

MATISSE OF MONTREAL

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It was an atmospheric night. The mountain glowed so bright the scrap metal twinkled like stars in the centre of a galaxy. The neon rippled up and down the cross at the summit.

Sweating, strung out on drugs and sex, Matisse climbed the steps to the highway. Centre-Ville came into view – slowly, piece by piece, with a sense of reluctance. Once upon time, according to rumour, there had been a law against building a skyscraper higher than the mountain. But these days it looked like an anthill surrounded by dead flower stalks. The tallest building was also the ugliest, a 153 story pseudo-monolith built in the grand grunge style. It had already survived three terrorist bombings. They had pinned one on the West and one on the East, for balance. The other one, the most recent one, was still a mystery. People joked that it had been for aesthetic reasons.

Pulling his overcoat up under his chin, Matisse set off along the sidewalk. The highway was almost empty – electricity taxes kept all but the richest people off the roads, and rich people were few and far between up here.

Up ahead he spotted a prostitute. Their eyes didn't meet – he was too far away. Still, she obviously knew a kindred spirit when she saw one, because she started towards him immediately. At first she looked ugly, then she looked pretty, and finally, as she closed in, he saw that she was old but not without some charm. There was a hint of youth and beauty in her ankles.

“Date,” she said, not quite a question.

“right,” Matisse said. He didn't need it, didn't want it, but he always went further when the chance came up.

“Room,” she said.

“Yes.”

The “room” was at the back end of an alley. Not that he was surprised, but he never did this kind of thing at his place. His home was for work, and, besides, Anna was there.

There was a wooden chair, a table, a recliner leaking stuffing, and a mattress with a pink mat – one of those old yoga mats, by the look of it. There was a lamp and a pack of cigars on the table.

As they stripped Matisse asked her name and gave a few compliments,

concentrating, for the effect of sincerity, on the lower portions of her legs. She didn't respond one way or another.

He was drained dry because he'd been with Anna all day, so it took a good thirty minutes to blow it. Not that he minded. He could tell she was impatient, though, so he kept up a steady stream of bullshit, going on about how he'd never had the courage to do this before, but he just hadn't been able to resist her, and he'd give her a big tip, oh, such a big tip. She didn't care about the other stuff, but Matisse thought it was better to mix it up instead of just saying "I know you're getting fucked off because this is taking so long but don't worry I'll pay for it."

Afterwards they sat together on the mat for the length of time it took Matisse to count out the cash.

"Long night?" he said.

"By the time I'm fucking done in my snotty box feels like the inside of a fucking cave in the fucking arctic. But the fucking pricks who keep you forever without getting the fuck on with it are the worst anyway. And the rich fucks with the fucking cars are the fucking worst yet. Last night I had a fucking date that put his gear shift up his fucking ass. No shit. I had to fucking sit waiting for him to settle himself, if you know what I mean. Then he wanted the fucking back door, like he thought we was going to make a fucking chain or something." She laughed and coughed.

Matisse held out the cash. She looked surprised, then afraid. She grabbed it.

"Thanks," she said. Then, "you don't happen to have a fucking Eastern five, by any chance?"

"Why do you want one?" Matisse asked, curious.

She shrugged. "They don't mean shit to me, but some of the fucking dealers find them handy. I don't give a fucking shit about any of the shit myself."

"No. Me neither."

But was that the truth? He wondered about it as he walked home. On the one hand he wasn't political. But on the other hand nothing made him angrier than all the lies and corruption with the city and the West and the East. And wasn't it the duty of the artist to expose the corruption? To expose, to break down loyalties, to – to champion the individual? The phrases felt stale and unnatural, like old chewing gum. Rounding a corner he kicked a dumpster.

“Matti, Matti, roll us a fatty.”

Matisse rolled. He was good at it. He could do the whole thing holding the paper up with one hand.

“I didn’t happen by any chance see you put syntho-69 in that, did I?”

“Fuck off. I don’t do that shit anymore. Fucks up your nerves.”

“Which you need. Matti here is an artist. An artiste.” The rest of the boys snickered.

Matisse shrugged. “A man can dream.”

“You taking classes?” someone asked politely. Matisse didn’t even know his name.

“Painting Fundamentals, Intaglio, Photography for Aestheticians, Art History mid 21st century to present.”

“Sounds heavy. You at UMME?”

“Cornelius McGillicuddy.”

“Fucking hell! How you paying for that?”

“Selling my body.”

“Seriously?”

“Well not all of it. Just my choad.”

“That’s so cool.”

“Matti is a sub-arctic motherfucker. That’s how he gets laid so much.”

“No, it’s because I ask questions.” They laughed.

“Let me ask you, though. A serious question.” It was the guy who had asked him if he was taking classes. “How does an artist deal with the, uh, political climate?”

Matisse glanced at him. His hair was done up in that torrent wave they were all wearing these days, but Matisse liked the look of him. He had a sort of earnestness about him. So Matisse took time to think about the question.

“It’s tricky,” he said, sparking his incendiary. “You can never be part of the establishment. The successful artist is a failed artist. The moment you succeed you fail. While you’re alive, I mean. You have to scrape and eat shit your whole life and hope you make it after you’re dead. You can’t be an artist living in Centre-Ville taking the train to Europe every other week.”

“I don’t get it,” someone said from the corner. Matisse gave him a look.

“It’s simple,” he said. “There has to be a delay. What kind of art are you making if the masses or even the critics and rich cunts love it right away? Art that serves the establishment. Facile art. Kitsch. That’s all. The delay might be ten, twenty years. Or it could be a hundred or even more. Who knows?”

“Don’t eat the fucking thing, eh?”

Matisse blew out a huge drag and passed.

“Only after you’re dead,” the same guy in the corner asked.

“Right,” Matisse said.

“But you’re never gonna die.”

Matisse laughed. It sounded forced.

“Don’t tell me you believe that shit.”

Matisse pitched his joint and took a pull on his flask, swishing the liquid around to wash out the syntho-69. Fuck, he had to kick sometime soon.

A professor walked past and gave him a dirty look. Matisse didn’t react.

The skyscrapers rose out of the old campus buildings like blue flames flaring out of cinder blocks. The shapes of Centre-Ville leaned down across the dead trees on the mountain. Matisse checked his watch. He was studious about attending classes. Why shouldn’t he be, with the money and all?

The guy from the other night with the torrent wave was taking photos of the ruins where the old Arts Building used to be. Matisse strolled up to him.

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

“Getting some shots,” the guy said, without looking at him.

“You’ve decided to take up art, too?”

The guy chuckled and shrugged. “I guess I did feel whatever you call it inspired after we hung out.” He looked at Matisse. “You know, what I wanted to know when I asked about the political is how you deal with the East-West stuff. As an artist.”

Matisse took a long pull on his flask.

“Montreal is just one place,” he said at last. Not really an answer, but he felt embarrassed. It was a strange feeling.

“Have you ever been anywhere else?”

“Of course not,” Matisse said. “Have you?”

“What do you think? But this is the point. The artist has to deal with

... with all of this. You can't ignore it, you know."

"Who's ignoring it? Anyway, I'm planning on leaving."

The guy smirked. "Don't you like it here?"

"I was born here, grew up here, still live here, have never left. What kind of fucking stupid question is it if I like it here?"

"Are you bored with it?"

"I'm always bored. If you're not bored you're boring."

"Where would you go?"

Matisse knew, but he didn't want to say. "I have to go to class," he said.

"Hold a moment. How do you pay for this?" He gestured, and it took in a group of rich shits wearing those fancy baseball caps they all had these days.

"I scam rich sluts. And I deal. Do you want anything?" For the first time it had occurred to him that this guy, whatever his name was, might be an insider.

"Bill was right you know," he called as Matisse walked away.

"Who the fuck is Bill?" he called back.

"From the other night. What he said. You're not going to die."

"We'll see," Matisse said, taking a big pull on his flask.

By the time he got to class he was pretty much done in. But in his experience a little booze never went amiss in the act of creation. His latest work was called "Jesus's Birth." It was his most radical work yet, though he didn't know how to finish it. So far the plan was for it to be a triptych. The left panel was coming along well. There were three monitors lined up together. The ones on the left and right were both running on two second loops. On the left, a close-up of an old woman's face crinkling like a bag into the same look of ecstatic happiness over and over. On the right, a close-up of a little boy's face withering again and again into a look of agony. There was at least four hours worth of film on the middle monitor, though none of the clips were more than two seconds long: a collage of all sorts of shapes and sizes and colours of penises entering the same vagina. Everything was in black and white. Behind the monitors was a Montreal skyline done in lurid detail. If you looked closely you saw the picture was made up of images of copulation – people, animals, even plants. In the middle of the sky, right above the cross, where you'd expect to find the sun, there was a peephole. If you climbed a stepladder and looked through it you saw a picture of Hell, flames and smoke and darkness and people twisted in shapes Matisse had

gotten mostly from looking at old photos of the '88 Quebecois massacre. There was a door off to the right, so small you had to crawl to get through. When you went through it you entered a kind of planetarium room, a space scene. The image of Hell was on the far wall, but here it was just a tiny dash of orange and yellow, no bigger than any of the other stars. You could only really make it out looking through the peephole on the other side.

So that was the first panel. Matisse was convinced it was the beginnings of a brilliant work, though the instructor, as always, was less than enthused. There was a rumour, almost certainly bullshit, that the instructor was Quebecky by descent and secretly one of those nationalists who hold ceremonies in the woods and stuff. He wandered over, glanced at Matisse, climbed the stepladder and looked through the peephole.

"Better," he said. He was the one who'd suggested Matisse model the Hell scene on the massacre.

On purpose, Matisse had chosen a flat overlooking the St. Laurent wall. He stood watching it from his window. The searchlights rotated atop the guard towers. In the glow from the streetlamps Matisse could make out the line of graffiti stretching in both directions, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-wall. Maybe it made a difference.

Anna was watching the TV. She was in a mood. She knew he hated TV, hated even having the fucking thing, and she had the volume turned up louder than seemed necessary considering the room was roughly half the size of the neutral zone in a hockey rink. Matisse's studio, if you could call it that, was in the next room, which was smaller. They shared a kitchen and a bathroom with the rest of the floor.

A Hibby-looking couple sauntered up close to the wall. They pulled down their pants and began screwing, the driver with his hands behind his head, the other with her hands flat against the wall. You saw a lot of that these days – men, women, mixes, all sorts. Probably they thought it was taboo, when in fact at most the guards would shine a searchlight and play a laugh track from one of their synthesizers. Vice had been passé for thirty years now.

"Couple Hibs having fun at the wall," Matisse remarked, to himself, probably.

"Why don't you go fucking join them?" Anna said.

What the fuck's your problem, anyway? But no, her voice was so full of poison that even the obvious question seemed wrong right now.

“I think I’ll work for a bit,” he said.

He was almost out of the room when Anna spoke.

“I came home this afternoon. The shop closed early.”

“Oh?”

“Someone phoned for you.”

“And?” he said. He sounded genuinely pissed off and not in the mood, which he wasn’t. But then he guessed.

“I thought it’d be polite to take a message,” she said, looking at him like he was a pervert uncle she was seeing for the first time in fifteen years. “It was Sharon. I thought you’d like to know. Tell Matti Sharon called. That’s what she said. I’m sure it was important. Sorry I couldn’t get any more than that. A good secretary would’ve gotten all the details for you, but fuck, I got the important bit right? Even if I don’t know who the fuck she is or why she’d be calling you in the middle of the day. Tell Matti Sharon called. So Sharon called. Just thought you’d like to know. Okay? Sharon called. You got that?” She was crying.

Fuck. “Fuck.”

“Yes, I gathered that was the gist of it.”

“Well so fucking what?” he snapped. “Tell me that asshole Millard isn’t still on the manor, eh?”

“See now, if you don’t know the difference you’re either a fucking idiot or the biggest asshole this side of Mile End. I hate to have to choose one, so I’ll say both.”

“Shut your fucking choad-fucking mouth you stupid bitch!” he roared, and then she was up and a switchblade was in her hand, like it’d just sprung out of her wrist.

“I want you to get your stuff and get the fuck out,” she said, enunciating every syllable.

He started towards her, then stopped when he saw how white her knuckles were.

“I want you to get your fucking stuff and get the fuck out.”

“Anna.”

“I – want – you – to – get – your – stuff – and – get – out.”

So he got his stuff and got out.

He was sitting behind a post in one of the few cheap terraces in Centre-Ville. He was well and truly fucked. The syntho-69 had landed in force, and there’d also been weed, sniff, a smidgen of romanian revolution, and a

whole lot of dirty booze. No skag, though. He didn't want anything that might make feel him better.

His eyes were following a course: his glass, the bar, the sacks of garbage lined up in the gutter, the palace-like buildings shining in the evening light, Anna and Millard sitting across the way on a classier terrace, oblivious. Occasionally he could hear her laughing. His mind felt like the inside of a piss hole in the snow.

The enabler walked over and gave him his bill. Apparently she had decided on her own that he'd had enough. He pulled out a wad of plastic money and threw it at her.

"Why don't you fuck off," she said. But she still picked up the cash – three times the amount of his bill.

He smudged a streak of booze on the table and licked his finger. The enabler materialized again.

"I'm sorry sir," she said, pronouncing the last word with obvious reluctance. "We need this table."

"I daresay you do. Give me a sec alone and I'll be out of your hair. Cross my black fucked heart."

She made a noise and left.

He picked up his glass and crossed the street. Anna's face shrivelled. Millard turned just as the glass came down. It shattered. Millard's head went one way and then the other. Matisse held the bottom of the glass. He was going to ram into his face. But then a line came into his head: a poet cannot be a murderer. It was like a miracle, a line he'd heard somewhere coming back just at this moment. He stopped, and then ran. At the end of the block he looked back once and got a glimpse of Anna's broken face.

He went to the mountain because it seemed like the safest place. He could hardly breathe. His hand was bleeding. Wading through the grass and tins and other scraps, he thought: a poet cannot be a murderer.

But would he have died?

It didn't matter. There was a line. He could break a glass on the fucker's head, but he couldn't stab his face. An artist couldn't stab.

He stood at the wall, waiting for whoever might come. From here he could see into their flat. Once a shadow passed in front of the window, and it occurred to him that it would be a lot easier for her to see him than the other way around. She could stand and watch him all night if she wanted.

He sold a bag to some woman he saw at least once a week. The strange

thing was she still didn't look too bad. Most regulars ended up looking like something dug up out of one of those graveyards you saw up the town.

A rich cunt pulled up, his car vibrating with a kind of musical hum. Every year their cars sounded slightly cooler than the last.

"Let's see it," the fuck said. The tints on his glasses swirled and dissolved, revealing giant insect eyes.

Matisse just looked at him.

The shithead took out a Western thousand. It caught one of the searchlights and flashed purple. Matisse took out his gear. The asshole took his time on his knees, checking it out. Finally he decided it wasn't quite what he was looking for.

"Awright, you do me," he said, unzipping.

Matisse took him into his mouth for one slurping high-octane sec, and then pulled back and said: "you do know this costs an extra 200, eh?"

"Eh, sure."

"An Eastern 200."

"Fine!" the fucker snapped. "Just get on with it."

Much to Matisse's relief, he finished in under a minute. His cum tasted like stale fertility. Sentimental music came wailing down from above, a guard's jest.

"Why you doing this?" the guy asked afterwards, taking a closer look at Matisse. They never looked closely beforehand, probably because it would spoil the mood.

"I have to pay for school," Matisse said.

"What are you studying?"

"Art."

"You trying to be an artist?"

"Yes."

"You must want it real bad."

"More than anyone has ever wanted anything."

The guy seemed to consider. He put his hands on his hips.

"Do you really need school, though? The artist has to be separate. It comes from in here." He touched his chest.

"Don't be a fucking idiot," Matisse said.

"Shit, just trying to help. Asshole." He got in his car.

When he was gone Matisse punched the wall. The cum was sticky and horrible on his tongue, but it was like something that had come from his own body. Like there was so much poison inside him it was seeping up into his mouth.

For two nights after Anna had kicked him out he'd lived on the streets and slept at the mountain, but then he'd found a room up north near the Park X train station. The room was empty except for a bed and a chair, and everyone on his floor shared the same wash basin, and late at night he could hear the Francex leaving the station.

The first thing he bought when he got some cash was an easel and some painting supplies. He pushed the bed into the corner and set up his studio in the middle of the room. It dominated the space, just as it should.

He was at a bit of a roadblock with "Jesus's Birth," so he tried his hand at one of those post-Ars Moriendi paintings that were all the rage right now. It was nothing really, just a bit of fun, but he managed to get into it, and was surprised at how comfortable he felt with the brushes. These days the subject of a post-Ars Moriendi was always a child in pain, a rather mundane inversion of the original Ars Moriendi paintings, which always dealt with some codger's death throes. The implication of the post-movement was that suffering forms the bookends of life, but that the viewer is free from it, by virtue of being neither too old nor too young.

To Matisse both the original and post-movements seemed stupid and establishment, so while he used the same medieval style in his painting he changed the subject. Instead of a child or a dying geezer, he painted Anna. He wanted to give her an entirely neutral expression, set against a neutral backdrop.

He thought it would be painful, but found it wasn't. He'd included her in plenty of pieces already, and he'd always found it easier to do her when he wasn't actually looking at her. Apparently having her gone altogether helped too.

He struggled with the lower part of her face, though. After a few tries he realized a neutral expression couldn't just be a blank one. A blank look was actually a hostile look. But maybe that was the point? No, he decided. No, it wasn't.

Eventually he settled on a very slight smile. Her mouth didn't look like it belonged in the painting. It was like a sticker in a model train kit that you just stick on some random place because you can't figure out where it's supposed to go. After looking at it from all angles he decided he liked the effect. When he looked out the window he saw the sun was setting, again. He'd been working for over thirty hours straight.

Two hours later he was still awake and holding an empty flask. His

incendiary was upright on the floor next to two unsmokable roaches. He was staring at the painting. "Anna: A Post-Ars Moriendi Concept." He was getting more and more agitated. He'd seen this painting somewhere before, or something so similar it might as well be the same thing. Where the fuck had that been? It was driving him crazy that he couldn't remember, not the least because it could only have been a few places: the new gallery, the old one, the middle one, or in class. Fuck, why couldn't he remember? Or maybe he was just torturing himself. Because, after all, it had turned out really well. So maybe he was just convinced it was too good to be true and he was trying to ruin the sense of good-will by telling himself he'd actually copied another artist's work.

He tilted the flask over his mouth and moved his tongue across the lip. Finally he picked up his blade and slashed a big X across the face of the canvas.

"There, it's done," he said. When he realized part of him actually was trying to figure out whether the X gash had after all improved it he drove the blade again and again into the surface until there was nothing left but scraps on the floor. Carefully, he placed the blade on the easel and went lay down on the bed.

It never occurred to him that it had been an act of violence against Anna. Because it hadn't been.

The inside of the Grand Music shop in Centre-Ville was vintage M.C. Escher. The physics-defying room was a model of organization and shopping efficiency and control.

He walked from platform to platform as fits and starts of music flitted through his mind from the pods mounted on the walls. People in fancy caps and jumpsuits mulled about. Somewhat dapper in his rented denim, he selected a handful of memory chips from the shelves. He was going for quality, not quantity. When he figured he was starting to get conspicuous, denim or not, he strolled towards the exit. As soon as the alarm went off he sprinted. He hadn't counted on the doors locking themselves, and he went ploughing headfirst into the glass. It was theft-proof, and he bounced, his head like a tennis ball lobbed at a stationary racket. He was still conscious when he hit the floor, and he managed to get his blade out before the security landed on him. Afterwards he didn't even remember that he'd grabbed for the blade, which was funny because that was what fucked him.

After three unmentionable days in the holding cell, the guard came and told him he had a visitor. He sat in front of a monitor and Anna's face appeared, looking CG. They still couldn't get it right.

"Is it really you?" he asked.

"I was just wondering the same thing."

"We should've made up a codeword."

"Yes. I can't believe we didn't anticipate this situation."

"It's definitely you."

"It's definitely you."

"Well?"

Anna, Anna's face, her image, whatever, looked reflective. A prism glinted in one eye and then the other.

"I was worried about you," she said.

What a disease I've been, he thought. To her and to everybody else. He remembered a history lesson about parents from when he was a kid. The teacher had been prattling on, and Matisse had raised his hand and asked why they didn't have parents anymore. "Because it was ridiculous," he'd snapped at Matisse, not his favourite student by a long shot. "Two people who's entire lives are devoted to worrying about you. Would you want that?" No, Matisse admitted now. No he wouldn't.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" she asked.

"I was thinking I could get away with it."

"Well, I was going to ask you how your head is but I can see it's working at its usual high level."

"You came here to insult me?"

"I told you why I came here," she said. The prisms glinted again, exactly the same as the last time.

"I can't deal with you," he said. Her mouth opened. "You or anyone else. If I think about all of this too much I'm going to finish myself off just like that. My life," he made a gesture, as if to show the scope of his life, "isn't worth shit. It never has been. The only good part of me is the work. It takes up everything. There's nothing left over. Nothing else is worth shit."

Her head shook from side to side, and her hair left graphic streaks on the screen. "When you say that you know it follows that I'm not worth shit."

"It doesn't follow."

"It does. I care about you. I love you."

"I love you."

“You love art,” she spat and crimson glowed in her cheeks. “No, not even. You love your art.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He was crying. “I can’t help it. When I walk down the street I see the blend of colours and the shadows and the shapes but most of all the way it could all be brought together into something rising right out of this frozen fucking piece of shit we call a world. I dream at night about the frame, the view into something else, something more. It’s a vision, right out of my own mind into this world to take it and bring it back inside and then back out again, like a train running a loop but coming out the other end like something you’d only see in a romanian revolution hallucination. It’s the dreams at night, the way they tell you everything if you let them. And when I wake up I can’t breathe. I can’t –” he pressed his hands to the sides of his head. “I can’t – I don’t want to be some rich famous fucking choad but I do!” He looked at her helplessly. “I want to be an artist.”

“Matti,” she said softly. “What does this have to do with you needing to go out and steal and do drugs and fuck whores and humiliate me?”

He looked at her for a long moment. The pips came on, counting down the time.

“I want to die,” he said.

Softly, kindly, she said exactly what he didn’t want to hear, what he couldn’t handle.

“You can’t. You know that, don’t you? Death is dead.”

There was only one way out: total self-abjection. Which was easy enough. He cried. He lamented. He informed a roomful of people he’d never met that he was a disease, a toxin, a carcinogen. Nothing he had ever done had ever been worth a tin shit to anybody, not even himself. There were whisky dicks hanging out at the wall who had accomplished at least ten times as much as he had. He was a shit stain on a poison ivy leaf. He was the inside of a leper’s anus after it’s been raped by a leprophiliac. He was the scab on a skag-head’s dick at the moment it breaks as he’s raping a girl scout.

The jury looked at him like they weren’t sure whether to applaud or cry or lynch him. The judge grunted and suspended the sentence, seeing as nobody was hurt. And Matisse managed to restrain his laughter until he was well and truly out of Centre-Ville.

But theft wasn’t like drugs or whoring. He knew the heat would be heavy. When he got back to his flat he found the only piece of mail he’d

received when he was inside was a letter from Cornelius McGillicuddy informing him of his expulsion.

Fluorescent plastic skeletons hung from the trees. They never took the Halloween decorations down. The oratory looked good in the mix of green skeleton light and yellow sun. It was just at that stage in its life where it looked old enough to be majestic but young enough to alleviate concerns about toxins and structural problems.

Matisse spotted the guy with the torrent wave near the entrance. It seemed he was one of those people who just keep turning up, to the point where you start to think it's by design – his, or fate's, or even yours. The camera around his neck made him look pretentious.

“What are you doing?” Matisse asked

“Getting some shots.” He held the camera at arm's length and snapped the dome. “I'm doing Montreal.”

“Well I guess sometimes you need to drop the hunt for the dolphin's ass and just take a bitch who's been broken in.”

The guy with the torrent wave looked confused, but he still laughed.

“I heard you were in the bass.”

“I was,” Matisse said. “I needed to sort myself out for money one way or another so I pulled an all or nothing at the Grand Music. And I got the nothing.”

“That why Anna kicked you out?”

“Mr. why are you so interested in all the things that are fucked up in my life anyway?” Matisse asked, staring hard. Still holding his camera out front the guy turned his head slowly and met Matisse's look. Matisse was the one who looked away.

“Because I know what you need,” he said. Without looking, he snapped a photo. “Believe it or not I'm trying to help you.”

“That why you're following me?”

“I'm not following you,” he said. Again Matisse had the sense that he was earnest. “I know what you need,” he repeated. “Do you really want to be an artist?”

“Yes,” Matisse said. No matter who asked it in what circumstances, he could never take the question cynically.

“You know the Francex?”

“Sure. I hear it every night.”

“We're going to Park de Boot de Ill. You know where that is?”

"I'm sure I don't."

"That's where the Francex leaves the island. You might be interested to know that it passes through there at 800 mp/h. That's the only piece of the plan I'll tell you for now. Be there or be square."

"Are you saying what I think you're . . . ?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?" he said, turning back to his camera.

"One thing I forgot to ask. How's Millard? Millard's head?"

"Millard," Anna said, saying his name the same way someone leaving a toilet stall would say "clogged" to the next guy in line. "Millard is a train wreck. But I suppose you knew that all along." She tossed down her caffè latte like it was a shot. For the first time he noticed she'd cut her hair since he'd last seen her, in the bass. It was for the better; her hair grew all which ways and turned into a virtual cane wave at the first touch of humidity.

"I'm seeing some new choad," she said, casually squashing hope just seconds after she'd revived it. "An Eastern guy."

"Fuck off."

She sighed and checked her watch.

"How the fuck did that happen?" he asked.

"What a small world you live in," she said.

"You called me here just to insult me," he said.

"In part."

"Here" was a café terrace on the first level of the Richard complex. All around them throwback ramps and stairwells stretched down vistas, like concrete rays shooting out from a concrete sun. Matisse felt out of place, and suspected Anna did as well, despite her front. He only half listened as she went on about the Eastern guy, about how they were really interesting if you got to know them, but, of course, nobody ever did, they were too busy building walls around their lives, shrinking their worlds. And trying to make shite art – she didn't say but might as well have. Suddenly she came out with a strange question.

"Do you know what ethnicity you are?"

There was a smugness to it, so Matisse dropped his immediate response and then spent too much time thinking about it.

"English," he said at last.

She threw back her head and laughed.

"Oh you poor boy you haven't a clue," she said. "Ricardo knows."

It took him a moment to realize Ricardo was the new guy's name. "He's French." She lowered her voice. "He speaks French. Crazy, eh?"

Smiling, Matisse leaned back. It was the bliss of one-upmanship, a once in a lifetime chance to burn your bitch of an ex.

"As impressed as I am by that you have to admit that it rather looks like something along the lines of a heap of gorilla shit next to me when I tell you that I am going to France."

"I guess it'd be different if he was Quebecky . . . there might be problems. Political intrigue," she said, not without wistfulness.

"Anna," he said. "I – am – going – to – France."

"No. No you're not."

"Paris."

"Either crazy or lying. I don't know which one." Giggling, she sparked her incendiary. A joint had appeared between her lips. "We lived together for three years, and I don't even know which one."

"Do you know what Park de Boot de Ill is?"

"Your nickname for your choad?"

"It's where the Francex leaves the island."

"So?"

"That's where I'm going."

She shook her head with a kind of mock pity. He knew exactly what she was thinking: I got him here to show off and make him jealous, and here he is ruining it – not because he isn't jealous, but because this crap about going to Paris is too pathetic to be enjoyable.

"This is good-bye," he said, in a neutral voice.

But was it? It occurred to him that maybe torrent wave had something else in mind. He hadn't actually said the plan was to hop the Francex. But then what else could he have meant? Matisse went over the things he had said. Do you want to be an artist? I want to help you. It's doing 800 when it passes through. The last one was a problem, but, then, he'd said he had a plan.

Going over it all, Matisse figured it couldn't be anything else. And as soon as he'd accepted it, he felt a mad excitement. Paris! The artistic centre of the world! What would it be like? Photos and videos of other places were prohibited, so all he had to go on was stuff he'd read and some vague rumours. Soon he would know.

There should have been a lot to do before he left, but only one thing

stood out as actually important. Back in his painting class at Cornelius McGillicuddy he was greeted by some very strained smiles. He found the instructor and told him he wanted to get his works. The instructor shook his head.

“Displaced, dismantled, disposed,” he said.

Matisse felt the room spin around.

“What, all of them? ‘Jesus’s Birth?’”

“No room,” the instructor said. “Why do you want it anyway? Where would you put it? Hell, how would you even move it?”

“So there’s nothing left.”

“Check the admin building. I think they’re supposed to keep one or two. For records and stuff.”

“Three works,” the admin person said, smiling like he’d just accomplished something.

“Great,” Matisse said. It was better than he’d hoped. The admin guy took him to the records department, a strangely cold room with a bunch of drawers built into the walls.

“Three works,” the admin guy said, pulling out one of the drawers. It only came six inches or so. Inside were two folded up sheets of paper and a piece from “Boondoggle,” a project he’d finished over a year ago. “Boondoggle” had been a puzzle with 200 pieces. Each piece contained a picture of a place, usually a room, with a bed in the middle of it. There was no overall pattern, so all you had to go on was the shapes of the edges to put the puzzle together. But if you looked closely at each piece (you’d need a magnifying glass and some aspirin) you could get the gist of the narrative – which, in Matisse’s opinion, covered basically the entire history of humanity.

The piece that had been left behind showed a white hospital bed with a rotten jack-o-lantern on it. The room looked very hip and fashionable, with slanted ceilings and funny shaped windows in odd places. The furniture was heavy and dark. Stickers and papers full of right-on political slogans were tacked to the walls. There were fans in front of all the windows, and, standing in a corner like a pruned plant, a mystifier blew clouds of water over the bed.

The two papers were forms he had filled out when he’d first been admitted.

He slipped the piece from “Boondoggle” into his pocket and left the forms in the drawer.

The guy with the torrent wave came to his flat to pick him up. He had his camera around his neck.

“What a shithole,” he said, looking around the room.

“I’ll cut you a new one,” Matisse said.

“Easy. Mine isn’t any better.”

“I don’t care,” Matisse said. He hadn’t taken his blade out, but he was holding it in his pocket. Instead of backing away, torrent wave moved closer and put his hand on the back of Matisse’s neck.

“Easy. You’re a hot young man. Has anyone ever told you that? You’re like Vindaloo with crushed chilli peppers on it. You have to learn to adapt a bit better.”

“They’ll have to adapt to me,” Matisse said. He meant it, too. The more he thought about, the more confident he became. He felt ready to storm Paris all at once.

“I heard you couldn’t get your gear back from Cornelius McGillicuddy.”

“Where exactly did you hear that?”

“The grapevine,” he said.

“I don’t care,” Matisse said. “There was value in all of those pieces, but it was all just the work of the amateur. The limitations of youth. No matter what you do you come up against them. If a master chef has an unhealthy addiction to salt, then everything he makes will be too salty, no matter how good he is at anything else. Art is the same. If you have some hang-up, it shows up in everything you do, no matter how brilliant it is. I’m moving on.”

“What was your hang-up?”

Matisse went through a couple responses before settling on one that seemed to sum up everything.

“Montreal.”

Torrent wave looked confused, but he still laughed.

He took Matisse to a café near the very north of the island. The weather was humid, and haze rose off the mainland behind the fibreglass facing and suspended walkways where guards patrolled. They sat in the café for close to three hours, and then all at once the guards disappeared. Matisse had never seen anything like it; it was like walking outside and seeing that all the trees were gone.

“We’re for it,” torrent wave said. And just like that they climbed a ladder to the top of the wall and then down the other side. Afterwards Matisse

realized he should have taken a moment to check out the view, but he was too shit-up to even stop.

He didn't have time to think about being on the Eastern side for the first time either. Torrent wave took him on a series of buses so complicated and circuitous that he quickly lost track of where they were. All he could think was that the buildings looked more run-down over here.

The sun had long since set by the time they got to Park de Boot de Ill. Crickets were chirping, and Matisse could hear the sea. Not in any definite way, but as a kind of background to the noise in his mind. It was creepy.

They climbed a ladder to the top of a cement platform. They were above a set of railroad tracks that led back into an opening, like a tunnel. The tracks disappeared off into darkness the other way. The last stubborn stars glinted overhead.

"We're here," torrent wave said. He bent and tapped a bell that was hanging from a metal hook. A wire trailed from the bell down towards the tracks. "This is where the Francex comes out. Through there," pointing at the tunnel, "and above ground most of the way until it exits off the Maritimes. By the time it passes through here it's doing 800."

"So how do we do it?" Matisse asked.

"It's tricky. But this bell is the key. The wire is hooked up to the track aways down in the tunnel. When the train's coming the track starts vibrating. The wire starts twitching. The bell rattles a bit. Then, at the right moment, it dings. That's when you jump."

"Jump?"

"Yes. Not up. You just want to drop down. Not that it makes a difference for you, you understand, but you want the maximum impact. If you're early it'll just run you over and nobody will notice. If you're late you'll ricochet off the top. Picture a baseball going foul off the top of a bat. But if you're just right you'll be spread across the front of the windshield like diarrhoea from a guy who's eaten nothing but strawberry jam for the last week."

"Sir what the fuck are you taking about?"

"What are you talking about?" He suddenly looked very hard and very certain.

"I don't know I could be mistaken but it seems I just heard you say something about me jumping in front of the fucking train."

"And you becoming an artist. Did you hear that part too?"

"No, actually I didn't."

“Because it was implied. How are you going to be an artist if you’re not attuned to subtlety?”

“You’re fucking crazy,” Matisse said, laughing.

“Am I? It seems to me not so long ago I heard you talking about how the true artist can only reach the people after he’s dead. And here you’ve been cutting away your life piece by piece, like some crazy savage chopping off bits of his body because he thinks it’ll cure his flu. No shut up, I know exactly what I’m talking about. And you’re not dying you’re just driving yourself into the ground. You’ll just sink lower and the heat will come heavier and finally security will pin something on you and that’ll be that. I’m giving you an opportunity.”

For the first time Matisse noticed that he had expressive eyes. Strange, but up until now his face had usually made Matisse think of a cat sitting in a sunbeam. But he didn’t look at all like a cat. How could he have thought that he did?

“This is your chance for political art,” he went on. “Living hyper-politicized art pushed to its extreme, right out there on the avant garde edge. Western artist sacrifices himself in the Eastern zone. At the extremity of the island. His dreams of Paris are splattered across the windshield of the Francex, an indictment of all the rich cunts curling their toes luxuriously as they pour champagne and settle in for the jaunt to Europe. Montreal is a prison. In-your-face art. It could be a new movement. And you want to die. You want to want to want to want to die. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Matisse said.

“But you’re afraid?”

There was a pause during which Matisse seriously considered the question. “How can I be?” he said at last. “I can’t, can I? I can’t die.”

“Not that I know of. That’s the point. Your insurance will get it, and you’ll be back in a Paris minute, as they say. Back and better than ever and famous. A famous artist. Or maybe,” he said, “you are afraid?”

Matisse could only stare. The thing was, fear hardly seemed relevant to the bizarre direction this thing had taken. In some fucked up way what he was saying even made sense, but the logic, if you could call it that, felt strange and foreign. This wasn’t Matisse’s artistic vision.

There was a faint noise, something that made you think of metal stretching. The bell gave its first rattle.

“It’s coming!” torrent wave said. He advanced, his camera held high. Matisse looked at his face, so different from what it’d been before, then at

the camera.

“Fucking lying piece of shit!” Matisse screamed, and he waded in, his blade out. Torrent wave shrieked and tried to run, but there was nowhere to go. Matisse swung the blade and torrent wave jumped backwards and fell down onto the tracks. The bell rattled, dk, dik, dick, ding! and Matisse got an aesthetic view of his eyes watching him as he crouched on the tracks with the camera limp in his hand. The torrent wave had become sweaty and dishevelled.

There was a roar and a rush and the Francophonic Express passed in a frenzy of silver and light. It was gone in a second, like a piece of debris snapped into a black hole. Only the rear lights showed far down the line, until they too disappeared as the train moved off onto the mainland.

Very slowly, Matisse walked forward. He was afraid of what he was going to see. But there was nothing. No blood, no pulp, no sign that there had been a man there less than a minute ago. The tracks were empty. Matisse just stood there, flexing his hand. Something was wrong. Then he realized: what had happened to the blade? It too was gone. After thinking about it for a moment, he dug up a memory of throwing it away just after the train passed. But he couldn't be sure if it was real or not.

“Jesus Christ! Was that a deer?” the first mate cried. There was a liquid shape at the bottom of the windshield, like a splodge of paint. In the middle of it was a tuft of hair.

“That, my friend, was a person,” the driver said. He thumbed a button, and the dry clean came on. The stain disappeared, the hair dissolved. One strand hung on for a second like the last leaf in a fall windstorm before it too dissolved.

“Shouldn't we stop?”

The driver had been wondering this himself, but hearing the first mate suggest it he decided against.

“Nah, no point. We'd sit here waiting for security to show up and then they'd just tell us we can't do anything and might as well go on and that would be that. Only difference is we'd be a good three hours late getting into Paris.”

The first mate nodded. The driver's fingers moved across the control panel – which looked as cool now as it did when he'd first seen the inside of the Francex cockpit, as a kid. He turned on the intercom.

“Ladies and gentleman we encountered a mild obstruction on the

tracks. I just want to assure you that this will not cause delays.”

He touched another button, and winked at the first mate, who still looked a bit uneasy.

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “It was probably just some stupid kid playing around. Happens a lot, I’m sure. His insurance will get it.”