

I

An Obese Cat

Naked as a trout, I was stepping out of the pond, each hand holding a bunch of weeds, when all at once I saw my cat with her head down, making a dash toward something small and black coming down the hill that leads to the chalet.

When she was watching her territory, old Chaloupe pretended to be asleep on the picnic table which is halfway between the chalet and the pond. Now an intruder had appeared partway down the hill, and she was rushing toward him with her belly to the ground. I am a translator, I love words, and if I say *belly to the ground*, it's not a figure of speech: her belly was quite literally dragging along the ground.

The intruder was a skinny young cat as black as a stove. When he saw the obese cat coming toward him, he leaped off the road, darted across the lawn, and disappeared into the bushes that line my property. Chaloupe abandoned the chase and scurried

back to her observation post. Her belly swayed from side to side with every step.

Monsieur Waterman came out of the chalet. He had woken up earlier than usual. I put my bikini back on and a T-shirt over it, but without rushing. To tell me that he'd witnessed the pursuit, he mimed with his hips the obese cat's undulating movement and made a funny face. Usually I don't have much confidence in men, but for him I made an exception. Despite being twice my age he was my best friend though we hadn't known each other very long. He's a writer and he'd started a new novel.

As for me, I'd started to translate one of his novels, the one that talks about the Oregon Trail. If there was a way to get close to someone in this life – of which I was not certain – it might be through translation.

It was Saturday and we both had the day off. He had left the Tour du Faubourg in Quebec City to spend the weekend at the chalet with me. The month of May had barely started, the water in the pond was freezing. The Île d'Orléans is always cooler than the city. I was glad to see the leaves coming out and the days getting longer, because the winter had been harsh. Several times heavy snowfalls had blocked the dirt road, forcing me to get around by snowmobile.

II

The Recorded Voice

Before he got into his blue Toyota 4 x 4, which he called *the Coyote*, Monsieur Waterman called out my name.

“Marine?”

“Yes!”

“I’m going to buy the papers!”

It was the beginning of the afternoon. The writer had taken a nap and during that time I’d gone back to removing the weeds from the pond. This time in a bikini.

My name is Marine. It’s a softer version of *Maureen*, the name of my Irish mother. I have inherited her red hair, her green eyes, her mood swings. Do you remember Maureen O’Hara’s fits of temper in John Ford’s film *The Quiet Man*? She was the spitting image of my mother.

At the top of the dirt road the Coyote drove out of sight. The sun, which had come up on that side, was now past the tops of the trees and it was warming the chalet, the pond below, and,

at the back of the property, the lush plot of land that I called “Where Murmurs Meet.”

The pond, which was oval, measured around twenty-five meters by fifteen. A wooden dock on piles (Monsieur Waterman called it a jetty) had been built at the end closer to the chalet. Everywhere on the shore shrubs, bulrushes, and flowers grew wild. I’m a little bit wild myself if you must know. I always do what I want. The only rules I accept are the rules of grammar. I’m comfortable in water, I swim like a fish, weaving my way through the weeds that are left.

Those damn weeds: there’s no end to pulling them out. They proliferate, they practically multiply before your eyes. Besides making the water cloudy and even slimy, they’re a threat to anything that lives in and around the pond – trout, frogs, bullfrogs, dragonflies, kingfishers, herons, raccoons.

That day, I devoted an hour to the task and it gave me as well the vague impression that I was doing some cleaning up in my love life: I’m a great psychologist. Meanwhile, Monsieur Waterman had come back with the papers. He brought out his chaise longue (an orange and green Lafuma) and settled down at the edge off the pond as usual. I saw him open *Le Devoir* and become absorbed in the book section, letting the rest of the paper fall onto the grass. He read all the book reviews. I could hear him griping about the use of the expressions *d’entrée de jeu*, *au niveau*

de and, in particular, *incontournable*, but he still read every article through to the end.

To impress him, I took a run up on the jetty and dove into the water, which is two meters deep in that spot. The bullfrogs, panicking, hid beneath the stones, and the trout glided elegantly through the weeds. Holding my breath, I swam to the other end without coming up. If there had been reeds at the end of the pond I would have chosen one and used it to breathe underwater, as Robert Mitchum had done in an adventure film I'd seen when I was little. Monsieur Waterman would have worried about me, would have thought I was drowning.

No reeds in sight and no hollow-stemmed plants either, so I got out of the pond, probably red in the face, and took a good gulp of air. He wasn't even looking at me! The book section was more interesting than the exploits of an Olympic swimmer . . . I climbed onto the shore, slipping on the clay bottom, of course, and while I was drying off in the sun, a plaintive mewling drew my attention.

The feeble cry was coming from the row of shrubs that marked the limit of the property. As soon as I got near, the young black cat emerged from a raspberry bush. He was thin, his left ear was torn, and he was taking frightened looks all around. When I turned my head I spotted Chaloupe at her post on the picnic table. She seemed to be truly asleep. I got down on

my knees in the wild grass and the little cat advanced toward me, his tail in a question mark. When I picked him up to show him to Monsieur Waterman, I saw that he had a dark blue leather collar around his neck.

“See what I found,” I said.

“Look, he has a collar,” he observed, stroking the cat’s head. “That means he belongs to someone.”

“That’s right.”

“Did you see the phone number?”

“Where?”

All too happy to have found the cat, I’d paid no attention to the brass disk attached to the collar. I was ashamed of myself. Mind you, it was only one and a half centimeters long.

The number was engraved on the disk.

“I’ll go and phone,” I said eagerly.

Chaloupe was still asleep on the picnic table, but everyone knows that cats sleep with one eye open. I took a detour and went inside through the back door.

The telephone was in the kitchen. As soon as I set him down, the cat headed for old Chaloupe’s bowls. I gave him a big handful of dry food and a bowl of cold water, then I dialed the number on the collar. I heard three rings, then the next one was interrupted by a female voice. A recorded voice that sounded

very young. It said: "Leave me a message and maybe I'll call you back."

The word *maybe* had a strange effect on me, especially because the voice sounded like my dead sister's. I simply hung up without a word.