

DAYLE FURLONG
UNDER A PILE OF SNOW

It takes five seconds for the train to pass by the half-frozen river, two for the river to swallow the child, one for the sign to flash by the window, letting us know we are approaching Trois-Rivières. Her red cap got stuck on a spear of ice, a wilted flower, a blood-like gash, but her body in a puffy pink snowsuit went under the water and over the falls. Her toboggan skidded across the ice and barrelled into a snow bank.

That morning I woke up at six o'clock to catch the train from Toronto to Quebec City. I don't drive. I never will—too afraid of traffic, accidents, pollution. The train is safer, cleaner than the bus. It's early; dawn sews up the seams of a night that's split in half, pink ribs of light bursting through the steamy vapours on the lake, shaped like fingers pulling the heavens downward. It's beautiful this January, the houses near Cobourg and Belleville coiled in snug semi-circles like charmed snakes, nestled amongst nature. Made of wood and nails, the same materials that killed Him, their Jesus, the saviour of small-town life. In our big cities we need no gods, we serve one another as gods. At least that's what my husband says.

Thirty minutes along the track and the fingers are still pulling like cloth enfolding the morning sun. The sun a mango, luscious, churning, a lamp on the horizon, the eye can only glance for a moment then look away in humility. Its juice lets us see, keeps us warm, our skin wrinkles under its gaze. And the fields—field after field after field, wheat a nuisance in Canada, while the train twitters across the tracks, calling like an uneasy owl at dawn, whining. Scabs of ice choke the lake, halted, humbled, startled by frost. I'll write these observations in my journal, compose a poem later, a poem that my husband Neil will read, smile and nod, ask about supper. Have the seating arrangements been made? Did you pick up my dry cleaning?

I catch my reflection in the glass of the train window a few minutes after I saw her drown—bunched fists grip my chin, fingers gnarled, and if I speak I'll bite. I know it. My eyes tell of what I've witnessed, of leaving Quebec, of arriving in Ontario. He grabbed my hand this morning after reading the paper, told me not to tell. His wife sleeping in their bed, in their small house in Quebec City, cold as cement. I nodded; I wouldn't tell Neil.

We used to study Media Arts at McGill. François was from Gaspé. I was from Saint John. My father was a factory worker at McCain's. He had three daughters with mushroom cuts: tiny little spores that clung to our mother's legs, innocent faces in the forest of her limbs, dangling from her arms. She was plump and excitable,

with short hair, glasses, peasant blouses and jeans. My father had thick black hair, was tall, lean, wore plaid shirts and jeans most of the time. He'd bring us frozen cakes, no use to the sales team, with all that icing smeared in the corners, or he'd bring us torn bags of frozen fries, fish and mixed vegetables. We were happy. We were a small, snug, charmed family.

My fingers reach for the air, shaking, fluttering. The attendant, a portly man in his fifties—beaming because his childhood dream of spending his life on board a train had come true—asks if I am ill.

"No, no ... I saw something ... I ..."

His radio starts beeping. "Excusez-moi," he says, and walks quickly away.

Montreal in the early 'nineties. It felt separate, removed from Canada, its own little glamorous world. While the rest of the country wasn't shaving their legs, wearing soft sandals and experimenting with heroin, we were making theatrical spectacles, installing art in every conceivable spot, resurrecting coffee houses, staying up all night. François and I would dance at the discothèques every evening after classes and homework. We'd skip dinner to spend more time on the dance floor, eat the fruit in our drinks. The way he led me, his hips swaying, footwork impeccable. One night he told me, after he had stepped on a bigger man's foot and a fight erupted, he told me what he did—and he made me promise not to tell anyone.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" François asked, during our lunch break at the conference at Laval University.

"Yes. I'm not in love with Neil, we've grown apart. I'll tell him when I get back tomorrow night."

"But Katie, a divorce? It's so *common*."

"Common? I can't live with him anymore."

"Do what you need to do, but don't expect it to be easy."

"Nothing is."

The *Communications in Canada* Conference went well. Quebec City in the first weekend of *Carnaval*. The ice castles sparkling, the snow sculptures intricate, complex, fragile. The children wrapped tightly in snowsuits, scarves a third lip pulled over mouths, muffling voices, eyes dancing at the foot of the ice-castles, waiting for Bonhomme. Waiting for their mythic hero, waiting for a beaming phantom of snow and ice.

"Teacher's pet, teacher's pet ..." they chanted, poking him with icicles ripped from awnings, pulled from underneath car frames, ripped like an albino root vegetable, clear, colourless, cold.

François' little body in a snowsuit huddled in the corner of the schoolyard, out of sight of the teacher's gaze. They poked his cheeks, shoulders, stomach, the parts of the neck they could get at through his red scarf. François would stammer

and snuffle, cry and whine. This made it worse; it egged them on. They couldn't have imagined how it ended: neither could François

Neil resented François. When he tore us apart I didn't resist—I was ready to eschew friendship for love. Neil hated the poem I wrote about meeting him. I had used the phrase, "Autumnal Tree". He thought it was old-fashioned and dramatic. I should have known then that we wouldn't last, but Neil was authoritative, confident, dominant. He promised to take me away from the region forever, promised to take me to Toronto: a city I'd never seen. He'd been offered a job at the CBC. He was going to do the news. We'd meet everyone. A house in Annex, the works, how could I say no?

I liked Toronto in the beginning. But meeting everyone became everyone-I-knew, and everyone-I-knew gossiped and put up fronts and competed, behaving slyly and snidely, had affairs with bosses and each other's husbands, and before long the only thing Neil brought home at the end of the day was more of the same. We had dinner parties, cocktail evenings, and I organized, prepared, and served: appetizers, drinks, entrées, desserts, whatever was in fashion that year. Neil should have married a sorority girl who would have been content with menu planning, shopping, keeping track of everyone's business and affairs—someone who knew when to tread lightly and when to stomp to get what she wanted. Those qualities work for some people, but not me. I don't know why I pretended to be something I wasn't.

The train conductor returns, out of breath, stooped.

"Oui, Madame. *What* happened?"

"I saw something ... back near Trois-Rivières."

"An hour ago?"

"Yes, out the window ..." I knew I had to tell him but couldn't find the words. I've kept secrets, lived lies for years, lies that have kept me buried. Lies the weight of trains, of ice, avalanches of snow.

François shuffled around the kitchen in his slippers and housecoat, fussing, patting the hissing kettle, urging it to boil. He sat and unfolded the paper, ruffling through each section. When he reached the back page something made him shudder and turn pale.

"François?"

"They've found his remains, finally. They identified the body, his bones were downstream, trapped under a log, between two boulders. The water level had dropped over the years ... a dog found the bones last week."

François started to cry.

François was walking home from school in January. The air was unusually mild, and he could hear the stream rushing over the cliff. He saw a hockey net and

stick on the ice, still solid, frozen against the bank. He tested the ice and began rescuing the hockey equipment. He had almost brought it to one side of the stream.

"Don't steal my stuff, François!"

Benoit Marceaux stepped onto the ice. "Give it back ..." he said. The ice started to crack. He tried to scramble back ashore, but the ice gave way. Benoit disappeared. François stood staring at the spot where the blue black water gulped.

Benoit surfaced seconds later, thrashing wildly, cracking the ice around him. François jumped ashore.

"The stick, François, the hockey stick ..."

François hurried to pick up the stick and held it out for Benoit to grab. But he was already moving downstream, swept by the current to the falls.

Benoit's voice seemed far away. He was clinging to a rock. "Come on you stupid cunt ... give me the stick ... pull me ... pull me up ..."

François followed him downstream. He held the stick. He saw long, bent icicles hanging from cars. He slammed the stick, wrapped in tattered black tape, on Benoit's fingers.

The splintered stick ripped his skin, drawing blood. Benoit couldn't hold on. He screamed as the current pried him away from the rock and carried him over the falls. When he was gone there was silence. The falls gurgled, ice cracked, and the roaring in François' head subsided.

"I threw the stick and net over after him," François told me that night in the nightclub in Montreal, after the fight.

I was horrified. "You were young," I said, "Irrational, bullied." Nothing I said could have helped. Besides, it frightened me.

"A little girl ... she went over the falls ..."

The attendant's face goes pale. He grabs his radio, shouts code words, walks away briskly. They might find her—she could be hanging onto a rock somewhere, calling out for help.

I checked the newspapers for weeks afterwards; there had been no report of a girl missing in the area. I called the ambulance and police services in the Trois-Rivières area. There had been no reports. Maybe a friend or neighbour had quietly rescued her, maybe she'd gotten out on her own, or maybe I'd imagined it.

I told Neil straight away, as soon as I got home. He was shocked, surprised, angry, clung to me that night begging me to stay. I shoved his hands away, wanted to slap him and draw blood.

"This isn't easy," I said, remembering François's words. I said that because I thought I should.

In fact it was very easy, pleasurable even; the years I spent with him were the worst years of my life. I'm glad to be out, suddenly, after so many years, free from the weight and the silence between us.

François told me that he'd kept chopping at the stone that Benoit had held onto, chopping as if a phantom were there, chopping so hard the end cracked off and went down over the falls after Benoit, black tape curling around the split edges of the stick.

François got up quickly when the kettle finally boiled. He poured me a cup of tea. He spilt the water, scalding his fingers. He put his finger under the cold tap water. "Sometimes I see Benoit's bleeding hands, and they are small, desperately curled around the rock, blue with cold. I see them at night, reaching from beneath a snow-bank, or coming up out of the ice. But he's a man now, and his fingers are long and strong, and they pull me in and nail me to icicles and cover me with snow. He buries me alive."

He turned off the tap.

I still feel Neil reaching for me, clinging to me with his delicate hands, and I can't brush him away—his hands that I have to pry off, wringing his wrists until they burn. François had stood up and started to shake, threw the rest of the stick and the net over the edge. It washed out into the St. Lawrence.

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