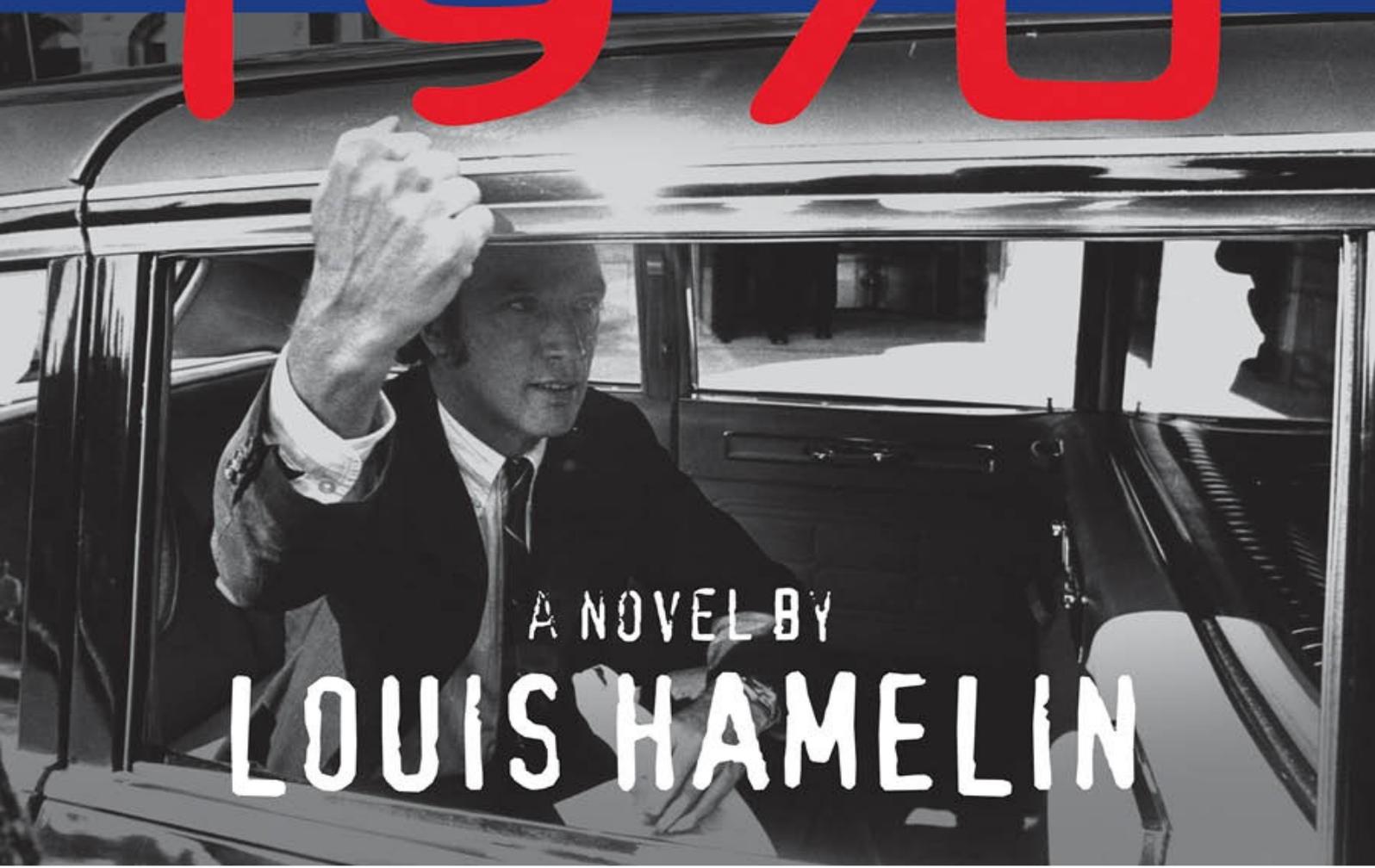


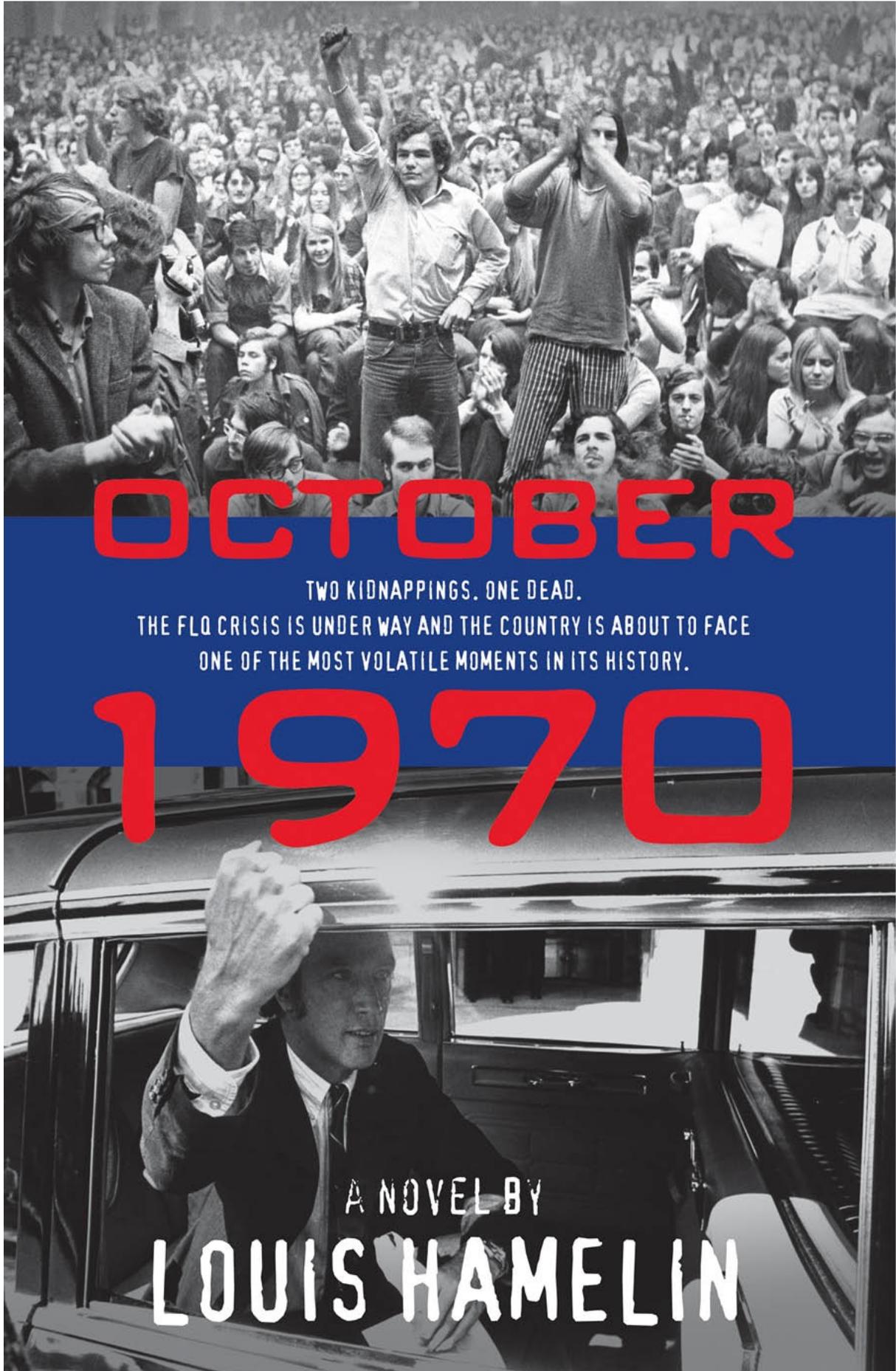
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THE FLQ CRISIS IS UNDER WAY AND THE COUNTRY IS ABOUT TO FACE
ONE OF THE MOST VOLATILE MOMENTS IN ITS HISTORY.

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TRANSLATED BY
WAYNE GRADY



ARACHNIDE

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For Marie-Hélène

For them too history was a tale like any other too often heard.

JOYCE, *ULYSSES*

Agents continually infiltrate to work on other side and
discredit by excess of zeal; more accurately, agents rarely
know which side they are working on.

BURROUGHS, *THE LETTERS OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS,*
VOL. 1: 1945–1959

THE TERRORISTS

REBELLION CELL

Lancelot
Corbeau
Justin Francoeur
Élise Francoeur
François Langlais, alias Pierre Chevrier (le Chevreuil)
Nick Mansell

CHEVALIER CELL

Jean-Paul Lafleur
René Lafleur
Richard Godefroid
Benoit Desrosiers

FOREIGN DELEGATION

Francis Braffort (Paris)
Luc Goupil (London)
Raymond Brossard, alias Zadig (Algiers)
Daniel Prince, alias Madwar (Algiers)

THE LITERARIES

Chevalier Branlequeue, editor, poet, literature professor
Samuel Nihilo, literary journalist
Marie-Québec Brisebois, actress
Frédéric Falardeau, researcher

AND THE REST

General Jean-B. Bédard, commanding officer, Royal 22nd
Marie-France Bellechasse, student
Bobby, CATS (Combined Anti-Terrorist Squad) agent
Raoul Bonnard, cabaret performer
Maître Mario Brien, lawyer for the terrorists
Jacques “Coco” Cardinal, militant separatist
Madame Corps, Coco’s ex-wife
Marcel Duquet, militant separatist
Mr. Grosleau, Crown prosecutor
Dick Kimball, Quiet American
Colonel Robert Lapierre, political adviser, grey eminence, etc.
Paul Lavoie, hostage

Claude Leclerc, police captain
Jean-Claude Marcel, MP from the back country, friend of Paul Lavoie
Miles “Machinegun” Martinek, detective-sergeant, emergency squad (Quebec
Provincial Police)
Gilbert Massicotte, detective-lieutenant, CATS
Rénald Massicotte, Baby Barbecue chicken delivery man
Bernard Saint-Laurent, FLQ sympathizer
Giuseppe Scarpino, businessman
Luigi Temperio, businessman
John Travers, hostage
Albert Vézina, premier of Quebec

CHRONOLOGY

October 5, 1970: Kidnapping of John Travers, British trade commissioner, by the Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ).

October 10: Kidnapping of the Quebec government's Number Two.

October 15: Mobile forces of the Canadian Army intervene in Quebec.

October 16: Proclamation of the War Measures Act by the federal government of Canada; suspension of civil liberties; nearly 500 citizens detained without being charged . . .

October 17: Number Two's body found in the trunk of a car.

ONE

A QUESTION
OF CHICKENS

L'AVENIR (QUEBEC), SUMMER 1975

MY NAME IS MARCEL DUQUET and I am going to die in about five minutes. The sky is blue, the sun is shining, the crows look like nuns' veils blown open by the wind, and I like the rumbling sound the tractor makes, the way it fills my ears as another row of hay falls before the harvester. I am forty-two years old, I have a round bald spot on the top of my head, which is so hot I feel like a prisoner who's been scalped by Indians and hung by my feet over a bed of coals until my brain starts boiling. The red scarf tied around my tonsure is brighter than the paint on the Massey-Ferguson; it must be a visible splash against the maples and the blue sky when I make the turn at the bottom of the field.

Now that I'm on the uphill run, I can see him walking toward me through the cut hay. It's Coco. And it's like my heart stops beating. Then it starts again: thoughts, the saliva in my mouth, the family of crows. In a way, I already know what he wants. I look around, nothing but the field bordered by the split-rail fence, the aspens and pines, the sugar bush, above them the thick blue arc of sky, the invisible river at the end of the land. And here, Coco Cardinal trudging across the field, face completely red, glistening with sweat, fat, hunched over, hands paddling the air, winded.

I get down from the tractor, leaving the motor running, and walk toward Cardinal, who has stopped a short distance from me. He's waiting until I reach him. Squinting into the sun, the light too harsh. As I close the distance, I wipe rivulets of burning sweat from my eyelids and forehead. I stop three feet from where he's standing. I swallow. I manage a smile.

"Hey, Coco. Been a while . . ."

He shrugs. He's sweating like a pig, his summer shirt completely unbuttoned and soaked under the armpits. His upper lip glistens, as though his lungs were trying to get out through his nose. His ant-red eyes want to unglue themselves from his face. Before he opens his mouth to speak, a black fist grips my insides.

"Well, if it ain't Marcel. They let you out of prison, eh? I hope they rammed a broomstick up your ass first."

He finds this funny. He giggles. I take another look around, the standing hay is stronger than I am. No one else in sight. My heart pounds in my chest but I hardly hear

it. I can barely move. But, as I said, I manage to smile.

“I survived, as you see . . .”

He sneezes once, twice, again and again, his face twitching uncontrollably. Still doing coke, I see. As he sneezes he also seems to be thinking. I wonder if I should take advantage of it, get the jump on him, grab him by the throat and finish him off some way or other. But I let the opportunity pass.

“There’s people say you talk too much. That since you got out you turned into a real chatterbox . . .”

I try to swallow; nothing. He spits on the ground.

“A goddamned stool pigeon!”

He’s not using his normal voice. I try to gesture in protest, but my arm feels like it weighs a ton. With him it’s the opposite: he moves his arm with the lightning speed of a cobra and suddenly there’s a gun at the end of it. I feel the metal rim against my forehead, sucking everything out. My brain melts like a block of ice, useless, nothing else.

“And the other thing, you asshole, is that you stole my wife . . .”

I try to say no, but all I can do is shake my head, not so much because of the cold metal against my skin, although it’s still there. Everything happening to me seems very far away, far from my head, which keeps falling, gently spreading out into the round darkness that pushes back at me harder and deeper, at the centre of my forehead, on my skin beaten by the sun. There’s excitement in his heavy, menacing voice.

“On your knees, Duquet! Now! On your knees in front of me! I’m not gonna say it again . . .”

I let myself fall and it’s like an act of deliverance, I start to say I’m sorry, I want to say it, my eyes raised through a valley of tears, to the muzzle that bores its hole into the silence, this blind full stop in the field, this pitch of forgotten light, of sun, earth, hot. The standing hay and the hay cut down by the reaper. Bewilderment.

The skull makes a cracking sound, like a coconut under the tractor’s rear wheel, followed by a sickening squelch and the grinding of bones and other pulpy bits. Cardinal puts the engine back in neutral, his breath coming in great gasps, and, like an idiot, clutches his legs. A violent spasm has gripped them, thrown them into an interminable shaking fit. With every limb trembling, he forces his left foot down on the brake pedal.

When he’s finished, he jumps to the ground and steps away from the tractor, turns back for a final look feeling almost calm, although his legs are as rubbery as they are after sex. Now he peers critically at the composition of his canvas. He closes his eyes, rubs the lids, opens them again, and takes another look.

He nods. Job well done. Takes a deep breath. Removes a plastic bag from his shirt pocket and, with a length of straw, knocks back a noisy snort of its contents. Then he turns his back on the scene and, for a moment, takes in the panorama of cultivated

fields, woodlots, barns painted shades of red from strawberry to dried blood, the glinting silos that stretch from where he is standing to the horizon. Behind him, the tractor is still running. A final glance. There's no way he can hang around. He decides to get back to the side road via the neighbouring field by following a line of elms and hawthorns and wild apples that can't be seen from the main road. He reaches the cedar fence, climbs it, balances precariously on the knotty top rail, which is the colour of Appalachian granite sculpted by a century of weather, and remembers an expression, *rib fence*, what split-rail fences are called in the Baie-des-Chaleurs region. Maritime language.

And Coco loves boats.

VILLEBOIS, NORTH OF THE 49TH PARALLEL, WINTER 1951

THE CABIN IS MADE OF round logs chinked with dried sphagnum moss. Its dark grey walls stand out against the white snow, and the air around it is filled with the smell of woodsmoke, pine resin, and rancid animal fat. The chimney is a length of sheet metal, a plume of ethereal, grimy whiteness hanging from it.

Caribou antlers are nailed above the door. On the walls, beaver skins, fur side out, stretched in frames made of birch saplings. It's one of Godefroid's earliest memories.

The lake. The trapper's cabin.

This is country where dogs become wolves when they get loose.

Where barges come down the river midstream, furniture belonging to families from the old parishes lashed to their decks under tarpaulins. The Turgeon River's as wide as eight boulevards, broken up by rapids that can make a vessel shake like an old jalopy on a washboarded dirt road. Two hundred kilometres farther on it joins the Harricana, whose waters flow north to the sloped basin of Hudson Bay, where the last handful of land grants were given out, well north of the railway. Amid dark forests that exhaust the sky and sap the horizon.

It was country that had been seen only by the master fur traders, from their canoes as they passed through, and by the scattered tribes of the taiga nations who wandered there in search of the last of the beaver lodges. In the days of walking and paddling the Muskuchii hills, the vast swamps where the snow geese swim. No one would settle farther north than this.

Godefroid's father was a labourer, unemployed, a hired hand who'd filled out a questionnaire with the Ministry of Lands and Forests, received eight hundred bucks, a pat on the back, and a parcel of land in this burnt-out bushland somewhere north of Abitibi.

When did he crack? When did he turn into this silent, sullen, beaten man? It was his wife who saved the family by taking a job as a teacher in the village: seven hundred dollars a year, a roof over their heads, and twenty cords of firewood.

The dogs went crazy. Tied up in the snow in front of the trapper's cabin, they

howled like banshees.

While Godefroid's mother taught a classroom full of lunkheads, his father went to visit the trapper in his cabin by the lake, taking a bottle of Seagram's with him, to listen to the old man's tricks of the trade. The X of sticks placed under the snare so the rabbit would leap into the noose. *When you shoot at roosting partridges, shoot the lowest one first so it doesn't scare off the others when it falls.*

This country where wolves run to the end of the forest and the dogs go crazy.

The trapper has to kick them out of the way to clear a path to the door for the father, his young son at his heels.

"What's wrong with the dogs today, Bill?"

Bill sniggers. His teeth are the colour of tobacco. He looks at the boy, then at the father, then at the boy again, then says:

"Come here. I'll show you something . . ."

Inside, steel traps hang by their chains from nails driven into the beams. A stretched otter hide, gleaming, sumptuous. The heavy smell of hanging meat, putrefying guts, sweat, damp, dirt, singed wool, wet fur, tobacco smoke, cold tea, and woodsmoke.

And piss. And something else, sweeter, more insidious, something men smell a mile away: fear.

Outside, the dogs go on barking themselves to death.

Slowly, the trapper turns to the back of the cabin. The two others, father and son, follow his gaze. As they passed through the door, they'd been aware of a warm, dark presence, and now they see the animal. Its sphinx-like face framed by sideburns worthy of a Dickensian banker, ears crowned with pointed tufts of fur. And its eyes, like two huge, amber lakes, swallowing them up.

The lynx sits on its haunches in the dark, a dog collar cinched around one paw and attached to a chain affixed to one of the cabin posts. Alert to any hint of movement, it fixes the three humans with an intense, devouring glare.

Mouth gaping, the father turns to the trapper, who keeps his eyes fixed on those of the big cat.

"You want him?" Bill asks after a moment has passed.

"Are you nuts?"

The woodsman reaches out, seizes a bottle of brandy from a plank that serves as a sideboard, removes the cork and takes a long swig. He offers the bottle to the father, who passes. Then he looks at the boy, grins at him, a stub-toothed rictus.

"It tastes like piss," he says.

The boy looks away without saying anything. He watches the lynx.

"He doesn't want to be my friend," says Bill.

"Who doesn't?" asks the father.

"Him," Bill replies, nodding at the lynx.

Another swig of brandy. Outside, the huskies bark, bark, bark themselves to death. Still thirsty, the trapper takes another drink, then passes the bottle to Godefroid's

father, who takes it without saying a word this time. Then Bill gets up and rummages in a trunk in the corner, traps, knives, everyday junk. He comes up with a pair of gloves, long protective gauntlets that go up to his elbows, made of some thick stuff, some kind of padded material, and he takes his time putting them on. They look like welder's gloves.

When he approaches the lynx, the animal shrinks to the floor and backs up without taking his eyes from the farthest corner. He reaches the end of his chain and curls into himself, ears flattened, eyes filled with murderous terror. Showing no fear, the man crouches before the animal. The entire cabin fills with a long, drawn-out hissing sound, backed by a deep, plaintive rumbling from the cat's chest. Its eyes widen, its face distorted by extraordinary tension as man and beast stare at each other without moving. Then the man moves quickly, grabbing the animal by the neck with both hands and lifting it slowly off the ground. The huge round paws, claws extended, scratch ineffectually at the man's gloves. He stands holding the lynx at arm's length, then tightens his grip on its throat. They hear a round of rumbling as two killers, united, execute a sort of dance together, a dance without movement. In the eternity that follows, in the cabin's half-light, the father and son watch mesmerized as the lynx's body goes from struggle to spasm, the fixed grimace, the evolution of death traced on its enigmatic face right up to the final tremor that rattles the animal's entire being.

His legs turn to rubber, the trapper falls to his knees, completely spent, and, after setting the animal down on the dirt floor, stretches out beside it. They hear his heavy breathing as he takes off his gloves and gently lifts an enormous paw, makes the fingers move under their fur, articulates the still-warm muscles as if the animal were a puppet, then, with an incredibly tender gesture, lets his hands stray for a moment into the long, silken fur.

SAM, AUTUMN 2000

THAT MORNING, AFTER FALLING BACK to sleep, Sam dreams of Marie-Québec. He was in the big house on Lake Kaganoma, deep in the forest fifty kilometres from Maldoror. They were on a white-sand beach somewhere, he could feel the pounding of the sea, and Marie-Québec walked in front of him, her back to him. She was moving away, not looking around but aware of his presence, moving away, her walk, almost formal, hardly swaying her hips, more from discretion than modesty, as though she were ashamed of her ass, which she was. As though her ass's fleshy abundance didn't exist in this world, which it did, and so she walked as though she wanted to tuck it between her legs, the way one tucks one's head between one's shoulders. That was how she went through life, too, the way she was passing through his dream, like a minor character who crosses a stage without realizing that she was playing a key role.

In the dream, Samuel was naked. Chevalier Branlequeue was in it, too, looking out to sea in a meditative pose, standing on one leg, like a hunter, with his other foot drawing the number four. He was holding a book up to the level of his eyes.

"Look," Marie-Québec said, "he's laying eggs."

What a stupid dream, he says to himself, opening his eyes.

When he goes to the window, the evergreen bush, tall black pines rooted in a thin layer of topsoil, and the pale, leafless birches are lightly powdered with an immaculate, fluffy blanket of snow that also covers the ground to a depth of some twenty centimetres, reflecting its violent white light into the room, which is welcome in October.

Sam Nihilo, who has registered forty clicks on the old odometer, is at the age when his dreams begin to look like emergency rooms. No girlfriend at the moment, and a writing career spinning its wheels. To keep his head above water he's had to get off his high horse and accept assignments handed to him by Big Guy Dumont, a man no one wants to know. Before starting *Éditions _____*, Dumont sold remaindered books in bars in Montreal's Latin Quarter, *step right up, ladies and gents*. Since then he has never stopped climbing; even now he'd climb anything that moved. He would have sold vacuum cleaners, but books were easier to lug around.

Around the large house, which is covered in brown CanExel siding, is a relatively

unspoiled lake, a little more than a kilometre wide and something like a dozen long. Lake Kaganoma, about a hundred kilometres north of the imaginary line that divides civilized Canada from the rest of the country. The eastern shoreline has been broken up into hundred-metre lots that accommodate cabins and a few year-round residences. Across the lake, there's two hundred and fifty square kilometres of more or less virgin bush, the main function of which seems to be to catch the sun when it falls from the sky.

Once again Samuel has spent most of the night sweating blood in his study, and then remembers that he has a plane to catch today. Fortunately, security at the Maldoror airport is fairly slack. If worse came to worst, he could always run to the end of the runway and stick out his thumb.

He drags himself downstairs to the kitchen in jockeys and a T-shirt, where he fills a coffee carafe with cold water, dumps the water into the automatic coffee maker's reservoir, and then drops the carafe directly onto his foot. From there it bounces onto the ceramic-tile floor and explodes. As he wipes up the spill, he notices splotches of blood on the tiles.

He dabs the blood from his foot with an Enviro-Plus paper towel. Enviro-Plus paper towels employ sponge-pocket technology for maximum absorption, yet contain zero fibres from the planet's old-growth forests. The pale lips of the gash on his foot are in the vague shape of a cross. The wound is clean, deep, and precision-cut, with a sort of flap formed by a strip of skin and flesh that can be opened and closed at will. Sam sees it as an all-you-can-eat buffet for flesh-eating bacteria and their little microbial friends. He takes it to the shower, where he becomes engrossed in the contemplation of his feet, watching the pink water being flushed out by the flow. Then he washes the wound with soap, dries himself, and applies a gauze pad smeared with disinfectant cream. He affixes the bandage to his foot, which he has propped up on the toilet seat cover. Then he goes back to the kitchen — where he has a visitor . . .

Paul Lavoie's ghost has pulled a chair up to the kitchen table. His left wrist and the thumb and palm of his right hand are roughly bandaged and stained with dried blood. The thin, blood-filled crease made by the wire around his neck is clearly visible. He sports a streak of grape jelly under each nostril, under both corners of his mouth, and in the folds of his ears. His face is blue.

The visitor lowers his head, rests his chin on his chest, half-closes his eyes. His hands are encrusted with blood. They rest on his thighs, palms up, as though he were offering his wrapped stigmata to the owner of the premises. His chest rises and falls slowly. He is sobbing silently. Sam goes about picking up the crumpled, blood-stained paper towels that he left strewn about the kitchen floor. He doesn't let his visitant bother him.

"It's the blood that brought you, isn't it?" he asks, looking at the paper towel in his hand. "You're like those corpses in the *Odyssey*, in the House of Hades. You look a bit

peaked, wouldn't you say? But don't expect me to go out and slit the throat of a goat in order to give you your colour back . . ."

"You're leaving me . . ." murmurs the ghost.

"No, I'm not. I have to make a short trip to France. I have an Air Canada flight at ten o'clock, you-know-who is driving me to the airport. Sorry, but no one in my situation would turn his nose up at a ticket to Paris . . ."

"Yes, but the problem, you see, is that the longer you take writing your goddamned book, the longer I'm condemned to sitting around on my thumbs! Believe me, this is a lot worse than purgatory," the visitor adds in that whingeing voice of his, the one he always uses when he haunts the lake house.

"Oh? Why's that? No golf courses up here?"

Sam calmly considers the apparition, which reminds him of strawberry jam spread on burnt toast.

"Among other things," the phantom says politely.

"Sitting on your thumbs in your condition can't be all that comfortable," Nihilo observes.

"Let me go . . ."

"Then go, for Christ's sake, go!" he says angrily. "What are you waiting for? Me to get the rifle?"

When he looks again, the chair that the former Liberal minister was occupying has been taken by Nouné, the cat he has had for the past two years. Nouné is playing with a mouse, no, not a mouse, a shrew, a masked shrew. The cat is sitting back on its haunches, its teeth and claws bared, boxing at nothing, like a diminutive kangaroo. With a swipe of its right paw, which has the power of a slapshot by Guy Lafleur, Nouné sends the thing spinning under the stove.

When the game resumes, Sam goes to the woodbox, selects a length of birch log, goes back, and, holding the log like a tomahawk, whacks away at the shrew's upper body. This necessitates another paper towel. *Those sponge pockets work miracles.* Then he reheats his coffee in the microwave. The thick, oily residue at the bottom of the cup makes him think of the Athabasca River tar sands as he goes back upstairs to pack his bags.

Sam drives a grey Toyota Corolla that rolled out of the factory in 1989, but it could just as easily have been a green Mazda Protegé or a red Colt as it takes him to the Maldoror airport, a distance of thirty or so kilometres, give or take. He's learned to leave himself twenty minutes for the trip to Maldo, the Hub of the Northwest.

The lake road runs north-south, along the ridge of an esker (a natural filter for potable water composed of several hundred metres of sand and gravel), more or less parallel with the lake's shoreline, which remains mostly hidden behind a thick stand of boreal forest. It winds its way through a series of undulations lined with black spruce, Scots pine, and sickly birch whose leaves, half-eaten by insect larvae, started turning

red in the middle of August.

The snow that fell during the night makes the glare on the road almost painful. When the sun comes out between the clouds, which look like two chunks of lead threaded onto a fishing line, Nihilo can make out the bird tracks along the pristine roadside. Ahead of him, a vast cluster of Scots pines descends toward a peat bog. A bit farther along, the dirt road crosses a log bridge over the bog's drainage outlet. Spruce grouse forage in the tall grass on either side of the road, poking up with the regularity of cuckoos in Swiss clocks, and the car startles two or three of them, which then perch in some bare pines by the roadside. Sam keeps a .410-gauge shotgun in a pouch under the back window and has more than once got himself a free dinner with it, but he doesn't see himself trying to go through customs at Charles de Gaulle with a brace of grouse in his underwear.

He slows the car, rolls down his window, and keeps the vehicle moving at a walking pace. In the snow, he sees the large round paw prints of a lynx and follows them with his eyes to a point under a pine where a flurry of dark feathers are scattered in a circle. He smiles: the mark of a successful hunter. He looks briefly into the forest, into the thick underbrush, at the play of blue-tinted shadows between the spruce trunks, into clearings cauterized by the cold. Behind him, the slanted rays of the autumn sun beat down beneath the nearly black trees.