

Picnic At Lac Du Sang

By Graham Masterton

'The girls here are very young,' said Baubay, taking a last deep drag at his cigarette and flicking it out of the Pontiac's window. 'But let me tell you, they'll do *anything*.'

Vincent frowned across the street at the large Gothic-revival house. It wasn't at all what he had expected a brothel to look like. It was heavily overshadowed by three giant dark-green elms, but he could see turrets and spires and decorated gables, and balconies where net curtains suggestively billowed in the summer breeze. The outside walls were painted a burned orange colour, and there was something strange and other-worldly about the whole place, as if he had seen it in a painting, or dreamed it.

'I'm not so sure about this,' he told Baubay. 'I never visited a bordello before.'

'Bordello!' Baubay puffed. 'This is simply a very amenable place where guys like us can meet beautiful and willing young women, discuss the state of the economy, have a bottle of champagne or two, play Trivial Pursuit, and if we feel like it, get laid.'

'Sounds like a bordello to me,' said Vincent, trying to make a joke of it.

'You're not going to chicken out on me, are you? Don't say you're going to chicken out. Come on, Vincent, I've driven over eighty miles for this, and I'm not going back to Montreal without at least one game of hide the salami.'

'It's just that I feel like - I don't know. I feel like I'm being unfaithful.'

'Bullshit! How can you be unfaithful to a woman who walked out on you? How can you be unfaithful when she was screwing a *crotté* like Michael Saperstein?'

'I don't know, but it just feels that way. Come on, Baubay, I never looked at another woman for eleven years. Well, I *looked*, but I didn't do anything about it.'

'So - after all those years of sainthood, you deserve to indulge yourself a little. You won't regret it, believe me. You'll be coming back for more. Hey - with your tongue dragging on the sidewalk.'

'I don't know. Is there a restaurant or something around here? Maybe I'll have some lunch and wait for you.'

Baubay unfastened his seatbelt and took his keys out of the ignition. 'Absolutely emphatically no you are not. How do you expect me to enjoy fornicating with some ripe young teenager while all the time I know that you're sitting alone in some dreary diner eating Salisbury steak? What kind of friend would that make me? You're not backing out of this, Vincent. You're coming to meet Madame Leduc whether you like it or not.'

'Well, I'll *meet* her, okay?' Vincent agreed. 'But whether I do anything else - '

Baubay took him by the elbow as if he were a blind man and propelled him to the opposite sidewalk. The morning was glazed and warm and there was hardly any traffic. The house stood in the older part of St Michel-des-Monts, in a street which was still respectable but which was suffering from obvious neglect. The house next door was empty, its windows

shuttered and its front door hoarded up, its garden a tangle of weeds and wild poppies. Behind the houses, through a blueish haze, Vincent could see the mountains of Mont Blanc, Mont Tremblant, and beyond.

They climbed the stone steps to the front door and Baubay gave a smart, enthusiastic knock. The door was painted a sun-faded blue, and the paint had cracked like the surface of an old master. The knocker was bronze, and cast in the shape of a snarling wolf's head.

'See that?' said Baubay. 'That was supposed to keep evil spirits at bay. They're quite rare, now.'

They waited and waited and eventually Baubay knocked again. After a while they heard a door open and piano music, Mozart, and a woman's voice. Vincent felt butterflies in his stomach, and he had a ridiculous childish urge to run away. Baubay winked at him and said, 'This'll be Madame Leduc now.'

The front door was opened by a tall, ash-blond woman with her hair braided on top of her head. She was wearing a long silk negligée in pale aquamarine, trimmed with lace. She must have been 45 at least but she was extraordinarily beautiful, with a fine, slightly Nordic-looking face, and eyes that were such a pale, washed-out blue that they were scarcely any colour at all. Her negligée was open almost to her waist, revealing a deep cleavage in which a large marcasite crucifix nestled. Judging by the way her breasts swung, she must have been naked underneath.

'Francois, what a pleasure,' she said. Her accent was faintly Québécois, very precise and refined. 'And - how exciting! You've brought your friend with you today.'

'I couldn't keep you all to myself, could I?' asked Baubay. 'Violette, this is Vincent Jeffries. He's a very talented man. A great musician. Like, eat your heart out, Johann Sebastian Bach.'

Mme Leduc held out her hand so that it slightly drooped, and Vincent realised that she expected him to kiss it. He did so, and when he lifted his eyes he saw that she was smiling at him in amusement. Baubay said, 'Let's go inside. I could do some serious damage to a bottle of cold champagne.'

They stepped into the hallway and Mme Leduc closed the door behind them, blotting out the sunshine. 'The tall one and the short one,' she remarked, and then she gave a brittle, tinkling laugh. Baubay laughed too, like a dog barking, and gave her a pat on the bottom. His shortness had never given him any trouble with women, or so he said, and Vincent believed him, because he was always packed with energy and he was quite handsome in a roughly-cut, unfinished way, with a square jaw and thick eyebrows and thick black curls. Apart from being taller, Vincent was much thinner and quieter, with blondish combed-back hair and a narrow, rather aquiline face, and a way of peering at people as if they were standing six or seven miles away. When she had first met him, Patricia had said that he looked like Lawrence of Arabia, trying to see through the glitter of a distant mirage. In the end, their marriage had turned out to be the mirage.

'So, you're a great musician, Mr Jeffries?' asked Mme Leduc. 'Some of my girls are learning the piano. You will have to give them some pointers.'

'Francois is exaggerating, as usual,' said Vincent. 'I write scores for television commercials - incidental music, links, stuff like that. Do you know the Downhome Donut music? That was mine. Right now Francois and I are working on a Labatt's beer ad together.'

'You should hear what he's written!' said Baubay. 'Is it dramatic? Is it sweeping? Do bears go to the woods to dress up as women?'

They entered a large, high-ceilinged living room. It probably overlooked the garden, but Vincent couldn't tell because all the windows were tightly covered by bleached white calico blinds, through which the sunlight filtered as softly as the memory of a long-lost summer day. The floor was pale polished hardwood, with antique scatter-rugs, and the furniture was all antique, too, gilded and upholstered in creams and yellows. There were huge mirrors everywhere, which at first gave Vincent the impression that he had walked into a room crowded with fifteen or sixteen girls.

Madame Leduc clapped her hands and called, '*Attention, mes petites!* Mr Baubay has arrived and he has brought a friend for us to entertain!'

Immediately, the girls came forward and clustered around them. Now Vincent could see that there were only seven of them, but he still felt overwhelmed, and more than anything else he wished that he were someplace else. He had never been simultaneously so aroused and so embarrassed in his whole life. All of the girls were pretty: two or three of them were almost as beautiful as Mme Leduc. There was a redhead with skin as white as milk, and a long-haired brunette with dark slanting eyes that he could have drowned in. There were three blondes - one bubbly and curly, the other tall and mysterious with hair so long that she could have wrapped herself in it, like a silky curtain. There was another brunette who stood more shyly behind her friends, but she had a face so perfect that Vincent couldn't take his eyes off her.

What struck him most of all, though, was the way in which the girls were dressed. He didn't quite know what he had expected: Fredericks of Hollywood lingerie, maybe, or satin wraps like the one that Mme Leduc was wearing. But they all wore plain white cotton nightdresses, almost ankle-length, and one of them was even wearing white socks. Vincent supposed that Mme Leduc had wanted them to look younger than they really were, like schoolgirls; but even so none of them could have been older than 18 or 19.

'Mr Jeffries is a musician, girls,' Mme Leduc announced. 'Perhaps he'll be kind enough to play for us while we bring him something to drink.' She winked at Baubay, and Vincent saw her wink. She must have sensed how nervous he was, and, yes, it was a good idea, asking him to play the piano. It would help to relax him. 'You like champagne, Mr Jeffries? Or may I call you Vincent?'

'Sure you can call me Vincent. But right I think I'd prefer a beer, if you don't mind.'

'Anything you want,' she said. She looked into his eyes for almost ten seconds without saying anything. Her eyes were extraordinary, like blue ink that has spilled across the surface of a mirror. He dropped his gaze and found himself looking at the cross that dangled in her cleavage. He could smell the perfume that she exuded from between her breasts. It was very summery and flowery, and for some reason it made him think of - what? He couldn't think. Something elusive. Something deeply emotional. Something that had happened a long time ago.

One of the girls came up and took his coat. Another loosened his necktie. 'You like this?' said Baubay, walking up and down the room. 'This is what I call pampering.'

'Please, play,' said the redhead, shyly, and pulled out the piano-stool for him. Vincent sat down, flexed his fingers, and played one of his party-pieces, a high-speed version of *Camptown Races*. The girls laughed and clapped when he had finished, and one of the blondes kissed him on the cheek. The blonde with the long hair, more daring and more sensual, kissed him directly on the mouth. 'Francois is right. You are a great musician. Your music is terrible - but you - you are a great musician.' Bold words, he thought, almost frightening. But he had never had an erection while sitting at the piano before, as he did now. He could feel the warmth of the girl's body through her plain white nightdress. It was unbuttoned, and he could see the curve of a small swelling breast.

Mme Leduc brought him a golden glass of beer in a frozen glass. He drank a little, and then he played something slower, more sentimental, a score he had written for a poem. The blonde with the long hair came and sat next to him, and put her arm around him, but he played this song for the brunette who stood away from the others, her eyes lowered, her fingers trailing through her hair.

*'In your arms was still delight ... quiet as a street at night;
And thoughts of you, I do remember,
Were green leaves in a darkened chamber,
Were dark clouds in a moonless sky.'*

The blonde girl massaged his shoulders, and then ran her fingers all the way down his spine. The redhead stood behind him and stroked his hair. On the opposite side of the room, Baubay sat with one of the curly blondes on his knee and another kneeling on the floor beside him. He lifted his glass of champagne and gave Vincent a blissful beam. 'Don't tell me this isn't the life, my friend. This is the life.'

'*Love, in you, went passing by,*' sang Vincent. He looked toward the brunette and she was lifting her hair so that it shone in the softly-filtered sunlight in a fine net of filaments. He didn't know whether she knew that he was looking at her or not. He didn't know whether she was flirting with him or not. She appeared to be indifferent, and yet -

*'Love, in you, went passing by, ... penetrative, remote, and rare,
Like a bird in the wide air,
And, as the bird, it left no trace...'*

He paused, and then he sang, very quietly, '*In the heaven ... of your face.*'

There was a momentary silence, and then Mme Leduc pattered her hands together like a pigeon trapped in a chimney. 'You weave quite a spell, Vincent. You must play us some more.'

'Why doesn't one of your girls play? I'd like to hear them.'

'Well, of course. I'm forgetting myself. You didn't come here to entertain *us*. Minette, why don't you play *Curiose Geschichte* for Mr Jeffries? Minette's been practicing very hard this month. And, Sophie, why don't you dance?'

Vincent left the piano and the girl with the long blonde hair guided him over to the couch next to Baubay's, and sat down almost in his lap. She stroked his thigh through his chino pants and then she cupped her hand right between his legs, and squeezed it. He looked up at her but all she did was kiss him all over his face. He had drunk less than half of his beer but already he was beginning to feel that he had lost touch with reality. His cock was so hard that it ached and it just wouldn't go down.

Minette was one of the curly blondes. She sat at the piano with her eyes closed and played the slow, plaintive notes with perfect timing and inflection. Mme Leduc was right: she had been practicing hard. She was almost concert standard. But if she could play like this, what was she doing here, in this Godforsaken Canadian suburb, selling herself to any man who wanted her?

Sophie, the redhead, stood in the middle of the floor with her toes pointed like a ballerina. Then she swept her arms down, gathered the hem of her nightdress, and drew it over her head. It landed on the rug with a soft parachute rustle, leaving Sophie completely naked. She was full-breasted but she was very slim, with narrow hips and long, long legs. Her breasts were marbled with blueish veins and her nipples were a startling pink that clashed with her hair. Between her legs arose a bright red flame, although it did little to conceal the plumpness of her labia.

Sophie danced: fast, and very stylistically, Isadora Duncan on speed. She waved her arms as if she were spinning through a storm and her breasts responded with a wild, complicated dance of their own. She whirled around the room, around and around. Then she covered her face with her hands and knelt on the floor only two or three feet away from Vincent. She swayed from side to side, staring at him as she did so, until he felt hypnotised. Then she slowly arched backward until her shoulders were touching the rug, and the lips of her vulva peeled apart, revealing the glistening depths of her vagina.

As if this wasn't enough, she reached down between her legs and pulled her lips even farther apart, exposing the tiny hole of her urethra, playing with her clitoris and sliding her long, manicured fingertips right inside her. The piano music. The succulent clicking of fingers and juice.

Vincent was breathless. As he watched, and he couldn't help watching, the blonde girl was gripping his cock through his pants, squeezing it hard and rhythmically, and he knew that if he didn't make her stop, he was going to be finished before he had even begun.

Suddenly Minette stood up and the music wasn't there any more. Sophie rolled away across the rug. Mme Leduc's hands pattered together again.

'Now, perhaps, a little something to eat, before we get down to the principal entertainment of the day?'

Vincent was trying unsuccessfully to fend off the blonde, who was licking his neck with the flat of her tongue and trying to slide her hand down the front of his pants. 'You're wet,' she breathed. 'Your shorts are wet. I can feel it.'

'Yes, food!' Baubay enthused. 'I hope you made some of your crabcakes, Violette! Vincent, you should try Violette's crabcakes! And her *andouilles*!'

'I want to try your *andouille*,' the blonde breathed in Vincent's ear, and then draped her hair all over his head, so that he was tangled in it, suffocated in it.

They sat at a long table covered in an extravagantly long white linen cloth that poured over their knees and trailed across the floor. The windows of this room, too, were covered by bleached white blinds. Mme Leduc sat at the head of the table, and the girls sat along either side. Vincent and Baubay sat side by side, each of them being cosseted and spoonfed by the girls next to them. The food was like nothing that Vincent had ever eaten before: not all at the same meal, anyway. Cold spiced beef and fruit-flavoured jellies; salads with endive and oranges; crabcakes served with fragments of honeycomb. There was a strange fried flatfish stuffed with peaches, and bowls of clear chilled soup that tasted like women's sexual juices lightly flavoured with cilantro.

The shy brunette sat on the opposite end of the table, eating only a little and saying nothing at all. Vincent deliberately stared at her while he ate, but she never once raised her eyes to look at him. The blonde sitting next to him reached beneath the flowing tablecloth and started to massage him between the legs again. When he was hard, she jerkily tugged down his zipper and took out his erection, her fingers running up and down it like a piccolo player. He suddenly realised that he was beginning to enjoy himself.

'Do you think you could love me?' she asked him, in a hoarse, dirty whisper.

He kissed her on the lips. 'You don't exactly make it easy to say no.'

'But do you think you could *really* love me? Or any of us?'

'What? And marry you? And take you away from all this?'

She shook her head. 'You could never do that, ever.'

'But you're not going to do this for the rest of your life, are you? I mean, how old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'There you are, then. One day you'll meet the right guy, and you'll be able to put all of this behind you.'

Again she shook her head. Vincent tried to kiss her again, but this time she raised her fingertips and pressed them against his lips.

Mme Leduc stood up and tapped her spoon against her wine-glass, so that it rang. 'There!' she said. 'We have fed very well ... now for some other pleasures. Francois, have you chosen who you would like to share your afternoon?'

Baubay put his arm around Sophie's shoulders. 'I can never resist a redhead, Violette, especially when she is a redtail, too.'

'And perhaps Minette to accompany her?' asked Mme Leduc.

'Wonderful! But not on the piano, this time!'

Baubay got up from the table, and took Sophie and Minette by the hand. Giggling, they led him out of the dining-room, into the hallway, and up the stairs. Vincent could hear them laughing all the way along the landing.

'Vincent, how about you?' asked Mme Leduc. 'Has any one of my girls caught your eye yet?'

The blonde gave him a dreamy, creamy look, and rubbed his penis again. Vincent didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he was too fascinated by the shy brunette. He nodded down the table and said, 'I don't even know her name, but if she doesn't mind - ?'

The blonde immediately pushed his erection back into his pants and tugged up his zipper, almost catching him in it. 'Look, I'm sorry,' he said, 'I think you're stunning, but - '

'But you prefer Catherine, I know. I've seen you staring at her.'

'Catherine?' said Vincent, and the girl looked toward him and nodded, although she didn't smile. Vincent stood up and walked along the length of the table and held out his hand.

'This is only if you want to,' he said.

'It is not her place to say if she wants to or not,' said Mme Leduc, with a slight snap in her voice.

Catherine stood up, gathering up her white nightdress in front of her so that it was raised above her knees. Vincent had never seen a girl so beautiful or so quietly alluring, and he had certainly never met a girl so subservient. She had a high, rounded forehead and huge violet eyes. Her nose was straight with just a hint of a tilt at the end. Her lips were full, as if she were pouting a little, but that suggestion of sulkiness only aroused Vincent all the more.

'One girl will be sufficient?' asked Mme Leduc.

'Am I allowed to come back for seconds?'

Mme Leduc came up close to him and ran her hand up the back of his head, like rubbing a cat's fur the wrong way. It was an electrifying feeling, especially since he could feel her breast swaying against him through the silk of her negligée.

'Perhaps next time, I can amuse you myself.'

God, thought Vincent. Baubay was right. I feel like I've died and gone to heaven.

Without a word, Catherine took his hand and led him out of the room. She walked quite quickly on her pale bare feet, as if she were in a hurry. Her hand was small and cool. She didn't lead him upstairs, but across the hallway and along a corridor with a polished parquet floor. The corridor was light, but all of the windows were covered with the same white blinds.

They reached a door at the end of the corridor and Catherine opened it. Inside, Vincent found himself in a large downstairs bedroom. In the very centre stood an iron-framed four-poster bed, draped with yards and yards of white gauze curtains, and covered in giant-sized white feather pillows. The only other furniture was a chaise-longue upholstered in plain cream calico, a French-style closet painted in dragged white paint, a washbasin, and a cheval mirror at the end of the bed, tilted in such a way that whoever was lying on the bed could see

themselves. On one wall hung a large, vividly-coloured painting of a woman in a pearl necklace, lasciviously clutching a horse's erect penis, and staring directly at the viewer as if she were challenging everything be believed in.

Catherine closed the door. She walked across to the bed and drew back the curtains. Then, without turning around, she lifted off her nightdress, so that she was naked. She had a long, flared back, and very high, rounded buttocks. Her breasts were so big that Vincent could see the half-moon curves of them on either side.

However it was when she turned around that he had the greatest shock. He saw now why she had gathered up her nightdress when she stood up from the table. She had been concealing the fact that she was at least five or six months' pregnant. Her breasts were enormously swollen and big-nippled, and her stomach was like a lunar globe. Her vulva was swollen, too. She had shaved herself so that Vincent could see the dark blush colour of her lips.

Pregnant she might have been, but Vincent still thought she was achingly beautiful. In fact, her pregnancy made her look even more beautiful. That was why her hair shone. That was why her skin glowed. That was why she had the secretive, knowing, self-protective look that had attracted Vincent in the first place.

She came up to him and unfastened the top button of his shirt. He looked down at her - at her calm, perfect face; at the trees of pale blue veins in her breasts; at her stiffened, rouge-brown nipples.

'How old are you?' he asked her, with a phlegmy catch in his throat.

'Eighteen-and-a-half,' she replied, unfastening another button, and another, and running her fingernails lightly through the hair on his chest.

'You're having a baby, and yet you're still doing *this*?'

'What else can I do?'

'You can contact your local department of welfare, for starters. You can get all kinds of financial help. You're a single mother-to-be, for Christ's sake, you're entitled. You don't have to work for Madame Leduc.'

'But I do.'

'No, listen to me, you don't. This really isn't suitable work for anybody who's pregnant.'

She looked up at him. 'So what are you trying to tell me? That you wouldn't have picked me if you'd known that I was fat?'

'You're not fat, you're pregnant, and if you want to know the truth I find you extremely attractive. But this isn't socially responsible.'

'You don't want me, then? You want Eloise instead? Or Martine?'

'I didn't say that. I simply said that in your condition you shouldn't be working in a bordello.'

'I don't have any choice.'

'Yes, you do. You *do* have a choice. There are plenty of people you can turn to. I mean, what about your parents?'

She looked away. 'Dead, both of them.'

'Brothers or sisters? Aunts or uncles?'

She shook her head.

'Then, listen, maybe *I* can help you.'

She said, 'I don't want you to help me. I don't want you even to try. This is what I do. This is what I am. Other men have offered to help me, too, and every time I have to tell them the same thing.'

Vincent didn't know what to do. He walked over to the white-blinded window and then he walked back again.

'You came here for pleasure,' said Catherine, standing exposed in front of him, making no attempt to hide her complete nakedness with her hands. 'Why don't you enjoy it while you're here?'

She came up to him and stood close so that her distended stomach touched the bulge in his pants. 'Pleasing men is what I do best. I got pregnant, pleasing a man. Let me please you too.'

'I don't know. I - '

She kissed his chest. She unbuttoned the last of his shirt buttons and then she started to unbuckle his belt.

'What about the baby?' he said, weakening. 'Isn't it dangerous or anything?'

'There's plenty of room inside me,' she said, pulling down his zipper. 'Once I had three men inside me all at once, and baby, too.' Without any hesitation, she wrested his rising cock out of his shorts, and pushed him back toward the bed. He sat down on it, and she dragged off his pants and his socks.

'Listen,' he said, 'maybe a blowjob'll do it ... I don't want to take any risks.' But he could hear his own voice and he knew how ineffectual he sounded. He wanted her desperately, he wanted her so much that his cock was visibly pulsing with every heartbeat. She pressed him down so that he was lying amongst all of those white downy cushions, and then she knelt beside him and took his cock into her mouth, running her tongue around his shiny purple helmet, sucking at it, licking it, and then sliding her tongue all the way down to his walnut-crinkled balls.

From where he was lying he could see underneath her body, her big swaying breasts, her rounded stomach. He reached out and cupped her breasts, feeling her rigid nipples brushing against his palms. Then he smoothed his hands around her stomach. He was surprised how hard it was, how tight it was. He thought to himself: *another man has fucked her, and left life inside her, and here it is, growing.* Although he couldn't understand why, he found the idea of it unbelievably erotic.

As she sucked him, he looked down the length of the bed toward the cheval mirror, and through the curtains of her hair he could see her lips enclosing his red, glistening shaft. She glanced up, and caught sight of his reflection. She smiled, and gave the head of his cock a long, lascivious lick.

In return, he lifted her right leg so that she was kneeling right over him. Right in front of him was her smooth crimson vulva, her lips thickened with pregnancy, her vagina flooded with juice. He buried his face in it like a man burying his face into a watermelon, licking as deep inside her as he could, then taking whole mouthfuls of her and sucking her until she let his cock out of her mouth and gasped, and pushed her lips even more forcefully into his face.

He lost all awareness of time. He gave her one orgasm after another, until her stomach was rock-hard and he was afraid that she was going to give birth. At the same time, she played with him, bringing him right to the edge of ejaculation and then letting him subside, until his balls ached and he was right on the edge of anger.

The bedroom was dark when she led him over to the chaise-longue and made him lie on his back. She straddled him, looking down at him, and it was so gloomy now that he couldn't see her face beneath the shadows of her hair. He could smell her, though. Her sex and her perfume and the same smell that he had detected on Mme Leduc: the smell of memories.

'I think you should make love to me properly,' she whispered. 'It's what you want, isn't it, to share my body with my baby?'

He half-rose, saying, 'I can't.' But she pushed him back again. She took hold of his erect penis and positioned herself right over it. She rubbed the head of his penis backward and forward between her lips until it was slippery with juice. 'You want to meet my baby?' she teased him. 'Don't tell me that you don't want to meet my baby.'

She sank down on him, until he was buried right inside the warm elastic tightness of her body. She leaned forward so that her nipples touched his chest, and then she kissed him, and made a snorting sound of satisfaction in his ear. He felt her child kick and stir against his penis and he climaxed with such violence that his whole world went dark.

It was almost eight o'clock when he left her sleeping on the four-poster bed. He dressed, and crept out, taking one last look at her. She was lying on her back with her hand lying idly between her legs, her hair fanned out across one of the pillows. It unnerved him to think that he had probably started to fall in love with her. He knew for sure that he would have to see her again. You can't have an encounter like this and just forget about it, just let it go.

He had never experienced an afternoon like it in his life. The way she had eaten his balls as if they were fruit. The way she had rubbed him until he had climaxed all over her breasts, and it had dripped from her nipples like milk.

'I want to feed my baby, when it's born,' she had told him, massaging his sperm around and around.

'So when will that be, exactly?'

'I looked at my horoscope and my horoscope said soon.'

'What about your gynecologist?'

She had frowned at him as if she didn't understand what he meant.

He walked back along the gloomy corridor feeling both elated and deeply guilty. He loved her, he wanted her, but he knew that he had to save her, too. He had to save her from Mme Leduc. Most of all he had to save her from men like him.

He had almost reached the hallway when he saw the shield-shaped plaque on the wall. He stopped, and peered at it, like Lawrence of Arabia peering at a mirage. It said 'École St Agathe, fondée 1923,' and underneath the lettering was an emblem of a goose flying from a blood-red lake.

He was still peering at it when a voice said, 'Did you have a good time, Vincent?' He turned to see Mme Leduc standing in the hallway. He didn't know whether it was the dim evening light or maybe his own sexual satiation that made her look older, much older, and far less beautiful. She looked rather like the Snow Queen, from the story that his mother used to tell him when he was young, frigid and stern.

'I had a very good time, thank you,' he told her, 'Well ... let's put it this way, I had a very interesting time.'

She reached out and stroked his cheek. Her colourless eyes were almost sad.

'Why do you - ' he began, and hesitated. Then he managed to say, 'Why do you *do* this? These girls, they're all so young. They have so much in front of them ... so much life to lead.'

'You disapprove,' she said. 'I thought, from the moment that I opened the door, that you would disapprove.'

'It's not that I disapprove. It's more like I don't understand.'

She gave him a smile like diluted milk. She unfolded and refolded her negligée and gave him the briefest flash of heavy white breasts, with areolas the colour of rose-petals, as they turn to brown.

'It isn't necessary for you to understand, Vincent. All you have to do is to enjoy yourself, and pay.'

'I mean, how did you *discover* this place?' Vincent asked Baubay, as they drove back toward Montreal along the Laurentian Autoroute. 'It's great, I'll grant you that, but it's so strange.'

'What's strange about it? I think it's very normal. I went to a club in San Francisco where everybody was jerking off all over the place and there were three guys trying to make out with a one-legged woman. You've been closeted, Vincent. You don't know the half of what goes on. Group sex, leather clubs, bestiality. Compared to all of that, Mme Leduc is respectability itself.'

'So how did you find it?'

'Some guy at Dane Shearman Philips told me about it. Mme Leduc encourages her clients to pass on her card to anybody who might appreciate what she has to offer.'

'Seven young girls, not much more than eighteen years old. One of them six months' pregnant.'

'Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it. Don't tell me you won't be going back.'

Vincent said nothing, but looked ahead at the glittering lights of downtown Montreal. It looked unreal, like a city painted on the sky.

And of course he did go back, only three days later, and on his own this time. The hot weather had broken into a thunderous electric storm, and even though he parked his rental car right outside the house he was soaked by the time he reached the porch. He was still drying his face with his handkerchief when the door opened and Mme Leduc appeared - dressed in a robe of peach-coloured silk.

'Why Vincent. I didn't expect you so soon.'

'I should have called, I know, but I didn't know your number.'

'And you didn't want to ask Francois for it, because you didn't want Francois to know that you were coming here?'

Vincent gave an awkward shrug. 'I just wanted to see Catherine, that's all. Well, I wanted to see you, too.'

'You'd better come in, then,' she said, as another deafening burst of thunder shook the roof of the house.

Vincent followed her inside. 'I'm worried about Catherine, if you must know. I haven't been able to get her off my mind.'

'You're not the first.'

'It's just that it isn't right, a pregnant girl having unprotected sex with strange men. Think of the infections she could pick up. Think of the baby.'

'*You* had sex with her.'

'Yes, I did. And I feel more guilty about it than I can possibly tell you.'

'So what do you propose to do?'

'I propose to make you an offer. Let me take Catherine away from here so that she can have her baby someplace quiet and comfortable, with a decent clinic nearby. I'll make sure you're not out of pocket. If you work out her potential earnings for, say, the next six months, I'll pay you in advance.'

Mme Leduc took him through to the living-room. The blinds were still drawn tight and it was so gloomy that he could barely see her. 'Why don't you sit down?' she asked him. 'Would you like some tea, or a glass of wine?'

'No, no thank you. I just want to hear you say that Catherine can come with me.'

Mme Leduc stood facing the mirror over the fireplace, so that Vincent could see only her dim reflection. 'I'm afraid that's impossible, Vincent. None of us can leave this house, ever.'

'Why the hell not? What happens when the girls get older, and lose their looks? You can't run a cathouse with a collection of senior citizens, can you?'

Mme Leduc was silent for a long time. Then she said, 'If I tell you why Catherine can't leave, will you promise me that you'll leave here, and never come back, and forget all about her?'

'How can I make a promise like that?'

'It's for her own good, that's why.'

'Well, I don't know. I'll think about it, okay? That's as far as I'm prepared to go.'

'Very well,' said Mme Leduc. 'I suppose that'll have to do.' She turned around and came toward him, standing so close that he could have lifted his hand and touched her face. 'A long time ago, in the 1920s, this used to be a school, an academy for young girls.'

'I saw the notice-board in the corridor. St Agathe's, right?'

'That's right. It was quite a famous school, and diplomats and wealthy businessmen used to send their daughters here during the summer to learn cookery and dressmaking and riding and all the social skills.'

'I see. Kind of a finishing school.'

Mme Leduc nodded. 'One July day, in 1924, some of the girls were taken by their teacher to Lac du Sang, for a picnic. Lac du Sang is a local beauty spot, and very beautiful it is, too. They call it Lac du Sang because it's surrounded by maples, and in the fall, when the leaves turn red, the lake reflects them, and looks as if it's filled with blood. They say it was a magic place, a sacred place, where even the Indians would never venture.'

'Anyway, the girls set out their picnic and the day was perfect. There was never such a day in the history of days. The lake, the trees, the sky so blue that it could have been ceramic. The teacher stood up and looked around at her girls and said, "What a perfect, perfect day. I wish we could all stay young forever. I wish the day could last for twenty-four years, instead of twenty-four hours."'

Mme Leduc stood looking at Vincent and Vincent waited for her to continue, but she didn't. After a while, he said, 'Go on. She wished that it would last for twenty-four years. Then what?'

'Then it did.'

Another long pause. 'I don't understand,' said Vincent.

'It's not difficult,' said Mme Leduc. The day lasted for twenty-four years. At least, it did for them. The sun stayed high in the sky and they didn't notice the time passing by. It was all like a dream. When at last they returned to the school they found that it was closed, and that all their friends had gone. It was no longer 1924. It was 1948.'

She went over to a rosewood bureau on the opposite side of the room and returned with a yellowed newspaper. 'Here,' she said. 'This is what happened.'

It was a copy of *The St Michel-des-Monts Sentinel*. The front-page headline read SEARCH FOR ST AGATHE GIRLS CALLED OFF - Little Hope Of Finding Missing 9 And Teacher, Say Mounties.

Vincent read the first paragraph. 'Police now believe there is little or no hope of them ever finding the teacher and nine girls from St Agathe's Academy who went missing three months ago on a picnic at Lac du Sang. The entire area has been thoroughly searched and there is no evidence to suggest that they all ran away together or that their disappearance is a practical joke. RCMP inspector René Truchaud called the Lac du Sang incident, "The greatest single mystery in Canadian police history."'

Mme Leduc said, 'They came looking for us on the day after we disappeared, but of course we weren't there. To them, we were still in yesterday, still lying in the grass by the lake.'

'It was you? It was you and your girls?'

Mme Leduc gave him a sad, elegant nod. 'We had a day like no other day has ever been; or ever will be. But we came back here and found that half of our lives had passed us by. I still don't know what happened to us; or why. I still don't know whether it was supposed to be a gift or a curse. But the first part of my wish came true, too, and so long as we stay here, inside the house, we remain as we were, all those years ago. It's almost as if my wish diverted us out of the stream of time, into a backwater, and that me and my seven girls are doomed or blessed to stay here forever.'

'It says here nine girls.'

'Yes ... there *were* nine. Two of them left - Sara five years ago, and Imogene just before Christmas. Sara tried to come back but she didn't look like a young girl any longer. Time had caught up with her, and aged her over forty years in a single week. I received a letter from Imogene. Only two lines. Do you want to read it?'

She passed over a sheet of paper that had been folded and refolded until it was soft. The handwriting on it was so crabbed and spidery that Vincent could barely decipher it. It said, '*Chère Mme Leduc, I am very old and close to death. Tell all of the girls that I will wait for them in Heaven.*'

Mme Leduc said, 'It appears that the further time leaves us behind, the quicker we will age if we try to leave. So ... the rest of us decided to stay.'

'I can't believe any of this,' said Vincent. 'Days can't last for twenty-four years. People don't stay young forever. Who are you kidding? You're just trying to stop me from taking Catherine away from you. All you care about is how much you can make out of her. A pregnant teenager, what an attraction! Jesus, if you cared about any of these girls you wouldn't be selling their bodies to every lecherous old guy with a fat enough wallet.'

'You exclude yourself from that category, I suppose,' said Mme Leduc.

'I was tempted, I admit it. She's a beautiful girl, she tempted me. But that doesn't stop me from trying to put things right.'

'Vincent ... has it occurred to you that this is the only way in which we can make a living? None of us can leave the house, so what else are we supposed to do? We may stay young forever, but we still need to eat; and we still have bills to pay.'

Vincent laughed and then abruptly stopped laughing. He looked at Mme Leduc and said, 'You're seriously crazy, you know that? If you really believe that you disappeared in 1924 for twenty-four years and that you're never going to grow old ... well, I don't know. I'd just like us know what stuff you're on.'

At that moment Catherine walked into the room in her long white nightgown. Her hair was tied back and she looked especially young and vulnerable. It had only been three days since Vincent had seen her, but he had forgotten how mesmerizing she was. The way she looked up at him from underneath her long, long eyelashes. The way she pouted. The way her breasts moved underneath the fresh-pressed cotton.

Mme Leduc took hold of her hand. 'Mr Jeffries here wanted to take you away with him, Catherine. I had to explain why he couldn't.'

'And of course I believed every word,' said Vincent. 'That must have been some picnic, out at Lac du Sang. Don't tell me you didn't run short of sandwiches - you know, in twenty-four years?'

Mme Leduc said, 'Why don't you take Vincent to your room, Catherine? I expect that he'd like to talk to you alone.'

Without a word, Catherine took his hand and led him along the corridor. She opened the door of her room and let him in. 'I just came to talk,' he told her.

'You mean you don't like me any more?'

'I came to ask you to leave this place. I came to persuade you to do the best for your baby.'

Catherine took a few steps away from him, and then pirouetted, and lifted her nightgown over her head, so that she was standing in front of him completely naked. 'Now tell me that you don't like me any more.'

'Catherine, you can't go on doing this. I've found an apartment for you. It's pretty small but the landlady can take good care of you, and there's a clinic only four blocks away.'

Catherine stood up close to him, smiling her dreamy smile. Her nipples were knurled and stiff, and she pressed the hard globe of her stomach up against his reluctantly-rising erection. 'There,' she said, 'you *do* still like me, after all.'

'I don't just *like* you, Catherine.'

'Then prove it,' she challenged him. She tugged down his zipper and pried his cock out of his shorts. He said, 'No, not that,' but she gave him two or three irresistible rubs with her hand and he didn't say anything else after that.

He watched her as she knelt in front of him, her eyes closed, her pouting lips encircling his reddened erection. Her cheek bulged as she took him in deeper, and her tongue swam around his glans like a warm seal. He ran his hands through her hair and fondled her ears and he felt so weak, but so transported with pleasure, that he knew he had to have her for ever, for himself. He would raise her and he would raise her baby, both. He would guard her and protect her and make love to her all night.

His sperm flew into her hair and crowned her with pearls. She looked up and smiled at him, and outside the house the thunder rumbled and rattled the windows.

'Would you like to live with me?' he asked her.

She squeezed his softening penis with her hand. 'Of course ... if only it were possible.'

'Then let me take you away from here. Tomorrow night, I'll come for you, yes?'

She held out her hand and he helped her onto her feet. 'If only it were possible,' she repeated, and kissed him, very frankly, on the lips.

'You're nuts,' said Baubay. 'You know what the penalty is for kidnap?'

'She wants me,' Vincent told him. 'She said she'd come to live with me, if I got her out of there.'

'Those girls say anything you want to hear. It's what you pay them for.'

'Catherine's different.'

'The only thing different about Catherine is that she's got a bun in the oven.'

'Francois, if you don't help me with this then I'll do it on my own.'

'I still say you're nuts.'

They drew up outside the house. Vincent had persuaded Baubay to bring him up here for another evening with Mme Leduc and her girls, with the promise that he would pay, but as they approached St Michel-des-Monts he had explained his plan to take Catherine away with him.

'Supposing Violette was telling you the truth about Lac du Sang?'

'Oh, come on, Francois. Get real. A bordello full of immortal schoolgirls?'

'I guess, when you say it like that.'

They knocked at the door and Mme Leduc answered, dressed in scarlet silk. 'Well, well,' she said, as she took them inside. 'Like a bee to the honeypot, Vincent? Can't keep away?'

Vincent gave a self-deprecating shrug.

The girls were all in the living-room, and Minette was playing Brahms on the piano. They stood up when Baubay and Vincent came in, and twittered around them, giving them little

kisses of welcome and touching their hair. Only Catherine remained seated, and Vincent deliberately didn't catch her eye.

'Who takes your fancy tonight, Francois?' asked Mme Leduc.

Baubay looked around the room. He glanced at Vincent, and then he said, 'You, Violette. It's you that I want tonight.'

Later, after champagne, Baubay and Violette climbed the stairs together while the girls clapped and giggled and whistled their encouragement. As soon as they had gone, Vincent went over to Catherine and took hold of her hand. 'Our turn?' he suggested.

He held her hand quite tightly as they left the living-room and crossed the hallway. Then - as they passed the front door - he suddenly pulled her and said, 'This is it! Come on, Catherine, this is our chance!'

Catherine tried to wrench herself away from him. 'No!' she cried out. 'What are you doing?' But Vincent twisted open the doorhandle, flung the door wide open, and dragged Catherine out onto the porch.

'No!' she screamed. *'No, Vincent, I can't!'*

She deliberately sank to her knees, but Vincent bent down, and bodily picked her up. 'No!' she shrieked at him. 'I can't! I can't! No, Vincent, you'll kill me!'

She pulled his hair and dug her fingernails into his face, but he found the pain almost exciting. He carried along the pathway and out into the street, where his car was parked. He opened the driver's door and managed to force her inside, pushing her across to the passenger seat. Then he climbed in, started the engine, and sped away from the house with a high-pitched squealing of tires.

'Go back!' she shouted, trying to snatch the steering-wheel. *'You have to go back!'*

'Listen!' he shouted back at her. 'Whatever Violette told you, it's garbage! She said it to scare you, so that you wouldn't leave! Now stop worrying about her and start thinking about yourself, and your baby.'

'Go back!' Catherine howled. 'Oh God, you can't do this to me! Oh God please go back! Oh God, Vincent, please take me back!'

'Will you shut up?' Vincent told her. 'Shut up and put on your seatbelt. Even if you don't feel protective toward your baby, I do.'

'Take me back! Take me back! I can't go with you, Vincent! I can't!'

She punched him again and tried to tear at his ear, and the car swerved wildly across the highway. But in the end he managed to catch hold of both of her wrists in his right hand, and restrain her. She stopped trying to hit him, and she curled herself up in her seat, and softly sobbed.

She was asleep by the time they reached Montreal. He parked outside the apartment building and switched off the engine. He looked across at her and brushed the hair from her face. She was so beautiful that he could hardly believe she was real. He lifted her out of the passenger seat and carried her in through the entrance hall. It was stark and brightly-lit, but it was late now and there was nobody else around. He went up in the elevator and by the time they reached the sixth floor she was beginning to feel heavy.

He opened the door and carried her into the apartment. It wasn't much - a plain, furnished place with two bedrooms, a bathroom and a small kitchenette. By day it had a narrow view of the Prairies River, partly blocked out by another apartment building. He took her through to the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Over the white vinyl headboard hung an almost laughably incompetent painting of a forest in the fall.

He sat beside her and took hold of her hand. 'Catherine?' he coaxed her. 'Come on, Cathetine. We're here now, sweetheart. We've escaped.'

Her eyes flickered open. She stared at him, first in bewilderment, and then in horror. She sat up and looked around her. 'Oh God,' she said. 'Oh God, this can't be true.'

'Come on, it's not that bad,' said Vincent. 'A few flowers, a couple of loose covers.'

But Catherine ignored him. She climbed off the bed and went directly to the mirror over the dressing-table. 'Oh God,' she kept repeating.

Vincent stood beside her as she peered frantically at her face. 'Catherine, nothing's going to happen to you. That story that Violette tells ... it's only a way of frightening you.'

'But I was *there*. I was there at Lac du Sang in 1924.'

'You couldn't have been. It simply isn't possible. I don't know what Violette did. Maybe she brainwashed you or something. But no day ever lasted longer than twenty-four hours and nobody ever stayed young forever.'

'You have to take me back. I'm pleading with you, Vincent. I'm pleading on my child's life.'

'You want to go back? Back to what? Back to being a whore? Back to sucking men's cocks and opening your legs to anybody who can pay the price?'

'Is that your problem? Is that why you took me away? Because you wanted me to open my legs but you didn't want to pay for it?'

'For God's sake, Catherine, I took you away because I love you.'

For the first time she took her eyes away from her reflection in the mirror. There was an expression on her face that he had never seen on any girl's face before. It laid him open right to the bone, as if she had cut him with a ten-inch butcher's knife.

It was after eleven o'clock. He asked her if she wanted anything to eat or drink but she said no. He switched on the television in the living-room but there was nothing on but lacrosse and an old Errol Flynn movie. Catherine stayed in the bedroom, staring at the wall. In the end he came in and sat next to her again. 'Listen,' he said. 'Maybe I made a mistake.'

She glanced up at him, and she looked very pale and very tired.

'If you want to go back, I'll take you back. I just thought I was doing the right thing, that's all. Why don't you get some sleep and we'll make an early start in the morning.'

She said nothing, but closed her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm sorry for being in love with you. I'm sorry for being human. What else was I supposed to do?'

He watched television until just after midnight, and then he undressed and climbed into bed with her. She was breathing softly against the pillow. He reached out and touched her arm, and then her breast. Then he ran his hand over the swelling of her stomach. He could feel the baby stir and kick, like somebody kneading dough.

He slept uneasily until 3:04. He kept having fragmentary dreams about people laughing and talking in other rooms. He woke with a strong hard-on and he reached out for Catherine again. She was still quietly breathing. He caressed her breasts through her nightgown and then he drew her legs apart and climbed on top of her. Maybe it was wrong of him to fuck her while she was asleep, but he needed her so urgently. She felt dry, in the darkness, but he spat on his fingers to moisten the end of his cock. Then he pushed himself into her, and started a deep, plunging rhythm.

She woke up. He sensed her wake up. But he was too close to his climax to stop, and he kept on thrusting himself into her, harder and harder. He heard her panting, quick and harsh, and he thought, great, she's getting into it too. He said, 'Come on, baby, you're wonderful. Come on, sweetheart, you're fantastic.'

It was then that she screamed. It was a piercing, gargling scream, and he could feel spit fly all over his face. He jerked upright, his skin freezing in fright, and then she screamed again. He scrabbled to find the bedside lamp, and managed to switch it on, but then it dropped onto the floor, so that what he saw was illuminated by an angled, upward light that made it look even more terrifying than it was.

He was kneeling between the legs of a shriveled old woman. Her sparse white hair was coming out in clumps. Her eyes were sunk into their sockets and her lips were drawn tightly back over orange, toothless gums. All that identified her as Catherine was her huge, swollen belly.

'Oh Jesus,' Vincent whispered. 'Oh Jesus, tell me this is a nightmare.'

The old woman tried to scream again, but all she managed this time was a thick gargle. She lifted one of her bony arms, and clawed feebly at Vincent's shoulder, but Vincent pushed her away. She was collapsing in front of his eyes. Her face was tightening over her cheekbones and her breasts were shriveling. Her collarbone broke through her skin, and her chin dropped onto her chest.

'Catherine!' Vincent quivered. 'Catherine!'

He lifted her head, but it dropped sideways onto the pillow and it was obvious that she was dead. Vincent climbed off the bed, wiping his hands on the sheet. He was trembling so much that he had to hold onto the wall for support.

It was then that he thought: *the baby - what about the baby? Even if Catherine's dead, maybe I can save the baby!*

He thought for one moment of calling for an ambulance - but how the hell was he going to explain an old, dead woman in his bed - an old, dead *pregnant* woman? He approached Catherine cautiously, and laid his hand on her stomach, and, yes, he could still feel the baby kicking inside her. But how long could it survive if he didn't get it out?

He went to the kitchen, opened the drawer, and took out a carving-knife. He returned to the bedroom and stood beside Catherine gray-faced. He nearly decided to do nothing, to let the baby die, but then he saw Catherine's stomach shift again, and he knew that he had to give it a chance.

He inserted the point of the knife into her wrinkled skin, just above her pubic bone. Then, slowly, he pushed it in through the muscle, until he felt something more yielding. He was terrified of cutting the baby as well, but he kept on slicing her stomach open, and she was so decayed and dry and papery that it was more like cutting open a rotten old hessian sack. At last he had her stomach wide open, and he drew aside the two flaps of flesh to reveal her womb.

Shaking and dripping with sweat, he cut the baby out of her. One foot emerged, and then a hand. Miraculously, it was still alive. It was purple and slithery and it smelled strongly of amniotic fluid. He turned it over so that he could cut the umbilical cord, and then he lifted it up in both hands. It was so tiny, so frail. A baby girl. Her eyes were squeezed shut and she clasped and unclasped her fingers. She snuffled, and then she let out two or three pathetic little cries.

Vincent was overwhelmed. He started to sob out loud. Tears ran down his cheeks and dripped from his chin. He couldn't understand what had happened to Catherine, but he knew that he had saved the baby's life. He carried her through to the living-room, laid her on the couch, and then went to the bathroom to find some towels.

He sped to St Michel-des-Monts through driving, sunlit rain. At times his speedometer needle wavered over 110 kph. He managed to reach the house just after eleven o'clock. He ran to the front porch, vaulted up the steps and banged furiously on the knocker.

Mme Leduc appeared, with Baubay close behind her. 'You came back,' she said. 'I'm amazed that you had the nerve.'

'Well ... I don't think I had any choice.'

'Catherine?'

He lowered his head. 'You were telling me the truth. Catherine's gone. But I managed to save her child. I wanted to bring her back here before it was too late.'

He went back to the car, and opened the door. Very hesitantly, like somebody who has never felt rain on their skin before, or had sunlight shining in their eyes, a young girl climbed out, barefoot, but wrapped up in green bath towels. Vincent took her hand and led her toward the house. Violette and Baubay watched in silence as she came up the steps. She looked at least 17 or 18 years old, with long brunette hair, like Catherine's, and she was almost as pretty, although her features were a little sharper.

'There,' said Vincent, as he led her into the house. 'You'll be safe here.'

There were tears in Mme Leduc's eyes. 'I wish that I had never wished,' she told Vincent.

'Well,' Vincent told her. 'Sometimes we all think that.'

They drove away from the house just as the rain was beginning to clear. Baubay said, 'Where are you going? Montreal's back that way.'

Vincent handed him a folded route map. 'Lac du Sang,' he said. 'There's one more thing I have to do.'

In the woods, he dug a shallow grave and buried Catherine's dessicated body. He filled her face with earth and leaves. 'I'm sorry,' was all he could think of to say. Afterward he stood by the edge of the water under a clear blue sky.

'They came here and they wished,' he told Baubay. 'God, they couldn't have known what they were wishing for, could they?'

'All I wish for is a new Mercedes,' said Baubay.

'I just wish that I could have woken up every night and found Catherine lying next to me.'

'You can go back to Violette's and try out her daughter.'

'Forget it. I feel like her father. I brought her into the world, didn't I? I watched her grow up.'

'In three hours? That's not fatherhood.'

'All the same, it was incredible. She just grew bigger and bigger, like one of those speeded-up movies.'

'Sure she did.'

'She did, I swear it.'

'Sure.'

They climbed back into the car and drove away, leaving the waters of Lac du Sang as still as ever.

Six weeks later, Baubay phoned to tell him that he had been promoted and given a metallic

gold 500SL as a company car. After that, Vincent awoke two or three times every night, and fearfully reached out to make sure that there was nobody lying on the other side of the bed.

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