

The Breakwater House
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Free Sample

FIRST NOTEBOOK

The Tender Age

On Mimosa Street there is a public garden. Here is what a demiurge looking down on the scene would see: two strollers on a spring morning, a young mother pushing each one. They enter the garden from opposite directions, which coincide with adjacent neighbourhoods. The first is middle-class - rows of white duplexes with square front yards and rectangular backyards; the other, working-class - cement-block buildings lining the sidewalks, with apartments mostly rented by the month. In both neighbourhoods there are families, widows, divorcees, pensioners, happy people, unhappy people, anonymous alcoholics, cardiacs oblivious to their condition, children.

The strollers, each at its own pace, converge on the centre of the garden but do not cross paths there. They meet ten minutes later, at a trash can. The infants, side by side, contemplate one another and smile. Lucie sees Claire, and Claire, Lucie.

For now, all they have in common are those luminous names under a cloudless sky and the years ahead, still blank and weightless. Newly arrived from the same elsewhere where angels become children and children stop being angels, they have decided to recognize and accompany each other here below, in order not to fall entirely from grace. Because life is long and winters are cold, because nettles sting and all mothers, without exception, are bizarre. Heeling like sailboats in high winds, some mothers capsize, others founder, most resist and regain their balance, tilting to one side.

The scene - which hinges on an apple core and a tissue being thrown by the mothers into the same trash can at the same moment - completes the journeys of these souls searching for bodies, the journey of one body searching for the other. It marks the beginning of their companionship on a jolly, crumbling road. They will, of course, forget where they came from. The true mechanisms of our lives tend to be indecipherable.

One mother, Aurore, works as a cashier in the largest supermarket in the neighbourhood, where the other, Suzanne, goes three times a week to buy her fresh - which is to say, frozen - produce. Aurore wears a uniform whose colour - country-kitchen turquoise - sets off her feline eyes. Her name is embossed on a pin. Suzanne sports an implacable perm and a dark blue, burgundy, and gold silk scarf decorated with sailor's knots. They know each other's faces and exchange a polite greeting whenever they meet. They inquire politely about the little girl gurgling in the other's stroller. What is her name, is she teething, how much did she weigh at birth? They discover that Claire was born only five days before Lucie. In the same hospital. And, incredible but true, in the same room.

The girls grow. They often see each other at the wading pool, in the park on Mimosa Street, in the shopping mall. They gladly play together and cry when they are separated. In September of their third year, Claire is enrolled at the nursery already attended by Lucie. In September of their fourth year they start going to the same kindergarten. In September of their sixth year, they attend the same elementary school and are placed in the same class.

That year, Lucie asks her mother for a book on her birthday. Aurore is bewildered: You don't know how to read, treasure. Don't you want a doll instead? Or a truck? Aurore has committed herself to balancing out any gender bias and always offers Lucie the choice between a toy for girls and one for boys. Lucie invariably chooses the girls' toy.

And Lucie is emphatic about the book. When she receives it, she keeps it close at hand on the night table. She looks at the pictures and counts the letters standing between her and the whole alphabet, while at the same time nurturing a passion for dressing,

undressing, and re-dressing her dolls, preferably at Claire's house, where Claire's legendary collection includes a black doll named Mélanie, given to her by Aurore. Precisely because it was a gift from Aurore, it is Claire's favourite. She finds that Mélanie looks fabulous in pink and insists on sleeping with her every night. Suzanne, who is not quite comfortable with the idea, suggests that Mélanie ought to become the other dolls' cleaning lady. Claire rebels and mentions it to Lucie, who asks for an opinion from Aurore, who rolls her eyes.

As soon as she can read, Lucie devours everything within reach - the washing machine manual, cereal boxes, the label on her baseball glove, the novels Aurore leaves lying around on the kitchen counter, the books in the under-twelve section of the city library. Pages open like the sea in the wake of new words, and before long there are pages being written inside her head. Sometimes Lucie can't sleep because a little poem is taking shape. She listens to it slip across the pillow and swim away like the Count of Monte Cristo making his escape. On Sundays she wakes up hoping for rain. A beautiful heavy, slanting, steady rain, one that slaps doggedly at the window and provides her with an excuse to stay in her room the whole morning.

Aurore, who enjoys sleeping and dreaming, has explained to Lucie that she will spend at least a third of her life in bed, so if there's anything worth investing in, it's a nice, thick eiderdown quilt and a pair of pillows. A pair if you're alone, three if there are two of you: you always need an emergency pillow, sweetheart - never forget that and never forget that a comfortable bed ensures you a good night's sleep, and a good night's sleep guarantees that your days will be lovely and full.

Snug in her guarantee of a good sleep, clutching her pen and notebook, Lucie spends rainy Sunday mornings inventing stories that make her laugh and weep. She lets herself get deliciously borne away by a river that never runs dry and whose sweet water is constantly changing colours. Aurore, incredulous but delighted, takes advantage of this quiet time to sleep late. Sometimes, on rare occasions, Lucie diffidently lets Aurore read her notebooks. Aurore is overjoyed and secretly shows them to Suzanne and to the cashiers at the supermarket, who, by way of encouragement, congratulate Lucie for her achievements, leaving her paralyzed with embarrassment.

Writing is the gift that Lucy received from the fairies who leaned over her cradle. It bestows on her the peculiar ability to settle into a story in the process of being invented, and to evade the foul waters, the putrid skies, the wars on the far side of the world. Writing. The power to hope. Like a glass shield, it protects the heart she was born with, the joyous heart of a new soul, alive to fragrances, sounds, beauty - naive, pure, open. This is Lucie's secret glory, her refuge: her freshness remains intact on the reverse side of all disappointment. Here she finds shelter from the horrendous suffering inflicted on children when they discover that evil exists but are not yet equipped for indifference. Since, at her age, a "scandal" is still scandalous, Lucie cannot find one valid reason to put filth in the rivers, blood on your hands, or lies in your words.

Part of Lucie grows up and adapts to the world, gains a sense of compromise and the laws of causality, plays outside, dresses, undresses, and re-dresses her dolls. The other part closes the Sunday bedroom around her and, with the guileless courage of a blade of grass piercing the ground to look at the sky, goes travelling on the backs of words, uplifted, vibrant.

This is why Lucie is often afraid: her strength renders her fragile. She continues well beyond a reasonable age to draw pleasure from building castles and speaking to whales, but when it comes to everything else she is always afraid of being mistaken. She is aware that conventions exist, but she weaves among them as though blind. It is Claire who, since they were tots, has been her white cane, her seeing-eye dog.

Claire received from the fairies leaning over her cradle a sincere love of real things, a gift that her mother, Suzanne, cherishes above all others and nourishes constantly with her acute sense of detail and her many must-dos. Suzanne conjures up before her daughter's golden eyes a crystalline world where dolls glitter in the limelight and arrive in full regalia to take tea in miniature china.

On Sunday mornings, Claire likes to draw back the curtains early, tidy her room, comb her hair, review the contents of her dresser drawers, and fill in her colouring books, taking care not to go over the lines. When she starts to grow bored, she asks Suzanne to call Aurore. Yes, of course, Cupcake. Suzanne - to her dismay, since it's past noon - wakes Aurore, who offers to take the girls to the movies for a double feature including *Aladdin and the Lamp*. The girls are not especially interested in Aladdin. Claire's attention is focused on the princess's costumes, and Lucie wonders where you can buy a flying carpet. They're too expensive, Aurore replies, and Claire adds, Anyhow, there's no such thing.

The girls know every inch of the public garden on Mimosa Street, every plus and minus, all the flowers and insects, the fragrance of each season. One afternoon, behind a patch of ferns, they exchange clothes. Claire is smaller than Lucie, pudgier, blonder, more curly-headed. Lucie is a flaming red-head, slender, and tall for her age. Their dresses, however, are alike, at least at first glance: white cotton, round collar, ribbon. But on closer inspection, Lucie's is worn, the hem hastily sewn, the ribbon wrinkled.

Behind the ferns, the girls undress and quickly trade dresses. Claire scrapes her calf against some nettles and lets fly a few choice words that she has learnt from her father and hides from her mother. That afternoon in the park, they play everyday games: hopscotch, jump rope, swings, ball. But this is a particularly happy day because of the game they slip underneath the others: each is the other.

They call this game "you-me-me-you," written "ioumeemeiou," and later to become "eyeyuyueye."

In the washroom, each girl takes back her dress before going home. At night, before getting into bed, Claire tramples on her ribbon to wrinkle it. When Suzanne irons it out with swift, sure strokes, Claire watches her on the sly, secretly upset.

Using the eyeyuyueye principle, Claire convinces Lucie to stand in for her at the unbearable Saturday afternoon visits with her grandmother. If we change dresses, Claire says, my mother will believe you're me and so will my grandmother. We could go together, but I wouldn't have to talk, or smile, or do anything at all, and I could go buy jujubes at the vending machine and eat them in the entrance hall and look at the goldfish and the plastic geraniums.

They're too old now to believe that exchanging dresses actually transforms them, but still Lucie finds the plan enticing. She is keen on visiting a grandmother, even one who's not her own grandmother, and even if she's a cranky, obsessive snob and behaves like the incarnation of the Last Judgement. Lucie sleeps over at Claire's one Friday night, and on Saturday morning they dress as they've agreed, a detail that doesn't escape Suzanne's notice, although she has learned from experience not to contradict the girls. Making a superhuman effort - what with the heat wave - to correctly transpose their names, Suzanne herds them onto the bus that takes them to a retirement home, citadel of the slow shuffle and sanctuary of naphthalene.

Claire clings to the entrance-hall vending machines with such zeal that Suzanne finally hands her some change, making her promise to take the elevator as soon as she has finished eating her jujubes. She stops at the reception desk to sign the register and whispers to the receptionist to keep an eye on her daughter. Then she takes Lucie's hand, saying, Come, Claire, my little Cupcake, Granny Cadieux is on the third floor.

In the elevator, Lucie's mouth feels dry. What does this witch look like? Will she tell her she's too fat, just as she unfailingly tells Claire? Will she order her to wash her hands before they touch? Will she make her sit in a corner, on the only unpadded chair, next to a box of mint chocolates that she won't be allowed to open?

Far from reassuring her, Suzanne appears even more nervous than Lucie, tormented as she is by the still raw memories of the domestic tyrant who reigned over the early years of her marriage. Suzanne often wonders whether her youthful love would have lasted longer if this predator had not been present in every room of the house, including the bedroom. She wonders whether her mother-in-law's adoration for Gérald hasn't proportionally sapped her own esteem for him. Many times she has pictured Gérald as a punctured watering hose with very little water remaining at the spout, while she and Claire shrivel in plain sight like small potted flowers. In spite of this, Suzanne diligently goes to visit Granny Cadieux every three weeks. She does this because of an asset that she possesses, or that possesses her, her weapon in face of the worst situations: a sense of duty.

The elevator opens onto a schizoid-pink corridor punctuated with identical doors. The heat is suffocating. And in the muffled, stifling silence there is something like a drainage of presence, silence as though death were skulking about with muted steps, waiting for the next number to come up. As it happens, the click of a doorknob makes the visitors turn around just as a stretcher pushed by a pale-green-clad - schizoid green - orderly, comes into view. The stretcher carries a vaguely human form covered from head to toe with a white sheet. Suzanne jumps, averts her eyes, furtively crosses herself, and tries to comfort Lucie: My poor little Cupcake, it's not like this every Saturday.

After this macabre overture, however, comes a welcome surprise: Granny Cadieux greets them with a full-denture smile and a freshly combed perm. She agrees unhesitatingly to call Lucie "Claire," says How pretty you are today, piglet, and offers her a mint chocolate, but just one. She has "Claire" sit in her lap at the risk of rumpling her dress; she compliments Suzanne on her new silk scarf with the sailor's-knots design and finally agrees to share the address of her beautician. It turns out that after decades of bad luck, Granny Cadieux has finally won a considerable sum at the lottery. A considerable sum, she repeats as she leans towards her daughter-in-law with a winner's superior tone of voice, the tone of Roman emperors and kept women.

Thanks to this considerable sum, Lucie experiences a grandmotherly ceasefire – an event that Claire completely misses, having manoeuvred, in exchange for a bit of conversation, to borrow some small change from two little old ladies who never have visitors, thereby prolonging her leave of absence. What's more, Claire chews her jujubes slowly, putting on an air of perfect innocence each time she senses the receptionist staring at her indignantly.

The episode leaves Lucie with an aching desire to learn about her own grandparents. She plagues her mother with questions until Aurore caves in and agrees to recount the dramatic saga of the "Fire Ten."

Kathleen, your grandmother, was Irish on both sides, but she was born in Quebec. She grew up barefoot on an isolated farm and attended a French school for only a month and a half before being conscripted to lend a hand to her mother, pregnant for the eighth time.

In the village, her family was nicknamed the "Fire Ten" because of their fiery red hair. Although freckled, they were honest, hardworking, and devout. They had chosen to live in Quebec, in spite of the French language, because it was Catholic. They were never seen anywhere except at mass or, on rare occasions, at the general store.

When the family attended church, the third pew on the left (counting from the back) seemed to ignite as soon as they sat down there. Due to a vague suspicion in the village concerning their hair and language it was feared they had sprung directly from the devil's

furnace, and so no one dared occupy the third pew on the left counting from the back, even in the family's absence. After minutely examining the suspect area, the beadle furthermore started a rumour about traces of sulphur and the singed corner of a Bible open to Revelation 20:10.

But the cold in Quebec is bitter and the winters are long. A climate of the damned wears down the juts of reputations, forces them down to the level of harsh survival and afflicted bodies. Nature gives no more than what it gives and takes what it wants. It mercilessly crushes human hierarchies - even a king would freeze to death if he spent Christmas out of doors. Consequently, the Fire Ten benefited from a sort of ontological credit: even though they were strange and strangers, they were human and therefore vulnerable, which in itself amounted to a form of redemption. Cows and potatoes were bought from them; shoes and snowshoes were sold to them. They were even given until the fall to pay. But great care was taken not to invite them to feasts, weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

Kathleen roamed the fields and woods with her bare feet and helping hands. She looked like what she was - that is, a savage. She could catch trout with her bare hands, attract birds with her voice, foresee the coming of storms and wolves. She never erred in predicting the sex of a child to be born and the day of its birth, and she bathed stark naked from April to November in icy rapids. Her eldest brother saw her grab hold of a fork that had dropped into the hearth. Her father swore he'd caught sight of her in the fields while she was stirring pork and beans in the kitchen; her mother swore she was knitting on the porch while picking blueberries. Her hair needed cutting every two weeks and her nails every Saturday. When the priest made his rounds, her family hurried to find her: they didn't know where she'd learned French but she was the only one who spoke it. Sometimes, in her sleep, she spoke another language, an ancient, magical tongue full of the rustling of golden trees. So, even within a family suspected of colluding with the devil, Kathleen aroused curiosity and disquiet, and it was not unusual for her to be woken with a sprinkle of holy water.

At the beginning of an exceptionally hot spring, the Fire Ten hired a coureur de bois named Jean to help them clear a plot of land. At the general store in town, Jean was buttonholed on the subject of the Irish, though not in so many words. Would he like the beadle to show him the dog-eared Bible? Did he need a pocket-size crucifix, just in case? Would he be able to recognize the odour of hell? Would he take along his gun?

To put an end to the village chatter Jean swore to commit himself to neither woman nor demon, and gladly accepted a flask of altar wine before leaving the store. A strapping lad, tall and broad-shouldered, master of wolf packs and woodlands, he was not about to run and hide because of such gibberish. Compared to the claws of bears, the cunning of foxes, the forests deep, dense, and dark, how dangerous could a handful of penniless freckled folks be? He shrugged his shoulders and left the village. He would never come back.

He headed towards the farm. The road was bad and got worse, but he moved at a fast clip in his leather boots, reckoning he could reach his destination before nightfall. After walking a long time, he felt his heart swell when, to the left of the setting sun, he perceived another sun on the horizon: it was Kathleen's exponential hair. She had calculated the moment of his arrival accurately and wanted to see him from afar.

Jean was thrown off balance. He had never seen a woman so much like a dizziness. Outlined red against the pale horizon, she moved like water and wild rabbits and migratory birds. He swore once again, but this time feverishly, to commit himself to neither woman nor demon. As he did so, he noticed that the laces on both his boots had come undone. He leaned down to tie them, and before he could raise his head saw two dark, robust, well-proportioned feet appear. How the woman had so swiftly covered the distance from the horizon to where he stood he could not say, yet his sensitive nose told him that he was in the presence not of hell, but of angelic venison. He was aware then and there of being

possessed by a celestial passion and he felt the epiphany tunnelling new veins for his blood, spawning ardent vessels and rivers of no return.

For weeks that seemed to pass like centuries, Jean was amiable, courteous, and distant with the Irish family. He shared hours of sweaty toil with the father and his four sons and sat down at the table with the entire Fire Ten at every meal. For all his vigilance, though, he could not detect the least whiff of devilry, black magic, or conspiracy. Only the little savage preoccupied him - her gift for ubiquity, her mastery of French, her bare hands on the burning embers, her millennial gaze. He had never been able to sleep when the moon was full, and on every such night he would see Kathleen appear on the gravel path, white under the white disc, floating in her thin dress. She had a disturbing way of staring at the sky until a seething force surged out of her, the nimbus of a solitude that Jean had long believed was his own sad birthright. The girl's white eye was fastened on the moon, and the man's blue eye was fastened on the girl: he felt damned, condemned, his flesh seared for all eternity.

Still, he was unfailingly pleasant and politely distant for those weeks that seemed like centuries. The summer was blistering, the house was made of wood, and its inhabitants had flaming hair. On the last night of August a fire broke out among the evergreens, was hurled against the house by the wind, and instantly engulfed the dwelling. The entire family died of suffocation, every one of them except Kathleen, who was bathing naked in the icy rapids; and except Jean, who on hearing her slip out of the house had followed her surreptitiously. The wind drove the smell of fire and flesh in the opposite direction, yet Kathleen felt her kin's blood boiling, and she tautened like a bow. A fathomless howl rose from the rapids and Jean witnessed a vision of fury, horror, and unbearable beauty that made time stop, as though the girl's lungs contained all the water's coldness and all the fire's flames.

At that precise moment, the blaze - terrified by the savage scream - was snuffed out. Jean leapt out of the bushes and rushed towards Kathleen while unbuttoning his shirt to wrap her in the threadbare cotton. The look on her face was so blank that he recoiled. With no thought for her own nakedness, she hurtled towards the house that had vanished, towards her family, of which nothing remained.

The story of Kathleen the beast, the sorceress, the druid of the underbrush and blueberry patches, was brief and tragic. Jean enfolded her in his male passion, made of threadbare cotton, capable arms, and perpetually untied bootlaces. He led her along brambly paths to the heart of the forest, home to the Indians, who fear neither women nor beasts nor the devil. One bright morning, in full view of the sun, he planted inside Kathleen a daughter whom they called Aurore, and who was born with bare feet.

As for the village priest, he noted while making his Thanksgiving rounds that his Irish parishioners, with their sadly premonitory sobriquet, had perished without leaving the slightest remnant. The villagers assumed that poor Jean had suffered the same fate, due unfortunately to his greenhorn carelessness. In a collective outpouring of superstitious compassion, the villagers held a funeral to avoid damning out of neglect eleven Christian souls at once. In the absence of mortal remains, they buried the third pew on the left, counting from the back, and the dog-eared Bible. The prayers on behalf of the deceased, however, were quick and guarded so as not to inadvertently act in favour of the Evil One.

And yet, evil never resides where you think it does. More often than not, it comes from bigoted kitchens where "good" is determined by the proprieties. Years later, during a spring like any other spring, the head clerk of the general store enlisted the help of some Indians to guide him to the mouth of the river, where he had some business to conduct. Far, far downstream, at the bend in the river, he saw emerging from the water a blazing head of hair as long as two canoes end to end. He recognized the one who, of all the Fire Ten, had aroused unanimous suspicion. Pointing in her direction, he mutely questioned the Indians;

their response was to smile tranquilly and nod their heads before the most venerable presence in the whole vast forest, the mother of herbs, who presided over spectacular cures and joyful births.

On returning to the village, the head clerk wasted no time. He broadcast with great conviction and a wealth of detail his new version of the tragedy of the Fire Ten, sacrificed, together with Jean, by their own fiendish daughter, who now lived like and among the savages - that is, outside the pale of God's justice. Fearing collective damnation for having performed funeral rites for this cloven demon, the villagers agreed to punish her without due process.

They found an ally where frailty and torment dwelt, in a blue-eyed Métis party to both worlds and easily plied with drink. A single bottle of Geneva gin was enough for this fellow to lead a contingent of the righteous to the girl of fire. In Jean's absence and in the presence of Aurore, they burnt Kathleen alive. She remained mute, aware her whole life of the risk of being herself. Her soul, beloved by the world, rose very high, brushing against her man's shoulder along the way, and he instantly apprehended what we already knew: time is short, beasts are free, humans are insane, bodies perish. Love endures, a spotless mystery through the brambles, beneath the snow, in ardent vessels. Fly, my beauty, with all the strength you have. I'll carry Aurore to the icy rapids and enfold her in us and tell her to hear you among the birds.

Jean ran breathlessly towards the howl of their daughter, taut as a bow before her mother's remains, scarcely a mute pile of embers to walk through with bare feet.

And Jean? Lucie asks, wide-eyed with horror. Jean, my grandfather, can we go see him?

But Aurore lowers her head. How about making some blueberry jam? she asks. What do you say?

Lucie grows up in a house full of plants, books left open on the armrests of chairs, red and gold cushions that Aurore likes to make disappear in her inspired moments of prestidigitation, epic songs, potted sweet herbs, wobbly chairs, unmatched cups, curtains trailing over the floor and hiding, when drawn, the building across the way, its yellow-brick wall and identical balconies, most of them outfitted with a mop, a clothesline, dark-ringed eyes, gestures that are sluggish, tepid, disheartened.

Lucie doesn't like mathematics, but she likes to choose and count the coloured beads that she threads onto fishing line to make mile-long necklaces and bracelets that Aurore wears at picnics, on walks along Bellefille Street, and when she has one of her rare dates with you never know who. Much later, when Lucie thinks back to her childhood, she will remember her mother's extravagance, her beauty, and her efforts to hide her sadness.

Claire grows up on lean ground beef, mashed potatoes, and Grade A green peas, in a tidy, well-to-do house, expensively decorated according to an astoundingly vapid set of rules and scrupulously cleaned every Thursday through the good offices of Alambra. Pastel walls, crystal curios, lace curtains, and family portraits taken in a studio against a bluish backdrop, with a hazy veil softening the imperfection of the features, their humanity. Leather armchairs, broadloom, bow windows looking out on a winter paler here than elsewhere. Suzanne likes shopping, ribbons, pedicures. Her conformism is almost a work of genius: there is as little that distinguishes her from her habitat as a frying pan from its Teflon. Her marriage is perfect and perfectly unhappy. While she is faithful and efficient, she knows very little about Gérald; he pays for everything she wants in cash without complaining and is on the road three days out of every four.

Among all the objects Claire owns, the one she cherishes most is the pink piggy bank into which she religiously drops the loose change and bills that her father discards when he empties his pockets. She hefts it and shivers at the giddy thought that she long ago lost count of her savings. She gets the same shivers thinking that she will one day have to break

the pretty pig to retrieve her money, even though her father has promised that he will then open a real bank account for her. The bank account, Claire fears, will not be as pretty as the pig, nor as pink and tangible, but Gérald explains that it will be the only guarantee of a secure future, a comfortable existence. Claire is afraid of the future. Before falling asleep, she tries to talk to it. She begs it to be secure and comfortable. Sometimes she keeps the pig within reach the whole night.

Claire admires Aurore, her papier maché sculptures; the fact that she laughs when someone spills a glass of milk. She adores her own mother, but does not admire her. She will remember Suzanne's meticulousness, her goodness, her efforts to hide her sadness.
