

JOHN LAVERY

HOW PF MET HIS WIFE SANDRA BECK

It was October, early evening. Dark, pouring. Outside the heavy wooden side door of Saint Peter's Church stood, hesitantly, Paul-François Bastarache. The matted, soaked leaves were treacherous underfoot, the black, doddering trees lurked close by, drooling rain.

His mother was watching him from the car and would not drive off until after he had opened the door and entered. Enter he must.

Paul-François was a Catholic and French-speaking. He lived on Casgrain Street in Sherbrooke. Saint Peter's, on the other hand, was the Anglican Church in the neighbouring town of Lennoxville. He was, therefore, at least as far as his friends were concerned, had they known what he was up to, which they did not, in enemy territory. But it was not this that made him hesitate. Like any twelve year old boy, Paul-François was not short on subversive curiosity. Nor was he putting up a token show of resistance to his mother's organizing his life for him, seeing as he was still young enough to believe that a lack of such parental organization was tantamount to an authorization to do nothing at all, and this he found tiresome.

No, what made Paul-François hesitate was simply the captivating, incontrovertible necessity of entering.

His mother, considering, one, that her own great-grandfather had in fact been a Protestant, his wife, her great-grandmother, an Irish Catholic, two, that the Anglican musical tradition was, and is, a good deal richer than the Catholic tradition, three, that her son possessed a wonderfully natural and pure singing voice as well as an astonishing ability to reproduce any melody whatsoever after hearing it only once, and four, that this same son's marks in English were hardly sensational, his mother, for all these reasons, had thought it would be an excellent idea for Paul-François to sing in the Saint Peter's men and boys choir.

Daniel Hyatt, the director of the choir, was, for his part, only too willing to give Paul-François a try, seeing as his dreams of performing excerpts of Handel's *Messiah* were founded upon two smoky bases, one good tenor, and four watery trebles. Mr. Hyatt himself sang the alto part.

Paul-François did enter, necessarily, and was relieved to discover the dairy-milk walls and chocolate floor of a bright vestibule so recently renovated that it still smelled strongly of latex paint. Taped to the pristine wall was a piece of music manuscript paper with an arrow and two words

written by hand, “choir rehearsal,” both of which were unknown to Paul-François. However he recognized almost instantly the first word as being the English version of what was in fact a “*choeur*,” and so felt the first of an incalculable series of small awakenings that would, after a good many years, result in his achieving the deceptively simple realization that “*choeur*” was equally the French version of what was in fact a choir.

The trail to the rehearsal room was well blazed with music manuscript signs, the last of which was stuck to the door and carried the entire brief sentence, “Congratulations, you found it.”

Paul-François opened the door, without hesitation.

“Paul-François!” said Daniel Hyatt who was in the process of pinning a music manuscript sign to his own white shirt, “Enter, enter. Welcome. I must say it’s almost frightening to have a choir member actually arrive on time.” He consulted his watch. “And even slightly ahead. This, as you of course know, is an English choir, so rehearsal starting times must be considered as mere approximations. Good. So. Why don’t you come over to the piano then and we, my name’s Daniel by the way,” he pointed to the sign on his chest, “I’m the choir director, if such an aleatory and open-ended system as this choir represents can be said to have a director, why don’t you come over to the piano and we’ll give this voice of yours a listen-to. You like choral music, do you? It is a bit of, of an a-choired taste.” He paused to relish the avid incomprehension on the young French boy’s face. Hyatt was always pleased when one of his puns was well received, but even more so when it passed unnoticed.

Paul-François, although he remained perfectly silent, did approach the small, upright, shoe-brown piano, giving the impression that he had grasped at least the essence of what Hyatt had said. In fact, he had not understood a single word. He was simply moved by a boyish desire to reduce the physical distance between himself and the director, like any young, forest animal, attracted by a shaft of sunlight. Hyatt seated himself on the piano bench, warily, as though he suspected the bench of choosing that very moment to amble off, and Paul-François sat down beside him.

They went through a series of simple vocal exercises after which the director, captivated by the incontrovertible grace, the imperious, almost painful loveliness of Paul-François’ singing voice, beamed beatifically at his new recruit.

“You’ll do,” he said.

He unpinned his music manuscript sign, turned it over, wrote Paul-François’ name on it, and repinned it to the boy’s raglan-sleeved sweater. Paul-François was likely too young and certainly too delighted to appreciate or even notice the slight tremor in the choir director’s voice, or the shyness

of his fingers.

The other members of the choir arrived—Mr. McKeague, chewing the barrel of his pipe which was upside down because of the rain, a loud, sloppy individual, with a mottled nose and an unpleasant, yellowish odour; the boy trebles, all slightly younger than Paul-François and, to him, incomprehensibly childish; William Lake, a staunch, neckless man, with a Cro-Magnon ridge over his small, dull eyes and an incongruously high-pitched, airy speaking voice that, when it sang, became a warm and lulling tenor; Phil, the other bass, with meticulous, silk-white hair and a tranquil face that was as pink as sandwich ham—and each, in much the same terms, was introduced to Paul-François by Mr. Hyatt, each welcomed him in much the same manner, so that not only was Paul-François able to grasp what was being said, he even managed to summon the courage to say in English that he was pleased to meet them too.

A brief discussion followed, none of which Paul-François understood. The choristers then took their respective seats, Mr. Hyatt installed himself at the keyboard, standing up so he could be seen, and the rehearsal began. The songs they worked on were printed in a white booklet written by Healey Willan. Paul-François had little trouble with the melodies which were simple and hovered around the same few notes. Naturally, he found the English lyrics intimidating, and he was also surprised by certain words, such as “*kyrie eleison*” and “*agnus dei*,” which reminded him distinctly of Mass and which he certainly had never thought were English. It was true he hadn’t been to Mass in many years, not even at Christmas, or to confession either, despite the fact that he had gone practically every week with his school class when he had been six or seven.

But what impressed him the most was how his voice, on leaving his mouth, was absorbed instantly by the voices of the other choir members, like an isolated molecule of air sucked into the slipstream of a motorized model plane. And what was more, it, his voice, seemed to want to drag him, Paul-François, along with it, so that it was all he could do to prevent himself, if not from levitating, at least from standing up.

“Would you all stand please,” said Mr. Hyatt, magically, as though he too were being swept into slipstream. PF was the first to his feet. They sang without the piano this time, Mr. Hyatt leaving the keyboard to come and stand next to his newest singer. This had the odd effect of redirecting PF’s voice back into his own ears before it reascended.

“Very nice,” said Hyatt, returning to the piano. “Really. Very. Very nice. We’ve added just one new voice. But effectively we’ve,” he was beaming, “trebled our trebles.”

“Yes, and doubled our troubles likely!” said McKeague, roaring at his own cleverness, holding

up his smouldering pipe like a trophy.

This exchange was lost on PF. Nor was he aware of the general admiration his singing inspired, open and spontaneous though the admiration was, untainted, for the moment, by jealousy or resentment. He did feel exhilaratingly autonomous. For although he was an outsider, a newcomer, surrounded by unfamiliarity and Englishness, he had the distinct impression of participating, of having a function to perform. Normally he walked himself through the rooms of his house, and from his house to his school, and through the corridors of his school, with every detail and point of view along the way instantly, unfailingly recognizable. Which, he supposed, was how lives in Sherbrooke were lived. But what, besides walk himself and occasionally horse around, did he actually do? He listened, yes, paid attention, usually. But were he to attempt to observe himself walking through his own surroundings, would he be sure even of being able to make himself out?

And so he sang for all he was worth, making little attempt to decipher Hyatt's directions, simply starting when the others started and stopping when they stopped, launching his voice into the rehearsal room and watching it orbit the walls with the other voices, dimly, ingenuously aware that his sense of belonging depended on his being a stranger in a strange place.

After a time, a girl arrived. Not a man or a boy, but a girl, her straight hair painted black with rain, her chest enormous. Mr. Hyatt welcomed her with his hallmark affability, "Sandra! Enter, enter," helped her out of her formless, sodden, greyish-pink coat under which, to keep them dry, she had slid an implausible number of schoolbooks, her chest, freed of its armour and protected only by a lifeless blouse and sagging green cardigan, revealing itself to be in fact so un-enormous as to hardly seem capable of housing even an adequate pair of lungs. She could not have been much older than PF himself, if at all. She pushed up her sleeves, hooked her wet hair behind her ears and disappeared behind the small piano out of which then thundered a cascade of warm-up exercises executed at subatomic speed.

Paul-François' face burned with apprehension. He wanted to flee the English universe in which he suddenly felt he had no part.

In the first place, Mr. Hyatt had not introduced the girl to him or mentioned his presence in any way, and he was far from having the assurance necessary to see his status as newcomer simply neutralized, to melt into the group.

In the second place.

In the second place, he knew the girl. He had seen her. Somewhere. He did not know where, no, but he was certain, certain he recognized her and more certain still she would recognize him, ask

him what he was doing there exactly, why, if he was French and a Roman Catholic, he was singing in an Anglican choir. She would pick away at him. She would definitely speak French. Girls were like that. They knew things. And they had to know things about you.

Nevertheless, once the rehearsal resumed, he felt much better. Mr. Hyatt stood next to him, singing alto. The girl handled the piano accompaniment. It helped that he could barely see the crown of her head. He could not even see that if he looked elsewhere. But he did not look elsewhere.

“Break time,” said Mr. Hyatt. “Five minutes. Give or give.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Hyatt,” said the girl over the general din. “One of the boys is singing far too loudly. Far too loudly.”

It was, and would always be, a curious fact that PF had not the slightest difficulty understanding this girl’s English.

“I know, I know, isn’t it *vundairfool*, my dear?” said Hyatt enthusiastically. “Come oafar here. I introdoose you to our noo-a mehmbber.”

“But I feel the balance of the choir has been utterly destroyed,” said the girl with high artistic intent, not moving a muscle.

Paul-François examined his knees.

“Yes,” said Hyatt. “Yes and I am entirely in accord with that assessment and I assure you that I, that is together we, will work to make the necessary adjustments to create a sound that is at once equilibrrious and harmoniful.” He paused, looking at the girl as though over imaginary reading glasses. “Now get your fanny over here and meet Paul-François. This dood can sing.”

The girl approached. Every detail of her manner expressed doubt as to the possibility of integrating this new and grandstanding treble into the small but rigorously musical unit which was the Saint Peter’s men and boys.

“Paul-François, Sandra Beck. Sandra, Paul-François.”

“*Salut. Ça fait plaisir*,” said PF.

“I don’t speak French,” said Sandra Beck, much, much to PF’s relief. Her stressing the word “speak” suggested that she did do something to the language. Grind it up and feed it to her cat possibly. She fixed her grey gaze on the new member. “I feel you are singing far too loudly.” She moved on.

Mr. Hyatt put his arm then around PF’s shoulders, bent down and whispered into his ear in stiff but clear French that it might not be a bad idea to turn down the volume a notch when Sandra was

around. He tightened his grip on the shoulders, as though to certify PF's unstated, secret accord.

So that later that evening, when he reluctantly opened the door to his mother's car, Paul-François was starving, having rarely inhaled so much oxygen and exhaled so much carbon dioxide, his lungs and midriff were aching, and the piece of music manuscript paper with his and Daniel Hyatt's names on it glowed in his pocket like a nugget of raw plutonium. He had wished the choir rehearsal would not end until the next one began. He was in that state of lightbodied elation which characterizes young people who have encountered an older person for whom they have completely fallen, Mr. Hyatt in this case, and he could still hear, harmonizing with his own, Mr. Hyatt's piercing, falsetto voice, which sounded as though it had been cranked through a pencil sharpener.

He climbed into the front seat. His mother asked him how it had gone.

"*Bien,*" he said, with no discernible enthusiasm.

She asked him if that meant he wanted to continue with the choir. He pouted thoughtfully before delivering his considered reply, "... *oui. Je pense que oui.*"

And when, later still, as he lay in his bed, the enzymes of sleep began at last to break down his brimming excitement, and the melodies of Healey Willan began at long last to precipitate out of his consciousness which was dissolving into a dream-tinged liquid, Paul-François, in the last dry crystals of his awareness, was still searching for an answer to the question that continued to taunt him with its disquieting menace. Where? Where had he seen her before? Where?

And he could feel, dancing over his skin, swirling like pigment into the oily images conjured up by his brain, the pale, grey gaze of Sandra Beck.

He loved to sing, loved the rehearsals.

But even more he loved to put the black cassock on over his stiff shirt, to do up the first cloth button at the neck, the first of twenty-eight such buttons that closed the cassock all the way down to his ankles, to put his head through the white surplice and arrange it on his shoulders, to feel the sober holiness of the garments invade him as he entered the hushed church and took his place in the choir stalls beside Mr. Hyatt, to smell Mr. Hyatt's everyday, pungent odour coated with Sunday cologne like, he thought, an onion with icing, to shiver at Sandra Beck's explosive, introductory organ chords that dispersed the silence like magician's smoke, leaving in its place the sudden presence of the Reverend Christopher Kidd who offered the congregation his practised, rending, earnest salutation, "*Dearly beloved ...*" the heartfelt syllables filling PF's ears with English dignity, "... the skritcher moo vithussin Sunday places tooik nawlidge inkin fess ..."

And how the thrilling, incomprehensible, wizardly language of the minister contrasted with the stumbling, toneless indecipherability of the congregation as they burred their brief, collective responses. No no, PF was not a member of the congregation.

The Christmas rehearsals often going overtime, Mr. Hyatt drove PF home so his mother would not have to wait for him. He drove Sandra as well. She talked about the various piano pieces she was working on and her innumerable musical activities, often asking Mr. Hyatt's advice. PF presumed that Sandra presumed that he couldn't follow the conversation, and certainly he was doing his best to not listen from the back seat, to not understand. Fortunately, Sandra did not live far.

Mr. Hyatt had a cream-coloured Renault Dauphine with red vinyl seats that, by his own admission, was little more than an upside-down baby carriage, a tin snail with every conceivable disadvantage and one, and one only, redeeming feature: that it belonged to him. Once Sandra had been dropped off, he rarely stopped talking. "We, you and I and Phil and Bill, we the choir people in our black and white outfits, we belong to the uniformed élite. There's a French word for ya. We ain't the soldierers, our gear doesn't come from the army surplice store," he permitted himself a sideways glance at PF, knowing full well there was no danger of his having caught the pun, "the congregational fill that function. No, we're the police. We enforce the liturgy, do the crowd control thing, keep the many-headed multitude thinking God. We get them to stand and sing at the right times, and sit and shut up at the right times. We fire into the air, vocally, when they start to nod off. You like singing in the choir, PF? Maybe you should think about being a cop when you're growed up."

"What you say? Me, a cop? *La police? ... moi?*"

He cultivated the friendship of the boy who sang next to him, Stokey Leggatt. Stokey had stiff, blond hair and a nose so turned-up his ridged front teeth were always visible. PF found him strange, almost exotic, he could be giggling almost to the point of hysteria one instant, and the very next be in perfect command of himself. Stokey made it his task to discreetly teach PF a new English word every week. He wrote the word, usually with an illustrative drawing, he was very good at drawing, on a slip of paper that he glued to the back of a hockey card. He traded new cards for old ones at rehearsals, and tested PF whenever the opportunity presented itself. Consequently, among the most long-standing words in PF's English vocabulary, more long-standing often than their French counterparts, were "cervix," "vaginal wart," and "Kotex."

What gave PF the courage to overcome his shyness and endure Stokey's tasteless obsession with sexuality, was the absolute necessity of having someone to talk to during breaks, in case Sandra Beck tried to talk to him. Or in case she didn't.

Sandra, according to Mr. Hyatt, was missing some molars, which was why she stifled every impulse to smile and also why her cheeks appeared somewhat sunken. She had no nose to speak of. A filament of saliva stretched between her lips when she spoke.

The first time PF heard Sandra play the organ, that is to say, the first time he saw her confront the terraced keyboards and raft of bone-coloured, push-pull knobs, her body perched on the very edge of the bench and her legs perfectly straight so she could just press the foot pedals with her toes, the first time he saw her minnowy fingers poise themselves over the keys before depressing them silently, effortlessly, and heard, not from any immediate vicinity, but as it were crashing through the far end of the church, a damburst of chord, the highest frequencies crawling in his ears like tiny insects, the lowest making his abdomen flutter, the first time, the blood drained instantly from his face. Suffocating he was, hot with amazement.

If Sandra was not much older than he was, twelve in other words, thirteen at the outside, then there were more days in her years, more hours in her days. More life in her life. Suddenly and at any time, the image of her face, contorted with the concentration of playing, might surge into his consciousness, unleashing a new wave of stifling admiration. At such moments PF would be genuinely relieved that Sandra had so little use for him.

There was something soothing, flattering, about being disliked by Sandra Beck.

"Sandra," said Mr. Hyatt as he drove, "Paul-François has this theory. He says that the choir, along with the organist of course, is sort of like a police force in church. The preach fuzz, you might say."

"I didn't say it," objected PF, "You say it!"

Sandra's head revolved until her eyes were directed at PF in the back seat. PF, whose eyes were directed at the weathered back of Mr. Hyatt's neck, could feel himself absorbing the pale, grey gaze. Like a wick absorbing kerosene.

"I do not," she said, "see what a choir could possibly have in common with a police force."

"They wear uniforms," offered Mr. Hyatt.

"The minnster," said PF, turning red, "is a sort of dict~~ator~~tor, no? Mr. Hyatt, you say it. The choir is a sort of ... *garde du corps*."

“Bodyguard,” translated Mr. Hyatt. “We’re the Reverend Chrisco Kidd’s henchmen, Sandra.”

Sandra’s gaze shifted to Mr. Hyatt. “You guys,” she said, “are weird.”

“At any rate,” said Mr. Hyatt, “I wonder what the bleary-eyed faithful who stagger in on Sunday mornings still suffering from their Saturday nights would think if they knew that the two Depotty Chiefs in the choral police force are barely twenty-six years old between them.”

“What do you mean by two Deputy Chiefs?” said Sandra.

“I mean you. And Paul-François.”

Sandra returned her gaze to PF. She smiled thinly, tensely, PF caught his first glimpse of the gaps in her teeth. She was silent after that.

Loved to sing, loved the rehearsals.

But even more he loved being one of the Chrisco Kidd’s henchmen. Paul-François may or may not have believed that he believed in God, but he knew that he believed in the Chrisco Kidd. All the more so in that, a part from Sunday services, he rarely saw him.

“What is it, that noise?” he whispered to Stokey Leggatt.

Every time the choir stopped singing, he could hear a soft but perfectly distinct scraping sound coming from the ceiling of the rehearsal room.

PF might have known, objectively, that the ceiling of one room was the floor of the room above, but he believed, phenomenologically, that a ceiling was a surface, not endowed with thickness at all, or, conversely, infinitely, immaterially thick. No sound of any sort could emanate from a ceiling because there was nothing there, only ceiling. So that his question was grounded in genuine anxiety.

“That’s Reverend Kidd,” said Stokey softly, “his office is just above this room.” He said this with his usual bright-eyed tremulousness, conveying the impression that what he was revealing was not only highly confidential, but also glowing with sexual implications.

The effect of this answer on PF was profound. In the first place, it dawned on him that it was perfectly possible for him to hear activity in the room above, if there were such a room, without his appreciation of the ceiling as ceiling, as the upper limit of his personal universe, being necessarily invalidated. His theoretic knowledge meshed suddenly with his empirical awareness in a way that was quite exciting.

In the second place, he had never found Stokey’s gift for salacious innuendo so repellently

juvenile. He had to look away in order not to punch him.

In the third place.

In the third place, no answer could have done less to quiet his sense of alarm. The idea of the Chrisco Kidd—a nickname which, in PF's ears, contained no trace of humour but epitomized the minister's black and dignified presence—the idea of the Chrisco Kidd so close at hand appalled him with its intimacy. Paul-François was completely unaware of the administrative responsibilities of a Church minister, and so he presumed that if the Chrisco Kidd had an office, it was unfurnished, unlit, and was where he went to plead, in his secret, soaring language, with his God. Nor could he resist the terrifying idea that were the minister to become aware that he was being listened to from below by a Catholic, his anger would seep like an odourless gas into the rehearsal room, seek the offender out and melt his ears shut forever before he had time to scream, "I am a 'enchman! I am."

And a henchman he certainly was, prepared to walk on his knees to Canterbury were the Chrisco Kidd to lead the way. PF wandered nonchalantly through the corridors of Saint Peter's church hoping to run by accident into the minister who would be wearing the flowing, black cassock he always wore, would be tall, commanding, his hair would be combed over his balding head in a shiny, black strip reminiscent of a warped phonograph record, he would run his tongue over his upper teeth, would be smoking, holding the cigarette in his right hand, under his curled and nicotine-stained index finger. They would nod silently at each other as they passed.

But he never did run into him.

So that when Stokey Leggatt nudged PF during Morning Prayer and whispered, "I bet you don't know what Reverend Kidd's got on under his cassock?" his piglet nostrils flaring, his lips red and eager, "Nothing, not even underpants," Paul-François said, "Fuck off," and when Stokey answered, "You don't believe me? Ask Mr. Hyatt," he hissed, "Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off," without the trace of an accent, causing Mr. Hyatt to stand discreetly and reseal himself between the two boys, the tip of his index against his pursed, restrained smile.

Christmas, Christmas day. A quarter to two in the morning. Pitch dark.

Paul-François sat with his mother in her car. The car was parked in the driveway, the heater on, the motor running. He could not tell if his mother was happy or unhappy. She was crying, and had been all the way home from Saint Peter's Church. Not that she was crying hard.

"Je m'excuse," she said. *"C'était beau. Vraiment, vraiment beau."*

She was referring to the midnight carol service for which her son had practised so hard, and which she had found so moving.

PF's brain, unaccustomed at this hour to either wakefulness or car heaters, had achieved a plateau of subdued, languid activity. It was replaying random selections of carol tunes, cross-indexing them with a myriad of impressions, the smells of hair cream and newly-ironed surplices, the barely perceptible effect of the flickering candlelight on the painted panels of the church ceiling, the rustling sounds rising in a thin mist from the congregation, the occasional dry, disembodied cough.

He could not know, of course, that his mother was remembering, longingly, "*Minuit, chrétiens*" and the head-spinning Latin of the Midnight Masses of her youth. She no longer attended Mass, had rid herself, or so she thought, of the nosy, insinuating Catholic Church, rid herself of a host of incessant, fussy obligations, and of the silliness of having to invent things to confess to a priest, a man that is, who, frankly, didn't know the first thing about family life, not hers anyway. But why, if she was free, did she feel like a traitor for having attended, hidden in the back row, a single Anglican service? In English, obviously, which, to her, was as head-spinning as Latin. To hear her son sing. Yes.

Yes, but she had had no idea the choir would occupy so much of his time, that he would have to attend so many extra rehearsals, sing three services on Christmas Day, that on Christmas Day of all days she would barely even see him, that his English would improve so quickly, that he would start using left and right English expressions he knew perfectly well she didn't understand, that he wouldn't even have time to open his presents on Christmas Day, that the entire family would have to break with tradition and open their presents on the 24th and that Paul-François would no sooner get his unwrapped than he would have to run upstairs to practise his carols and take his shower. She managed to prevent herself from asking him if he thought he was ever going to actually play with his new electric football game. But what could she say? Whose idea had it been that he sing in the choir? She was thwarted, gagged, by the resounding success of her own good intentions. She was jealous, she was, of her own twelve-year-old son.

"*Je ne comprends plus rien,*" she said at last, turning off the motor, opening her door. "*Dodo.*"

Paul-François, although he didn't know what there was that needed to be understood or not understood, was only too happy to go to bed.

His mother looked up at the dependable winter stars, breathed in deeply. And again she remembered, as she had heard it, the unmistakable clarity of her son's voice, secret and soaring. Even when the organ and congregation had combined to drown out the rest of the choir, her son's

voice had still been clearly audible, like a buoy, like a distant light. She felt the lump in her throat thicken.

“*Dodo, Paul-François,*” she said commandingly, adding with limp sarcasm, entirely lost on her sleepy son, “Bed.”

Paul-François was exploring the corridors of Saint Peter’s, idly, wondering why he was wasting his time, when Stokey Leggatt suddenly rounded a corner at top speed and ran right into him. Stokey was in an advanced state of slaving, antic giggliness. PF despised him when he was like this, all the more so in that he found him difficult to resist.

Stokey took PF by the hand and lead the way, looking back continuously, almost amorously, as though he were afraid the rest of PF, apart from the hand, might not be following. They were heading, PF realized, towards the church proper. He also realized that the organ was being played, and wondered why he had not been aware of this until now.

They came to a door unknown to Paul-François. This door Stokey nudged open with experienced delicacy. A torrent of organ music surged over their faces. Sandra was not six feet away, practising. She had kept her greyish-pink winter coat on in the cold church, a clear drop of mucus clung to the bottom of her red nose. On the other hand, in order to reach the pedals more easily, she had taken off her skirt. Her stringy, leek-white thighs closed and opened according to the musical requirements of her feet, causing breathtaking shadows to appear under her puffy, grey underwear.

After a time, Stokey closed the door as gingerly as he had opened it and tore off down the hallway, stopping eventually, panting, flushed. He collapsed on the floor. PF collapsed beside him.

“She’d let you, you know,” Stokey said, his eyes dark, his voice thick with copulatory suggestiveness.

“Me?” said Paul-François. “You crazy? She ’ate’ me. She can’ stan’ my guts. You, she let. You’re the...sexpert.”

This so delighted Stokey that he was consumed by squeals of spine-twisting laughter.

And although Paul-François laughed just as giddily himself, he was in fact harbouring, hiding, a sense of austere privilege, having witnessed what he did not believe he deserved to have witnessed, that is to say the intelligent nakedness of Sandra Beck’s legs, mechanical, devoted.

At the same time, and as a sort of corollary, he was admiring the talent for discovery which Stokey Leggatt undoubtedly possessed, and which he, PF, seemed to lack.

“My mother,” said PF in Mr. Hyatt’s Dauphine, “says my voice is going to...*muer*.”

“Break,” said Hyatt.

“I woan be able to sing in the choir no more.”

Mr. Hyatt remained silent for some time, absorbed with the business of driving. He stopped unevenly at a red light, looked steadily into his sideview mirror as though he were looking into his own past.

“Anymore,” he corrected softly.

The third Sunday after Epiphany.

A special occasion. Paul-François, seeing as his parents had gone skiing at Jay Peak, and seeing as he had to sing all morning and again in the evening, was spending the afternoon with Mr. Hyatt who took him to *Monsieur Patate* where the cheeseburgers were compressed until they were flatter than two pancakes, and the French fries came in three brown paper bags placed one inside the other.

“Good?” said Mr. Hyatt.

PF rolled his eyes and kept wolfing.

“Want another?” Mr. Hyatt was not likely aware that an unstated moral edict against over-indulgence hovered over the Bastarache family. That you could not, if your name was Bastarache, eat two cheeseburgers any more than you could live two days, without an intervening night.

“With the slice of onion this time?” That you could not have raw onion on your second cheeseburger any more than you could pour hot fudge over your first fish.

PF watched as the jaws of his compressed cheeseburger were pried open, displaying its ferocious, stringy, orange teeth. He watched as the machined disc of onion was slid onto the beefy, greyish tongue, and as the jaws were clamped shut again.

“Good?” said Mr. Hyatt. “Our breath, PF, is a-gunna be some-thing-rank. Want another?”

Mr. Hyatt’s apartment was a shambles. Paul-François did his best to smother his astonishment.

“I knew youzid be coming, so I straightened the place upsome. Wannawatcha da toob? ‘D’Iberville’ is on, je crois. Starrink Albair Meeyair.”

PF took a deep breath and waded into the swamp of comatose clothing, banjos, recorders, music scores, magazines, guitars, grocery flyers, expired sneakers, lapsed socks, and climbed out onto the high ground of a worn armchair located immediately in front of a TV filled with murky,

green water. He turned the set on.

“The reception’s not great I’m afraid.”

Mr. Hyatt busied himself in the bathroom, leaving the door open so he could maintain verbal contact.

“It’s not ‘D’Iberville,” said PF. “‘D’Iberville’ is Saturday. Sunday it’s ‘Shell’s Wonderful World of Golf.’”

“Right. You play golf?”

“I am playing, yes.”

“Any good?”

“Yeah not bad.”

After a time Mr. Hyatt, still in the bathroom, said, “You know, Paul-François, when you sang ‘Silent Night’ at the midnight carol service, just you, no choir, no organ? Hey, you blew ’em away.”

“I bloom away? Like a flower? Thank you.”

“No, you blew *them* away. You knocked ’em dead, kid. Dead. I won’t tell you that Sandra B. said it was the most gorgeousest thing she’d ever heard because it would just go to your head.”

PF did not answer.

“You wouldn’t mind,” said Mr. Hyatt, “singing me a few bars while I shave?”

PF remained silent. For many moments.

And then it was as if the apartment could not prevent itself, if not from levitating, at least from standing up. It was as if the airspace were set in motion by the mild but concentrated propulsion of Paul-François’ treble voice, so that even the newspapers sleeping on the floor revived, listened, and were blown away.

Mr. Hyatt placed a stool beside PF’s armchair and sat down. His face was flushed, his shaved chin was gleaming, he exuded a haze of Sunday cologne. “Thank you,” he said, “That was lovely.” The television screen danced with sunlight and shadow, long fairways and deep skies. “And thanks I mean for, for ... ah, what am I trying to say? I’ve had a number of choirs. None of them very good really. We’ve had fun, lots, sure, me and my choirs, made good friends and...But Christmas was really very special this year. We even did an excerpt eh, one, from Handel’s *Messiah*. Yeah.” He watched for a moment. “So Christmas was great. Thanks to you. Who’s that guy?”

“Frank Beard. Leading money winner last year.”

“Good swing?”

“Yeah not bad. The other guy is Dan Sikes.”

“I come from a practical family, Paul-François.”

“Dan Sikes has a diploma in *droit*.”

“A diploma, a degree, in law. Does he? ...a practical family. We practically had to declare bankruptcy. We practically won the lottery, several times, if having all the right numbers but one constitutes practically winning. My dad practically bought a cottage on Lake Massawippi. He practically totalled the station wagon once. With me in it. I was fine, but he put a dent in his back forever, which gave him a good reason from then on to do practically nothing. They must be playing in New Orleans are they?”

A man was painting convoluted eyebrows onto a giant papier-mâché head for a Mardi Gras float.

PF nodded. “The New Orleans Cunnry Club.”

“Mmn. I’ve done okay, Paul-François. Really. I’ve spent my time failing. I don’t mean failing to succeed, although I’ve done some of that too. I mean failing to fail. The very definition of mediocrity.” He stared at the screen and was silent for a time, after which he said, “I’ll let you watch.”

“No, no, no,” said Paul-François, “it’s not nesis-airy. I can watch golf each Sunday.” He got up quickly and turned off the set, looking around for some object to use as a source of distraction. He was marvelling at how the cluttered life of the apartment was relegated entirely to the floor, there being no decoration on the walls of any sort, no shelves or bookcases, and no furniture, apart from the TV, the sofa, and a legless couch that might well have been a bed, when his eye was caught by a partially buried head, a bald head, over which was combed a shiny, black strip of hair reminiscent of a warped phonograph record. His heart leapt. Hasty excavation uncovered a studio portrait in a black, plastic frame. Two words were moulded into the frame in a florid script: “Best Friend.”

“So he is your best friend, Mr. Hyatt? The Chrisco Kidd?”

“Eh? Who? Oh that. That’s just, I mean I had to put the picture in something didn’t I and that was the only frame I could find, I don’t remember who gave it to me originally, it had a picture of a giraffe in it.” The high points of his cheeks and the rims of his ears had become quite red. “Give it here.” PF handed the picture to Mr. Hyatt who opened the back and slid out the photo of the Reverend Christopher Kidd which he let fall negligently to the floor. He reclosed the frame and handed it back to Paul-François. It now contained a close-up of a giraffe with gracefully curved eyelashes and a facial expression suggesting the giraffe had been feeding on acacia leaves marinated in the best barbiturates.

“Watch your golf, Paul-François,” said Mr. Hyatt with a vague, muted surliness that indicated this was not what he wanted at all.

“No, no,” said PF, unsettled by the choir director’s moodiness, by his blatant need to be entertained coupled with his unwillingness to allow himself to be so. PF had never before been with Mr. Hyatt in a context entirely removed from that of the choir, he was unnerved, a little desperate, his face was hot, he adopted a reckless, almost goofy tone, as though Mr. Hyatt were barely older than he was. “Stokey Leggatt is weird,” he said. “He tol’ me Reverend Kidd is not wearing *nothing* under his cassock.”

The choir was practising William Byrd’s canon. PF’s voice, airworthy, windtight, was gliding under the rehearsal room ceiling, “... *Domine, non nobis, sed nomini ...*,” and was about to soar up to, “... *tuo da ...*,” when it crumpled, as though shot in the wing, and fell to the floor where it did not flutter. No, it hissed and coiled, before slithering away.

Generous, vengeful laughter.

The voice was changing, mutating, learning to crawl.

By Easter PF was out of the choir.

Once she had her son back, his relieved mother could vaunt the benefits of his choir experience to all her friends. His English had improved so enormously. She had known it would, mind you, it was the only way, they’d certainly never learn to speak properly in school. She really would have liked him to play on a football team in Lennoxville during the summer too, but that, of course, Quebec being Quebec, was against the regulations.

She was not, however, the only one who was relieved. The truth was that PF had had enough of the choir, despite, or perhaps because of, his initial infatuation.

Certainly he was glad to be out of the clutches of Stokey Legatt.

And something had changed after the Sunday afternoon he had spent watching golf on television in Mr. Hyatt’s apartment. The choir director had become distant, his enthusiasm had flagged. Rehearsals started late, finished early, and were devoted as much to nattering as to singing. PF found the endless English conversation impenetrable, exhausting. He was tormented with the idea that Mr. Hyatt did not really like him any more.

And although she still played the organ on Sunday, Sandra Beck no longer came to rehearsals. She was busy, and there was not the same need as during the Christmas season. PF, who had repeated out loud in front of the mirror dozens of times, “I just wanted to say that when you play

the organ it's the most georgeous thing I've ever heard," never got the chance even to have to find the courage to actually say it.

So that it was easier to give his disappointment the deke by simply dropping out.

Which did not prevent him, after school or on Saturday afternoon, from taking the *rue Wellington sud* bus out to Lennoxville, getting off near Saint Peter's Church, and exploring on foot.

The streets looked very different without snow, the trees in leaf. PF was never completely certain which house was Sandra's.

Sometimes he sat in the cemetery behind the church and ate the May West he had bought at the bus depot. The fir trees were very dark, very still and superb, each one trying to pretend the others didn't exist.

There were some very old gravestones in the cemetery. None bearing the name Beck. The Hyatt family, on the other hand, had their own weathered monument, a hundred years old, overseen by a painted wooden statue of Jesus on the cross. On his left side, under his ribs, Jesus had a vertical mouth with a pair of thin, grey lips, drooling drops of blood. His eyes were gloomy and bloodshot. He was so close to being life-sized that he looked like a short, sinewy pirate, a castaway, no taller than a cabin boy.

In time, however, PF gave up on these trips as well.

October, Friday, late in the afternoon. PF's shadow was so long that his head watched him from the other side of the street as he stood waiting for his bus. The May West he had bought was in the pocket of his windbreaker. Why after so many months he had decided suddenly to go out to Lennoxville he did not know. He hadn't eaten a May West in ages.

When he arrived he was startled to discover that a fire truck was parked outside Saint Peter's Church. The red light on top of the cab was flashing with desperate, almost frenzied insistence. And yet the firemen themselves, grey-haired, pot-bellied, were leaning nonchalantly against the fenders or sitting on the running boards, their black and yellow coats undone, their boots sagging.

A knot of people had gathered. One or two were sitting in folding chairs. They had the look of early arrivals at a high school track meet.

Spotlights were being installed on the church lawn. The instant they were turned on, the church burst into flame, orange and cold. The fire truck's red light flashed more frantically still, the firemen remained unconcerned.

A sudden flight of pigeons from the church roof drew PF's attention upward. He gasped. There

was a man on the roof, squatting on the ridge. A man he almost thought he recognized.

“Excuse me,” he said to one of the onlookers, “who is he that guy up there?”

“That,” answered the man very soberly, “is Reverend Kidd.”

“Why he’s up there?”

The man paused for a considerable moment before answering more soberly still, “He seems to have gone ... a little mad.”

“A little mad at who?”

The man smiled imperceptibly.

“At God.”

The flock of pigeons described a long arc against the deepening eastern sky and settled on the other end of the church. Reverend Kidd scabbled back along the ridge of the highly pitched roof, howling, gesticulating at the birds.

“I’m terrified,” said a woman, “he’s going to kill himself.”

“Yeah well his chances are pretty good of doing just that,” said the man, the gravity of his manner attenuated by an amiable prosaicness.

Paul-François was horrified to the point of nausea. He was utterly unable to comprehend why or even how the Chrisco Kidd had climbed onto the roof, why the firemen were not helping him get down, why the people were not yelling at the firemen to help him get down. He felt as though he were watching a television documentary about the fascinating behaviour of the adult human in its natural habitat. He wished Mr. Hyatt were there watching with him.

A car arrived. An elderly, corpulent woman got out and strode up to the firemen with a determined, forward lean that carried considerable authority. A brief caucus was held as the firemen hastily did up their coats. The woman then approached the church, cupped her hands to her mouth and called up to the Chrisco Kidd. It was darker now and the spotlights, while they illuminated the church until its walls appeared swollen and spongy, actually threw much of the roof into greater obscurity. The Chrisco Kidd was all but invisible as he answered the woman in a voice that was thin, haunting and unintelligible.

The woman returned. “He wants a hundred balloons,” she said. “He’ll come down if we bring him a hundred balloons. And string.”

Reaction to this ranged from strained incomprehension to hilarious disdain.

“Ask him if he’d like crayons too, and coloured paper.”

“Where’s Hyatt? Why doesn’t Hyatt talk to him?”

“Hyatt is why he’s up there.”

“Yes I realize that but...”

“Can somebody get a portable spotlight so we can see him properly?”

“...can’t Hyatt at least talk to him?”

“Hey, you don’t know chalk from cheese, do you? Hyatt has gone, left him, disappeared, miles away. That is why he’s up there.”

“Yes but ... christ, queers. Eh? Queers. Just because you’re a queer doesn’t mean you don’t know how to live does it?”

Reverend Kidd could still be seen on the ridge of the church roof, squatting in a puddle of white light, blowing up his balloons. The puddle, which was fed by the beam of a 6-volt Rayovac flashlight, slid erratically over the church roof occasionally as the flashlight was passed from one spectator to another.

An undeniably festive atmosphere reigned. The froth of conversation rose and subsided. The corpulent, authoritative woman had given a short speech in which she had said that Reverend Kidd had been a help to any number of Lennoxville citizens and that now it was their turn to help him. Period. They were to make him feel welcome—welcome—when he came down. Consequently, a communal generosity had gripped the townspeople, an altruism that was of necessity fervid and celebratory in that it was founded in their muffled repugnance for the reverend’s homosexuality. There was folksinging, hand-clapping. New arrivals brought food, sandwiches, eggs, and potato salad. PF was offered, and accepted, beer. The taste in his throat was loud and daring.

Silence, suddenly. The reverend was straightening. He was upright, on his knees, massaging his lower back, surrounded by his balloons.

The spectators were fascinated, utterly still. The maraschino red light of the fire truck streaked rhythmically across the stone wall.

He inched his way forward, the reverend did, bent over, manoeuvring in front of him with considerable difficulty an irregular object. He had tied the balloons to this object, which was not small, and which must have been on the roof the entire time. But if it had been seen, as it certainly had, the object had not really been observed, distinguished as being something other than an adjunct to the roof itself. So that a whisper of intrigued curiosity skated among the onlookers.

The reverend struggled to the front of the church where, bracing himself against the lightning rod, he got to his feet. He gathered himself, breathing heavily.

And then he raised the object, held it in his outstretched arms. The applause at first was light, uncertain.

The object in question was the wooden statue of Jesus, sawed from the cross of the Hyatt family monument in the cemetery. The balloons had been tied with long pieces of string around the waist and upper body making Jesus look, without the cross behind him, like a short, sinewy paratrooper on a holiday jump, wearing an outdated, baggy swimsuit.

The applause, while it would have liked to bolster the morale of the disconsolate minister, was not sure it could condone the defacing of a historically valuable cemetery monument. It remained sparse, hesitant, while the statue, from its position of ascendancy, regarded the townspeople with impenetrable calm. And then, revealing its innate sense of the moment, the statue acknowledged the timid applause, indicated its appreciation, brightened for an instant, became more radiant. And the applause, having a wide streak of vanity as applause always does, warmed in response, fed on its own enthusiasm until it was completely won over, confident and loud. It surged with anticipation when the Chrisco Kidd drew the statue in close to his chest, and thundered its approval when he launched the statue into the air.

Paul-François watched the statue lurch and bob before steadying itself, suspended in the flashlight beam under the barely visible canopy of balloons. He did not applaud. It was late, dark, the beer was eating into the lining of his stomach, his bladder was full, he should have gotten on a bus back to Sherbrooke ages ago. He felt an impulse to cry. He was in no danger of doing so, but he would have liked to. To cry. His exaggerated admiration for the Chrisco Kidd had evaporated. Not because he felt that it had been misplaced. He simply realized that the Reverend Kidd lived in a universe he knew nothing about. Nothing. Any more than, despite having called himself the Chrisco Kidd's henchman, he actually knew what a henchman was. Or despite having been watching now for several hours, he really knew what was going on. He knew nothing. His admiration was meaningless, juvenile, empty.

And yet, if he could not tear himself away, it was because he still felt bound to the reverend by a mysterious apprehension, a nameless uneasiness that scurried up his spine and set him on edge. He had the strange and exasperating impression that the townspeople, in their adult way, were just as awkward and unaware of what was happening as he was. Of course there was nothing he could say. He would not be listened to for one, and for two, there was no possibility, none, of his being able to find the words.

And so he watched the statue as it dropped earthward. Its descent was graceful. Brief. And yet

even before the statue touched down, the companion applause began to disintegrate, not of its own accord, but because it was being undermined, infiltrated by a second sound. This second sound grew with terrifying rapidness until it was all that could be heard. It was little more than a murmur, a distant hiss, little more than silence itself, and yet its impression on the ears was so intense as to be almost painful. So intense it made PF's temples pound. He wanted to scream, was even on the point of doing so, he would have certainly, had not an adult beat him to it:

“Call an ambulance!” screamed the adult. “Somebody! Christ oh christ, call a fucking ambulance!”

Paul-François was crying. He was standing in exactly the same place as he had been although the entire gallery of spectators had left him now to form a compact mass at the front of the church. The siren of a distant ambulance could be heard. The siren would grow louder. He thought how strange it was that so many people along the way would wonder who the ambulance was for, where it was going, and that he knew and could have told them. Thirteen he was now, and a quarter. He was convinced that he had known the Chrisco Kidd was going to jump. From the very first moment he had seen the reverend on the church roof, he had known. He should have said something to the adults. If only he had. If only. But there had been no possibility, none, of his finding the words. Not even to tell himself.

He realized suddenly that he was not alone. There was a presence close to him. This presence he resented the instant he became aware of it. He refused to look.

And yet the presence loomed, dark, breathing and tentacular. It was impossible not to look, impossible. His head whipped around.

Sandra Beck, too, was crying. A clear drop of mucus clung to the bottom of her red nose. She was not ten feet away, not looking at PF. She was observing the maraschino red light streak across the church wall. How long had she been there? Her not looking at him threw in his face like a challenge the responsibility of speaking. He wanted to be snide, sarcastic, it irritated him that she did not say anything, that she still refused to look, that she was crying harder than he was, that she had so many projects, that her un-enormous chest seemed to contain so much life.

She cupped her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob.

But he had no idea how to be snide and sarcastic with girls. What could he say? He hadn't spoken English now in months. He squirmed under the incontrovertible necessity of finding the words.

“Fuck off,” he hissed, the movement of his lips allowing the thin mucus to dribble into his mouth.

Sandra ducked as if she had been startled by an insect flying close to her ear. And then she ran.