

✦ A Hand at the Window ✦

In the beginning he was alone on the island.

He had a code name, Teddy Bear, which he used for communicating with the boss's helicopter. Every Saturday the boss would bring him work and provisions for the week.

There was still some snow in the underbrush, but the ice on the beach had been swept away by the April spring tides. Sometimes flocks of snow geese would land on the sandbar on the north shore. If Teddy saw any geese on Saturday morning he would advise his boss by radio and ask him to land at the other end of the island.

On this first Saturday in May there were no snow geese. They were probably on the other islands in the river, or at Montmagny or Cap Tourmente. The boss landed his helicopter on the edge of the beach, opposite the North House. Teddy wanted to meet him, but before the Jet Ranger's rotor had stopped spinning, the man was already climbing

up the path to the house. He was small in stature, bald and paunchy. Eyes to the ground, face flushed, he strode past his employee without seeing him. He carried two bags of provisions and a leather briefcase.

When Teddy caught up with him on the gallery where he had set down his packages, the boss asked the ritual question:

“Are you happy on the island?”

“Very happy,” said Teddy.

“Are you sure?”

Teddy nodded.

The boss’s eyes were filled with concern. He shook Teddy’s hand vigorously, then smoothed his gloves. Racing driver’s gloves: the fingers were cut off and there were air vents on the backs. He never removed them.

“I smell coffee,” he said.

“Would you like a cup?” Teddy asked.

“All right, a quick one.”

Teddy took the groceries into the kitchen. He poured the coffee. The boss opened his briefcase.

“The Phantom’s in great shape. He wiped out a dozen pirates with his Death’s head ring,” he said, taking a large brown envelope from the briefcase.

He put the envelope on the table and drank a mouthful of coffee. When there was no wind and the weather was clear

he would fasten the comic strips to the helicopter's instrument panel and read them during the flight from Montréal to Ile Madame.

A cat scratched at the door, then clawed at the screen. Teddy opened it.

"Look at the pretty kitty. Is she coming to see me?" asked the boss.

"It's a he," said Teddy.

"Oh yes, you told me last time."

Matousalem,* acting as though the boss wasn't there, headed straight for his bowl of Puss'n Boots. He was an old cat with short white fur. He had one brown eye and one blue, and he was very skinny.

"Here, kitty kitty!"

"He was born deaf," said Teddy.

The boss said that he preferred dogs. He had two Afghans. And he'd bought his wife a chihuahua. He thought dogs were more affectionate than cats.

"Well, I'd better be going," he said.

"Are you going to Rimouski?"

"Rimouski and Sept-Iles. Can I have the . . ."

"Of course."

* The name of Teddy's cat is a play on *matou* (tomcat) and *Mathusalem* (Methuselah).

Teddy opened the drawer in the table. That was where he put the comic strips he'd finished translating. He handed the envelope to the boss, who put it in his briefcase.

"No problems?"

"Not too many."

The Boss drained the rest of his coffee in one gulp.

"Good! Don't let your work get you down. Unhappy people depress me!"

Laughing, he slapped Teddy on the back.

Teddy went to the helicopter with him.

"He must be lonely here, all by himself on the island," said the boss as they came to the beach.

"Matousalem?"

"Yes."

"He isn't though, he chases squirrels."

The boss heaved himself into the cabin, propping the door open with his foot, then said:

"We'll try and find him a lady cat."

He moved his foot and the door closed. He kept motioning with this hand behind the window until Teddy realized he was asking him to move back. But the Jet Ranger didn't stir up very much sand as it took off, because the beach was wet.

♦ The Early *Tarzan* ♦

Teddy had met the boss a month earlier, in April. At the time, he was plying his translator's trade at *Le Soleil* in Québec City. The boss, who had just bought the newspaper, had come to the capital to meet his employees.

The translator's office was in the middle of a huge room divided into oases of greenery by an arrangement of exotic plants and moveable partitions. The boss arrived unannounced, moved Teddy's *Harrap's* so he could sit on his desk, and told him he was a businessman who wasn't in the habit of beating around the bush.

"Apparently you're a 'socioaffective'," he said. "I don't know exactly what that means, but I've got a question for you: what can I do to make you happy?"

His tone wasn't aggressive, it simply showed great concern for efficiency. He placed a file labelled "Confidential" on the table and the translator asked where he'd got it.

“From the psychology department,” he said. “But not from the psychologist. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because I fired him. We didn’t get along.”

He took a note from the file explaining that the translator had an obsessive personality and that he’d become a fanatic about precision. He agreed on one point: do a job as well as you can or don’t do it at all. That’s what his father had always said.

“You haven’t answered my question. What does it take to make you happy?”

“Would you have a desert island by any chance?” the translator replied.

“I do: Ile Madame.”

The boss didn’t seem to be joking.

“It’s near Ile d’Orléans. A small island. About two kilometers long. Are you interested?”

“Why not?”

“As it happens, the caretaker’s old and he isn’t well.”

A caretaker was essential: in the spring, the snow geese, Canada geese and ducks attracted crowds of poachers who showed no hesitation about moving into the houses. There were two on the island. There was even an old tennis court, overgrown with vegetation.

“It isn’t heaven on earth, but it’s a pleasant spot,” he said.

The translator said nothing. The boss started talking about comic strips. He preferred the older ones, and he intended to run some in his papers. In particular, he liked *The Phantom*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Prince Valiant* and the early *Tarzan*, when Hal Foster was drawing it. He intended to turn over more and more space to comic strips.

“Do you know how many people read *Mandrake* every blessed day?”

“No.”

“Ninety million.”

✦ Toast on the Coals ✦

Teddy divided his time among translation, keeping an eye on the island and such occupations as building maintenance and repainting the tennis court. He gave priority, obviously, to his main job, and he worked to a very precise schedule.

Now, on some days the words simply didn't come. . . . He would give up waiting for them; then as he was getting ready for bed, they would appear, like guests who have forgotten the time. They kept him awake a good part of the night.

The words whirled around in his head.

There was a full moon.

Matousalem didn't feel at all like sleeping. He approached the door. By stretching out as far as possible, he was able to grasp the knob in his paws. He never meowed. The translator went out with him and sat on the beach, watching the boats. The river was flooded with lights. Matousalem had

a large hunting ground: the island was a little more than two kilometers long and half a kilometer wide; its total area was two hundred and sixty-six acres, according to surveys carried out in 1915 by Georges-P. Roy. But actually there wasn't that much space, for the interior was almost completely overgrown by forest so dense that it really wasn't very pleasant to enter it. A single path went from one end of the island to the other, past the tennis court in the center.

The night was cool and Teddy decided to make a fire on the beach. Later, he went back to the house to prepare a thermos of hot chocolate and get a blanket. He also brought some bread and butter and made toast over the coals. Eventually, the words stopped spinning and he felt good.

He started thinking about his brother Theo. He never heard from his brother, but he must be somewhere in southern California, and as the weather got warmer on the Pacific coast, he would surely be preparing to return to San Francisco. He'd have laughed like a loony if he could have seen the *zouave* drinking his Nestlé's Quik on the beach of a desert island, waiting for old Matousalem. Teddy was thinking about someone else too: a girl. She didn't exist in reality, but her features and appearance were beginning to take shape in his mind.

When there was a full moon, Matousalem would take his

time coming back to the fire. But Teddy waited patiently. For a long time the old cat had lived a hard life and his wounds had healed badly; they reopened every time he got into a skirmish with the raccoons on the island.