

JOCELYNE SAUCIER

translated by Rhonda Mullins

AUTHOR AND
TRANSLATOR OF
*AND THE BIRDS
RAINED DOWN*

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CANADA READS
SELECTION



TWENTY-ONE
CARDINALS

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for Gilles

When the old coot with the nicotine-stained teeth asked the question, I knew we were headed back to the good ol' days.

I have no problem with that. I love it when I feel our family slip into the conversation and I know someone is going to ask the question.

My family has always fascinated me and given me a leg up in conversations. We're nothing like other families. We are self-made. We are an essence unto ourselves, unique and dissonant, the only members of our species. Livers of humdrum lives who flitted around us got their wings burned. We're not mean, but we can bare our teeth. People didn't hang around when a band of Cardinals made its presence known.

'There were how many of you?'

The question invokes tales of wonder, and I have wonder to spare. I don't know if I manage to conceal my pride when I hear them repeat in a chorus, stunned, in awe:

'Twenty-one? Twenty-one kids?'

The other questions come on the heels of the first, always the same ones, or pretty much. How did we manage meals? How big was the table? (It's always a woman who wants to know.) Where did we live? How many bedrooms were there? What was Christmas like? The start of a new school year? A new baby? And your mother, wasn't she worn out from carrying all those children?

So I tell them. About the house our father had moved from Perron to Norcoville after he discovered the mine. The four kitchens, the four living rooms, the four tiny bathrooms – which

we called the wc, for *water closet*, because there was no bath or sink. It was a house made up of four apartments; our father had merely broken down the walls. I lay it on thick. The two dozen eggs in the morning, the hundred pounds of potatoes in the cellar, the morning battles to find our boots, the evening battles for a place in front of the tv, the constant battles for nothing, for fun, out of habit. The good ol' days.

I tell them everything I've been told. I missed the best part of our family's life, when we were Big, when we were pretty much all still at home and had stars in our eyes about what awaited us once we left Norco one by one and set off to conquer the world. The era of Geronimo, Big Yellow, Tommy, El Toro. The 1960s. The mine was closed, Norco was crumbling, the houses were disappearing – they were either moved or we had burnt them down – scrub was taking over the cement foundations, weeds ate away at the pot-holed roads. We reigned over Norco, which should have been called Cardinal, because it was our father who discovered the zinc that was extracted from the mine, and they stole it from him.

I wasn't yet born when the mine closed. There was dismay, dejection and wailing from the shacks, but not at our house. This was our moment. Northern Consolidated had just been tripped up by international finance and was being dragged along behind the plummeting price of zinc. It had reached the bottom and wet itself. We weren't going to shed any tears. Our mine had been returned to us.

I was born one year later, a pointy-headed runt, which necessarily made me the last, the twenty-first, nicknamed the Caboose. When my father saw the howling bag of bones in the cradle (because of the forceps? because I was marring his lineage?), he decided there would be no more.

The last one, the Caboose, always being carted around on hips, on shoulders, passed hand to hand, constantly howling,

screaming and crying, afraid of being left behind somewhere. Good lord, how I wailed and cried! I think about it and I can still feel my larynx tighten, wanting to open up, the burning air of a cry that swelled, expanded, built to pierce the highest note and persisted even once someone had grabbed me by the collar or the sleeve and dragged me along to wherever they were all going, a great throng of Cardinals big and small, ready to tackle another outrageous plan.

I wasn't really crying. I was protesting. Protesting being so small, so frail and so defenceless. Being so unlike a Cardinal. The others ran errands in minus-thirty-degree weather, barefoot in the snow, while I had a toque jammed down over my ears as soon as the slightest cool weather hit in the fall, because of recurrent ear infections. They would compare their frostbite the next day, and I was asked to palpate the swollen soles of their feet to see who had the best blisters from the cold. They would limp for a few days, but if one of them grimaced in pain, the others would burst out laughing.

They were thin, but with muscles and nerves stretched taut, as if they were ready to pounce, always on alert, at the starting line of a race or watching for prey they would make short work of.

We were a race of conquerors. Of those who do not bend or break, of those who follow their instinct, who spread their wings wide and fly in the face of fear. We were the kings of Norco.

I was under their wing, and I had nothing to fear but being forgotten in the fray. There were so many of us.

Sometimes we would head out in a group of eight or ten. We would be off to set fire to an abandoned house, hunt small critters or whatever else. They would never tell me. And then, all of a sudden, without me knowing why, the group would split up. Three or four would follow El Toro or Tintín or Big Yellow, while the others ran through the dry grass, and I would be left alone in a huge field dotted with the remains of homes. I

would feel space distend and a cry of panic scratch at my throat. Often, I wouldn't even have yelled yet, and I would hear: 'Grab the Caboose!' It was usually Tintin. He would realize that I had become separated from the expedition and send Wapiti or one of the Weewuns to my rescue.

I was five, maybe six, and the town seemed to go on forever. Yet I simply had to stand on the sheet metal roof of the dynamite shed, which we would slide down winter and summer, and I could see the entire expanse of it. From the disused fire station that gleamed white in the sun (it was built just before the mine closed) to the flimsy hovels scattered along the forest's edge, there were three large, square, grassy plots of land and, lost in the desolation, a few houses in ruins or well on their way. It was the same when you looked along the other axis: space, tall grass, grey asphalt roads full of potholes, a few forsaken buildings and, just about anywhere you looked, the mounds left by houses that had been transported elsewhere: the cement foundations, the sagging sheds, the body of a car that didn't want to follow. And sometimes, lo and behold, a smart, tidy house cultivating flowers and hubris. Like the Potvins', which had once been the city hall. Just two children. The son was going to college, the daughter to the convent, and their mother played the organ at church. Rich people we cheerfully despised.

Norco had shrunk since the closing of the mine. There had once been a movie theatre, two garages, restaurants, grocery stores. All that was left was the fire station, the rink with its shelter for the benches, the church and its presbytery, a restaurant/corner store/post office, and, the thing that always surprises people when I tell them, two hotels and three schools.

The schools tell the tale of what people had hoped for from Norco. A mining town that would attract prosperity, longevity and happiness for its children. The dream didn't last, and we had to make do with disillusionment and three large, handsome red

brick schools. And so every morning, a dozen school buses brought children from neighbouring villages. They were the children of hicks, who had to milk cows and muck out stables, untrained in the art of idleness, no taste for freedom. They let themselves be saddled and ridden, and they were ours for the day.

I hesitate here when I tell the story, because often I'm speaking to people who had childhoods similar to those of the hicks.

We weren't the local bullies. We didn't go about insulting people, tripping them, bloodying noses. Of course, we wouldn't walk away from a good fight – hand-to-hand battle, like a duel. Eye to eye, muscles raging, well-landed blows imparted and received, the pain that makes you even angrier. It was intoxicating.

Nor were we the sort to pull down little girls' panties or steal marbles. We were the kings. The real deal. We wanted so much from ourselves and from life that everything around us seemed pathetic.

So the hicks, with their dull minds, their diligent understanding of nothing at all and their general insignificance, were a constant source of wonder. We couldn't stop marvelling at their stupidity and our intelligence.

Geronimo was the smartest. Pure, distilled Cardinal. The story goes that he was the one who started the anti-hick commandos, the bear blasting and the festival of cats. When I manage to get someone talking (we aren't talkative, except for me, who is always trying to bring the conversation 'round to our life in Norco), I can be sure Geronimo will show up at the climax of the story and, no matter who is doing the telling, I always know it will end the same way, in the same admiring tone: 'He was the smartest Cardinal.'

He was just thirteen or fourteen when he started accompanying our father to his claims. He would leave at the crack of dawn, his prospecting gear in a yellow canvas bag slung over his shoulder, gesturing with his hand to everyone at the breakfast

table – a gesture meant mainly for the older ones to mark the distance that separated them now that he was roaming the woods with our father. He would come back late at night, dirty, beat, famished, and if he had to go back to school the next day, he would retreat into a sullen funk. He dropped out in Grade 9.

No one took offence when our father made him his assistant. He was the smartest, but also, as Mustang once told me, he was the one most interested in rocks. ‘He had been studying rocks long before he was chosen. As soon as he saw the Old Man head down to the basement, he would follow him and stay there for hours watching him inspect and scratch his samples. You could hear them talking, Geronimo asking questions and the Old Man explaining.’

I often went down to the basement to daydream about our father discovering an incredible mine from one of his rocks. He had hundreds and hundreds of them, labelled and categorized by origin in baskets piled on planks hanging askew along the west wall. What I saw fuelled my admiration for our father. I knew nothing of rhyolite, galenite, copper pyrites, all the precious words written in his own hand, but I liked to read them and imagine that he was sharing his secrets with me.

I never would have been as bold as Geronimo. To go down into the basement while our father was there and ask him to explain it to me. He was so solitary, and we were so many that I found it hard to imagine he would have time for me.

I would tremble with emotion if he happened to lay his hand on my shoulder. So imagining that he might have a private conversation with me . . .

Besides, I had an unpleasant memory of the only time I had been alone with our father. Alone is relative, of course. There were about fifteen of us there at the time. It was my birthday. I was turning seven, the age of reason, the age when our father introduced us to dynamite.

There were the Weewuns, the Twins, and then Tintin, El Toro, Big Yellow, Zorro, Mustang – anyone the Big Kids had called the Middle Kids and who, since they had left, had become the Big Kids for the Little Kids, the Weewuns. The Old Maid was one of them. Geronimo too. They still lived at home, which was unusual for their age, particularly the Old Maid who, if I do the math, was twenty-three years old and who, rather than having a husband and two or three rug rats, stood in for our mother, our real mother being too busy with her pots and pans, too busy, in fact, to be at the ceremony. And, of course, there was our father.

He initiated his children to dynamite at the sand quarry. The festivities began as soon as we left the house. We would pile into our father's van, an old 1950s Ford, and since it was already filled with all of his drill steels, pickaxes, shovels and bags of rocks, we couldn't all fit, so it was a question of who would have the honour of travelling on the hood, on the back bumper or hanging on to the door, one foot on the running board and the other left dangling to heighten the pleasure. We would shout ourselves hoarse the whole way, singing and chanting lord knows what, our father joining in on the racket with the horn, a rare and delicious moment in our family life when he would wake from his reverie and join us in our brazenness.

I was seated to his right, a place of honour reserved for me because of the day, and my heart was seized with worry. I wasn't afraid of the dynamite, really; it was the long, close contact with our father with the others looking on that scared me.

I was familiar with the ritual. It was repeated for each of our birthdays. Fall offered the most opportunities for blasting because of the birthdays of Tootsie, Mustang, Wapiti and the Twins, but there were only two in the winter (my favourites: the geyser of snow that fell back to the ground in a glittering spray was

pure magic), and mine would come with the thaw, just before the festival of cats.

I knew how to handle dynamite; we all did, even without having been introduced to it and without having seen it up close. Our father made an imaginary circle with his arm that pushed us back about ten feet, leaving the inside of the circle to him and the initiate, so that we would see only their backs bent over the details of the operation. It was afterwards, back at home, that we learned – it was the initiate’s duty to explain everything: how they had punctured the stick and spliced the blasting cap, chose the length of fuse and, then, the most delicate and terrifying part of the operation, how they had managed to push the cap into the end so as to protect the fuse line. But of our father’s murmuring, what he had said as their bodies brushed against one another in the middle of the magic circle, the initiate said nothing. Everyone kept that private conversation to themselves. It was a birthday gift.

I will always remember the first words my father spoke to me in the circle.

‘Are you scared?’

He was smiling his little half smile, and I, too young to recognize male bonding, thought I had to be a man and answer no.

‘You should be. If you’re not scared of dynamite, you’re a dead man. I’m still more scared of dynamite than I am of lawyers. Many a time it’s saved my life. Fear is important.’

Fear. The fear of finding yourself on a rock outcrop when lightning strikes. The fear of selling your shares in a mine too soon. The fear of a fuse that has absorbed humidity. Prudent fear, mistrustful fear, intuitive fear. ‘Fear is important. You have to listen to it.’ He confided his fears in me to help me overcome my own.

I should have felt reassured, but it was the first time I had to sustain a conversation with our father. At that moment, he

became *my* father, mine, and it was too great an honour for a boy of seven. I was simultaneously puffed up with pride and paralyzed with humility, tangled up in my emotions and my words, and suddenly I know longer knew what a cartridge, a blasting cap or a fuse was. His patience was endless; he repeated his explanations, replayed his gestures, always with these words of advice: 'Take your time. If there's one thing dynamite hates, it's haste, and humidity, and a shock. Dynamite is skittish. You need to take precautions.' And I discovered the smell of his breath, the texture of his skin, the feel of his calloused hands and his gentle presence.

I think I got through it without incident, except for the fuse. It had to be cut on a bias, and I trimmed it nice and straight and clean. It was the last thing to be done before lighting it, and I was distracted by everyone looking at us.

My blast wasn't the most spectacular. Too much frozen aggregate combined with loose material. From the row of spruce trees where we had all taken cover, you could see the sand fly up amid chunks that fell in a splash of blackened snow. It was disorderly, jumbled, a bit clownish. Nothing like summer or winter blasts, which sent huge petals shooting up from the ground, superbly and distinctly outlined, forming a cloud in the sky, coming back down in a light drizzle.

And then, when the blast had finished echoing through the silence of the forest, my father struck up my birthday song, *Happy birthday to you*, his fluty voice getting lost amid the others who sang in a chorus *Happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Denis*. Our father always called us by our given names, ignoring the nicknames we had for each other. I jumped when I heard them sing my first name, which had dropped out of use in our family.

That was my only blast at the sand quarry. After that, there was the accident at the mine, and we stopped dynamiting there.

The story of my initiation to dynamite is a big hit in conversations. People cry: 'Seven years old and he let you play with dynamite!' They protest: 'You're not serious!' They exclaim, they are scandalized, but they ask me again: 'Who planted the stick of dynamite in the sand, you or your father?' Particularly the women, the ones with two or three kids, and the busybody mothers who want to hide their disapproval and think they are being subtle: 'And what did your mother think about all this?'

Our mother didn't have time. She would prepare a birthday meal, and we barely saw her behind her enormous table, the fatigue of an entire life making her invisible. But the absent figure of our mother offends these ladies; they don't understand, so I always tell them that she left us to it, which is pretty much true.

There are plenty of parts of our story that I can't tell. People are too narrow-minded to accept such a lust for life. We don't belong to the same species. We never wanted their lives, and I can see in their eyes that our defiance sends them scurrying back to their doghouses with their tails between their legs the minute a particularly Cardinal episode comes up. Over the years, I have figured out which things are the most remarkable, and I don't pour it on any thicker. I stick close to what's deemed acceptable.

I don't tell the story of Geronimo with the stick of dynamite against his chest. I don't want to see – as I have seen reflected in their sidelong, sticky eyes – Geronimo, savage and cruel, standing in front of the school bus that took the hicks back to Hurault, challenging that girl (her name was Caroline) by stroking the tip of the fuse on the stick of dynamite that was jutting out of his windbreaker pocket.

He was in love with another girl, and this Caroline had been ruining it by telling anyone who would listen for the previous three days that he had tried to kiss her. He was twelve years old, already savvy with dynamite, but not so savvy in love, and he was miserable.

Geronimo wasn't the horrible bloodthirsty beast that I can see reflected in their pathetic mongrel eyes. He just wanted to get that hick Caroline to admit she had lied. And he would have gone back, day after day, in front of the Hurault bus, with his stick of dynamite conspicuously hidden in the pocket of his windbreaker, if the story hadn't reached our principal's ears. She summoned Geronimo to her office, along with the schoolyard monitor who, by unhappy coincidence, was the Old Maid. She made it clear to both of them that a monitor couldn't tolerate such conduct.

Geronimo would never have given in, and the principal knew it, if the Old Maid's job hadn't been at stake.

'My job as a schoolyard monitor meant more to me than anything. Geronimo knew it. I used the money from my shifts to buy clothes, and I helped the Old Lady out when she was short for groceries. You know how proud she was of her cooking.'

The Old Maid told me a lot more of this story than she had meant to, during one of our conversations about what our family had been. But she never revealed the name of the girl who had stolen Geronimo's heart. She wasn't even pretty, but she had the beauty of the devil deep in her eyes. That was all I could drag out of her.

Would he have done it? That was a question she wouldn't answer, and to distract me from the stick of dynamite, she told me about things I hadn't asked about.

He would have done it, although what, exactly, I don't think even he knew.

A young warrior – that's how I picture him – a young warrior who didn't know where to thrust his sword, but who was valiantly determined to have his love story.

The Old Maid smiled at the image.

'Except that time, the young warrior didn't win the duel for love. His beloved left Norco a little while later. Her father found work, somewhere else of course, and the family followed.'

The Old Maid is our second mother. She took care of us from the cradle and continues to watch over us. We are at either ends of the family spectrum. Her at the front of the line, the eldest girl, and me at the back. Time could have separated us even more, but whenever my work takes me to Val-d'Or, we meet at the Tim Hortons over a coffee and two doughnuts, and we continue our family odyssey, me a fan in the front row and her trying her hardest not to enjoy it.

I sense her resistance, a knot that tightens and keeps me from traipsing wherever I like. She keeps me on a leash; I can feel it. I can't go farther than her reticence and silence will allow. There is a secret place that she keeps me away from with all her might.

We are always happy to see each other, though. It is incredibly and joyously invigorating, the pleasure of being among Cardinals again. We get so few opportunities. Life has scattered us around the globe.

Émilien is in Australia. He's done a bunch of different jobs that have made him rich. He is the eldest, the Patriarch, as he was once called. We also called him Stan, Stanley and Siscoe, because of an old story about Stanley Siscoe's wad of cash. But none of the nicknames we gave him stuck: he was too remote, too old, practically an uncle.

Big Yellow is fighting fascism, imperialism, injustice and all of that in South America. I last saw him five years ago. He was on his way to Frankfurt, supposedly for a conference on international aid. I didn't believe him. I think he's an arms dealer. That's what the Old Maid thinks too.

Mustang has been on the move since his first divorce, Tommy is lying low somewhere in Ungava, Nefertiti exists only by cell-phone and there is no point trying to get Tintin to leave behind his life of poverty. We see each other in groups of two or three, never all at once. We haven't had a family reunion since Norco.

So when I saw everyone walk into the lobby of the Quatre-Temps one after the other, I thought this was it, our family reunion, the great Cardinal celebration I had spent thirty years hoping for.

The Quatre-Temps is a long, depressing building with tentacles that reach out into the spruce forest at the southern limit of Val-d'Or. Inside, it's all fake leather, fake oak and fake smiles. It tries to create the illusion of a luxury hotel. This is where the prospectors' conference is held every year, in this labyrinth of corridors and illusion. This is where, I hope, the wonder that is my family will be returned to me.

They all came. I don't know how the word got around. The Old Maid was the one who had told me about it. Last month, at the Tim Hortons. In fact it was the first thing she said, she was so excited.

'Prospector Emeritus? They're going to give him the Prospector of the Year medal?'

I didn't understand. Our father was still prospecting, of course, but at eighty-one years old, he wasn't what he once was. When I visit him in his little bungalow (an abomination, I still can't get used to it) and I go down to his finished basement (another abomination) where, inevitably, I find him gripping his cane but busy with his maps, books and rock samples brought from Norco, he is, and to my eyes shall remain, the only truly great prospector in the world. Even though he is no longer out in the field, even though he has swapped pickaxe and compass for the phone, even in slippers and a wool cardigan in his chilly basement, he is still the man we would see coming home from his claims, late in the evening, with the smell of the forest on him, a tired silence and, in his eyes, the metallic glint of the vein waiting for him in the bowels of the earth.

But Prospector Emeritus for 1995? I still don't understand. He hasn't discovered anything important since 1944, since

the zinc deposit that Northern Consolidated deftly stole from him.

And I don't understand what happened to us at the prospectors' conference either.

I arrived in the Quatre-Temps lobby before the others. I wanted to watch them walk in. Most of all, I wanted to see who would come. I had passed along the news to many of them, hoping they would spread the word, but I never thought it would make it around the world.

I hadn't seen some of them since Norco. Geronimo, for instance. After Norco, he went back to school and hadn't wavered from his goal. He got his doctorate in medicine, specializing in vascular surgery and orthopedics, all from a Grade 9 education, and by age thirty-nine he had embarked on an illustrious career as a war surgeon. Chad, Ethiopia, Chechnya: he had been to all the world's hot spots. A latter-day Bethune of sorts. He had never taken out tonsils. I saw him on TV a few years ago being interviewed about Afghanistan. The jet black hair, the ashen complexion, the eye of a jaguar – I would have recognized him anywhere. He was pure Cardinal.

I didn't recognize the Twins. They had faded with time. Carmelle and Angèle. Tommy and the Twin, as we called them. Tommy, because she could strike a trout like nobody's business, because she was our best right winger in hockey and our pride and joy in jiu-jitsu, a real tomboy, the neighbours liked to say. And to show them we couldn't care less what they thought and that she belonged to us, we called her Tommy. The Twin? Because ... there were so many of us, some just went unnoticed.

They had aged from the inside. They had curdled, withdrawn. They were impenetrable. They could have been any woman nearing fifty. I hadn't seen them since Norco, and it took El Toro saying, 'Hey, there's Tommy,' before I could pick out which gloomy, sullen woman was my sister.

To see one was to see the other, they looked so much alike. But I didn't see them together once during the conference. It was as if they were avoiding each other.

As soon as the conference started, it felt as though my family was slipping through my fingers. Already, in the lobby, as they arrived one after the other, Cardinals gathering near the front desk, I felt an edginess, a desire to slip away. I saw Big Yellow and Yahoo sneak off to their rooms.

The uneasiness grew as more of them arrived. There was the joy of seeing each other again, of course, the outpouring of cries and thumps on the back, happy reunions, as I had hoped. But the eyes of each new arrival showed a flash of panic as our numbers grew near the front desk. Between the cries and back thumps, some deserted, going off to their rooms, and others slipped away to the bar or the restaurant. There were only five of us left at the front desk when our parents made their entrance.

It was like chasing shadows that won't stand still. I went from one to the other, running, searching, but the shadows slipped away, the groups broke up, and I would find myself alone with an interrupted conversation, my heart in my hands.

It was as if we were repelling each other. As if, above the Quatre-Temps, a giant, crazed magnet were playing with us. As if, after all these years, we couldn't stand to be together.

There was a moment of grace that broke the evil spell. An incredible image that no one could resist, a moment when we were all drawn to an extraordinary scene, at the centre of the Quatre-Temps exhibition hall. Our father, in front of a state-of-the-art computer, talking about cross-referencing geographical data and satellite images with the young technician, was translating the short young man's coded language for two prospector friends seated beside him, who were chewing on their astonishment. It was a thing to behold.

I heard El Toro say behind me, 'He's never touched a computer in his life!'

We were shocked and amazed.

The diminutive technician, who was just as dumbfounded, was offering explanations and giving instructions, and our father was executing them, his awkward fingers stumbling over the keyboard, as what they had agreed upon appeared on the screen. A prodigy, a genius as he headed to the other exhibition booths, trailing a crowd of curious onlookers behind him.

I was in the front row, between Big Yellow and Magnum. Behind us, beside El Toro, was the Old Maid. I heard her offer by way of explanation, 'He learned from books. You should see all the computer books he has in his basement.'

Wapiti, a bit further back, begged to differ.

'That's cutting-edge technology. He couldn't have learned that from books.'

I hadn't yet realized that we were all there.

Our semi-circle around the computer grew smaller under the crush of the crowd. At one point, I was ejected from the arc and pushed against the chair of one of the old prospectors, the old coot with the nicotine-stained teeth. He leaned in toward our father and said, 'Albert, you have company.'

Our father, eyes wide from the strain of looking at the screen, turned to us. I followed his eyes and realized that the family had gathered around him.

I had recognized the other old prospector right away. He used to come to Norco from time to time. I recognized the scar among the folds of his skin. 'A mother bear defending her cubs,' he had told us when, as kids, we climbed on him to plunge our fingers into the purplish gash of the wound. But he wasn't sure whether he recognized us.

'They're your kids? All of them? Yours?'

Senility, no doubt. How could he not recognize us?