

A photograph of a person from behind, wearing a hat and sitting on the ground in a forest. The person is looking towards a dense stand of trees. The ground is covered in grass and fallen branches. The lighting is soft, suggesting a misty or overcast day.

*And the Birds
Rained Down*

*Jocelyne Saucier
translated by Rhonda Mullins*

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Coach House Books, Toronto

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for Marie-Ange Saucier

In which people go missing, a death pact adds spice to life, and the lure of the forest and of love makes life worth living. The story seems far-fetched, but there are witnesses, so its truth cannot be doubted. To doubt it would be to deprive us of an improbable other world that offers refuge to special beings.

This is a story of three old men who chose to disappear into the forest. It's the story of three souls in love with freedom.

'Freedom is being able to choose your life.'

'And your death.'

That's what Tom and Charlie would tell their visitor. Between them they have lived almost two centuries. Tom is eighty-six years old and Charlie is three years more. They believe they have years left in them yet.

The third man can no longer speak. He has just died. Dead and buried, Charlie would tell the visitor, who would refuse to believe him, so long had been the road to reach Boychuck, Ted or Ed or Edward – the variations in the man's first name and the tenuousness of his destiny will haunt the entire tale.

The visitor is a photographer who is as yet unnamed.

And love? Well, we'll have to wait for love.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I had already driven many kilometres of road under threatening skies, wondering whether I would find a clearing in the forest before nightfall, or at least before the storm hit. I had travelled all afternoon along spongy roads that led to labyrinths of quad trails and skidding roads, and then nothing more but clay ponds, beds of peat moss and walls of spruce, black fortresses growing ever thicker. The forest was going to close in around me without me laying my hands on Ted or Ed or Edward Boychuck, whose first name changed but whose last name remained the same, a sign that there was some truth in what I had heard about him, one of the last survivors of the Great Fires.

I had set out with directions that seemed sufficient. *At the end of the road that runs along the river, turn right and keep going for about fifteen kilometres to Perfection Lake, which is easy to spot with its jade green waters – glacier water from the Quaternary Period – and shaped like a plate, perfectly round, that's where it gets its name, and after looking out over the jade plate, take a left at the rusted-out mine head-frame, keep going straight about ten kilometres, be sure not to take any of the crossroads or you'll end up on the old logging roads, and then, you can't miss it, there is only the one road leading nowhere. If you look to the right, you'll see a stream that cascades into volcanic rock – that's where Boychuck has his cabin, but I might as well tell you, he doesn't like visitors.*

The river, the jade lake, the old headframe. I had followed all the directions, but there was no cascading stream or cabin in sight, and I had come to the end of the road. Farther along there was a fallow field, barely in good enough shape for a quad and not something my pickup would want to cross. I was wondering whether I should backtrack or settle in for the night in the back of the truck when I saw smoke appear at the base of a hill and form a thin ribbon swaying gently above the trees. It was an invitation.

Charlie's eyes, once they spotted me in the clearing surrounding his collection of cabins, gave off a warning. You don't set foot on his property without an invitation.

His dog had announced me well before my arrival, and Charlie was waiting, standing in front of what must have been his living quarters, since that was where the smoke was rising from. He had an armful of small logs, a sign that he was about to make his supper. He held the load against his chest throughout our exchange, which kept us outside a door he clearly had no intention of opening to me. It was a screen door. The other door, the main one, was open inward to let the heat of the blaze escape. I couldn't make out anything inside the cabin. It was dark and chaotic, but the smell it gave off was familiar. It was the smell of woodsmen who have lived alone, steeping, in the forest for years. Mostly it was the smell of unwashed bodies; I had never seen a shower or a bath in any of the living quarters of my old forest friends. It was the smell of burnt fat; they mainly ate fried meat, thick stews and game that required a good dose of grease. The smell of dust fossilized in layers on anything that lay still. And the stale smell of tobacco, their drug of choice. Anti-tobacco campaigns hadn't yet reached these men. Some still chewed their square of nicotine and religiously snuffed their Copenhagen. It's hard to understand how much tobacco meant to them.

Charlie's cigarette roamed from one end of his mouth to the other like a small tame animal, and when it finished burning, it rested at the corner. He still hadn't said a word.

At first I thought it was him, Ed Boychuck, or Ted or Edward, the man who had survived the Great Fires and who had fled from his life into the forest. He was spotted only occasionally at the hotel where I had spent the previous night. The hotel was preposterous, a huge construction in the middle of nowhere, with three storeys of what had probably been the height of elegance, now a relic of civilization lost in the woods. The man I took to be the owner but who was merely the manager – *Call me Steve*, he said after we exchanged a few words – told me that the hotel was built by an eccentric with cash to burn, a Lebanese man who had made a fortune in doctored liquor and had then set about losing it in megalomaniacal construction projects. He believed that the railway would make its way toward what promised to be a new Klondike, and he wanted to be the first to snatch up the business that was sure to follow. His final obsession, Steve said. The new Klondike was nothing but a big hoax, and no train appeared spewing its steam in front of the Lebanese man's luxury hotel. He went to the States, where he expanded into a chain of hotels for truckers.

I like places that have given up any pretence of stylishness, any affectation, and that cling to an idea waiting for time to prove them right: prosperity, the railroad, old friends ... I'm not sure what they're waiting for. The region has a number of these sorts of places that stand the test of time as they revel in their own dilapidated solitude.

My host at the hotel had talked all evening about the hardships of the place, but I wasn't fooled. He was proud to tell me stories of bears devoured by ticks and the hunger that waits outside your door, of the moaning and creaking

carried on the wind at night, and the mosquitoes, *don't get me started on the mosquitoes, they all come out in June, mosquitoes, black flies, no-see-ums, deer flies, it's better not to wash – there's nothing like a thick hide to protect you against the little beasts – and the cold of January, good god!* The cold of January. There is no greater source of pride in the North, and my host wasn't going to let the chance slip by to complain about it so that I could quietly admire his courage.

'And Boychuck?'

'Boychuck is an open wound.'

This silent, motionless man on the doorstep couldn't be the man I was looking for. Too calm, too sturdy, almost debonair in spite of his eyes searching mine for what they were hiding from him. *Animal* was the word that sprung to mind. He had the gaze of an animal. Nothing fierce or threatening. Charlie was not a wild animal. He was simply on the lookout, like an animal, always asking himself what lay behind a movement, a flash of light, an overly emphatic smile, or words that sounded too smooth. And my words, in spite of the conviction I put into them, had not yet persuaded him to open his door.

You don't just land on the doorstep of someone who has lived close to a century with an improvised spiel. You need tact and skill, but not too much. Old men know a thing or two about the art of conversation. It's all they have left in their final years, and words that are too slick make them wary.

I had started with a few words about the dog, a lovely animal, a mix of Newfoundland and Labrador, who had stopped barking but was keeping an eye on me. 'Nice dog,' I said, as much to praise the dog as its master. 'Labrador?' The only response I got was a nod of the head and a look that said he was waiting for the rest. I hadn't come all this way to talk about his dog.

'I'm a photographer,' I told him straight away. I had to dispel any misunderstanding. I wasn't selling anything, had no bad news to deliver, wasn't a social worker or a nurse, and most certainly wasn't from the government, the worst of the lot, as I had learned from all the elderly folks I had visited. *You're not from the government, I hope?* If I took too long to explain my presence, the question was never long in coming. *We don't want some bureaucrat coming here telling us something's not quite right about our lives or about our papers, that there are letters or numbers that don't add up, that something in the files is suffering from inconsistency. And what about me? You don't think I'm suffering? Vamoose, government, go on, scram!*

'I'm a photographer,' I repeated. 'I take pictures of people who survived the Great Fires.'

Boychuck lost his whole family in the Great Fire of 1916, a tragedy he trailed behind him wherever he tried to make a life.

The man I saw before me carried no such wound inside. He was smooth and compact, a monk in stone. He seemed impervious to everything, until I saw him lift his eyes to the sky, grow sombre at the threatening clouds, which were growing heavier, more laden – Charlie's eyes, when they returned to me, held the lightning of the coming storm. An animal, I thought again. He responds only to nature.

I explained what had brought me there, taking care to give him names: I had met so-and-so who told me about someone who knew someone else, I explained the trail I had followed, all the old acquaintances who, each in turn, served as safe conduct and led me here. 'A very nice spot, I can see why you choose to live here, Mr. Boychuck, with this magnificent lake at your feet and all this beautiful nature surrounding you, but if you have a moment to spare, I'd like to sit down with you and talk about all this.'

It was dishonest. I knew I wasn't talking to Boychuck, but a bit of wiliness is sometimes necessary.

Boychuck's name affected him more than he would have cared to show. I saw his eyes falter, and then the sky darkened, the earth grew flatter, the storm raged with impatience, and Charlie's voice was finally heard.

'Boychuck is dead and buried.'

He was not going to tell me anything more. I felt in his manner that the interview was over and that I should go back to wherever I had come from with the little I had just learned. He was about to turn his broad rustic back on me when the skies opened up. It was coming down as if from a showerhead. With a movement I barely felt, a gesture of natural authority, he opened the screen door and, his hand on my back, heavy and light at the same time, pushed me inside.

'Get inside. You're going to get wet.'

The voice was no more amiable than the rest of him. He went straight to his stove, a miniature wood stove – I had never seen one so tiny – and stoked his fire without giving me a second thought. The fire was dying. He had to restack the kindling, blow on the blackened embers, add some bark, blow again, and when the flames leapt to life, he closed the stove door and vents and went to what, in the darkness, I took to be his kitchen counter. Judging from the number of potatoes he was peeling, I took it that I was invited to stay for supper.

The rain on the roof was deafening. It was falling more heavily, and at times we could no longer hear each other, and then the wind chimed in, gusting, surging and howling, and the thunder and lightning came. We both knew I couldn't go back to my pickup.

'You'll have to sleep here.'

I impressed him more than once during the evening. About a fern, lichen or shrub I knew the name of, while he, who had intimate knowledge of them, couldn't name them. He could describe a plant from the underbrush with the precision of a master botanist – its companions, its habits, how it collects the dew, protects itself against dryness and windburn – all without knowing its name. 'It's wild lily-of-the-valley,' I told him, after he wondered whether the plant's fruit was truly venomous. Partridge poison, that was his name for it, a lily of the underbrush. 'The fruit is edible,' I explained, 'but in moderation. If you eat too much, it can give you the runs.'

'How do you know all that?'

I am not a botanist, a naturalist, or anything like that, but twenty years of wandering in the company of such folks gave me a certain familiarity with the forest. I had made it something of a speciality. I used to call myself a vegetative photographer, because of all the veins of leaves I stooped over to capture on film and the contemplative life I led. At some point I got tired of it. I wanted to return to humanity. I wanted faces, hands and eyes; I could no longer lie for hours in wait for a spider to trap its prey. Chance put me on the trail of the Great Fires, or their survivors, all very old folks of course because the first Great Fire was in 1911, and that's where the conversation ground to a halt. Charlie refused to go on once the subject was broached.

But the evening was pleasant nonetheless. He was delighted for the company, you could tell. His features relaxed, but you couldn't hear it; he still had that grumbling, resonant voice that had made such an impression on me when I arrived.

We talked about our lives, mine on the road, searching for a new face or a new encounter, and his in his cabin,

watching time go by, with no worry other than living. Even that was a lot, according to him, and I had no trouble believing him, because there is plenty to do to avoid freezing or starving to death when you're living alone deep in the woods. I emphasized the word *alone*, but he smelled the trap. He was a trapper, so he had an instinct for danger, and he wasn't going to let himself be caught in such a poorly laid device.

'I have Chummy,' he said, indicating the dog with his eyes.

The dog was sleeping fitfully near the door, each clap of thunder making his fur bristle head to tail until the flat calm returned, when he slept, his breath deep and regular, until the next crash.

As soon as the dog heard Charlie speak his name, he got up and went to lie at his master's feet.

'Eh, Chummy, tell our guest how we make a good team, you and me.'

Charlie's hand meandered through the dog's fur, stopping at the neck and at the base of the ears, where it detected clumps that it removed in small woolly tufts. It roamed, soft and vigorous, an expert at scratching and massaging, along the length of the dog's body. Chummy grunted contentedly while his master continued his conversation with the visitor, every once in a while tossing a few words his way.

'Isn't that right, Chummy, aren't we good together?'

I was impressed by the thick, coarse hand, stiffened with age, that became pliant and supple in his dog's fur, and even more so by the voice that, when it spoke to the dog, softened, becoming velvety and intimate. He explained in this tender bass voice that Chummy was afraid of storms. 'It's the thunder that scares him,' he said. 'You have to reassure him, so that's why I keep him inside when there's a storm.' The cello voice trailed off somewhere, and he resumed that tone of the lord of the forest who won't let himself be imposed upon.

The supple hand and velvety intimacy of the voice came back a little later when he unrolled the bundles of fur to make my bed.

The storm had not waned any. The roof dripped smack in the middle of the one-room cabin. Charlie knew the leak and had placed a pot on the floor. The *tink* of the water in the pot, the rain drumming on the windows, the crackling of the fire in the stove, and Chummy snoring comfortably under his master's stroking: the cabin was filled with the sounds of a warm, comfortable life. I was delighted to have been invited to stay.

I slept in a bed of furs like a princess in a fairy tale. A soft layer of black bear, silver fox, ash grey wolf and even wolverine, a deep brown that glistened with a flash of jet black on my bed of pelts. Charlie was impressed that I could identify them, particularly the wolverine, which is a rare animal, even rarer in hide form, because it is reputed to be aggressive and intelligent and hard to trap. 'But with the price we get for pelts,' he said, 'trapping isn't worth it anymore.'

The bundles of fur were piled in a corner. There were at least twenty of them. 'Very practical during the bitter cold of the winter,' Charlie said in answer to my astonished eyes, and I imagined him at minus fifty, buried under a mountain of pelts, Chummy probably in bed with him, and the cabin silent other than the stove burning a blazing fire.

He had stopped trapping since environmentalists had caused the prices to plummet, but he kept his last catches, and with each pelt he unrolled, the story of the animal that had left him its skin came to him. His voice slowed and became rounder as the animal came back to mind: where it lived, the trail it took, how the animal came to be caught in the trap, all this he told me in a warm, enveloping voice. 'Poor little mother,' he said, caressing a beaver pelt with the leather of his hand. 'She shouldn't have been there.'

I like stories. I like being told the tale of a life from its beginnings, the twists and turns and the sudden jolts way back in time that make it so that a person finds himself sixty years later, eighty years later, with that certain gaze, those hands, that way of telling you that life has been good or bad. An old woman, among all the ones my search led me to, had shown me her hands, two long hands, fine and white, that rested on the floral pattern of a dress and then spread out on the table. 'Look,' she told me, 'not a mark, no wrinkles. They are just as they were when I was twenty.' Her hands were the trophy she was proudest of. They told of five children born one after the other, a farm that went up in smoke, a husband who disappeared in the Great Fire of 1916, a cramped dwelling in town, hungry children, and household after household after household that paid wages, an entire life spent in soapy water and not one flaw. Not one crack.

'Poor little mother,' Charlie said, and I felt like we were in one of those great stories about life that I love so much. The beaver, a four-year-old female, was caught in Charlie's trap with three barely formed little ones in her belly. 'She shouldn't have been there. It was the male I was after, the large gingery male, almost blond, a rare colour, a valuable fur. I knew the whole family that lived in a lodge on a narrow bay of the lake. There was the mother who was preparing her nest for the spring, three young from the previous spring's litter, and the big golden chief who refused to be caught in any of my traps. I got one of the young males in January and then another in February, nice catches, but nothing like the gilt of my chief. Normally, I close my traps in March. Fur loses its lustre as springtime approaches, but I was reaching, I wanted gold, and I left my traps open. Poor little mother. She should never have come out of her lodge.'

There was also the story of a fox cub that caught its paw in a hare snare and cried like a baby, of a wolf that had followed him and watched him all along his trap line, of a spring bear he stumbled upon. It took me a while to get to sleep amid all the lives he had told me about. It was as if I could hear the wolf, the fox and the mother beaver sigh nostalgically at the telling of the lives that had been theirs and that I was using as bedding. The smell of animal was strong and heavy. I tossed and turned, searching for a breath of air that wasn't filled with their odour. And then there was Charlie's snoring, which at times reached deafening heights and trumpeted a fanfare along with the roar of the thunder.

I woke up late. The cabin was warm and still. The only sound was the crackling of the fire in the stove. Just as I was dropping back to sleep, I felt Charlie's eyes upon me.

He was sitting at the table in a halo of grey light. A beam of silvery dust bisected the room from two tiny windows facing each other. At the centre of the beam of light was Charlie's white head haloed in grey like a religious icon. He looked at me attentively, perplexed, a look full of questions.

I usually sleep naked and for a moment I thought I had taken off my clothes in my sleep. A quick look reassured me. I still had on my jeans and my sweatshirt, but I understood what intrigued and worried the old man, because I found myself in an unfortunate position, my nose buried in a mass of black, woolly fur, my arm draped over a warm body, and my hand in the curve of the animal's belly. I had slept with Chummy.

We quickly hauled ourselves out of bed, Chummy and I, to join Charlie, who had not said a word about this state of affairs. Instead he started reassuring me about the day ahead, a way of saying that good weather had returned and letting

me know that I no longer had any reason to hang about these parts.

But he invited me to stay for breakfast. The menu featured more potatoes, this time fried with diced bacon, and very sweet tea.

The conversation would not get off the ground; there was some kind of uneasiness. Charlie answered my questions with grunts. I am not easily defeated, but this time I had to accept that I was going to leave without getting anything out of Charlie, not even another trapping story. And then the miracle occurred.

The door opened and Tom walked in.

‘Sorry, I didn’t realize you had a fiancée.’

You could tell straight off where Tom came from. He didn’t need to tell his story. His voice, burnt by drink and cigarettes, attested to years spent hanging around in seedy joints. Large, bony, a few hairs scattered over a bald head, one eye steady and the other wandering – exactly the opposite of Charlie.

His good eye scanned the room, and when he found what he was looking for, a metal bucket that he overturned to make a seat, I realized I was sitting in his place.

‘What brings you to this neck of the woods, my lovely?’

I’m not the type of woman men spontaneously chat up. I have a build that commands respect and a stare that transforms the overly solicitous into a pillar of salt, but I was delighted with ‘my lovely,’ salacious chivalry from an old man who wanted to get across that he knew his way around women, and I leapt at it to bring me back to my quest, the Great Fires, Boychuck supposedly dead and buried, but who might still be found in perfect health somewhere in a cabin if I let the old man’s swaggering run away with him.

Tom had known neither the Great Fires nor the Boychuck who had roamed for days through the smoking rubble. 'Who do you take me for, Methuselah?' he said, planting his good eye on mine. 'I'm too young to know about things that happened before Noah. I'm the youngest one here.' In spite of his pretensions to youth, he told me the old tales I already knew, the woman who gave birth in the lake where the town had sought refuge, the other woman who had thrown herself into the wall of flames and the child who followed, and the woman of whom all that was found was a wedding band among the ashes. He told me about all this intertwined with his own stories, with no concern whether or not I believed them, as if to say, *if you don't believe me, it's because you haven't lived.*

From what he told me, I understood that he had been a gold smuggler, a dangerous occupation, if you can call it an occupation, similar to the young people of today who cross borders with cocaine hidden in their suitcases or their intestines. Tom regularly made the trip by train to Toronto and New York with gold nuggets tucked inside his guitar because he was also a musician, true or false I'll never know, just like the rest. There was a bit of everything that morning at Charlie's table. There were love stories. A woman cried out his name on a station platform, the train started moving, the woman was still crying out, a Russian princess who danced the flamenco at the hotel where he was performing and who held a little baby in the air while the train carried Tom away. And then, suddenly, his life became the life of the lame: he took a serious beating when he tried to go behind the back of the high grader who had hired him. He waited for the miners at the site office and had started to trade nuggets with them for himself when his employer's goons arrived.

'Don't believe me? How do you think I lost my eye?'

And while he continued – because his life didn't end with his infirmity, he had his legs broken, his ribs bashed in and one eye destroyed, but his heart was intact, he had other loves, other adventures – and while he told me about this incredible life, I asked myself who this man really was. He wasn't the sort to cling to the solitude of a cabin in the middle of the forest.

Charlie was watching me with an amused smile. He had been listening to Tom's stories for a long time, the truth and the lies, and no doubt wondered where I found myself in the mixed bag of tales.

They made an odd pair. Charlie, a big grumpy bear who had a hard time hiding the pleasure he took in the conversation, and tall raw-boned Tom, who was trying to hold my attention by any means.

What was this crank doing in the forest? Men who spend their lives steeping in grimy hotels normally grow old there. I have met broken-down old men, barely able to raise their glass, who live like shadows among the beer drinkers and feel right at home there. They have their table in a far corner, and from time to time someone will buy them a drink, other drinkers who feel like having an old man at their table. People ask them for their story, tease them, ride them a little and then forget about them. They retire at their regular time for a nap in their room, normally in the basement, a dark, damp room, often windowless, stinking of old socks and tobacco. They wouldn't know what to answer if asked if they are happy. Happiness is beside the point. They have their freedom and fear only the social worker who could come take it away from them. That's exactly what Tom answered when I asked him what brought him to the middle of nowhere.

'Freedom, sweetheart, the freedom to choose how you live.'

'And how you die,' Charlie added.

And they roared with laughter.

Tom had lived in one of those cavernous hotels. He swept up, washed glasses and chased flies. He had been given the title of caretaker, but that fooled no one. It was a way of sparing the pride of an honourable drinker who had seen better days. Tom had knocked back more than his share, mainly of scotch. *Scotch was my drink. I can still hear the ice tinkling in the glass. Just thinking about it gives me the shivers.* He was able to forget his age and get hammered like a young man. His binges lasted days and nights and ended in delirium and vomit. Which one day led to a coma, the hospital and a social worker. *A woman even huskier than you, if I may say so.* The rather ample social worker grew attached to the old man and that was the end of poor Tom's freedom. The even-huskier lady wanted him to be happy in a tidy little room at a seniors' home, and she waged a fierce battle to have his physical and mental decay, his alcohol-induced senility and his legal incapacity to manage his own affairs recognized. She even tracked down his two children, a greying man and woman who vaguely remembered having seen him during their childhood, to sign the papers.

'I was ready for the trash heap!'

'When he got here,' Charlie said, taking up the tale, 'he looked like a hare who had just outrun a pack of wolves.'

I didn't find out how he made it to this hideaway in the middle of the woods, except that the decision was swift and final.

'In two minutes, I had packed my bags and was on the road to freedom!'

And again he burst out laughing, accompanied by Charlie, who had abandoned any reserve and was letting go a throaty,

booming laugh. The two old men were giggling like kids at the idea of this blow against all the social workers of the world who wanted to lock up old men in old folks' homes.

Charlie had forgotten that he was mad at me for having slept with his dog, and his eyes were almost smiling when they looked at me. He got up to put water on to boil, and while he rummaged in his pots and pans, Tom launched into a volley of digs and diversions as if he were back in one of the hotels where he had made a career as a drunken clown, and I alone was playing a room full of people laughing.

'You see that old guy playing the housewife? Well, he's not really there. He's a ghost. He's been dead for fifteen years. What did you call it again, Charlie?'

'Kidney failure.'

'Kidney failure, that's what the doctor told him, and three sessions of what? To die slowly but surely?'

'Hemodialysis, three sessions of hemodialysis a week.'

'That was three too many, and Charlie here tipped his hat to all the nice folks who wanted to help him, and that's how come he's here today making us tea. I don't suppose you have any sugar cookies, do you, Charlie?'

They would have gone on that way, and between the two of them I would have heard Charlie's story had I not seemed so interested in the conversation. Tom's eye narrowed to the point of becoming a black slit, while the other, the wandering one, went off in every direction to finally light upon me.

'You're not from the government, I hope?'

I asked myself which of the two was alive, Tom's eyes I mean, if the marble eye was the good one or whether I should follow the one that was wandering. This man had more than one trick up his sleeve. He was capable of great tomfoolery, but make no mistake, behind the clowning was a cunning old fox, and the wandering eye could very well

have been the one that ransacked your insides while the steady eye held your attention.

'Because if you're government, I might as well tell you right now, you'll find nothing here. As far as anybody's concerned, we don't exist anymore.'

The time had come to tip my hand – my bag – and to show them the photos in my portfolio, otherwise I was going to lose the trust I had earned. I normally save this moment for the end of the meeting, when I sense that I have to leave a mark for the next one. The photo session takes place at the second visit. The subject has had time to sift through memories and secretly wants me to come back. Nobody can resist the idea of being the centre of somebody else's attention. The most stubborn old man turns as smooth as honey when he sees me coming the second time. I arrive with my gear. My tripod, my Wista with bellows and my dark cloth. I take photos the old-fashioned way, for the precision of the grain that seeks out the light in the creases of the flesh and for its ceremonial slowness.

My portfolio has around a hundred pictures, portraits for the most part, but also snapshots taken off the cuff with my Nikon, the sole purpose of which is to tame the subject at our first meeting.

Charlie recognized no one in my photos, but Tom spotted a few acquaintances. A woman with eyes a delicate shade of blue, Mary Gyokery, whom he had met on a friend's arm. Peter Langford, a tall rack of skin and bones who had been a champion boxer. Andrew Ross, his eyes veiled with cataracts, a toothless smile, who kept me for a full day in his small two-and-a-half telling me about the four hours he spent in Porcupine Lake while the town burned. Samuel Dufaux, the miracle survivor, who was discovered in a stream splashing about with a dog that had been placed in his care. His

mother had run to the house to help her husband fight the fire. Dead, both of them. Tom had known Dufaux as an adult, rich and partying. He had just discovered a copper vein and was celebrating at the hotel where Tom played guitar. He had pockets stuffed with money and plenty of friends around, and he woke up the next morning with nothing left. No money, but happy. He could go back to sampling rock in the woods.

‘And Boychuck? Was he a prospector too?’

I already knew that Boychuck had sampled rock for a time, but the opportunity was too good to pass up.

Tom’s eyes almost came together.

‘Ted is dead, sweetheart, just last week. I still have the blisters on my hands from digging his grave.’

Blisters on his hands, give me a break. These old guys had palms that were callused to the bone. A few hours of shovelling wasn’t going to do them any harm.

I couldn’t help a little smile. That’s what convinced them, my sceptical smile, to take me to where they had buried Boychuck. To satisfy my curiosity and then, adios visitor, I would have to go back to where I came from. Nothing was said, but it was understood.

So we left in a procession, Tom, Charlie, me and their two dogs, because Tom had his as well, a golden lab by the name of Drink, in memory of the tinkle of ice.

We walked along the shore of the lake for about a hundred metres, and then we headed back into the forest on a well-cut trail, machete marks still fresh and the ground almost smooth. It was like walking on carpet.

A dog came to meet us. It was a strange one, a less-than-successful mix of malamute and Labrador, but most of all it was the animal’s eyes that weren’t quite right, one steel blue and the other velvet brown. I felt like I was being watched

by a third eye planted in the centre of the malamute's arabesque forehead.

'Kino, Ted's dog,' Tom said by way of introduction.

At the end of the trail, the dogs ran to a cabin surrounded, like Charlie's, with a collection of constructions. It was an enchanting spot. The hill that sloped gently to the lake was covered with a potent green, a forest of conifers that absorbed the light of the beautiful sunny morning and scattered it like a long tranquil river. The calm was majestic. The island of shacks, nestled in a large clearing of forest at the foot of the hill, had something movingly fragile about it: a small observation post with its back to the ramparts of the forest, with the great expanse of lake laid before it. I imagined Boychuck's mornings spent contemplating all this.

What they pointed out to me as his grave could well have been just that. The earth had been recently disturbed in an area that could have accommodated a man of average height, but there was nothing to indicate that anyone had been buried there. No cross, no inscription, nothing that could have testified to the presence of someone buried below and, what made me doubt Boychuck's body was there, a complete lack of reverence on the part of the two old men. They lit a cigarette and talked quietly between themselves. They raised no objection when the dogs took turns lying along the rectangle of funereal earth.

It was time to go. There was no longer any reason to linger. Nevertheless, I asked how he died.

'He just reached his expiration date,' Tom answered. 'At our age, that's how you die.'

There were no goodbyes. They let me leave with no other send-off than a wave of the hand when I turned toward them before taking the trail back to my pickup. Chummy, the only civilized one in the bunch, accompanied me as far as the

trail. I had time to take a few pictures before Charlie called him back.

On the way back, I tried to imagine the thoughts running through poor Charlie's mind. I had called out to him that I would bring him the pictures of his dog. He thought he was rid of me, and now he had to contemplate a next time.

I got lost on the way back. My landlord's directions from two days prior were no longer as clear, and I got confused in a tangle of paths that led me to a lake bathed in light, the same lake that welcomed my aged friends each morning, along the shore of which ran a road in compact, solid sand that led me in a straight line back to the forsaken hotel.

My innkeeper had made a mistake. He had made me drive a long loop of needless kilometres to the west when there was this road to the east that led directly to Boychuck and his companions.

They had a protector, a man who fielded questions from travellers, spouting nonsense, sending them on wild goose chases. He was the gatekeeper of their hideaway. I was both intrigued and moved by such precautions to protect a free, hardscrabble life in the middle of the forest.

Boychuck or no Boychuck, I knew I would be back.