

*Heating
Up
the
Fog*

Stories by
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A Leap of Faith

The train had left Montreal's Central Station as scheduled, but that was not Father Vaillancourt's preoccupation at the moment. He was tired and wished for sleep to come quickly. Too many thoughts dwelled in his mind, squatters of brain space in need of eviction. The train passed by the Imperial Tobacco building, a remnant of the times he tried to reconcile with, and the view distracted him for a few seconds. After that there would not be anything of interest in the darkness until his arrival in Toronto.

He had just spent three days in the big city on his first trip away from the Gaspé Peninsula, part of his strategy to finally retire from his forgotten village parish. Was it foolishness on his part to decide, so late in his life, to leave on a journey to explore the rest of the country? People in his village thought they must be in the nicest place on earth, as so many tourists drove by in the summer. The tourists took pictures of the fishing boats, of the little houses, and of the codfish lined out to dry, a sign, thought the people of the village, that the city must not have much to offer. But he, old Father Vaillancourt, just wondered if he should not go to verify that assertion. So one morning he had decided to take his modest savings out to buy a coast-to-coast train ticket.

On his seat in this night train, he imagined himself back in his small room, with a window overlooking the ocean. It was strange how similar the view was at night: darkness hides the life that is out there, a life to discover when one still has time. In the urban

daylight he had found himself taking steps prudently at first, but had soon become interested in what else he could discover beyond another street corner.

Still he was glad to be away from the rush of the city. It looked like everybody in that town needed to get somewhere quickly. There were people walking on the sidewalk who looked like they were talking to themselves, but in fact were talking on the telephone. There were people from every country in the world, large and small, sometimes talking languages he could not understand. There were people of races he had only seen in pictures or on television, and seeing them in person had fascinated him but also frightened him a bit. In his village, everyone looked alike and they all knew each other.

In Montreal he had stayed with his nephew Richard in a flat shared with a nice, polite young man. They had let him sleep in the only bedroom, in the only bed, while they slept in sleeping bags in the living room. He wanted to avoid judging the situation, and never asked any questions, however subtle they may be. After nearly seventy years of an uneventful life, of ignoring the Diocese's communications about the new ways of life out there, he had found himself "out there" not knowing how to react. Not reacting resulted in having it all caught in his mind at the same time. Had he encouraged his nephew's behavior by not saying anything? Had he implicitly approved? He took the book that Richard had given him and looked at it: André Gide's *La Symphonie Pastorale*. He did not remember reading any of Gide's books, but he vaguely remembered the name: it may have been on the index, someone in Rome thinking that others might enjoy reading it too much. It was strange to look at such a book: one day someone says you can't read it, and years later it appears in your hands and you don't have to hide it at all. The retired Father had decided he would read it. From the back cover, he could see it talked about a clergy man, most likely Protestant, who takes care of a young blind girl. He read a few sentences randomly chosen from the pages of the book, as if to check the appropriateness of the contents.

Heating Up the Fog

The sudden end of Indian Summer had already chased the wild geese away to the south. Up at his usual 7:30 in order to catch the 8:25 bus, Paul silently had his usual breakfast of orange juice, Rice Krispies, and toast at the kitchen table his mother had set the night before. She had returned to her room after seeing her husband out. The house was silent except for the occasional, and unintentional, ding of the spoon on his bowl. The thermometer outside the window showed that wool would be in order.

Paul never worried about his appearance, or rather he never wanted to appear, and managed to never wear anything that had buttons or color beyond tones of green and blue. There were brown days as a result of Christmas presents from his godmother who thought she could shape Paul into her ideal of a young man. "Thank you," he would tell her, crossing the living room to give her a kiss. He tried to lie by uttering a shy "yes" when she asked if he liked it. "It is exchangeable, I bought it at The Bay expressly for that," she would say. Every year Paul would try his best to say that it didn't need to be exchanged and that he liked it. He wondered if others ever liked anything they received as presents. His cousin always exclaimed, "Oh! Just what I wanted! Thank you so much!" and she would run to the giver to give her a big fat kiss. Was his cousin acting, or was she genuinely happy? Did she have such a strong desire for these things that ended up on her wish list? Her room overflowed with brightly colored Christmas and

birthday presents displayed on shelves, hung from the ceiling, or transforming her bed into a fluffy menagerie. In contrast, Paul's last stuffed animal, a Collie dog named Fido, had been taken away and discarded after it had spilled some of its filling and been judged filthy. As Paul grew older, the presents from his parents had become more serious (no more plastic bowling alleys) and looked like they were designed to improve his grades in school (a French dictionary; *The History of the World in Six Volumes*). The rest of the Christmas evening he would help setting up a cousin's new game of *Mouse Trap* and play with it, watching the ball go down the rails to cause the trap to fall and catch the mouse.

It was cold, and the 8:25 bus was late. Although he saw the same people every day at the bus stop, he didn't know who they were. He knew what street they came from, but he never saw them elsewhere. They were probably from the other parish, St. Giles, he thought, as the bus stop was close to the border that decided which of the two churches one belonged to. On Sundays around the lunch table, there would be a discussion about other parishioners that his parents had seen at the church. Paul would remember some of the ladies' hats and fur coats, but not necessarily whom they belonged to. His mother talked about other women and the trouble they had with their kids (one in particular would faint in church), and his father talked about the other men's professions, some honorable and some not so honorable. Paul did not know how his parents obtained all that information about other parishioners. Did other parents talk about him and his family? What did they say? "Mr. Durocher was sleeping again during the sermon," came to mind, as well as "did you see Mrs. Durocher's hat?" but what was said about *him*? "That Paul Durocher is weird. When they sent him to play hockey, all he did was try to stand on his skates and try to follow the puck. Once he got an assist for accidentally touching the puck and hitting it away. That was the only time he had not passed it to the other team." They would laugh and coach their sons never to be part of a team of losers.

No wonder the bus was late: the driver was a substitute. The regular driver would greet everyone, even Paul who would nod back while he took his quarters out of his mitten and showed his student pass. With the regular driver, there was also no problem if he had forgotten his pass, whereas substitutes would make a fuss

The Confirmed Bachelor

Montreal, 1949.

The afternoon snowstorm was going to cause problems to get home. The men who worked on my floor came to have a look through my window to see the furious white flakes obstruct the view to the Stock Exchange building. On a nicer day, they would come to watch the girls who worked there, but this time they worried about the streetcars. Trying to keep my eyes down on my papers as the men slipped behind my chair, I kept the conversation to approving mumblings in response to their concerns. Some even thought they might need to camp in the office.

At three o'clock, every office worker in the area seemed to have had the same idea of going to the bank to withdraw a little extra cash. The bank was unusually crowded with men in snow-covered clothes.

“One hundred dollars is a lot of money,” said Lenny the bank teller, always keeping an eye on my finances. No need to reply to Lenny’s comments. He carefully took his key out of his pocket, locked his drawer, and walked to Mackenzie’s office with the withdrawal slip. Although Mackenzie approved the transaction as he had for several years, Lenny kept his serious frown. I suspected that Lenny had associated my name with another Irishman who died drunk before paying for his last bottle. Lenny probably thought all those ten dollar bills he meticulously counted

out of his drawer would be wasted at the tavern later that night. The bills scented of fresh new money, and I wondered if Lenny had developed an addiction to it. I supposed it broke his heart to push the money towards me.

It was partly my fault that Lenny wouldn't trust me as a good family man saving money for the future. I never tried to justify my withdrawals with subtle remarks such as "need to help with mother's rent," or "special Church collection on Sunday," because none of them would be true. I would get no redemption in admitting that I spent large sums collecting books and hosting intimate evenings for the literary-minded.

My gray wool scarf over my nose, I exited the bank like a bandit. It was now four o'clock, and I still had a pile of articles to proofread before I could attempt the journey home. At the end of the day, I proofread the obituaries and the society articles. Your name in the latter category seemed to guarantee a longer obituary with a photo of your younger self, in the way buying indulgences at church would get you a place in heaven. People like Lenny never appeared in those pages. Mackenzie appeared not only when he was promoted to his nice office with a view on the street, but also when he married the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Forrest of the Forrest and Sons advertising agency. In the photo, Mackenzie wore his spiffy uniform with the medal he had received at the end of the war. Congratulations on your survival, and please proceed to the next level with your lovely bride. I think Mackenzie will not only have a quarter-page obituary when his time comes, he will also have a funeral at that cathedral on St. Catherine Street, and if he does really well the prime minister will attend. Mink coats and discreet tears, a sober cocktail party to conclude gracefully.

I finished the last article and sent it to the typesetting shop by the usual deadline. I could see more snow falling between the window and the street lamp. Waiting with my colleagues for the clock to tick five o'clock, we discussed our different strategies for getting home in the storm, as if there was a contest for the manliest plan. Thibault and I decided to wait for the end of the storm at the tavern on the Main, not even considering that the streetcars could still be running. The tavern is like a club with no membership fee and no guilt for lining up bottles, but you have to get rid of the riffraff yourself.

Cherchez la Femme

On his fifth day in Paris, Jeff Turner entered the Pantheon, a decommissioned church known for containing the remains of famous dead Frenchmen. He had exhausted the top places from his guide book's list of the most important places to visit in Paris, and the Pantheon happened to be near his small hotel on the Left Bank.

He did not have a fascination with tombs and cemeteries as did the tourists who visited the Père Lachaise cemetery where famous people were buried. In the Pantheon, the guide book said, were buried Pierre and Marie Curie (so there *was* a woman, he thought), Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, and others he may have known by name only. There were those who had written novels and essays important enough to be translated to English and to figure on the reading lists of his classes in College. In fact he had been reminded of the hunchback Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's novel the day before while standing in front of Notre-Dame de Paris.

Contrary to what the guide book said about it being moved for repair work, he found Foucault's pendulum hanging in the center of the mausoleum, under the well-lit dome. He could not see the top of it where it hung, as barriers had been put to prevent visitors from interfering with the movement. Jeff wondered what was so important about the pendulum: was it demonstrating *perpetuum mobile*, the endless movement he knew from a piece of classical music? He went to read the information displayed in one

corner. The pendulum, it said, was used to demonstrate the rotation of the earth: at every beat it did not return exactly at the same point it had been before, following the rotation of the earth. In a few hours, it would be swinging at a good angle from where it was then; and in a little more than thirty-one hours it would be back at the same position.

“Not your most exciting place,” he said to himself, walking back towards the slow-moving, silent pendulum. “Under this floor, dead people; up here, a big swing you can’t even ride: now, that would be exciting...”

Jeff did not want to wait a few hours to see the change, but perhaps he could see a small difference by watching it closely at one end. Leaning on the guard rail, he tried to watch each return of the pendulum towards him and compare it mentally with the previous. It was very hard to observe, and he soon felt drowsy as had happened to him every morning of the week while visiting museums.

He had not noticed the woman who was now standing next to him.

“Are you Christian?” she whispered in what he perceived to be an English accent.

“Yes... Uh, no!” He responded, confused by the two possible meanings of the question. Yet he thought it would not be fair to say he was Christian when in fact he had not set foot in a church in a long time.

The woman stared at him, puzzled by his answer. She had her long, dark hair in a pony tail and looked like what he imagined a Left Bank Bohemian could be, with her black turtleneck and a black skirt. She withdrew after lowering her eyes as if disappointed.

“Wait,” Jeff said, trying to be nice. “Did you mean to ask if my name is Christian or if I’m Christian as a member of the religious group?” While saying that he could think of a third possibility, the non-religious Christian who would be one by an act of his parents but not of his own volition.

She smiled.

“Isn’t it the same thing? But the person I was looking for would know, and you aren’t him.”

Now he felt sorry for being such a disappointment. She was, after all, a good and honest looking woman.

The Pleasure Party

Beverly Watkins got up later than usual on Tuesday morning, her mind filled with the thoughts spawned from the lively discussion at the book club meeting the night before. She felt lucky to have flexible hours and a home-based job, even though it was not as well-paid as other jobs in the area. After several years of being someone's assistant, she had decided to take one of those "work at home" jobs that consisted in talking to customers of a long-distance company.

They had discussed D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, her friend Judy's controversial choice for the month. Usually the woman whose turn it was to select the book of the month chose a best-seller or something recent that could be available at a discount. The almost centenary book had to be ordered or found at a used book store, and then some of the women had abandoned it midway: they felt no sympathy for the characters, members of English nobility who could allow a spouse to have extramarital sex in order to obtain an heir. Most of those who had read the book and who had come to the meeting wanted to judge the characters as if they had presided at a tribunal. These members of the jury felt that they knew what was right or wrong in matrimonial behavior, citing examples from their perfect unions with ideal husbands. While Beverley had understood these judgmental women's point of view, she could imagine that circumstances could bring someone to act outside of the norm. In that line of thought she had unexpectedly found herself in

agreement with her friend Judy, whose marriage had always been declared absolutely perfect.

The only problem with Judy's marriage, from Beverley's point of view, was Judy's accession to higher society. Her husband had been successful in business and had provided the means for them to move to a one-acre property where one needs at least a Mercedes to keep up with the Joneses. As a result, Judy's circle of friends now included people who had a more exclusive status, more *comme il faut*. Beverley felt that the larger circle diluted their friendship: it was not as fun as it used to be; there were no more improvised picnics in the park.

"Beverley, let's go to Café Trentadue tomorrow or Wednesday, if you have time," had offered Judy outside the bookstore where they held the meetings.

"Sure," Beverley had responded, "how about eleven o'clock tomorrow?"

Beverley had time to work two hours before getting her bicycle out for the short ride to the downtown café, a place that had evolved in the direction set by Judy's new circle. Was it that Beverley had been unable to go along with the new trends? While it still served the best espresso in a five-mile radius, its customer base had changed from students and bearded intellectuals to entrepreneurs and venture capitalists or the wives of such on their way back from riding horses.

"Parking was so difficult," offered Judy as her reason for being late.

"Parking, always parking or traffic," thought Beverley who was proud of her independent lifestyle.

They had to wait in line behind two women talking about people who had fired their contractor in the middle of their kitchen renovation. Apparently there were threats of lawsuits and counter-lawsuits, it had left the kitchen unusable, and the whole thing was unbearable.

"Those people are leaving," observed Judy directing her eyes to a table against the wall, "why don't you go to get the table and I'll order for you."

Accepting the implied orders, Beverley placed herself in a strategic position to reserve the table being liberated by a man and an older woman. Beverley wondered if the woman could be his mother. They had just shared *The Wall Street Journal*, and both

Are We Dispersing?

They saw Miss La Trobe as she rose from her stooping position. Greg and Michele had watched the people disperse themselves, and now they turned their attention to the author and director of the village play that had just ended. She gathered her records and placed them into a large case.

“Would you like some help with these?” said Greg, trying to hide his American accent.

“Oh, that would be lovely. Thank you,” said Miss La Trobe, not raising her eyes to see the twins.

“We enjoyed the play,” said Michele.

“It was a failure,” said Miss La Trobe.

Greg hoisted the record case on his shoulder and moved to follow them. The rain had softened the soil and Miss La Trobe’s heels punctured it.

“I loved the parade of mirrors,” said Michele, “but I am still wondering about its meaning. I suppose I am not better than that pastor who tried to say something at the end.”

“Ourselves. Dispersed are we,” said the author. “Each member of the audience saw something different, a private impression in the mind.”

“That is a bit profound,” said Greg. “We saw some people in the audience who were shocked by the mirrors, by seeing themselves or others.”

“There was that woman in the front who got her make-up set out!” joked Michele.

How did these Americans end up here, Miss La Trobe wondered? And why should they be interested in this play? Did she need to consider foreign audiences in her future plays? If so, how? How could she know them, people who did not cross her path on her way to the fish market? One could not assume. One would have to ask or go abroad, look at them as they walk to the market, be invited to dinner at their house, if that could be acceptable, before they knew her.

An old woman carrying dead flowers crossed their path. They all looked at her, but she did not acknowledge their presence. Why dead flowers, wondered the twins? They looked left to see where she had come from, and saw a small cemetery. Perhaps her husband was interred there, or a son killed in the war.

"You can put the case there against the wall, under the window," said Miss La Trobe, pointing at the scullery window. "Thank you very much indeed."

She looked at the strange pair that had just accompanied her on her way to the cross. They were identical twins of different sexes! No, that was not possible. Perhaps she was too tired and could not distinguish them very well. Perhaps her play on mirrors had played tricks on her.

"How did you come here?" she asked, thinking they might need directions.

"With our parents: they must still be talking to Giles in the castle," he said. They both looked annoyed. Miss La Trobe was pleased by the familiarity, his calling Giles Oliver by his first name. And the house, a "castle!"

"I was going to the pub; would you like to accompany me?" Miss La Trobe asked, in an excess of friendliness others could see as an attempt to lead young minds astray.

The pair accepted with a joyous air as two children who had been offered ice cream.

They heard voices hushed when the English woman opened the door. They recognized some of the players, who were all staring at them as if they had been holding the mirrors from the play. They moved to a table near the window; the voices rose into a murmur at first, then gradually into their original roar and laughter.

“We hung out here with friends of Beth’s. They’re all from South Africa. We laughed a lot. They said we should go to Camden Town today: there’s a big market there.”

Nora didn’t know about Camden Town: it was not in the part of her guide book she cared to see. She had planned a visit to the War Museum. She needed to change the subject.

“Tonight: Shakespeare! The Globe! They’re playing *Romeo and Juliet!*” she said.

“That should be fun!” responded Michele with an enthusiasm that warmed her mother.

“I wonder if we can go in Elizabethan dress?” added Greg.

“Reenacting the theatre, reenacting the audience! Brilliant!” said Michele.

That word, “brilliant,” they had taken from the hotel people. They always said “brilliant.” The twins were inching away.

“Well, start with getting dressed in twenty-first century,” Nora said, pointing at the pajamas.

Sean was now reading about English politics. Unknown names, unknown functions, unknown concerns, but politics interested him. How power was bartered. Who had real power, and who had it in appearance only. What made real men, and the others, the losers. What happened behind closed doors and what was said when the hand blocked the microphone and strategies confirmed in a whisper. That was real life; those were the big players in the big theatre.

A Sopwith Camel, a Spitfire, a V2 rocket, a Polaris missile... Sean admired so much steel, so much strength from earlier days of massive weaponry all displayed in the same place. He imagined himself piloting one of those ancient airplanes, wearing a heavy leather jacket, leather hat with goggles, and a silk scarf. He would come back home from dangerous dogfight missions, to an admiring wife.

How that could not be anymore. He was too old to be a pilot... His father had obtained an exemption for him, during the previous war, so he could go to College. It had been a good thing: the business had flourished, he had married, started a family... And now, faced with another war, should he do the same for his children? He didn’t know. He regretted not having had the opportunity to pilot a fighter jet, but he had not known at the time

that it would come to haunt him thirty years later. What was he doing now, flying in First Class but never as the captain? His power was immaterial: growing the wealth of the wealthy, influencing politicians, making deals, attending cocktail parties.

His wife joined him, followed by his children.

“You should see the Holocaust exhibits, and the children’s exhibits,” said Greg. “After that, who would want to start a war?” He looked at the instruments of past wars that surrounded them, bearing the signatures of entire generations of workers who never wondered why.

“Wars just happen, and we have to fight them,” said his father.

The twins remained silent at the fatalistic view.

“We have just enough time to get dinner before the play,” said Nora.

Juliet had died once again, her bed transformed into a tomb as Romeo prepared to join her. A helicopter passed in the dark sky outside the Globe theatre. Greg and Michele stood near the stage, holding hands. Seeing her children from her balcony seat, Nora searched her husband’s hand. Found it. Romeo died. Everybody knew, but nobody intervened to tell the lovers what they didn’t know. Sean and Nora took their hands back to applaud. People started thinking about where they would catch a bus or a cab. Sean followed Nora down the stairs that were not a replica of the original.

“They did not have a strong British accent,” said someone with an American accent.

“It was easier to understand than when it is played in the U.S.,” someone added.

Nobody seemed to know why.

The family gathered outside the theatre. It was a beautiful night: they could walk along the Thames for a while. In two days they would leave London to go back home. The business trip had been successful. Nora tried to take Sean’s hand again: it yielded. They would talk.

The twins thought about Miss La Trobe: maybe they could meet her some day, in Bloomsbury where they now hoped to go to college, enamored with the place as they were. She would jump out of the book again to talk about the carp in the mud, or the

windows the characters looked out from. Or perhaps they could talk about life.

A tour boat passed on the dark river, the flashes of cameras catching them all together.