



Élise Turcotte

*translated by
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She became a ghost. What is a ghost? A being that puts you under its spell? That you can't escape? How did she disappear? Is there even an answer to that question?

– Åke Edwardson

The Wings of Invention

There was still something I needed to sort out.

School was ending soon, my year of battle would end with it, and I wanted everything to be perfect. But there was something nagging at me, making me feel like I hadn't finished my homework. The slightest stumbling block can foretell dark days to come. But I was born to survive, as others are born to thrive in absence or in the hereafter.

I dialled the number, swearing it would be my last try.

I had been calling for three days, with no answer, not even Harriet's recorded voice. I was starting to get annoyed. It was a business, after all, and I was a good customer.

Why weren't they answering?

One last try. Then I would hang up for good.

Except I couldn't.

I listened to the ringing with the attention of a soldier awaiting orders.

And then the dread of something more final started to insinuate itself in me. The ringing started to reverberate inside me as if I were in an empty room, on the eve of a departure.

Maybe the hair salon was closed, but that didn't seem likely. I realized that if anything had happened to her, I would never know. If she had gone to work somewhere else, I wouldn't be able to find her. I didn't even know her last name. I had never asked.

Philippe wanted an appointment with Kimi and that was that. His hair was sticking out in tufts at the back of his neck, and he didn't like it. His obsession was going to take him over, and soon he would feel like a metamorphosis had begun. His own body was a source of so many questions: his body, the world – leaving him feeling like he was being sucked up by an unknown force.

That morning he had asked me to call one more time.

'My hair, Mom,' he pleaded.

I was dreading the moment when I would have to tell him that we might have to find someone else.

Philippe's hair is a serious matter. More serious still is accepting the touch of a stranger. Kimi understood that at our first appointment. Her gestures naturally moulded to Philippe's standoffish ways. We were both grieving, and Kimi had a gift: with just one look, she wrapped us in gentle certainty. She immediately became one of the new markers we were counting on to help us get on with our lives.

The scene had unfolded the same way for over a year:

She would sit him in the chair, gently drape his shoulders in the black cape that he would pull down over his thighs to smooth out the folds while she fastened the snap at the neck. I would stand behind them, and she would shoot me a glance in the mirror, smiling, and make a comment about Philippe's big eyes. The haircut had to bring out his eyes. Once she started cutting, I would sit down beside them. I would swivel in the chair and flip through magazines. Hair would fall onto the beige linoleum. Philippe would relax. I would talk to Kimi. Was Philippe listening? I didn't know. He would study his face in the mirror, watch the hairdresser's gestures, sometimes show a hint of a smile. He would sit up tall and stay quiet. More like concentrated, really, as if on a math problem. At the end, when Kimi would take the electric shaver from the drawer, we would both be silent. How I would have loved to run the shaver over his whole head. Philippe would brace himself a bit at the buzzing. Things slip, don't they? Hands can grow weak, and composure can vanish under a drop of blood behind the ear. But then, no, the haircut was done. Kimi would warm the gel a little in the palm of her hand. Despite Philippe's wary eye, she would ruffle his hair. This was too much for him, but he was too proud not to let her. Then he would remove the cape, suddenly in a hurry to be off. Aside from Kimi, nothing could keep us in the salon. I would go on talking to her while she swept up the fallen hair. This was my

favourite part: the broom gliding gently over the floor, the hair gathered into a pile, a compact blotch you want to touch. But you don't. Touching it would be like sullyng your hands with something freshly dead. I prefer things that are properly done, clean, in a neat pile. This was why I didn't like hanging around too long in the salon, which was anything but neat and tidy. When the ball of hair was neatly tucked against the wall, I would pay and follow Philippe out.

This scene was an enclave of peace in a series of more complicated efforts for Philippe and me: the decision, the phone call, the bike ride, how to position the bike locks, who should open the door. . . People have no idea the discussions that can go on in accomplishing a series of mundane tasks with a child. We also had to walk through the wall of young locals hanging around on the sidewalk in front of the salon, or sitting lined up in chairs, as if in a movie set in a village in the West Indies. I say this because of Kimi. I can almost see the colour of the weather change, from grey-white or cold blue to a warmer hue. I'm arranging the landscape of history a little.

But the landscape I'm creating seems truer today than it did before. The hair salon with its uninviting storefront, the little dead-end street: a storyline was already moving in a certain direction. Of course, the young men were part of the decor. They were probably even some of the key players in the story, but I had never bothered to find out who they were, except for one. Once we made it through the wall, I would try not to think about it anymore. But the uneasiness was real: it was as though no one there, aside from Kimi, cared whether there were customers.

Philippe was at school. It was a lovely day in May, one of those days that make you think summer might finally be coming. Tomorrow, there was the chess tournament, and Philippe wanted to concentrate on his moves, not on the hair tickling the back of his neck like a swarm of small, famished mosquitoes. Days that were different from others were always like a time bomb for him. The anxiety

eventually spread to me. It was contagious. No one ever tells you that you can catch madness from children, but you can. Parents have to keep their distance from it, people do say that. The distance that you need to put between you and another person's pain. Pretty certain statements for such an imperfect world.

I left the house and got my bike. Maybe the phone wasn't working. Maybe the salon was closed. I would know soon enough.

Winding through the neighbourhood's oldest streets, I was struck by how tall and green the trees were. I had lived in this neighbourhood as a young girl, and there were no trees back then. As a child, that's how I thought of the city: no trees, no water; plastic animals running along the sidewalks. The noise of planes taking off and landing at Dorval Airport. And the daily clash between the English and the French. The clash had become more complicated. The violence was palpable, child's play no more. The planes still made life miserable in the summer, but the city was divided into two more distinct sections than before: the section for the very poor and the section for the middle class. The nouveau riche were starting to build houses west of the aerospace plant, and to the east ghettos were forming: children of immigrants from the West Indies who had left Côte-des-Neiges to live here.

The salon was in a sort of no man's land: a curving street between the city's two worlds, right near the metro station where it was becoming increasingly dangerous to venture. There was also a clothing store and a small café that played Jamaican music and served smoked carp and crab oil. Kimi had told me about it. I had never been. You had to have good reason to get a haircut at Salon Joli Coif. Or you went there for lack of options, like me. The storefront was practically in ruins, and the tired decor looked like something from the past. Two old hood dryers awaited somewhat dubious-looking customers. Harriet herself sported one of those backcombed do's from the 1960s, her hair dyed a coppery blond. You could picture middle-aged women looking apprehensive under the hairdryers,

and Harriet lifting the domes one after the other to check on hair rolled tight in curlers. Thankfully, Kimi was there, smiling, slender, barely five feet tall, hair cut short, amber brown skin, shining green eyes – a real beauty, completely of our time. She was also the only one who spoke decent French in the tiny world of the curving street. The language was losing ground again, particularly in the western part of the island of Montreal. So she was always the one who greeted us, Philippe and me. In fact, I think we were her only French-speaking customers. Harriet worked the next chair and listened without taking part in our conversation – otherwise she stayed in the back of the salon, apparently unavailable. But from what I understood, she and Kimi came from the same region, and it was what had drawn them together in spite of their differences. But Kimi looked as open, young and cheerful as Harriet did disillusioned.

When I got to Rue McDonald, I saw that yellow police tape had been stretched in front of the salon. I leaned my bike against the wall a little further along. I approached, slowly; I was afraid of what I would find, and at the same time I wasn't surprised in the least. The sun was blinding, and to see anything I had to press my face up against the window, using both hands as a visor. The salon was empty. My phone call had probably cut through the silence that appeared to reign inside. It was even duller and greyer than usual in there.

I sat down on the sidewalk. I had to calm down. The street was deserted too. Where were the young men? Maybe they had been selling drugs and were arrested. That would explain why they stood guard in front of the salon, a little mafia basically, connected to a more powerful gang, like the one that ruled the metro station. And the lack of real interest in the hair salon... It was a front of some kind; Kimi mustn't have known, but maybe she had been arrested too.

The local police station was practically next door on the boulevard. Should I go? Would Kimi come out and tell me what had happened?

No matter what had happened, I couldn't go home. Not right away. How could I lie to Philippe if I didn't even have the most meagre of answers when I faced him?

I got up and took a few steps.

Just then, I saw Harriet come around the corner. When she spotted me, she looked down. I wanted to tackle her before she could get away.

But she didn't turn to go; she started to approach.

That's when I first realized that something serious had happened.

Against all expectations, we went into the café together.

I knew it was going to be about Kimi; Harriet wouldn't have been there otherwise, sitting across from me, her hands clamped to her face. But it took her a while to say something.

She lit a cigarette, thinking maybe she could disappear behind the smoke that she was exhaling in short, quick bursts.

And then she mired me in pointless details. It was as if it was more than she could do to put together a single meaningful sentence. I wasn't trying to drag a confession out of her; I just wanted to know what had happened. And finally she told me: Kimi had hanged herself from the ceiling of the salon.

I wasn't prepared for that.

I made her say it again. I needed explanations, and at the same time, I wouldn't listen to them. I pushed away the idea of having foreseen even the outlines of such a tragedy, as if it were my fault, in some dark corner of reality, as if reality were now cloaked in a lie, as if the lie were not being told by Harriet but rather forged by my hearing it.

But it was true.

Two days before, Harriet had found Kimi when she got to work in the morning. She had done it during the night.

I started talking too loudly.

How could a girl who seemed as happy as Kimi take her own life, and in such a sordid way?

Harriet shrugged.

Maybe she thought it was a stupid question, maybe she wanted to spit in my face: is it really better to hang yourself in a chic hotel? That's what I would have said if I were her.

We stayed quiet for a moment, watching one another.

Her face showed no emotion. But her body had lost the struggle. She was hunched and her hands fidgeted under the table.

I thought of Rudi in his hospital room, that little cube in a foreign place, and of the fact that it was always better to die at home.

'The police don't know yet whether it was suicide,' she finally admitted.

Crazy as it sounds, the possibility of murder was almost a relief. Harriet started to moan.

She wanted to be left alone. By the detective who had questioned her, by me, by everyone else.

I took her arm and squeezed it.

'What detective, Harriet?'

Her expressionless face suddenly seemed drained, and a web of fine lines around her open mouth offered a glimpse of what she would look like older. It was a flash of a miserable future, a possibility that appeared for a quarter of a second. But it did not have to come true. Possibilities lie within us, and sometimes they hijack our facial expressions, like when you inadvertently glance in a store window. I once saw myself old and dour in a restaurant mirror. I saw a darker version of myself, with no way out, mired in hate. With Harriet, the vision was too real to erase completely.

She stopped talking, having nothing more to say.

And then she left the café, leaving me alone, a terror-stricken tourist in a city more hostile than I'd originally thought.

All sorts of things can happen, no matter what road you take, and I never forget it. Death in particular should never be forgotten. Since Rudi's death, I have tried to anticipate and skirt obstacles like an Olympic skier. My imagination is so agile that I glide effortlessly between the little red flags. Philippe's imagination is both infinite and inflexible. It's a dangerous combination. He stays planted on the ground while looking down over reality. Between us, we do a good job of imagining everything that could happen.

I figured I shouldn't tell him the news: your hairdresser hanged herself in her salon.

He got home a little late from school, and I was annoyed, worried; my composure had slipped once more.

'Kimi went back to her country,' I said.

But once the truth is silenced, there is no going back.

'Actually, I don't know what happened, but the salon is closed at any rate.'

Philippe looked at me, incredulous. He must have felt like a small explosion had happened a few hours before.

'Did she leave or not?'

'Yes, she left.'

'What's with you?'

I took his backpack and set it on the kitchen chair.

'What about my hair?' he asked.

For once, I was so happy that he reverted to his obsession that I started to laugh.

'I'll cut it. You know I'm good at things.'

He knows. I can do anything if I put my mind to it. I don't give up until I've exhausted every possibility.

I laid the instruments out on the table: a glass of water, comb, scissors. I took my time, injecting a bit of ceremony into the proceedings. Philippe was getting impatient. I told him to sit down and be

still. I spread an old sheet over his shoulders. I started cutting. My heart was racing. I was afraid of making a mistake, so I tried to recreate Kimi's gestures from memory.

'I know how Kimi does it. I've watched her closely. But you have to be as patient with me as you are with her.'

Which was of course impossible. Kimi made everything around her serene.

But I kept moving with her gentleness anyway.

Philippe has very thick hair: it made the job all the harder, but also made it easier to camouflage mistakes. I hurried a little so he wouldn't start to lose his cool, and finally I was done.

I removed the sheet with a theatrical flourish. Like the moment of glory in a bullfight.

'Voilà! The handsomest boy in the world!'

Philippe ran his hand over the back of his neck. He went to look at himself in the entryway mirror. He smiled at me.

'It'll do.'

Then I cleaned up the kitchen while he did his homework.

I needed to save my energy for the after-dinner chess game, but I couldn't get Kimi's smiling face out of my mind. I poured myself a drink, hiding it from Philippe's view. If I could have, I would have locked myself in the bathroom to drink it. Having a glass of wine, then two, and then three... I had come to the conclusion that children see this as an act of weakness. The simple truth is that I have a witness to everything I do. Sometimes I resent Philippe for it.

I had to think some more. A hole had just opened up in my everyday life, and I couldn't help but look through it, even though doing so was dangerous. The implausibility of Kimi's act made continuing on with my day and its series of activities seem almost unbearable. I couldn't believe it was suicide. Kimi's apparent happiness was what we had hung our future on. I hoped someone would call to explain what had really happened. Perhaps I had imagined it

all, my conversation with Harriet and all the rest. I had to focus, and I was afraid that Philippe would start talking. There was a fog around me, and I didn't want him to make it any denser – or to lift it, truth be told.

I picked up the phone and dialled the number for the salon. One day, someone would have to penetrate the four greying walls again and answer me. I knew it was an absurd thought. All the same, I had to dial the number and then hang up, like when in a moment of insanity one night you call the person who dumped you. It offers a semblance of proof of existence. And proofs of existence are important. Sometimes they are the only thing that will calm you.

In fact, I was finding proofs of Kimi's existence pretty flimsy now that she was gone. Even the adjective 'dead' seemed unreal alongside her name.

I looked through the papers to see whether they said anything about her. Nothing, anywhere. And nothing in the obituaries, of course. The investigation wasn't over, and the body had to be kept on ice in such cases. So Kimi's body was resting in a morgue, and maybe no one was interested in that body except me. I was exaggerating my own importance, because she did have a fiancé. But I wasn't ready yet for that thought, which led straight to other theories.

The day was still warm, and I went out on the deck to drink my glass of wine. Philippe joined me.

'It's summer,' I said, turning my glass on the table.

'Not yet, gawd!'

He sat across from me.

'You're not cutting any lilacs?'

'Yes, in a minute.'

'Why not now?'

'Tonight, Philippe.'

'Tonight we're playing chess.'

'I can do both.'

'You won't though.'

'You're right, I never keep my promises!'

I pushed a stray strand of his hair back into place. I would have liked to stroke his head until his eyes closed.

'Maybe Kimi's dead.'

'Not everyone dies, Philippe.'

'Of course everyone dies! What are you talking about?' His blue eyes were lit by a small weak flame. 'Except you,' he added mischievously.

'That's right. Everyone dies except me.'

Rudi had the right to die. I even told him to go at the end, but it wouldn't happen that way for me. I had to survive everything. It was oppressive.

But I had picked up the pieces pretty well, I thought.

I poured another drink.

I made dinner, pretending to be cheerful. We ate. Then we shuffled our pieces around the chess board, not exactly prodigies. I was the one making things seem gloomy; I wasn't playing well. My mind was somewhere else. I lost the game, but Philippe took no pride in winning. I was ashamed. So for once, we went out for a bike ride under the stars. It was a good idea. Philippe relaxed, prattling on about the night. Whether he slept or not, he would win the tournament tomorrow. His will was stronger than anything. And I could predict the future, although I didn't say so.

I prepared for the next day, where there was no room for Kimi. This was how I had been getting through the past year, one day at a time. The death of the tiny hairdresser – that's what I had always affectionately called her – changed nothing. At least, that's what I thought that night. Everything had to be visible; I had to see our lives in the rustling of the leaves in the trees; sometimes I had to freeze the frame, a self-awareness strong enough to see Philippe and me back to the present.

He won the tournament. I had his grandparents, aunt and two uncles over for dinner. Tomas and Stefan took turns spinning him in the air, and as usual it scared me. Some men are strangely driven to defy danger, even when there isn't any. Then my sister Christine washed the dishes while my parents snuck a listen at Philippe's chest. Rudi was probably laughing, wherever he was. 'Released' is what they say. I don't know. But in the end, we laughed all the time together, and I didn't see why it shouldn't continue. So I laughed with Rudi in the hallway that led to the bathroom, where I could breathe a little. But my parents' interference still irked me.

Since the great sadness that had befallen our family, every occasion for getting together had to be observed. It was starting to weigh on me. All of these meals had a hidden agenda: to patch a crack. Enjoyment was hardly ever part of it. I had figured out that Philippe felt it too. That day, I would rather have taken him on a trip to Tibet or to a beach in Mexico – anywhere but here.

I kept my secret to myself.

I did what I was supposed to do – serving, reviving the conversation, changing the music – but a scene of desolation lay in the background.

I had become a master in the art of living this way, on two planes. Nobody talked about Rudi. If I didn't mention his name, he was absent from our world. Even Philippe respected this rule. Sometimes I wanted to blow the smokescreen away. But everything was so well choreographed, like how Philippe moved his pieces on the chessboard when he knew he was being watched.

That night, he thanked me.

'For what?'

'For my hair.'

In the dim light of his room, he looked like a small, tired actor.

'You're not talking about your hair, are you?'