marinoni road bike to donate. It was racked with the very newest and finest in road bike technology. The sight of it almost made Shimano salivate.

"I can't believe you're giving up *that*," Shimano told the donor.

"Oh, well. I have another couple of bikes, and I rarely ride this one anymore. So today I was looking at it and thinking, why don't I make someone in Cuba very happy?"

"You certainly will," Kaspar said, and started writing up a tax-deductible receipt.

Shimano's eyes followed the cyclist as he headed back out. His shirt had a number on the back. His helmet came to a point in the back, and his cycling gloves were meshed. He looked like Louis Garneau en route to the Tour de France.

"I wonder what the other three bikes look like," Shimano said, turning to the Marinoni.

"Well we'll find out in a year or two – as soon as they go out of style." Shimano and Kaspar just stared at the bike, not talking, for what must have been a full ten minutes. It had all the deluxe fixings. Two chainrings on the front, nine on the back. The gear shifters were integrated directly into the brakes. The handlebars were dropped and neatly wrapped with orange handlebar tape.

Finally Kaspar shook his head and said, "Road bike for Cuba. He has no idea what roads even look like in Cuba. Well, Shim, give this one a little brush-up and we'll try and sell it on eBay."

Shimano turned to him, his mouth gaping. For a minute, he doubted Kaspar's integrity.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. This bike is way too bourgeois for a Cuban farmer. They need workhorses, not fashion statements. Sell this and we'll have the money to send ten clunkers to Cuba."

Clunkers. That's what the Cubans needed. Mountain bikes with thick, gnarled tires. They'd settle for CCMs, even Supercycles. But not this orange princess. Shimano picked it the Marinoni. She was a light one: fifteen pounds at most. He clamped the seatpost to the bike stand.

To his surprise, the bike needed far more than a brush-up. The bottom bracket was almost

completely seized and had to be replaced. But extracting it proved a formidable task. The bottom bracket would not budge. Shimano knew of only one tool that would be a match for the bottom bracket cartridge – and that was the one tool they didn't have. Instead Shimano lengthened the handle of the wrench with a long pipe and banged at the end of the pipe with a hammer.

"If it's taking you that much energy, just leave it and we'll sell it as is," Kaspar said as he came out of his office.

Shimano was exerting himself so much with every strike of the hammer that his speech was choppy. "I can't – " *humph* " – give up now – " *humph* " – not after all this – " *humph* "work."

"Really, you can let it go."

Shimano dropped his arm down for a brief time out. "No, I can't fucking let it go. Not after all this!" Shimano had had these moments before. It was not about the bike anymore.

He threw the hammer three times in quick succession and yelled, "Fuck, you goddamn piece of shit! Won't you fucking move!?" and with the next whack of the hammer, the bottom bracket gave – a tiny bit.

Kaspar cheered. "Go, Shimano, go! Show the bastard who's got the hammer!"

"Fuck!" *Whack!* "Fuck!" *Whack!* "Ah! Why the fuck is this – " *Whack!* " – so fucking hard to – " *Whack!* " – move?"

"Stop, Shimano!"

"No, I can't fucking stop!"

"Stop! You're stripping it!"

Shimano stopped mid-swing. "What?!"

"That bottom bracket is crooked. Someone cross-threaded it in there."

Shimano stopped and examined the damage. In his frustration, he had forgotten to make sure it wasn't cross-threaded. Sure enough, it was. He could tell because the bottom bracket was in crooked

relative to the frame. Someone had screwed it in wrong, probably out of inexperience. Shimano knew he had probably stripped the threads that held the bottom bracket in place, and the frame was as good as gone. He let the hammer drop to the floor with a loud *clack*. An almost biblical rage came over him and he reached up his arms to the sky. "Ah!"

"Louder, Shimano. Let out all your anger."

"Ahhh!"

"Louder still. Let it all out, my friend."

"AHHHH!" he yelled. "Ahh, ahh, AHHHHHH! Fucking shit, piss, hell. Goddamn it. Why is my life such a fucking mess! Why the hell does nothing ever work out?"

"Maybe you're using the hammer too much. Leave it."

"AHHH! My life sucks. Everything sucks!" Kaspar came and embraced him. Shimano withdrew and picked up the wrench. Kaspar clasped the business end of the wrench and gently shook it out of Shimano's hand.

"Leave it, Shimano. Let's go to my office and have a beer. Want to hear my rule of thumb about mechanics? Most problems can be solved with a little bit of lubrication."

Shimano looked back at the bike. It was rare for him to give up – on anything. He looked away from the bike and followed Kaspar into the office. Kaspar offered him a seat at his desk. The desk itself was barely visible because of all the papers that were strewn on it, pictures too, of people riding bikes down deep trenches of mud in fields. One was carrying enormous sacks of grain on his bikes. The bags were stacked on the back rack, hanging off the sides of the top tube and piled on the basket at the front of the bike. The pile was so high that the cyclist could barely peek over it. Yet he seemed not at all concerned that anything would topple.

"Amazing, huh?" Kaspar said. "It's a different life. Here in North America, people here think the car is such a necessity. Drive to the store to get milk, drive to the gym. They don't *know* necessity. "

"Yeah," Shimano said, still fixated on the photo. "And to think how frustrated I get just because of a fucking bottom bracket. They probably have frustrations beyond anything I could possibly imagine."

"Neither can I. Neither can anyone. Unless you've been there, you can't imagine. But as they say over there, 'If necessity is the mother of invention, then his father is Cuban.' Amazing how inventive you can be when you have no other choice than to *be* inventive. But you *are* inventive, Shimano."

"When I'm not so fucking pissed off that I'm wrecking everything."

"Hey, one of our old mechanics – a volunteer – had some trouble with anger. Used to literally break things when they pissed him off. One day one of the staff came in with a flier on stress management and posted above his work bench. It came down pretty soon, but I held onto it. It's in my files somewhere." Kaspar opened his file cabinet and began to flip through documents. Suddenly Shimano felt like a child who'd been sent to a counselor's office. He wished he could sneak gracefully out of the office before Kaspar gave him a spiel.

"Here," Kaspar said, and placed a flier in front of Shimano. "Stress Management" was written at the top. Everything else had been blotted out with marker. At the bottom of the page, someone had scribbled:

"Step 1. Put source of stress in vice

Step 2. Apply hammer liberally

Step 3. Go for beer"

Shimano laughed with sheer relief, to which Kaspar responded with his characteristic goofy:

"Har, har, har."

"Step Three," Kaspar said, and clinked his beer against Shimano's.

"Santé," Shimano said, maintaining eye contact with Kaspar as they both sipped their drinks.

"You actually look at me while you drink. Anglophones rarely do that. Someone must have

taught you well."

"Yeah, I guess so. I still didn't get the girl, though."

"No, somehow I guessed as much. So, Shimano, what's going on in your life? Tell Uncle Kaspar everything."

Shimano started to talk. He stumbled and stuttered, but eventually the words began to grow legs and run, and before they'd popped open the third beer, Shimano had told Kaspar nearly everything: about Gabbi's rejection of him, his lack of money, how he still couldn't leave Montreal, about his father and his futile efforts to find him.

Suddenly he turned to Kaspar. "Kaspar, do you, by any chance . . . "

"Know your father?"

Shimano nodded. "Gerald. Gerry. Gerald O' Keefe?"

"Gerald, Gerald. It doesn't ring a bell. Is he a biker too?"

"Yeah. And a mechanic."

"Is he a cycling advocate?"

"I don't know. He never really talked much about his life in Montreal. He's – I don't know – average height. Balding."

Kaspar lifted his eyes, as if consulting an invisible directory on the ceiling.

Shimano was almost afraid to say it: "He rode a Cannondale, which he spray-painted yellow and maroon, to make it look like it had rusted."

And then the light-bulbs flickered. "Oh, yes. Yes! How could I forget that? That was really convincing. He wanted it to look cheap, I guess. Uglified. So, yes, I do know Gerry."

"Do you – do you know where he is?"

Kaspar shook his head. "Sadly, no. I haven't seen him for – God, I don't even know. I never knew him very well. Knew his bike better than I knew him, practically. Didn't even know he'd moved

to the States. He was involved in Le Monde à Bicyclette back in the day. We used to protest together, and that was pretty much the extent of our relationship."

"What's Le Monde à Bicyclette?"

"You mean you don't know? Shimano! How long have you been in Montreal?"

"Nine months, about."

"So as long as you spent in the womb, and – really, you don't know?"

"I'm sorry. I guess I keep to myself a lot."

"Well, that's okay. What would you young people know about it? It disbanded about 10 years ago, but I'll have you know that Le Monde à Bicyclette is one of the reasons why Montreal is the bike-friendly city that it is. Hell, it is *the* reason. It all started back in the 70s. Cycling community was small back then. I was just a teenager, newly arrived with my parents from Switzerland, and I'd gotten hooked on bikes there. Here there was nothing for cyclists. The community was so small back then. People thought of bikes as a children's toy, not as a viable form of transportation. We'd go to city council meetings and ask for bike paths, ask for bike lanes on the bridges, and people would laugh at us. Literally laugh at us. 'Grow up and get a car.' That was the attitude. But many of us in our little group had been to Copenhagen, had been to Amsterdam, had breathed the air there. We knew there was a better way, but it was so frustrating how the city counselors would practically turn themselves into cement for the cars, but would do nothing for us. It was like we were second class citizens. The frustration we felt. Cycle-Frustration, that's what we called it. There was only one bridge on the whole of Montreal island that tolerated cyclists, the Jacques Cartier, and I mean 'tolerated' not 'allowed.' But even on the Jacques Cartier, we didn't have a lane so we had to merge with traffic, practically risking our lives. So we started to plan demonstrations around this. It started with street theatre. Put up posters and announced to the press that we had discovered a new way to get to the south shore by bicycle. Then we got this big guy with a beard to dress up as Moses. He tried to part the St.-Laurent as the rest

of us prayed out loud. At another protest, we tried emptying the St.-Laurent with buckets. Then we hopped into canoes. Then we rented a hot air balloon. You know, I'm having a moment here. I think the balloon was actually your father's idea."

"Really?"

"Yes! I'm almost certain of it. I remember he made this crazy contraption that allowed us to hang our bicycles from the basket, hang them so they would dangle and people would see the bicycles from a ways off. It was a wacky-looking thing. Made of inner tube strung to a few old bike parts."

"That sounds like my father."

"It's all coming back to me now. He was like our – our technical go-to guy. He could do the weirdest things with bikes."

"That's my dad."

"He made this drum that connected to the wheel somehow so that every time you pedaled, a little hammer hit the drum."

"That's definitely my dad."

"He was a compulsive fixer, too. He couldn't stop fixing it. Once, in the middle of a meeting, he noticed that the table was wobbly, so he took everything off it, turned it around and tightened all the bolts. People were getting a little distracted by this, but he kept saying, 'Don't mind me. I'm listening.' He'd even carry around bike tools and fix random stranger's bikes . . ." Kaspar trailed off and looked at Shimano. Both laughed in unison.

"Why did I not see the resemblance before?"

"Well, it was a long time ago."

"Yes. When did Gerry – your father – move to Vermont?"

"1976."

"He would have missed some of our big successes then. How we got bike lanes on most of the

bridges. The bike paths."

"Too bad. But hey – he had other priorities – me! My mom was pregnant, and he thought he'd do the honourable thing."

"A love child, are you?"

"Yeah. My mom was big as a whale when they got married. They used to joke that I was a guest at their wedding. 'Don't you remember the wedding, Shimano? You were kicking through the entire ceremony.' That's what my mom liked to say."

"Hey, I was also a love child."

"Really?"

"I didn't find out until I was well into my teens. In Switzerland, well, you didn't talk about those things. What would people think? Va vould people tink?" Kaspar gave him another beer and they clinked glasses. "From one love child to another."

"Cheers."

There was a sober pause.

"How long has it been since you've seen him?" asked Kaspar.

"Ten years."

"Long time. Do you have any idea where he is?"

"Well, my uncle said he got a call from him three years ago. He wasn't doing well."

"Hm. I hope he's okay, wherever he is. Oh, he's probably just fine. A man that resourceful."

But to what point? Shimano began to peel the label off the bottle of beer.

He changed the subject. "Tell me more about Le Monde à Bicyclette. Is it still going?"

"No. Disbanded in 1989. After we got the bridge, well, most of the cycle-frustration was over. There were no more urgent problems. None that we could see anyway. That doesn't mean there aren't any. Of course there are. We'd barely begun. But people got complacent. When you can't find a seat,

well, now that's when you take a stand. But now people are getting too comfortable. We forget how much work there is to be done. Forget to look at the whole picture. The whole world, where the real problems come in. Car culture is literally killing us. More people would bike in this city if the streets weren't so damned unsafe. And there's this mutual hostility between cars and bikes that has to end."

"Yes, I know. I was hit by a car."

"Shit! Oh, no! I'm sorry about that."

"I was on the bike path."

"Oh, I'm *really* sorry about that."

"I was going straight on Berri and Viger and the guy turned right into me."

"Scheisse! Now that sort of thing rarely happens in Europe. There are bike paths along every major street, so it just becomes second nature for motorists to check."

"I don't even think the idiot knew he was in the wrong. You know the first thing the bastard did after he hit me?"

"No."

"Got out and checked the damage on his fucking car."

Kaspar tipped his head back and snorted at the ceiling.

"Well, now, isn't that typical? The car fetish. I'm not even surprised. We worship those things. We become what we love and what does this say about us? We design cities so the car is front and centre, our landscape all shaped to give the car the ultimate freedom. You know, I love what I do, sending bikes to Cuba. The Cubans appreciate them. Hell, they need them, but what we need more is for North Americans to stop driving so much. We keep this up and we won't even be able to use the word 'abnormal' to describe the last ice storm."

"Yeah, the ice storm. I thought that would be a real wake-up call for call for people. Sure was a wake-up call for me. People were saying on radio that they were planning on changing their habits, but

then, after the ice storm –"

"The lights switch back on and it's business as usual?"

"Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It was like nothing had happened. It was frustrating."

"I know. We, as a species, are collectively committing suicide. I fear for my children. But because of my children, I can't live the way I used to. We now own a car. A van, as a matter of fact."

"But I bet you don't use it much."

"No, we don't. But also, I had to give up some things: protesting, advocating. I can't risk getting arrested. Well, now is not the time for it. Not until they're older. But you, Shimano, you have no kids."

"No."

"And you're so young. What are you? 21? 22?"

"Almost 23."

"Yeah. Young. Like I said, you should find a vent. Some great cause big enough for all your rage. That's stress management. I don't know you that well yet, but I sense that you somehow feel you shouldn't let out your anger. I watch you get overcome by anger, then back away from it, like you're ashamed of it. Am I right?"

"Yeah. You know . . . ? Yeah. You got me."

"But you *should* feel that anger. You absolutely should. And what's more, you should act on it."

Kaspar looked at him with an earnest expression, then got up.

"Speaking of my wife and kids, I really should get home. Can I leave you here alone? Door locks by itself."

"Yeah, sure. If you trust me."

"Of course I trust you. I trust you to do a great many things."

Before Shimano had a chance to reply, Kaspar grabbed his jacket and helmet out of the closet and opened the door.

"Well, goodnight, Shimano."

"Goodnight."

Shimano stared at the closed door. He was not outright drunk yet, but he was hitting on that stage where things were hazy and wouldn't stay still. He had to stare for a while, fix his eyes on things in order to stabilize his vision. He studied the photograph on the desk, the farmer on the overloaded bike. When Shimano had taken the job to fix bikes in Cuba, he had not realized they would be carrying so much.

So this is what it's like in the developing world – people ride through trenches with bikes loaded up to the very limits of gravity – and sense. But in the "land of the free," people will drive an SUV if there's the least bit of gravel on the road.

He flipped through more photos, people displaying their rusty CCMs in front of their shacks, smiling. *What tough people.* If they lost electricity for a week or two, that would barely register on their adversity scale.

But what would happen when temperatures rose, glaciers melted and rivers dried up. What would happen when extreme weather events became commonplace? Those rickety bikes can only go so far.

Yes, Kaspar's right. We owe them more than a few bikes.

Shimano's eyes scanned the walls for more photos. His eyes rested on a poster he had never noticed before then. It was a drawing of a hot air balloon, with bicycles dangling out the sides of its basket. The St. Laurent river and the Jacques Cartier bridge were at the bottom right of the picture, diminished in size in comparison to the surrounding land, hills, the long blue line of river. The artist had exaggerated the curvature of the earth. The mountain was on one edge of the picture, with a small cross surrounded by larger-than-life trees. On the top left corner of the poster were the words: "*Le Monde à Bicyclette.*"

He considered the name: "Le Monde à Bicyclette." He knew that the name didn't follow French conventions of punctuation. All the words after "Le" shouldn't be capitalized. *A deliberate choice?* Another thing he realized was that the phrase had two meanings. It could translate to "the world on bicycle," if you followed the meaning of *à* as "on top of." But the preposition could also mean "according to," so "Le Monde à Bicyclette" was also "the world from the view of a bicycle."

Appropriate, he thought. Cycling was more to him than a sport, more than a means of transportation. It was a way of life. A way of acting in the world. But he also loved it for its own sake. No glass separating him from his surroundings. Nothing to protect you from snow, wind, ice. How that was exhilarating He even thrived on the danger on the road, all the tiny but vital decisions he made in a day. Cycling made him feel like a participant in the world. An active participant.

He looked up at the hot air balloon. Yeah, that was his dad, alright. Something in him lifted. He poured out the rest of his beer – it was just clouding his vision anyway. He went through all the filing cabinets until he found what he sought: a folder with the words "Le Monde à Bicyclette" in a little plastic sleeve at the top.

The file trembled as he open it. Inside were newsletters, photographs, fliers, posters, more fliers, more posters, a photograph of a demonstration, people with signs in front of City Hall, and there, someone holding a bicycle in the air, a Cannondale, complete with faux rust. Shimano barely recognized him. He had a full head of hair and there were almost no lines in his face, just some crows feet around his eyes because he was smiling. He looked no older than 22, Shimano's age, and so – light – like he could float right up into the air.

Chapter 38

Shimano took the entire folder home with him, suspecting that Kaspar probably wouldn't mind. The next day he read nearly everything that was in the file. There were letters from *Le Monde à Bicyclette* to the director of the metro and various other officials, asking for access to the metro. Then there were the letters back, all refusals. Through reading other documents, it was easy for Shimano to piece together what happened next. The activists snuck into the metro with bikes hidden under enormous stuffed elephants. When they were caught, they refused to leave, refused to remove their offending bikes from the metro, and were arrested and sent to court. After a two-year battle, there was success. Bikes were permitted in the metro.

Shimano skimmed through everything, even what was written in French. One was an opinion piece from *Le Devoir*, which made casual reference to *Le Monde à Bicyclette*. After some painstaking labour, flipping through his French-English dictionary, Shimano picked out the gist of the article. The columnist charted the history of socialism and activism in Quebec. For him, the Quiet Revolution was the catalyst for change not only with regard to language and separatism, but social change in all milieux. Uniting and working together was a necessity; they had to acquire a sense of the common good, connect with a greater cause. Shimano was astonished that after nine months in Quebec, he had not detected this mentality which was so "essentiel" to the "esprit québécois." "The common good, a greater cause." A cause big enough for his rage.

He skimmed through the archive photos, the scant few with his father, and the people that rode or protested alongside him – people who perhaps were his friends, might still be his friends. Shimano tried calling Kaspar to ask him about these people, perhaps get their coordinates. But Kaspar wasn't at work or at home.

The very next day, Shimano found a flier taped to his bicycle, advertising a cycling protest at

the Milton entrance to McGill University. "Cycle-protest: for greater visibility and accessibility for cyclists." The flier seemed rather vague on what this protest would entail. But this didn't matter much to him. Shimano left a message at his work, saying he was sick, and wouldn't be in that afternoon. He coughed a few times just to make the point. Then he rode leisurely through the McGill University campus, admiring, as he often did, the regal arrangement of buildings as he entered Sherbrooke gates. The iconic dome of the main building looked like a church steeple, except that instead of a cross at the top, there was a flag with the McGill insignia.

He expected a huge crowd of cyclists holding up large signs, but there were scarcely a dozen. The protesters were not yelling into megaphones or launching hot air balloons, but crouched on the right side of the street, right alongside the moving cars. They were drawing a fake bicycle path in chalk on Milton, a quiet one-way street that led from St. Laurent up to the university gate. There was a banner tied between two street signs, that said: "Better access to the McGill campus for cyclists."

Shimano scanned the faces of the "artists." He was disappointed that they were all very young – college age, all of them. No one there looked older than Shimano himself.

As he approached them, they barely looked up from their work. They seemed nearly oblivious to everything, even the motorists who pulled down their car windows and told them to get off the road, in both official languages.

"Hey," Shimano yelled out to a petite girl, with a round face, fringed by little brown curls. "Is this where the protest is?"

She looked up and smiled. "Yup. There's some chalk over there, if you want to help."

"So – you're making a bike path."

"Yup. There's no easy access to the Plateau from McGill. You have to either risk your life riding on Sherbrooke or you have to climb the hill to Prince Arthur. We wrote to the city about it and no one replied. Cyclists just go the wrong way on Milton all the time, so we thought, hey, why don't we just

make it official?" She put her piece of chalk down and held out her hand. "I'm Eleanor, by the way."

"Shimano," he said as they shook hands.

"Nice nickname."

"It's not a nickname. My dad was a mechanic. Is a mechanic. He comes to protests sometimes. Maybe you know him. Gerry? Gerry O' Keefe?"

"Don't think I know him. You wanna help? There's some chalk."

"This is – against the law, isn't it?"

Eleanor laughed. "Of course."

Shimano didn't know if this was a chance he was willing to take. He didn't need his criminal record to be any longer.

Noticing his reluctance, Eleanor said, "Well, you don't have to help with making the path. You can just stand here and talk to people that walk by, tell them why we're doing this."

Shimano paused. The prospect of talking to complete strangers about something they might not want to hear about almost terrified him more than the possibility of getting caught by the police.

"That's okay, you don't have to do that either," Eleanor said. "You can just sit here and cheer us on." She turned to her work, and Shimano stared at the street as Eleanor chalked in the bicycle.

Another driver drove by and yelled at them, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Taking our place on the road!" Eleanor yelled back.

He loved their audacity, their self-possession. Part of him wanted to risk everything and leap in there. He remember what he had read in the journals and newsletters of "Le Monde à Bicyclette." It wasn't all play and street theatre. That got them public support, but it wouldn't change the law. To do that, they had to *break* the law.

He watched Eleanor draw a chain on the bike and realized she was drawing the drivetrain on the wrong side of the bike relative to where the handlebars were.

"You've got that on the wrong side," Shimano said.

"Oh, no, we're deliberately putting this bike path on the wrong side of the road. That's the only convenient way to get to the Plateau – against traffic on Milton."

"Yeah, I know. I meant your drivetrain. You drew the drivetrain on the wrong side of the bike."

"What's a drivetrain?"

"The chain and the derai . . . the things that move the chain. Here, look at my bike," he said, pointing over at Lipstick, his Schwinn, which was leaning against a fence.

"See? If the handlebars are on the right of your picture, then the chain and everything should be on the right side of the bike."

"Oh, I see. Do you – did you want to fix it?"

"I guess."

"There's some water and a sponge over there if you want to erase what I did."

Shimano fetched the sponge and water and rubbed off the offending drivetrain. He saw something flash in front of him and turned around. Behind him was someone with a camera, taking pictures.

Shimano felt uneasy about this, but he kept working anyway. The photographer moved on, taking pictures of the other students. One looked up from his work and started talking to him.

"I'm going to go talk to this guy, see what he's about," Eleanor said, getting up.

"I think I might leave," Shimano said.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, I don't really want to get any publicity."

"Well, do you know about the Critical Mass ride tonight?"

"What's that?"

"You mean you don't know? Well, that's when a huge gang of cyclists get together, go for a ride

together, and totally take over the streets. It's a protest against car culture. We're meeting at Cabot Square. You know that park on Ste. Catherine and Atwater. By the gazebo."

She gave him a flier. "We're hoping to get a pretty good turnout. 60, 70, people we're hoping. Would be good to see you there." She stood one leg, with her head cocked to the side.

"I'll see."

"Okay, well, I'm gonna talk to the photographer," she said, and ran off.

Shimano glanced at his drawing before he left. *Not bad*, he thought.

It would wash out in the rain, but at least he had made a mark.

Chapter 39

It was drizzling by the time he got to Cabot Square that night, and again he was disappointed by the lack of people and pizzazz that greeted him when he reached the gazebo. There were barely 30 cyclists. This time the crowd was more diverse. Although most looked under 25 and student-like, there were some aging hippies and other graybeards who were likely alive and riding in the early 70s. He scanned the group for faces that he might have seen in the newsletters and photos in the archives of *Le Monde à Bicyclette*, but none of the faces looked familiar. Before he could get to them, Eleanor ran over to him.

"Shimano!" she called out. "I'm glad you came," She reached out and kissed him on both cheeks, with an exuberance that took Shimano aback. He didn't find her that attractive – she was too much of a pixie for him, but he was flattered by the attention. She was jumping from one foot to another to stay warm. When she spoke, her voice fluctuated with her bouncing.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Pretty good. How are you?"

"Oh, alright, everything considered. You left at the right time. The cops came shortly afterwards."

"Oh, shit." *Oh, shit, I'm glad I left then*, he thought. "Did they arrest you?"

"No," she said, shrugging her shoulders in an expression of nonchalance and sophistication that seemed somehow unconvincing and mildly pretentious. "But they gave us tickets and big fines," she continued.

"How big?"

"Four hundred dollars."

"Jesus!"

"Just for a little chalk on the road. Isn't that ridiculous?"

"Yeah, shit. Well, I'm sorry about that."

"Well, we're not going to pay. Fuck that," she said.

She asked him some more questions, and before he had a chance to talk to anyone else, anyone older, a man rolled in front of the group and yelled out, "On y va. Lez go!" he said, the last a popular anglicism.

"Lez go," mumbled some people beside him. Two cyclists rode to the front of the parade. Each held up one end of a banner that said, "Masse Critique" in big letters.

"Plus de vélos, moins d'autos! More bikes, less cars!" yelled the leaders, and the group rode out to Ste. Catherine, taking up the entire width of the street, as the cars honked behind them. Shimano felt like apologizing to them.

One motorist managed to assert his way through the parade. Eleanor and her friends finally skirted out of way of the irate driver, whose car raged forward in stops and starts, as if sputtering with anger. The driver rolled down his window and yelled, "You're blocking traffic!"

"We're not blocking traffic," someone gleefully shouted back. "We *are* traffic!" Shimano recognized the slogan from the flier Eleanor had given him. Behind them, the cars were lined up like box cars. Some muscled their way through the cyclists, and the cyclists yelled at them, sometimes holding up their middle fingers. The line of cars started going askew. In their efforts to get ahead of each other, and the cyclists, the cars had managed to block each other in a tangle of opposing angles. The horns got more and more aggressive and urgent. The thirty-some cyclists had effectively jammed the main artery through downtown Montreal.

Shimano was leery about all this. *Wasn't this just going to antagonize people? Was this really a good way to win people over to the cause?*

There were some angry shouts, but there were also cheers from pedestrians, even from some

cars. Cruising down McGill was a contingent of bike couriers, distinctive with their little caps, courier bags, bike shorts and gloves. They clipped the corner and joined the Critical Mass procession, ringing bells as they merged with the rest.

"Welcome!" yelled Eleanor.

"Plus de vélos, moins d'autos!" everyone chanted. Then someone began a new chant.

"L'auto. Ça tue! Ça pu et ça pollue!"

Shimano did not feel entirely at home with this, but something inside him stirred. Like a lingering wound, like the way his ribs felt on frosty mornings.

"L'auto. Ça tue! Ça pu et ça pollue!" *Cars kill, stink and pollute.*

This is too extremist, Shimano thought, remembering Kaspar, who needed to get his kids around somehow, and his mother, who bought a car when Shimano was injured.

The chant changed again, this time in English: "More bikes, less cars!" Shimano joined in, feeling his voice rise. "More bikes, less cars!"

They reached the intersection of Ste. Catherine and University Street, and turned left at the green light. *Who's leading this thing?* Shimano thought. Anyone, everyone, it seemed. The procession continued as the light turned amber. Some of the cyclists rode lined up end to end, bridging the width of Ste. Catherine's, so the cars were blocked from crossing the intersection even as the light switched to red. There were honks and blaring engines, but the cyclists just stood there with their hands on the hips, not getting out of the way until everyone had safely crossed the intersection.

As the cycling mob charged up University Street, Eleanor yelled, "Let's go the wrong way on Milton! Take our bike path!" He had no idea how such a small girl could fit so much air in her lungs. The cyclists turned right onto Milton, straight into the headlights of an approaching car that swerved to miss them. The driver stopped by the road and yelled profanities. More cars swerved, but they kept riding.

Just before they reached St. Laurent, they found themselves in the headlights of three police cars. One turned on his alarm. The red and blue lights flashed above. Shimano darted his eyes around, but couldn't see an easy escape route.

The police cars stopped, blocking the road, but still some of the cyclists managed to squeeze between the parked cars. One of the officers got out and grabbed the jacket of a cyclist trying to sneak past. *Now*. Shimano thought. *While she's distracted*.

He kept riding, navigating carefully. He was so busy wending his way through the obstacle course of bumpers and car windows that he didn't notice another cop leaping out in front of him. The policewoman caught his handlebars and for a moment Shimano was so stunned that he forgot to brake and instead lurched forward.

Never – not during the ice storm, not even during his many accidents – had Shimano ever been more scared as he was then, when he realized what he'd done. He watched helplessly as the cop backed off, grabbing her shin. Every rational brain cell Shimano had was overruled and at that moment, and yielded to one driving principle, one sole command – run.

Chapter 40

Ride, ride.

He was past the cops, now. They were yelling at him, one was even trying to run after him, but he clipped a left turn onto St. Laurent, wove quicksilver through traffic, until there were two lanes of cars between himself and the racing cop. He took the very next turn – Napoleon, and sped down the street, every now and then glancing over his shoulder.

Ride.

But where?

Home?

The cops might find him out. Might consult their files and discover his criminal record. After that, it wouldn't be hard to find out where he lived.

Where to go?

Where would he be safe? Home. Not home-Montreal. But home-home, out of this crazy city they he never completely understood, even now that he could understand the language. Get the fuck out of this city, this province, this country. Go back to America.

He planned things mentally as he rode to St. Hubert, went through a to-do list in his head. Clear out his apartment, pack some food, keep only what he needed, a tent, panniers. Wait. He didn't have his tent or his panniers. Those were still at Gabbi's place. *Shit.*

He changed course, blasted up St. Dominique to de Gaspé. He stopped at that familiar grey building. He fumbled in his bag, then realized he no longer had the key, and the ringer was broken.

He could see light coming from their window.

If I could just get their attention...

He picked up a rock and threw it at the window. Then another. Finally the window opened and

he heard Gabbi's voice yell, in French, "Get the hell out of here, or I'll call the police!"

"Gabbi, please don't do that. I'm in enough trouble already," he yelled back, in English.

The window opened and her face looked out.

"Shimano, is that you?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

"Sorry. I didn't have the keys."

"Alright. I'll come down.

A few seconds later she opened the door and Shimano scampered in, wheeling his bike in with him.

"Shimano, there's great inventions called phones. Maybe next time, you call me first."

"I'm sorry. I'm in trouble."

"You're always in trouble."

When they got into the loft, Gabbi closed the door and asked him what happened.

"Was at a critical mass rally – a cycling protest – and we rode the wrong way down Milton.

Then the cops blocked our path. I tried to get through and rode into a cop's leg."

"Oh, shit. Shimano, you didn't."

"It was an accident."

"Whatever."

"Please, don't – not now. I'm in trouble. I need to leave. I – need my camping stuff and my panniers. I left them here."

"I was wondering about that."

"Where are they?"

"Where Mark used to keep all his scrap metal."

"Used to?" He realized then that the apartment was no longer littered with those familiar chunks of metal that Mark had hacked together.

"Mark moved out," Gabbi said.

"I'm sorry," Shimano said.

"It's not your fault."

"Well, it kind of is."

"Never mind that now. What are you going to do?"

"Go home. To Vermont."

"Are you sure?"

Shimano nodded and hustled over to the corner of the loft where Mark used to keep his stash of "art supplies." He crouched down and rifled through some wayward items until he found his tent, and a pair of panniers stuffed with camping equipment.

He got up and met her eyes. They just stared at each other for a while, until Shimano couldn't bear the silence, and said, "I wish I could pay you back somehow for all you did for me."

"You gave me a bike."

"But – that was just a piece of trash."

"Oh, come on. À cause tu fais simple de même?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm just simple, that's all."

"Do you really have to go, Shim?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Do you need help carrying everything?"

"Not really."

She opened the door for him. When he realized how awkward it was to carry both the tent and his bike down the stairs at the same time, she wordlessly took the tent out of his hands and followed

him outside.

He started to load his bike, then realized he only had one bungee chord.

He turned to her. "Do you have an old inner tube or something?" he asked.

"You need a spare?"

"No, I need something to strap the tent on with. I just need an old tube, one you can't use anymore. They make good bungee chords.

"I'll go up and see what I have."

Gabbi ran upstairs and Shimano waited for what seemed to him like hours. He darted his head around, fearing doom, tormented by a nagging paranoia that the police was chasing him and would find him any minute minute. Finally Gabbi came back outside, holding an unopened bag of bungee chords.

"Will these be okay? I didn't have any old tubes."

"I can't take that. It's brand new. You should keep it for yourself."

"*Ben, voyons donc*, Shimano. I buy them at Dollarama.

"Well, okay, if you insist."

He hooked the panniers to the sides of his bike rack and strapped the tent to the top with the bungee chords. When he had adjusted everything to the point of stability, he turned to her. He wasn't sure what he should do, how he should say goodbye. Hug? Kiss? A kiss on the mouth, or the customary two pecks on the cheek? Finally, he moved tentatively forward and kissed her right cheek, then her left, while Gabbi did exactly the same. Their lips ending up meeting in the middle by mistake and they both pulled back awkwardly.

"It's always left first," Gabbi said. "In case you ever come back to Montreal, remember. "Left first."

"Sorry."

"No sorries."

"Okay, I'm not sorry."

"You can stay here if you want, you know?"

"No, Gabbi, I really can't. I can't get you into this."

"What, do you really think the cops will come and throw you in jail?"

"I can't risk it."

She leaned in and touched her forehead to his. They stayed like that for a few moments. There was something deeply intimate about it, more intimate even than a kiss.

"Well, I really should head."

"Take really good care, Shimano."

"Yeah, yeah. You too."

She was still watching him, but he had to turn to other things. He clipped into his pedal, then rode away.

Chapter 41

Shimano hastily cleaned out his apartment, putting everything he didn't absolutely need on the sidewalk – which was where he'd found most of it.

He was left with little more than what he had when he came to Canada. Among his scant souvenirs were a few photographs that people had given him, pictures of him with his friends, especially Gabbi and Mark. Some pictures of the ice storm: toppled trees, frozen bikes. He wished he could take an iced-over branch without it melting in his bag.

At just past midnight he crossed the Jacques Cartier bridge, a stately hanging bridge, which straddled the width of the St. Laurent from Montreal Island to the south shore. Even this late at night, the traffic was deafening.

He stopped halfway across the bridge to look back at the cityscape. The glittering skyline, with its forty, fifty story sky scrapers. The slope of the mountain in the background, marked by the little cross, lit with yellow lights. The mighty Place Ville Marie building complex with its searchlight, rotating four shafts of light into the night sky. How different this had all looked during the ice-storm, when the city had been brought to its knees.

Once on the other side of the river, Shimano followed a ramp off the bridge and into Longueuil. He wended his way through the South Shore, following the bicycle paths with all their illogical turns and digressions into public parks and patches of wilderness. The way was too dark for his bike light, so he duct-taped his flashlight to his handlebars. Even so, he got lost several times before he reached Chambly, which, for him, marked the end of suburbia and the beginning of countryside. There he set up his tent, at 1:30 am, along the canal, in a secluded patch of trees which would conceal him from cyclists on the bike path. He awoke in the morning. The air was crisp. The April sun struggled to assert itself through mirky clouds. By late morning, the clouds had dissipated and the unencumbered sun beamed

through the trees, making the baby green leaves glow verdantly. Nearly every single tree and many of the bushes bore scars from the ice storm. There were deep cracks in the tree trunks, splintered branches, exposed sinews. He would have plenty of firewood tonight.

He cycled slowly at first. Not accustomed to the weight, he kept forgetting to switch down to a lower gear so he wouldn't have to pedal so hard. Then after several hours, his feet settled into the pattern: push, pull, push, pull, push, pull. Alternating with soothing regularity. Cruise control.

After a good 30 kilometres of farmland, each brown, expectant field as tedious as the last, he reached the shores of Lake Champlain, with its gleaming blue waters that matched the sky. He reached the border in the early afternoon. The border guard glanced at his passport and asking him why he had gone to Canada.

"To visit friends," he said.

"So, I hope you will come visit us again," the man said.

"I don't know. I'll try."

"So that's it."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"Merci. Salut."

"Salut. Bon retour."

When he reached American customs, he forgot momentarily which side of the border he was on and said "Bonjour," instead of "Hello."

The border guard asked if he had anything to declare.

"Not really. Well, it's a beautiful day."

"You didn't buy anything?"

"Didn't really need to." Without another word, the guard waved him through.

He was again struck at how much better the roads were in America. The bike path, however, ended at the border. He stopped for a snack in the late afternoon, sitting on a little patch of sand on the shores of Lake Champlain. He took his shoes off and dipped his toes into the water. Bitter cold, but so, so much cleaner than the St. Laurent. He realized then that this was the farthest he'd been from Montreal since October. Now he was back in the country, back where he grew up, where there was little exhaust and few car horns. All he could hear were a few buzzing wasps and the jostling leaves. A subtle gust of wind shivered over the water and gentle waves radiated to the shore, licking the sand. A little yellow butterfly skirted by. Everything was right and bright, except inside.

He was home. He was safe.

So why did he feel so uneasy?

Chapter 42

Two days later, he pulled up to his mom's house in Randolph.

"Shimano, you're *here!*" was the first thing she said. Her voice sounded distant, dreamy.

She reached out to embrace him.

After they had hugged, Shimano said, "I'm sorry if I'm really wet and stinky. I really need to take a shower."

"Ah, yes. Good idea," she said, making sniffing sounds. "Smells like cycling. Come in, come in. Gosh, I'm really surprised."

"Maybe I should have called first."

"Oh, no. That's fine. Fine. No problem. You can stay here tonight. You meant to stay, right?"

"Yeah. If that's okay." Shimano was surprised to see her so flustered.

"Of course it's okay. It's just – well, there's been a new – a new – development."

"A new development?" Shimano said.

"Yes, but – I'd rather if we wait until you've gotten a chance to catch your breath. Go ahead and take a shower or whatever you need to do."

Shimano could hardly stand the suspense, but he could hardly stand his stench either.

He removed some luggage from his bike and followed Gail into his old bedroom, which was now the guest room. There was even a fresh, fluffy towel on the bed ready for unexpected visitors. A few minutes later, Shimano came out of the shower smelling like his mother's peppermint shampoo.

Gail was sitting at the kitchen table. She motioned for him to sit down.

Shimano sat on the oak chair across from her.

"So – a new development?"

"Yes." She stood, walked to the window and looked out. Then she lifted her arms in an almost

childish gesture, and looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to find some inspiration up there.

"What's going on, Mom?"

"Shimano." She turned back to the table, and sat down. "Your father phoned." She waited for this to settle in and continued. "He phoned a couple days ago. He saw your picture. In the – what was it? – *The Gazette*? Is there such a thing?"

"Yes. *The Montreal Gazette*."

"He saw you in the paper. That you were involved in some sort of protest – some cycling protest . . . ?" Shimano nodded. ". . . in Montreal. And he was floored you were in Montreal. He asked me for your address and I gave it to him. I had no idea you were coming here."

"Is he in Montreal now?"

"No, but he's on his way there. He wanted to surprise you."

Shimano exhaled, realizing he hadn't done that for a while. "Well, he has. Surprised me."

"Same here. My God, Shimano, just when I thought he was gone from our lives forever."

"Where is he?"

"He's been cycling. For the last four years, he told me. Just cycling around America and Canada. Well, when he phoned me – he was in Ontario, somewhere near the Quebec border.

"Does he have a cell phone?"

"This is your father we're talking about."

"I guess not."

He imagined his father riding. Smiling. He always smiled when he rode. Probably he had his old blue and red saddlebags, maybe even the Cannondale. No, he must have gotten a new bike by now. What sort of bike might he have? How would he manage to afford one? How did he afford to ride for so long? Such questions came to him, so many questions, he couldn't even hold on to one of them long enough to ask it.

"The article in the *Gazette* – I looked it up on the Internet at work," Gail said.

Shimano thought, *Oh, shit. She knows.*

"Could barely make you out in the picture," his mother continued. "I don't know how he even recognized you. So many years later. Anyway, you were chalking in a bike path or something?"

"Yeah, kind of." He stared at the table, bracing himself.

She paused, as if trying to decide how she felt about this. Finally, she said, "Interesting protest. 'Like father, like son,' that's what your father said."

"What else – what else did the article say?"

"Oh, not much. Said that there were people who chalked in a bike path. The police came and charged them with vandalism. Then there was another protest that night and some people were riding on the same street, the wrong way. A policewoman got knocked in the leg by passing biker, but she said it was an accident and she wouldn't press charges."

Upon hearing this, Shimano breathed in slowly and flipped his gaze to the ceiling, a quick look of relief. He recovered quickly, hoping she hadn't caught that fleeting betrayal of emotion. She was not looking at him, but staring out the window. She seemed too overcome with emotion to even pay attention to her own words.

She fell silent for a long time. Shimano suddenly noticed how loud the birds were: *Cree, cree, cree. Cree, cree, cree.* Many of them must have just arrived.

"Well, he'll phone again and then we'll just tell him to come here," Gail said. She turned to him. "He loves you. He always loved you. He said that."

Shimano felt his chin twitch. "What – What else did he say?"

"He apologized to me for – well, for everything."

"Yeah?"

"Well, he's doing a 12-Step Program. I believe 'making amends' is step six on the list."

"Mom."

"I didn't mean it to sound like that."

"He quit drinking?"

"That's what he said."

"I'm sure he meant it. You can say what you want about Dad, but he's honest."

"I know. He's honest because he knows he's a lousy liar. Just like you."

"Mom."

"I don't mean to be unkind. He – he told me he was sorry he was a terrible father. And I told him that I wasn't an angel either. And – we both cried, Shimano." Her eyes began to moisten. He saw her hand in front of him on the table, writhing, grasping.

He reached out and held her hand, transgressing boundaries, not just the ones between him and her, but the ones right inside him. He felt on the cusp of an awkward transition, like when his voice cracked at age thirteen, and kept alternating back and forth between high and low, boy and man.

She grasped his hand, two hands now. He was holding her, not vice versa. He the adult; she the child. He felt her fluttering, spastic pulse just under the skin on her wrist. His hands were dirty but she didn't seem to notice or mind. Nor did he apologize.

The intimacy became too intense for him and he released her hand, but slowly, gradually, so she would know that this was a recess and not a rejection.

He got up, walked to the window and looked out to the yard. The work shed was still there. Dilapidated, but standing. A robin was building a nest in the space between two slats; evidently that was where the cheeping came from.

"I have to get outside to – to process all of this," Shimano said.

"Yes, of course," Gail said.

He left the house and picked Lipstick up from where it was leaning against the porch. Then

planted his right foot on a pedal and clipped in with his shoe. He rode at a leisurely pace at first, so his eyes could linger on the trees – apple and cherry trees – with nascent blossoms already spouting out of the buds.

It was one of those blooming, celebratory spring days. The sun was so warm and bright that it seemed to evaporate all boundaries between him and it, and he felt like there were things sprouting inside of him.

As he cleared the city limits, his legs instinctively span quicker, feet pushing slightly more on the downstroke, pulling more on the upstroke. A calculated increase – enough force so he would accelerate, but not so much he would tire.

Push, pull, ease on the arc that connected push and pull, push, ease, pull, shift gear, push, pull, shift gear, push, pull. Then came a gentle stream of momentum, a river channel which carried him, rotating his legs effortlessly. The flow, inertia – that was what sustained his long rides, not human strength – there was only so much a small human could do. He recalled Newton's First Law of Motion: "An object at rest will remain at rest unless acted on by a force. An object in motion continues in motion unless acted upon by a force."

A little push, a nudge, that's all the legs do. Then the wheel – the sacred wheel – does all the rest.

Spin, spin. 30 km, his odometer said. He'd changed the setting to kilometres while was in Canada.

35 k, 40 k.

Ah!

Now there was nothing on earth but the drone of whirring wheels, the rush of wind, the expectant horizon ahead, opening generously in front of him.

He had often wondered how the ancient people didn't realize the earth is a sphere. It's so

obvious. If the world were flat, you would see a lot farther out. Things wouldn't vanish so quickly as you moved away from them. But here on earth, every time you travel, you move along a gradual curve. It's subtle, but it's unmistakable.

He realized then that he had unwittingly chosen a path that headed northwest. Somewhere beyond the edge of that horizon, past the Green Mountains – *les Vert Monts*, past Lake Champlain, was an large island floating in the middle of the St. Lawrence with which he had unfinished business. He had left a mess in his apartment. He had left two unresolved court cases: one for which he was the defendant, one for which he was the plaintiff. He had left a girl he loved. He had left his quest; he had left, even, the whole possibility of having a quest. He had left culpability. And responsibility. He had left Vélos sans frontières. Mark. Maître Gagnon. Kaspar. And an unpaid Hydro bill.

His father might be arriving there right now, might be riding up to his apartment on St. Hubert, ringing the bell, waiting.

Shimano looked ahead of him. Land, sky, and the blurry boundary between. It wasn't that far to Montreal, really. Distances shrink when you've got a well-tuned bike, a strong set of legs and a steady heart. Couldn't be more than 250 k. With the kind of shape he was in, he could get there in a day.

"Hang on, Dad," he whispered. "Stay right where you are. I'm coming home."

Notes:

This is a work of fiction, as are all the characters, events and institutions, with some notable exceptions:

Le Monde à Bicyclette is a real organization, and they pulled off all the stunts mentioned in this book, except the part about the hot air balloon, which I made up.

The protest on Milton also really happened, although I changed some of the details. A few years later, the city built a bike path on Milton, in exactly the same place where the activists chalked it in.