

Chapter Six

Iron Maiden

I'd been in Montreal for a decade, and now out of work for six months, without making a move in any direction. I had fallen into a deep funk. Walked into the Champagnieur apartment one night after another sixteen hour day of solitary lassitude and found another note in place of Anais.

"Out with Manon."

Manon was a real toxic strain of dyke, just on her way out of the closet, which made her volatile generally. Added to that, she had the zeal of the converted and was engaged in a full-time campaign to drag Anais into never-never land with her. I smoked a few cigarettes, flipping the note back and forth, beneath an oil and tempura portrait of an anorexic female journalist, executed by Otto Dix at some point between the two world wars. It looked like the painter had spilled a half dozen egg yolks into his palette just before he set to work. The woman had pitch black hair. Her torso twisted and torqued from head to hips like a stretch of wrought iron rail. She sat at a café table, left leg crossed over the right thigh, which opened up a view of a black patch beneath her knee-length red and black chequered dress. Her monocled eye was ringed with mascara. She looked infertile. She smoked a tipped cigarette. The thing about smoking was not to lose your nerve. If you got winded or had to stop exercising or lose a few overhygienic friends, it was a test of your resolve. To be worthy of the tobacco god, you had to be prepared to cough your way to extinction if necessary.

I'd been fixated on Chaplain flicks, but graduated to Fritz Lang and Fassbinder. You can't wank to Chaplin. Masturbation is a bloodless feast, which can only be performed to anemic actresses like Hanna Schygulla, who stare blankly out of a steely cellu-

loid dusk enveloping a generic German megalopolis. I was getting bloated through inaction and drink. My basic hygiene was deteriorating. Every day, I'd shave, but instead of taking a bath, I'd cake Marseille soap over my body, producing a rancid hybrid stink. From the inside, it was like having a protective coat against hostile weather, or preparing to swim the English Channel in mid-winter.

I stepped out onto Champagneur, following my usual trajectory, which began with a stroll through the tree-lined boulevards of Outremont, where the upper crustaceans of the city picked at their mussels and drank Pouilly Fumé. I naturally gravitated further East - towards the pure laine bars, xenophobic hideouts where no anglo was welcome. My first stop-off was Le Bobar on the Main, where Gaby, a dwarfish Parisian transplant, served me pints of St-Ambroise while I shot pool. From there southward, no more than a few metres separated each bar. Later in the night, I moved towards the Cheval Blanc, a hole-in-the-wall near the bus terminus or Inspecteur Epingle, out in the East End, a denizen of ex-Front de Libération du Québec terrorists, where you could slice through the hatred it was so thick. That suited me. I only wanted to bury myself in the dark recesses of Quebec. But the dark recesses of Quebec didn't want to take me into her arms.

Unless you've slogged through the driven snow of St. Petersburg or Quebec City, you can't know what happens to the mind when you start routinely walking the streets in thirty below, when winter is three months gone, and there's still three left to endure. Try taking a stroll down rue St Denis on the Feast of the Epiphany. If you make it as far as rue Mont-Royal without freezing to a lamppost, you can always climb the steps to the upper floor of the Café Central, and throw your quarter up at the pool table. No-one will even look, because you don't exist, you're one of the oppressors. It's only after you've held the table for seven or eight games, and you're on and winning games off the rack, and you're quaffing quarts of Black Label, or guzzling glasses of Belle Gueule that people notice you, usually for the wrong reasons.

I buried myself in that hexagonal coffin of desire for better than a decade, and severed all relations with the English-speaking world. As it turned out, I missed the entire decade when the masters of the universe - the networkers, the venture

capitalists, the sect leaders - were spreading the gospel of greed. The only bank I frequented was made of driven snow. I didn't fit in at all, but I fit in even less where I came from, so it wasn't bad shooting pool with people that hated my guts. I lived with a dark mass on my brain, like a tumour, and I'd found a place to let it fester, and subdivide into successive half-lives. There's a comfort to these dead-ends, when you know you're beyond the pale, and you're wandering alone, just begging somebody to start something, and when you finally look so bad that you fit in, in the way all big city people fit, that is, they become invisible.

I noticed two girls talking to each other at a table on a narrow stretch of the upper level mezzanine, overlooking a stage. Perched at the end of a long night like a couple of semi-colons. The taller one, a pig-tailed brunette, had olive skin and hair strands on her upper lip she didn't have time or money to remove. Her tits pushed up against the inside of a black T-shirt with crimson Gothic letters spelling out "Iron Maiden". The sleeves were torn off at the shoulder. She wore a red scarf around her neck, tressed into a cloth rope, ETA-style. A black leather newsboy cap was sitting back to front on her head. I sat down at the neighbouring table, don't know what I said, but managed to sit down without them leaving. I was coherent but on my way to amnesia.

The Iron Maiden said her name was Szusa. If you were paying attention, you could spot an animal need to get fucked. Some women, after they haven't had it for a year or more, lose their will, and move back into a kind of catatonic life-neutral gear until somebody takes notice and sticks it to them. Then they can go back to their regular lives. This Szusa was like that. There was nothing else she was looking for. I was just a walking prick for her. Not that I was even thinking that way. Things were happening to me that night, not the other way around.

Her friend, a short stump with a pony tail coming out of an otherwise shaved head, stared at me, then back at Szusa.

"Like, are you coming or not?"

I lit a cigarette and kept my mouth shut. This was between them.

"No you go home first. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hostis. Have it your own way. But don't expect me to be there when you get back."

For no particular reason, I recalled the days when pony-tailed

Québécoises walked around old Québec in their fur coats and drew our minds away from things like making a living.

I ordered two more quarts of Black Label. We stayed for another drink, without saying much. The band downstairs played a garbled version of Blues de Businessman, a tune from an old French rock opera, then stopped for a set break.

“She’s just someone I know.”

She laughed and fired up a cigarette, shrugged her shoulders.

I waited until she finished, then said,

“Let’s go.”

We stepped out into the snow. I grabbed her and pushed my tongue into that moustachioed mouth. The city was being whitened out by a storm. We plunged through the driving gales and eddies of snow in silence, clutching each other for balance and warmth. It was thirty below. You can always tell when it goes below twenty; your lungs feel like they are being slashed by razor blades. We continued south towards the river, then onto Pine Avenue. The snow let up a bit. We crossed the Main into the McGill ghetto, and a series of indistinguishable, six floor apartment buildings. She picked one of them, punched an intercom code through frostbitten gloves, and we stumbled into the elevator, exhaling, inhaling slowly, then faster, sucking in the warmth.

Her four room flat looked like a rummage sale or Sunday night at the flea market. The living room doubled as a bedroom, a fold out terracotta sofa bed stuffed with foam upholstery. Clothes were strewn everywhere – on her already unkempt hide-away futon, on the floor, on top of the fridge. She was a typical fashion statement for the neighbourhood. You could wear anything as long as it was leftover. She walked ahead of me into a kitchen tiled from floor to ceiling, her ass low to the ground, as if fastened onto a set of undersized coffee table legs or bowling pins. She served me a whisky and lemon juice. We smoked a Rothman Special, then another one to warm up. She unravelled her red scarf. I watched her walk out of the kitchen, sit down on the bed, and pull off her Iron Maiden T-shirt, revealing her large breasts. She rolled over onto the bed, and propped herself onto all fours, pushing her ass up into the air. And not a word between us. A woman who knew what she wanted out of life. We were both taking our time. Then, I was inside her, watching her ass bob up and down, a metronome beating largo time. Tick tock, tick tock.

We had abandoned the solar day for lunar rhythms. Tick tock, tick tock. I couldn't see anything but that rotating ass. All I could recall of her face was that hair coming out of her upper lip. Tick tock, tick tock.

Sometimes, conversation is redundant. I pushed hard up her Magyar entrails. We were involved in something of our own making, stepping right into a new sidereal reality. It was not a night for procreating. I was just a hydraulic pump, jamming into her, desecrating the dead. We were sacrificing to the gods of mechanical extinction, the two of us grunting like workers on the assembly line:

“unhhh, unhhh, unhhh, unNNHHH, UNNNHHHHH!!!”

It reminded me of driving into a loose maul on the rugby pitch, or moving oil derricks, or dragging two by fours off the green chain or trying to push a diseased Holstein into a barn as the back wall of Typhoon Freda approached. It was animalistic, depraved, Neanderthal, but more than anything, it was routine. Montreal was like that. People partied in graveyards and didn't believe you had to procreate. They glorified defeat, turned it into a religion. We were losers, one and all. Loser was the one English word the Quebs pronounced with veneration. They transformed it into a status symbol. Because they had the collective cunts to turn their back on the world, you had to surrender to their nihilistic realities or leave town. You have to wonder how long the powers that be will allow the sanctified garbage dump of Quebec to breach their notions of hygiene and correctness before they send in the troops again to scorch the place.

Later we smoked a joint in silence. Then, we started all over again. We stared out the window at the stop signs reverberating in the wind, and the snow eddies dancing pirhouettes around the street lamps, watching the ambulances back up to the emergency exit of the Hotel Dieu, trucking in other members of the species like crates of vegetables. It was one of the best nights of my life.

No one really knows what life is about. There was one man, Jacob Boehme, who said it was a good thing to be ruined before you died. That made sense to me. I was going through the motions, because I didn't really care about my fellow man, least of all myself. So fucking this moustachioed woman up the ass outside the Hotel Dieu was a spiritual experience. I had returned

to the Middle Ages. The only problem was that I was surrounded by moderns.

The next day I started thinking about her again and drifted down to the Mile End neighbourhood, but couldn't distinguish her flat from the other boxed Lego suites lining either side of rue St Urbain. I set about retracing my steps during my nocturnal forays, hoping I'd come across her. South along the Main, then over to St Denis, in and out of bars where I might spot her, chain smoking, stopping only for a drink before moving on to the next bar. And, every night, I'd forget why I'd set out in the first place. Anybody who lives by night knows that sooner or later it's the night that dictates the rules. When one or two in the morning chimed, I'd drift South toward the port, and start another form of exploration, burrowing through a nocturnal tunnel, where the scraps and dregs of the Montreal night congregated to perform their own subterranean rites.