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To my father

Bondrée is a place where shadows defeat the harshest light, an enclave whose lush vegetation recalls the virgin forests that covered the North American continent three or four centuries ago. Its name derives from a deformation of the word “boundary,” or frontier. No borderline, however, is there to suggest that this place belongs to any country other than the temperate forests stretching from Maine, in the United States, to the southwest of the Beauce, in Québec. Boundary is a stateless domain, a no-man’s land harbouring a lake, Boundary Pond, and a mountain the hunters came to call Moose Trap, after observing that the moose venturing onto the lake’s western shore were swiftly trapped up on the steep slope of this rocky mass that with the same dispassion engulfs the setting suns. Bondrée also includes several hectares of forest called Peter’s Woods, named after Pierre Landry, a Canuck trapper who settled in the region in the early 1940s to evade the war, to flee death while himself inflicting it. It’s in this Eden that ten or so years later a few city-dwellers seeking peace and quiet chose to build cottages, forcing Landry to take refuge deep in the woods, until the beauty of a woman called Maggie Harrison drove him to return and roam around the lake, setting in motion the gears that would transform his paradise into hell.

The children had long been in bed when Zaza Mulligan, on Friday 21 July, stepped onto the path leading to her parents' cottage, humming *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, flung out, in the bedazzlement of that summer of '67, by Procol Harum, along with *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. She'd drunk too much, but she didn't care. She loved seeing objects dancing about her and trees swaying in the night. She loved the languor of alcohol, the odd gradients of the unstable ground, forcing her to lift her arms as a bird unfolds its wings to ride the ascending winds. *Bird, bird, sweet bird*, she sang to a senseless melody, a drunken young girl's air, her long arms miming the albatross and those birds of foreign skies that wheel over rolling seas. Everything around her was in motion, all charged with indolent life, right up to the lock on the front door into which she couldn't quite manage to insert her key. *Never mind*, because she didn't really want to go in. The night was too lovely, the stars so luminous. And so she retraced her steps, crossed back over the cedar-lined path, and walked with no other goal than to revel in her own giddiness.

A few dozen feet from the campground she entered Otter Trail, the path where she'd kissed Mark Meyer at the start of summer before going to tell Sissy Morgan, her friend since always and for evermore, for life and 'til death do us part, for

now and forever, that Meyer frenched like a snail. The slack memory of that limp tongue wriggling around and seeking her own brought a taste of acid bile to her throat, which she fought off by spitting, barely missing the toes of her new sandals. Venturing a few awkward steps that made her burst out laughing, she moved deeper into the woods. They were calm, with no sound to disturb the peace in that place, not even that of her footsteps on the spongy earth. Then a light breath of wind brushed past her knees, and she heard something crack behind her. The wind, she said to herself, *wind on my knees, wind in the trees*, paying no heed to the source of this noise in the midst of silence. Her heart jumped all the same when a fox bolted in front of her, and she started laughing again, a bit nervously, thinking that the night gave rise to fear because the night loves to see fear in the eyes of children. *Doesn't it, Sis*, she murmured, remembering the distant days when she tried with Sissy to rouse the ghosts peopling the forest, that of Pete Landry, that of Tanager, the woman whose red dresses had bewitched Landry, and that of Sugar Baby, whose yapping you could hear from the top of Moose Trap. All those ghosts had now vanished from Zaza's mind, but the sky's moonless darkness revived the memory of the red dress flitting through the trees.

She was starting to turn off onto a path that intersected with Otter Trail when there was another crack behind her, louder than the first. The fox, she said to herself, *fox in the trees*, refusing to let the darkness spoil her pleasure by unearthing stupid childhood terrors. She was alive, she was drunk, and the forest could crumble around her if it wished, she would not shrink from the night nor the barking of a dog that had been dead and buried for ages. She began to hum *A Whiter Shade of Pale* among the swaying trees, imagining herself in the strong arms of someone unknown, their dance slow and amorous,

when she stopped short, almost tripping over a twisted root.

The cracking came closer, and fear, this time, began to steal across her damp skin. *Who's there*, she asked, but silence had fallen upon the forest. *Who's there*, she cried, then a shadow crossed the path and Zaza Mulligan began to retreat.

PIERRE LANDRY

I remember Weasel Trail and Otter Trail, I remember Turtle Road, Côte Croche, and the loons, the waves, the docks suspended in mist. I've forgotten nothing about the Bondrée forests, and their green so intense that it seems today to have emerged full-blown from the radiance of a dream. And yet nothing is more real than those woods where the blood of red foxes flows still, nothing is truer than the fresh water in which I swam long after the death of Pierre Landry, whose presence in the heart of those woods still haunted the surrounding area.

Many stories circulated concerning this man who it was claimed lashed out with a mystifying rage, stories of bestiality, savagery, and madness, all to the effect that Landry, rejecting the war, had signed a blood pact with the forest. Some drew on these absurd legends to explain why Landry had hanged himself in his shack, but the most plausible version spoke simply of a love story and a woman Landry called Tanager, associating her red dresses with the flight of those scarlet birds. Recollections of this woman, whose name was linked inexorably to that of Landry, had bit by bit worked their way into Boundary's collective memory. She had become a ghost to whom children cried out at dusk as they stalked the shadows dancing on the shore. Tanager, they whispered, fearful, Tanager of Bondrée, hoping to see the silhouette of this bird woman, born of a few

shreds of red silk tossed together in Landry's deranged mind, rise from the thin fog licking at the shoreline. I dared not, myself, conjure Tanager, fearing in my own muddled way that her ghost might materialise before me and give chase. I preferred, perched in a giant tree, to watch for the spectacular emergence of the tanagers in Bondrée's dense forest cover, barely compromised by the construction of the road leading to the lake.

It was that road, they said, which had forced Landry to retreat deep into the woods, a road soon followed by cottages, and then the men, the women, the voices seconding the din from shovels and motors. Soon after these disturbances, patches of colour appeared in the still-virgin landscape, creating a small enclave where for a few months each year the colour took on life, to encroach on the greenery at the heart of which Landry had established his derisory empire.

Despite the relatively small number of vacationers, the human presence, while it lasted, detracted from the wildness of that place. From the beginning of June doors began to slam, radios to crackle, and sometimes you heard a child cry out that he'd caught a minnow. But it was in July that Bondrée really came alive, with its share of teenagers, tired mothers, pets, and family vehicles so loaded down with belongings that you could almost see them sending off fumes at the last turn onto Turtle Road, the gravel road circling the lake, which followed, it was said, the trail marked out by the slow exodus of turtles come from ancient rivers. All those people who were jolted along Turtle Road formed a mixed community of English speakers and French speakers from Maine, New Hampshire, or Québec, living side by side and barely talking to one another, often content with a wave of the hand, a *bonjour*, or a hi!, signalling their differences, but acknowledging the bond they shared in this place they'd chosen to assert their remote connection to a nature that excluded them.

THE LAST SUMMER

As for us, we arrived right after the Saint-Jean Baptiste holiday and the end of classes, whatever the weather. That summer, however, my father treated us to three days of rides, cotton candy, hot dogs, and space travel at Expo 67, before, our heads crammed full of Africa and Sputniks, we got on the road for Bondrée and the familiar rituals that awaited us, without which no summer would be worthy of the name.

They never changed, and smacked of a freedom known only to a life that's free from care. While my parents unloaded the car, I went down near the lake to drink in the smells of Bondrée, a mix of water, fish, sun-warmed conifers and wet sand, along with the slightly mouldy odours that permeated the cottage right into September despite the open windows, the aromas of steak and fruit pudding, and the pungent perfumes of the wildflowers my mother gathered. Those odours, which lasted from June until the nights grew cool, have no equal beyond the wetness in the air when it comes to unearthing my childhood memories, shot through with green and blue, with grey overtopped by foam. They are the custodians, beneath sunlit surfaces, of those summers' humid essence during the years when I was growing up.

I was only six years old when my parents bought the cottage, built from cedar logs and surrounded by birch and spruce that shaded a windowed room from which we could admire the lake. That's why they'd acquired the property, for the veranda and for the trees that gave them renewed access to a utopian dream that life had taken from them. They were only twenty years old when my brother Bob was born, twenty-three when I arrived, twenty-eight when Millie came on the scene, and even if they weren't old their idea of happiness had contracted, had been reduced to a veranda and a cockeyed garden where parsley and gladioli grew pell-mell.

I knew nothing of those dreams that had vanished along

with my mother's virginity, dreams sacrificed to the scrubbing of diapers and the many unpaid bills piled up on my father's desk, squeezed into a corner of the living room. I didn't realise that my parents were still young, that my mother was beautiful, that my father laughed like a child when he could forget that he had three offspring of his own. Saturday mornings he jumped onto his old bicycle and did the tour of the lake in more or less forty minutes. My mother timed him, watched him dart through the trees and take the turn at Ménard Bay, and she gave a yelp of victory if he beat his own record. Thirty-nine minutes, Sam! she exclaimed with a delight whose ardour escaped me, because I didn't know that my father was an athlete converted to hardware, and that he could have left in the dust that handful of adolescents coming down Côte Croche, Snake Hill to the English, feet perched on the handlebars of their bicycles, trying to impress the girls.

My parents' lives began with me, and I couldn't conceive that they had a past. The little girl posing in black and white on photos stored in a Lowney's chocolate box that served as our family album didn't at all look like my mother, no more than the boy with the shaved head chewing on a wisp of hay near a wooden fence looked like my father. Those children belonged to a universe that had nothing to do with the adults whose immutable image kept the world on its steady course. Florence and Samuel Duchamp's entire purpose in life was to provide, to protect, and to impose limits. They were there and would always be there, familiar figures for whom I was their only reason to be alive, along with Bob and Millie.

It was only that summer, when things got out of hand and I began to lose my bearings, that I came to see that the frailty of those little people shut up in the Lowney's chocolate box had endured down the years, along with the fears buried at

THE LAST SUMMER

the heart of every childhood, fears that resurface as soon as it becomes clear that the world's solidity rests on a foundation that can be swept away with a single gust from an evil wind.