

ALEXIS LACHAÎNE

GAS

WELL, IT'S JANUARY AND I'm pumping gas in minus-twenty degree weather. There are colder days to come, I know, and Anne-Marie says that I'm crazy to have taken this job. But the truth is, I sort of like it out here with the blue moon and the shadows and the snowbanks all along the road. And mostly I just sit inside this heated booth, wait for cars, and read. It's quiet here and I'm not bored at all.

I pour myself another cup of coffee. There's a jazz song playing on the radio next to my thermos and I open up the book my brother gave me just before he left. It's Faulkner's *Light in August*. I'm already halfway through, and I am sure he wants a letter all about it when I'm done. "I think you'll like the story of Joe Christmas," he had said, and he was right—I do. I hope to write him in a week and let him know how great it was to have him back, and that I miss him now.

Anne-Marie is due to show up in an hour. Her husband is away, and we're supposed to go out for a drive after I close. Maybe drive down to the railroad yards and talk, or drive along some country road. It doesn't matter. I just want to be with her tonight, and hold her in my arms.

And so for now I read my book, and wait for cars, and wait for time to pass. My mother told me once there's nothing like a book to take your mind off things, and she was right. There's nothing like a book to ease your mind.

My reading's interrupted by the honking of a horn. It's Joe Dubois in his red pickup truck. He waves and I zip up my parka and step out into the cold.

"*Ça va, mon homme?*"

"*Oui, ça va.*"

He turns the engine off and asks me to fill up the tank. I look at him. I tell him to put out his cigarette first and he just laughs. He's been drinking. "Wouldn't want to light this place on fire," he says.

Frost on the windshield, frost on the door. I scrape it off and give the windshield a good clean. My hands are numb under my gloves. I take

my gloves off and rub them together. While I'm filling up the tank he asks about my brother.

"Yes, he's back in Asia. Hong Kong. Still teaching English."

"Still the wanderer. Always been the wanderer."

"Yes."

Joe Dubois and my brother had been close in *secondaire*, but their friendship didn't last, and by the time my brother decided that he wanted to go away to university they'd drifted apart. Also there was the business of a girl called Georgette Proulx, which my brother had never gotten over. It's all in the past.

"Listen," Joe says, cracking a sly smile. "Some friends of mine are throwing a party down at the Beaufort tonight, do you want to go? I hear there's gonna be some women there."

I pull back the nozzle and a few drops of clear gasoline drip down by my boots, into the snow. "No, that's alright, Joe," I tell him. "I think I'll pass this time."

"Suit yourself." He gives me a couple of twenties and tells me to keep the change, that I look like I could use it. I ask him what he means. "I know you've got a girl," he says, and starts the engine and drives off.

Cold air, my breath. I wonder if he knows. Anne-Marie says she hasn't told anyone, but someone may have seen us once. It doesn't matter. Maybe he was just joking around. I walk back to the booth, my boots crunch cold on all the snow.

It's been two years since I met Anne-Marie. I was twenty, she was twenty-five. My mother had just died and Paul, my brother, was away.

For a while I had thought of applying to university myself, but had decided against it, at least for a while. Seeing my mother wither away like she did had rattled me somewhat, and I was pretty down about things, as no doubt you can imagine. Living alone hadn't helped, and I had secretly hoped my brother would come back to stay with me in our parents' house, which was now our house, though my brother didn't seem to want anything to do with it. Meeting Anne-Marie had helped me get back on my feet, though it was hard because she was married and I wanted to see her more, and in the open. Still.

Sometimes it was clear and clean between us and so seemingly natural that I forgot all about her husband, and that she was married, and going home to him at night and sleeping with him, though she didn't love him, and he

didn't love her, she explained. Sometimes, though, I just told myself that she was a stepping stone to greater things, a bypass on the road to greater happiness, and that it would be best not to get too attached to her, just enjoy the ride while it lasted, and move on. In my life, and it has not been long by any stretch, I've learned not to ask of people more than they can give. My father couldn't give my mother what she wanted, and it broke them.

Headlights on the road, the slow crunching of tires. At first I think it might be Anne-Marie, but quickly realize that it's not. It's just Madame Duguay, her rusted silver Chevrolet. She, too, is looking for a fill-up.

"Allo, mon cher."

"Bonsoir, Mme. Duguay."

The air is crisp. The sky is darkly clear. She must be eighty, eighty-five years old. She's come from bingo, she explains, and it's her lucky night. She made some forty dollars. I smile. "I knew your grandmother," she says. "She was a good woman. Shrewd, but good. She prayed five times a day."

Just now I notice the pink beads, the rosary dangling from her rear-view mirror. I've never noticed it before. It looks more like a carnival trinket than an object of ritual.

If I let her, she'll talk to me for hours. Tell me her life story. My toes, my hands, are cold. I don't have time. "What can I do for you, Mme. Duguay?"

She looks at me. Her grey eyes match the colour of her hair. "For me? What can you do for me?" she says. She laughs. Her hands are thin. She rubs her purse strap with her thumb. "What can you do for me? Look at me, *mon cher*. Look at my face—I'm old. You can do nothing for me. You can fill up the tank," she says.

I fill up her car with regular unleaded. When I'm done I ask her if she knew my grandmother when she was young, or old. Her face lights up. "When I was young, of course. Those were sweet and simple times, back then. We used to go for walks together in the mountains." It seems Madame Duguay had had some money in her youth, and my grandmother, a poor and fair-skinned girl with eyes like mine, would talk with her about her hopes, her dreams, the happiness she wanted. It didn't happen. My grandmother married my grandfather and lived the same life that her parents had lived before her. Still, I wish I had known her. This was my mother's mother. My father's mother I knew.

"That'll be forty dollars, Mme. Duguay."

She reaches deep into her purse, pulls out two twenty dollar bills, and says, “Well, there goes all my bingo money now.”

“*Merçi, Mme. Duguay.*”

She smiles. “*Écoute, mon cher,*” she says, “you just stay here with us, you hear? Now don’t do like your brother did—we need you here.”

“*Oui, Mme. Duguay.*”

Her car looks like a hearse. She rolls the window up, and turns the engine on, and waves. I put the forty dollars in my pocket, watch as she drives off.

When I was young, or younger than I am, my brother Paul and I went camping in the woods, just north of town. It was a means to get away, of sorts—our father had just left and, as I’ve said, our mother took it pretty hard. In fact, it had been her idea for us to go. “I know,” she’d told us late one night, “it hasn’t been much fun for you—don’t think that I don’t *know*.” And so we took our father’s tent—a tent he’d bought back in the sixties, patched in places, colours fading—and set off. We’d packed a weekend’s worth of food and water, anything we thought campers might bring.

Paul led. He had a map a friend of his from school had given him, and had picked out a site about a five-mile hike, through woods and brush and woods again. It was late fall, a Saturday, and I remember this because the air was crisp, and mostly all the leaves had fallen, crackling under foot. A cool wind carried smells of black raw earth, of dying moss and bare-stripped trees. We walked. At times a shy mist came up off the water and enveloped the dead woods, light grey and haunting. As we came close to the mountains, though, the air started to clear.

We looked for game but didn’t find any. We walked in silence, mostly. I carried the old tent. Paul carried the supplies. We set up camp on a low ridge that overlooked a marsh, what once had been a lake. Putting up the tent took quite some time. Night fell. We drank a bottle of *gros* gin, cooked sausages over the fire.

“Well,” Paul said, “I think I’ll go away next year.”

“Where will you go?” I asked. The moon, a crescent moon, came up over the marsh, and I could see a hundred stars.

“To university, I guess. If I get in.”

I poked a stick into the fire and turned a log, revealing its burning embers. “You’ll get in,” I said, and smiled. My brother Paul was two years older. I looked up to him. “You really think you won’t get in?”

He took a swig of gin. “Well, I don’t know,” he said. I guess you never know about these things.”

I laughed. The fire’s flames rose up, then waned, then rose again. A chipmunk scurried in the bush. Paul lit a cigarette and said, “Up there’s Orion’s belt, I think,” and pointed at the sky.

I looked. I asked Paul if Orion, in the story, had been killed by wolves. He said he didn’t know. We talked about our mother and our father for a while, and drank more gin. Paul told me that one day he hoped to be a writer.

It was something he had told me once before, but it felt good that night to listen to him talk about it. Sometimes listening to a person talk about their dream is better than the dream itself; I don’t know why. Maybe it’s the look they have that says perhaps they will endure—perhaps, through all, that they will last. And all I know now is that, looking back on that cold night, Paul gave me strength to look at the coming times with a certain sense of assurance. And really, does it matter if the dreams were his, not mine? Does that fact lessen it in any way?

Well, I don’t know, but sometimes I don’t think it does. Paul passed out later on that night, and I walked over to our tent to fetch a sleeping bag for him, afraid that he might freeze. I spread it over top of him, and sat there, watching as the fire’s flames died out and there were only embers and the smell of woodsmoke clinging to my clothes. I tried to think of him leaving and about what it would be like to stay here after he had gone, but then I stopped. It made me too sad to think about it and I didn’t want to be sad just then. So I just smoked his cigarettes instead, and wondered what exactly it was like for him to want to be a writer, and to go away to university—and to dream.

I turn the book’s worn pages. Every now and then I stop and glance at notes my brother made, at passages he underlined. It’s strange to hold a book so full of someone else’s thoughts. Somewhere, scribbled in the right-hand corner of a page, I find the words: *Joe Christmas doesn’t know quite what, or who, he is.*

Outside, the moon hangs blue and cold. I put the book down for a moment, rub my eyes, and sip the last dregs of coffee. Anne-Marie is late, but I’m not worried in the least. Probably she couldn’t find her keys. Or it could be her husband called her just as she was leaving, just as she was heading out the door. Certainly it’s nothing to worry about. Why would it be? Her husband doesn’t know.

And what if he *does* know? What then? Her husband's not a violent man, I'm pretty sure. Asides from a few bar fights in his youth, I'm almost certain that he's not the type to raise his hand, or voice, in anger. In fact, the way Anne-Marie describes him sometimes, you'd think he's hardly ever felt the slightest bit of anger in his life at all. But isn't there, in all of us, the capacity for violent action? Were we pushed far enough, wouldn't we all—even the meekest one among us—lash out, given the right circumstances? Look at my mother. She never struck my father after she found out about his infidelity (though surely he deserved it), but I saw a flash of hurt and hatred in her eyes just then that seemed to say, *Lord, if I kill him, will I really be to blame?* And though it lasted but a moment, but a flicker in the eyes of something deep, primordial, and unsound, I know she could have killed him, then—that the capacity, as frightening as it was, was *there*. And does it matter that she struck herself instead? Does it really make a difference that she turned the violence inwards at herself, instead of outwards, at my father? No. The only difference was she didn't love herself, and that is all. That was the only difference, I suppose.

So should I worry, then? Should I be fearful for my safety, or for Anne-Marie's? Although her husband's not, by any means, a violent man, can he be threatening to me, or to us, in any way? He doesn't love her—not the way my mother loved my father. So, perhaps, if he finds out, he just won't hurt enough, or care enough, to act in any way. But what, though, if he loves himself too much? What if he suffers from an excess of self-love, then surely he'll strike back at us, in any way he can? He'll see me as a threat to *himself*, not Anne-Marie. How then will he react?

I stuff the book in my back pocket, grab my gloves, and step outside. My boss, Monsieur Beaulieu, has just shown up to take the money from the cash register. He's a big man, bald and ruddy-faced, and wears a bushy mustache, graying at the sides.

"You need a lift?" he says, after he's done.

"I'm fine. Someone's supposed to pick me up," I tell him.

Monsieur Beaulieu and my father used to go out drinking together, back when my father and my mother were still married. He was the first person my father told when my father decided to leave my mother, and I can't help but think that he felt guilty about this for some reason, and that it's because of it that he gave me this job. As if, somehow, he felt that he could right my father's wrongs.

He holds the cash-box in his hulking hands and nods. After he puts it away safely in the trunk of his car, he clears his throat and turns to me and says: "You know what I did when I was your age? I worked as a truck driver. I bet you didn't know that, did you? I drove trucks. Big tractor-trailors. Drove them all the way to Florida."

I take my gloves off, blow the warm air from my body onto my hands. "You ever been to Florida?" he asks.

I tell him that I haven't, but my brother has.

"I almost stayed down there," he says. "When I was in my twenties. I almost stayed down there because I met a girl in Jacksonville, and almost married her. I got cold feet, though. Can you believe it? I would have made my life down there, in Florida. Now that would have been something."

I don't know why he's telling me this. Florida is not a place I've ever thought of visiting. The only image that I have of Florida is of a postcard that my brother sent me from Key West. It showed a beach, some boats, and palms. My brother spent a winter there, before he took off for Hong Kong.

"Of course," he adds, "I don't regret it, not one bit. I have a good life here, and I don't miss her much. And Florida, you know, is not all it's cracked up to be."

He stuffs his hands in his coat pockets, looks me in the eye. "Your father," he says, "regretted lots. He always mulled things over in his mind. But what can you do? You are who you are, I suppose."

I look down at my boots. My boots are dark and wet with snow. When I look up Monsieur Beaulieu is standing in the bluish light, his winter coat tight-fitting on his bulky paunch and arms. "You don't regret things, do you?" he says.

"No. Not more than most, I guess," I tell him.

"Well good. That's good," he says. "So many people spend their lives regretting things. Not me. No sir. Not anymore. It's best to take things as they come."

He smiles. In all his heaviness and girth, he moves to open the car door. "Listen," he says, "you sure that you don't need a lift?"

"I'm sure," I say.

"Well there you go," he says, "well there you go." He squeezes his large frame into the car. A cold wind whips against my face, my hair.

"Now don't forget to lock up when you leave," he says.

"I won't."

“Well, good,” he says. He puts the key in the ignition, closes the car door.

The moon has passed its zenith. I can see my breath. I watch the tail lights as he drives away.

Growing up, my brother was an avid, a voracious reader. He used to spend entire afternoons sprawled out on the couch, or with his feet up on the coffee table, reading books like *Moby-Dick*. He wouldn't let anything get between him and his reading—not my father yelling, or my mother begging him to go outside and get some air, or even his friends wondering when he'd put the book down and come out with them and have some fun.

My mother worried about him. She would see him coming home with all those hefty books, and I could see on her face the consternation this caused her. It was a consternation that only got worse, years later, after my father had left, and Paul had decided to leave. “I don't understand it,” my mother would say to me sometimes, “it's as if he lives in them, those books.”

I'd laugh, tell my mother Paul just had big dreams, and not to worry so much about it. There was nothing to worry about, I'd tell her—Paul just wanted to write and he needed distance in order to do so. “It's not funny,” my mother would snap back at me. “I worry about him. I'm afraid that he doesn't know what he's getting himself into. I'm afraid that he'll never be happy.”

Mostly I just shrugged it off. Mothers worry—it's what they do, I'd tell myself. Or I'd joke with Paul in private that if worrying were an Olympic event our mother would surely win the gold medal.

But there was one time, and it all comes back to me now, when my mother was washing dishes in the kitchen sink (she wore a blue bandanna on her head, and rubber gloves up to her elbows), and she blurted out: “He won't ... he won't even be here when I need him.”

Her voice quivered as she said this, and I realized then that it was *her*, not Paul, that she was truly worried over. The prospect of being abandoned again. The idea of one day being alone.

She put her hands down in the soapy water and pulled out a plate and scrubbed it clean. Her face seemed distant, lost in thought. “He won't be here,” she said.

“I'll be here, *Maman*,” I said. It had been a long time since I had called her *Maman*, and I don't know why it came out just then, but it did. I remember it was cold in that kitchen, and the blue evening light was coming in through the window, and the wind outside rattled the eaves. It was late fall

or early winter, and for a long time I just stood there, not saying anything, watching her, not saying anything. And I remember feeling very small just then, and powerless. As any child or teenager feels powerless when faced with situations that they cannot do a thing about, or understand.

“He won’t be here,” my mother said again, and turned to face the wall.

And she was right, for it turned out that Paul had not been there when she most needed him—when she needed not just me, but both her sons. Of course, I’ve never talked to Paul about this—I’m pretty sure I never will. Paul has always had the best intentions, and I’ve never begrudged him the decisions he has made, no matter what the consequences they’ve had for other people. How could I? Paul has never been one to carry with him the burdens borne by others, no matter what the cost.

He did come home for the funeral, though, and for this I was grateful. He helped me settle things and even offered to give me his half of the house which had been left to us, though of course I refused. The house was as much his as it was mine, and I could only hope that one day he would return to it—for good this time. My mother’s last coherent words to me were “never let your family, when you have one, if you have one, dissolve.” I know she was torn up over my father, over Paul. But people say the strangest things when they are dying; it’s always better not to pay them any mind.

Each in our own way, both Paul and I stayed true to ourselves, and to our words. Paul left, I stayed. And it was I, not Paul, who spent those long bleak nights at home next to our mother. Who sat at home next to our mother. Who stayed at home next to our mother. And what did it matter? What did it matter if it was I, not Paul, who in the end would change her sheets, and hold her hand, and listen to her final rambling words?

Never let your family, when you have one, if you have one, dissolve.

The gas pumps look frozen. My feet are cold. I take the book—Paul’s book—out of my pocket, walk back to the booth, and read some more.

Well, I don’t know. I guess what I have such a hard time accepting is the suddenness with which it all seems to happen. Families come unraveled, life gets in the way, I *get* that part—it happens all the time. What I *don’t* get, though, is how one minute your mother and your father can be arguing in the kitchen, or your brother can be sprawled out on the couch reading a book, and the next, it seems, they’re gone. And by the time you realize what has happened, by the time you turn around and realize what has happened, everything you knew, or thought you knew, about your life is

gone as well—*it's changed*.

And once you've realized this, where can you go? How can you go? How can you even move? I mean, it took me years to even get to this point. It took me years to get to the point where I could even get a job, and meet someone, and learn to appreciate the quiet plainness of it all—the plainness, in a sense, of things. This moon, for example, and this booth. These gas pumps and this snow. And, once you have come to see it, to appreciate it, why would you give it back? Why would you ever give it back? After everything you've been through? Because it might somehow be better somewhere else? Who knows? Maybe there will come a time when, like my brother, I too will grow tired of it all, and none of this will be enough. But I doubt it. Why? Because the prospect of leaving doesn't seem so appealing when you've been through all the changes I've been through. And I've already been through more, much more, than enough change—enough to last a lifetime.

First I see the headlights, then the car—her husband's car. And when I see inside the car, and see that she's alone, I gather up my things, and step outside.

She opens the car door. "Hello," she says, and smiles.