

CHRISTOPHER RING

GRAVEL BAR

MATHILDE TRACED THE LINES OF GROUT on the cell wall, searching for that departure point in habit and thought that had brought her to this moment. She tried to sketch a pattern of old hunts and game trails through the forests of Gaspé, but the tiles were square and geometric, unyielding to the flow of life. The chlorine stench burned her eyes. Doors clanked, footsteps scraped, security buzzers hammered, and everything echoed. The food, especially, was a lifeless gruel.

A faded map of New England was posted on the corridor wall with the city of Augusta, Maine—the location of her detainment—circled in black permanent marker. With that point on the map fixed in her mind, Mathilde puzzled the route of her detainment. Now, after eleven days, she traced the path of her extradition back. The Canadian authorities had brokered her release, but neither effort located that emotional point that brought her to this situation. So, Mathilde settled on a moment weeks before, when she notched the scope on her .30-06 Springfield as a bull moose rose out of the St. John River—the border between Quebec and the U.S.

The moose's dark shoulders and back had breached the surface like a rising submarine, broad and long. The sight of him took her breath away. Sheets of water had cascaded off the bull's rack, raining tendrils from his dewlap. The current in the back eddy split around his stone-like mass. She'd dreamed of such a clear shot for six years. There had been other potential kills: a young bull that may or may not have been legal size, a gothic-looking old male wading in the marshes of Val Oakes that was too old for good meat, and a beast just across the channel on Caton Island that was well within range but on the wrong side of the international border.

None of those moose were her current quarry's equal. The bull's rack alone spanned four feet, and his coat was a dark, loamy brown. The animal packed enough meat to feed a family of four until the decade was out. But Mathilde had no family to feed. There was just a small circle of friends fond

of her obsession and the provisions it offered: deer, caribou, the occasional beaver. The last she'd stewed with such skill that they demanded she quit her photo editor job at *Innover* and open a restaurant. Mathilde couldn't imagine running a restaurant. She'd have no time to hunt the game that set her meals apart.

Mathilde watched the moose dive and pondered his story: the struggles of his first venture alone; his battles with rival males; his encounters with bears, men, and maybe wolves. Sated at last, the moose mounted the cobble shore, shook off the water, cleared his nostrils with a grunt, and sniffed the air. Mathilde stood downwind on an elbow of land that jutted into the St. John River, looking east into a wide eddy. The morning sun behind her bathed the riparian edges in a lava-like glow. Another advantage. Sometimes it was this light that brought her to the river's edge, not her prey. Her Gran Pepe had called it a time of invitation and forgiveness. *Le heure du invitation et clemence*.

Mathilde notched the scope on her rifle another click as the moose turned broadside to her and hesitated. The cross hairs painted clearly on the kill shot, but the touch of cold steel triggered a feeling of loss. Such giants were rare, as a plague of winter ticks had been decimating the population. Though the old timers disagreed as to whether or not this was an issue of climate change or mismanagement, one and all lamented their dwindling size. Mathilde was too young to witness this change, but a recent trip to the Museum of Nature in Ottawa seemed to validate their claim. The dioramas from one epic to the next dwindled in size. Time, she reckoned, had a habit of shrinking the earth's great creatures. Mastodons to elephants. Giant short-faced bears to brown bears. Dire wolves to timber wolves. Even the land was shrinking beneath a global tide.

Resigned to these truths, Mathilde took a breath and unlocked the safety. The moose stood before her chewing a bolt of pondweed. The cool trigger warmed to her finger. Her Gran Pepe had taught her to initiate the pull like slowly drawing back a curtain. She'd hunted for long enough that she could feel when the firing pin was engaging and could sense that line of tension between life and death. Later, she decided that it was not a change of heart but the flash of fly line that stopped her, as an orange thread of light split the air above the river line over her right shoulder. The thread divided the horizon in her periphery twice more as she held the bull in her sights. Then it floated down into the river flow, rippling sideways towards her. With a

sigh, she snapped the safety back on.

The bull immediately turned her way, but Mathilde focused on the angler, who was standing a dozen yards off on one of the shifting islands—an undeclared territory along the border generally referred to as *no man's* land. The angler absently stripped the fly line, but she noticed that his eyes were fixed on the moose. She thought at first that it was a shared sense of awe, but the meaning of the angler's stare became self-evident when she turned back towards her quarry. The moose had closed the gap between them to twenty metres. Its ears lay flattened back, and the long hairs on its hump bristled.

"Ne vous inquiétez pas," she said. *"Se detendre."*

Don't worry. Relax. But Mathilde was worried. In close quarters, moose charge when threatened, but given space, they always take the path of prey animals—that is, flight. This bull, though, had walked assertively towards her, calm as a king. Lacking a good shot as it faced her, she receded into the shrubs and did the only thing she could: run.

She fled directly across a thumb of land and stumbled into open territory. Branches snapped, and the understory crashed behind her. Pine scent tinged the air. The river was her only option. With her Springfield held overhead, she trundled two steps into the sweeping bend of the St. John and immediately sank chest high. She could feel her boots filling with cold water as the current swept her downstream. It was only a matter of seconds before she heard the gut-wrenching laughter of the angler and felt his hand seize the fabric on her shoulder. She was swimming in three feet of water.

"Jesus Christ," the angler said. "Talk about spoiling a hatch."

Mathilde shook herself free—she'd heard enough condescension from the "man's world" of hunters—but when she looked up she realized that the angler was a woman. That woman let Mathilde catch her breath as they watched the moose recross the back eddy. He snorted his way up the bank, announcing himself to ovulating females as he faded into the dark forest. Mathilde felt the hot flush of embarrassment.

The American peeled back her Orvis hat and combed back her bobbed hair. She had a boyish look about her, like a young Rob Lowe crossed with Charlize Theron.

"Ayup," she said, offering a hand. "Been watching that bruiser for weeks now."

Mathilde followed the angler's gaze up to the high sun. Wordlessly, the angler stripped back her line, snipped off the fly, and broke down the two-

piece.

"The hour of invitation is over," Mathilde said. Perfect English.

"I like that," the American said. "Yours?"

"My Gran Pepe."

The American nodded.

"Let's get you some dry clothes. I know a shallow gravel bar you can cut back on."

They crossed the shifting island in silence. In a month, Mathilde knew, it might not be there. She'd witnessed the river changing over many seasons. Every nor'easter introduced her to a different story. Traces of old paths and game trails could be found for decades. Even the landscape on the American side looked little different from her first hunt there, including that strange Yankee penchant for planting Old Glory everywhere and a tendency to place a road alongside everything pretty. The river, though, was always in flux. Its changing course always intrigued her.

They crossed a shallow flow to a dark blue Toyota 4Runner parked on the road's edge. There were scums of rust around the dented wheel wells and a dozen stickers on the rear window: *Fly Gal*, *Trout Unlimited*, *The Tug is the Drug*, and *Coexist*. The entire vehicle was coated in dust.

"I heard you say something back there to the moose," the American said.

"I just told him not to worry."

The American laughed again—a big hearty cough that reminded Mathilde of venison stew and the cold winter nights of her youth.

"Must have been an American moose."

"Why?"

"Well, he certainly doesn't speak French."

Mathilde didn't often feel at ease with new acquaintances. She'd spent much of her life working behind a glass optical for that reason—the magnifying lens of her work, the scope of her rifle—but already she wanted to hear that laugh again.

"Now he's what do you call . . . an illegal alien?"

Mathilde stripped out of her shirt and was just pulling the American's camouflage hoodie over her chest when they spotted the white and green Customs and Border Patrol car rounding a bend in the river. Mathilde looked around nervously. Crossing an international border with a weapon was no small matter.

“You better go. I’ll get your gun to you. I promise.”

“But I don’t even know your name.”

The American dumped a tangle of fly rods out of a hard protective case and slid Mathilde’s rifle inside.

“My name is Kim. Now go.”

Mathilde crossed a wide rocky bar not seventy-five metres away just as the customs officer parked behind the 4Runner. She felt unsteady in the current but wasn’t sure if it had more to do with the angler than the water. She hadn’t even told Kim her name.

Mathilde felt the absence of her grandfather’s rifle like a lost appendage—it itched. The rifle wasn’t simply a tool for killing game; it was also a piece of her family history and the one item she’d kept for herself after Pepe died half a decade before. She kept it on a rack in the pantry right above the spices and her homemade rubs. The rifle belonged there every bit as much as a carving knife. Cursing herself, Mathilde lifted a bottle of cognac off the rack and set it on the stainless steel countertop. She poured out a quarter cup for the partridge *Coq au Vin* she was preparing and a tall glass for herself. Food and the hunt were always intertwined in her life, even as a child growing up on the Gaspe Peninsula.

She first hunted at age nine. Her father’s fishing boat had been forced to shelter at Sable Island by three weeks of late autumn storms. While her mother graded schoolwork at home, Mathilde hiked the bluff overlooking the harbour several days running, searching in vain for his trawler. Gran Pepe found her there one afternoon. He was carrying a small pack and his rifle.

“This is the problem with fishing,” he said. “Too much unknown.”

They walked the treeless ridgeline, Gran Pepe pointing out arctic rock cress and dwarf willow growing between the ledges. From there he led her down a steep ravine peppered with black trumpet mushrooms. Mathilde held them closely to examine their pores. Later, squatting at the edge of a high mountain meadow, white tail deer crept out of the yellow birch stand to feed on wildflowers. The grey Atlantic rolled beyond it.

Gran Pepe unslung his rifle and winked.

“Why hunt invisible creatures in the deep when you can walk the woods with me and see your prey with two eyes.”

But he didn’t pull the trigger.

"Too young," he said, giving her a view through the scope. "We'll let him mate another season."

Crossing a wet meadow in the browning light, he detoured off trail to check a trap. Lifting a beaver from the iron gate, he rubbed his belly with a smile.

"You should be a part of your food from beginning to end," he said. "Meme will be happy tonight."

After dinner, Mathilde studied Pepe from the bottom step of the stairwell while he sketched in his journal by the woodstove. She had known about his obsession with hunting, but she'd never stalked the woods with him before. Already she felt much closer to him.

"Come, look," he said.

There in the pages he had chronicled each of his kills with a sense of love for the animal. In some cases he had written notes. He called them eulogies for the magnificent beasts. *Eloge pour bêtes magnifique*.

"What is it that you love so much about animals?" she asked.

"Because for animals there is no tomorrow or yesterday. No separation."

Mathilde liked the idea of timelessness. She was tired of counting time for her father's return.

"An architect is a builder of borders," Gran Pepe continued. "All day I draw lines and walls. But animals have no borders. They have only their instinct to guide them. Yes, I love my animals. I give them thanks."

Mathilde returned to the river a week later. She had little faith she would find Kim, but she had to go. Her story was written in the Springfield, though she doubted anyone at the national registry would sympathize. Lost firearms were a serious matter, though hers wasn't so much lost as cached across an international border. Her thoughts were equally occupied with Kim—the woman with strong hands and lips like azalea blooms. Mathilde wanted to see her and hear her gruff laugh again.

She was twenty-five, but she'd had few relationships in her life. There was a boyfriend in secondary school, who was more interested in Gran Meme's dishes of game; a classmate at McGill, who scripted adult life like a classic family caricature; and a brief affair with a married engineer from Montreal, who referred to her as "Ti-Jean"—a wild and wily character in Quebec folklore. None of those relationships ever felt intentional. Mathilde

had been stalking animals in the woods for so long that direct interaction seemed more and more alien. Yet with Kim, that's what she wanted.

She stopped short of the border checkpoint in Claire. Two hundred metres away she could see the Paradis Shop & Save and the North Country Angler—friendly businesses that welcomed her with open arms. Entry into the U.S. was not an issue; being found on the U.S. side with an unregistered rifle was.

Ten miles upstream, Mathilde followed a trail of pale, pink leaves back to the big eddy. The water level had dropped significantly. The gravel bar had doubled in size, and the roots of cottonwood and silver maple poked through the undercut banks. She crossed the channel easily, but the only sign of life on the far side was the line of American flags flapping in the wind.

Mathilde snorted in mockery of herself. Of course there wouldn't be anyone waiting! She shamefully remembered the feeling of prey animal flight as she forded the river a week before, leaving her grandfather's rifle with a stranger. She was still fuming at herself an hour later, when she heard the bull moose in the shallows. It stared at her, and she stared back. Killing it, she realized, would be a terrible mistake. She might never see such a magnificent creature again. To her surprise, the moose seemed to invite her with a nod as it climbed the river bank.

Mathilde felt limbless without her rifle, and she felt exposed among the thinning trees. She followed the moose cautiously, convinced it would turn southwest along the river towards wilderness. Instead, it kept heading north towards farms and open fields, tracking nearly the same path she had followed down to the river. Despite thick woods, its great strides made fast progress, and she quickly lost the trail. Catching a familiar tree cut, she worked her way back towards the trailhead, wondering if she would ever track down her rifle. Rounding a corner, head down, she nearly bumped into another hunter, but it was only Michael Cloutier—the farmer whose land she hunted.

"Ah, it's Mathilde," he said. "I didn't recognize the car. Is it yours?"

Mathilde apologized. "I should have told you. It's new."

"*C'est bon, c'est bon,*" he said, waving off her apologies.

Michael had dark, caterpillar eyebrows and a thick shock of grey hair. He had always been kind to her, letting her park in his field and even use his barn to dress the game she killed. Often he watched, complimenting her

skill with a knife. She enjoyed dressing game as well, especially deer. The heat and blood never bothered her. She thought of the muscle and sinew as evidence that for most of God's creatures the world still demanded a calculus of strength and agility, and she yearned for such basic terms.

"I was just tracking a big moose. Have you seen him?"

He nodded. "Yes, I saw it browsing willows at dusk under the edges of my field. But where's your rifle?"

She knew better than to lie. She'd been hunting from his land since university and never once arrived simply to scout or set up game cameras to gain an edge. She'd felt silly the first time she shared her principal of fair chase, but Michael agreed with her. Now she only felt like a child explaining her story of the week before. His concern made her think of Gran Pepe.

"Be careful," he said. "You remember the man in Estcourt?"

Mathilde remembered quite well. Only a few years before a Quebec man had been arrested for crossing the border with his rifle to fill up on petrol on the American side of Estcourt Station. Nothing but a blue painted line ran through the centre of town, dividing the two nations. To the locals that line was a trivial matter, but a zealous new officer from Texas had relocated to the small post. The Quebecois man was charged with smuggling a firearm across the border and heavily fined. Federal marshals had transported him to a detention centre in Boston while the immigration agencies sorted out the case.

"They confiscated his gun, too," Michael said. "Seize and destroy."

Mathilde felt a leaden weight just thinking of it.

She set up camp a mile below Michael's farm. She'd prepared a venison stew to reheat on her propane stove, half of which she left with him. That night, as her fire burned, she thought she saw the moose across the flames. When she got up to follow, the moose was gone.

"You've lost your mind," she told herself.

At dawn, Mathilde returned to the gravel bar once more, feeling foolish, but thirty metres from the river's edge she witnessed the orange fly-backing rippling in the morning sun. It knifed a liquid ribbon of light across the tree-line, dividing sky from river. Mathilde paused to let her pulse settle. And to watch, unnoticed.

For Mathilde, hunting big game was defined by an invisible hammer blow entirely unlike the silent stalking that preceded it. An animal stood before her; then it fell, like a card removed from stop-gap animation. Ev-

everything up to that moment, she knew, depended on her own actions and preparations. The bullet then took over. Fly fishing seemed altogether different—the prey unseen but sensed, every moment thread tight from the anglers hand to the fish's mouth, no magnification to aid. She braised the goosebumps on her arm with a hand.

"It's about time," Kim bellowed. "I've been waiting all morning."

Mathilde felt tongue-tied. She stepped forward, scanning the river.

"Don't worry. I got your rifle right there on the island," Kim said.

The fly line twitched, and Kim set the hook without even looking. Her pulse, she later explained, had to be connected to the water. The reel clicked speedily as the fish darted across the channel towards the deep cut shore. Then the line caught, and a burst of golden brown flaked out of the river. The brookie charged back upstream before veering off into the main current and running out the line. This time the line sheared across the current, but after a third run the fish gave up the battle.

"You've got to give it a last little run of freedom before . . ." Kim said as she knelt down in the eddy and scooped the fish out of the water.

"Before what?"

"Before we eat it."

On the gravel bar, Mathilde prepared a meal with the gear from her camp: a stove, a pan, oil, and a knife. She'd gathered hen of the woods mushrooms and a clutch of purslane in the forest. Slicing chunks of homemade venison sausages, she whipped together a simple cassoulet.

Kim stared blankly at the river as she slowly chewed the first bite. Mathilde watched anxiously.

"What is it about fishing you like so much?" Mathilde asked.

"I guess you could say fly fishing is more art form than hunt," Kim said.

A raft of mallards drifted by on the current.

"You made this just with the weeds you picked out of the woods!"

"And your fish. *Cassoulet sans haricots*."

"Sands hairy cots?"

"Without beans," Mathilde said.

"Good lord."

Leaning back against a driftwood log, Kim lifted the rifle off the gravel bar and sighted upstream. Mathilde was unaware of anyone ever holding the rifle but herself and Gran Pepe.

"The woman who taught me to fish called it 'the eloquent struggle,'" Kim said.

Mathilde stood paralyzed as Kim turned the rifle towards her. She had already locked the safety herself and removed the ammunition, but Kim was studying her through the scope. Her body felt wooden.

"You're pretty," Kim said.

Mathilde felt the crosshairs on her heart.

Mathilde shared the story of Pepe's rifle and all the game it had taken down like ancient folklore. They were cleaning their gear in the river when Kim pointed out the green and white border patrol car prowling Route 2 on the American side.

"Look," Kim said. "The Martian isn't sure what to do about us. These shoals are always crossing the border and back."

"Martians?"

"That's how I picture them since they're always in those cars. Little green men."

Kim took a cloth and wiped her bowl dry.

"Always a man showing up when you dry the dishes. That one's a real greenhorn."

"Greenhorn?" Mathilde wondered.

"Just moved here from Texas or something."

Mathilde tensed up with fear. Across the river, the border officer stood on the bank, watching them through binoculars.

"Wave," Kim continued. "Look natural."

Kim eased down into her camp chair and reached for another strip of dried caribou from Mathilde's sack.

"By the way, last week I told him you were out here chasing Big Foot."

"You didn't!"

"I don't even know what you do for work. What was I supposed to say?"

They returned the following weekend to the gravel bar and again twice more. They lugged backpacks filled with food and photo albums of their lives at home. Mathilde also brought copies of the magazine that employed her. She'd prepared the ingredients for her best recipes and waited anxiously for Kim's appraisal. On their third visit, Mathilde brought no food. If

necessary, she was happy to hunt mushrooms and berries, the wild herbs of the wood. Treks through a forest always filled her with hunger.

"I want to bring you somewhere special. On my side."

"Quebec? Now?"

Mathilde scanned the river corridor. The land was quiet, the river mumbling stories of a thousand generations of the animals she knew.

"You're serious."

"*Oui!*"

Hearing Kim's gruff tones as they climbed the bank into Quebec, Mathilde felt light underfoot, schoolgirlish. Little physically changed in the land from one side to the other, but she could feel a shifting of her own consciousness.

J'm'en calice', Mathilde thought. Fuck it.

"I swear, this is a felony," Kim said. "I'm a federal employee, you know."

"You are?"

"National Forest Service. If I get caught, I'll lose my job."

"Okay, but we have only an old farmer."

The woods surrendered to a wide open field of mown hay. At the top of the hill, smoke threaded out the chimney of Michael's farmhouse. Mathilde pointed to her small SUV parked at the edge of the stubble. Kim took a deep breath. Halfway down the rutted farm road, she burst into laughter.

"I pictured you driving a Mini Cooper, but where would you put a moose kill?"

Kim's voice startled her. It was the first time they had met without the sound of the river coursing, and her voice was lighter and her steps were quieter than Mathilde had realized.

In St. Francois de Medewaska, they drove to a small, shingled house with a red metal roof: the Café Les Anciens. The village itself consisted of little more than a post office, a petrol station, and a grocery store, but the café was busy. Mathilde loved the simple decor and the ordinary, rural people.

"Just wait 'til you eat it. *Mon dieux.*"

The owner hugged Mathilde, as did the chef.

"I trade fresh game and berries for recipes," Mathilde told Kim.

A handful of patrons tipped their heads to Mathilde as well.

"Why are they looking at us?" Kim asked.

"They think I am sharing my secrets."

Though she generally kept to herself, Mathilde was well aware of her reputation as the “Diana” of the woods, the goddess of the hunt. Some had even tried to follow her, but with Michael’s help her stalking remained private.

Mathilde ordered for both, awkward about the unintended machismo, but Kim shrugged.

“It’s not like I read French.”

Her lips reddened with a deep swig of wine.

“So,” Kim whispered. “I spend my winters in New Mexico, working for the forest service down there. Maybe I could take some frozen dinners to hold me over.”

Mathilde’s pulse quickened, but she tried not to let on. She’d heard nothing about New Mexico before.

“Maybe you can spend some time with me down there? I’d like that.”

Before Mathilde could answer, the chef arrived with a dish of poached trout. He proudly stood by the table, waiting for Mathilde to have a taste.

“Anton?”

“Okay, okay,” he said, walking away.

Then Mathilde watched Kim.

“Maybe as good as yours,” Kim said, reaching across the table. The smoothness of Kim’s hand surprised her. “Not better, and with no kitchen.”

“I had the forest.”

Mathilde ate slowly and waited for Kim to mention New Mexico again. They were holding hands over the remains of maple bread pudding when a provincial officer entered the restaurant. Kim immediately released her grip. He chatted warmly with the staff and took a seat in the corner. Kim was fuming as they drove away minutes later.

“You said no police stations all the way up to Rimouski.”

All Mathilde could think of was Kim’s gentle grip.

“I can’t believe I did this. What was I thinking?”

But Mathilde knew what she was thinking. The same feelings were coming over her.

“Why the hell are you smiling?”

Mathilde pulled over in a timber lot and caressed Kim’s cheek.

“You risked yourself for me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. It was the bread pudding.”

But the warmth of Kim's skin told a different story.

It was not until a week after Canadian Thanksgiving that Mathilde got up the nerve to invite Kim to her home. The weather had gotten too cold for riverside chats. The air whipped by North Atlantic winds. Feelings for a woman had never seemed possible before. Now she often thought about watching the weather under a blanket with Kim, but her imaginings of New Mexico would evaporate that dream. Kim had yet to bring up the topic again.

"A formal invitation?" Kim queried.

Mathilde pointed to the turnout on the American side of the river. The border patrol officer was scoping them once again.

"Don't worry about him. Waffles are still legal here."

"Maybe your Martian would like some"

Mathilde plucked a waffle from the lightweight grill pan and waved it. "Well, will you?"

"No passport," Kim said.

"No?"

"I used to cross all the time, but when you guys started demanding passports I decided not."

Mathilde scoffed. "It was your country."

"Yeah, I suppose, but I couldn't afford a passport then. I guess I just got used to not having one."

Mathilde dropped the steaming waffle on a tin plate.

Nothing could prepare her for the sight of Kim holding a bottle of Mrs. Butterworth's. Mathilde shuddered with disgust.

"Oh, you're one of those real maple syrup snobs."

"No," Mathilde said, feeling a flash of pride. "There's only maple syrup. So no, I don't eat your *sirop du poto*."

"The what?"

"Syrup of the telephone pole."

Mathilde snatched the bottle from Kim and tossed it aside.

"Whoo," Kim huffed. "I always thought you were a small woman, but I can see you've got the wolf in you."

Mathilde had heard the same comment before from men who couldn't understand her—city men put off by feminine independence. Coming from Kim, it seemed more like a compliment.

"The wolf?"

Kim removed another bottle from her pack and laughed. Pure maple syrup.

"Do that again but in French," Kim urged. "So beautiful."

Three days before their rendezvous Mathilde was pawing through her closet for just the right outfit. She could not recall ever fussing over clothing so much except for the interview that landed her the magazine job and Gran Pepe's funeral. She settled on an old pair of jeans and a simple white blouse. They met at Kim's home in Ashland—a yellow clapboard A-frame with weathered shingled gables and a woodshed filled to the rafters with split timber. Mathilde clenched her fists with embarrassment at the sight of a sugar house in a small clearing. Beyond that, a network of blue PE tubing ran down the upland of maple groves.

"My *sirop du poto*."

They began where relationship always do—with food. Mathilde set out a tray of smoked meats, venison rilletes, and beaver pate. While Kim stoked a fire in the Danish wood stove, Mathilde explored, picking up signs of trail, listening to the sounds of this new forest. There were some of the predictable trappings of a fly fisher: kitschy prints of anglers on mountain streams, antique-looking fly rods pegged to the walls, a stuffed Atlantic salmon. The backdrop, she noticed, was a stark contrast: white-washed birch plank walls, frameless photo prints of rivers, contemporary end tables, Scandinavian chairs, cement countertops, a block of good kitchen knives.

"Can I help?" Kim asked.

"Absolutely not."

While her Caribou roast warmed in the oven, Mathilde turned the pages of Kim's photo books. With few questions she learned that Kim had grown up not in the woods but on the shores of Nantucket. There was barely a photo of her with shoes on her feet. Over dinner they shared stories of their youth—the hunting girl of the Gaspé Peninsula and the maid's daughter of Nantucket billionaires. Mathilde wanted to hear it all.

"I thought you must have sprouted from a river," Mathilde said.

"And I thought you were born from a litter of wolves."

"I was."

Mathilde uncorked a second bottle of red, and they knocked it back like water. She watched Kim move about the cabin, looking for signs of where

the evening would lead. Firsts were always difficult for her, even her first hunt alone. The ground felt unstable beneath her feet, the path littered with tripping hazards. When Kim kissed her by the fridge, Mathilde was surprised.

“Here?”

She’d never been lost in a forest, but if there was ever such a feeling to match it, Mathilde was sure she was there now.

“Sorry. I don’t know how to do this.”

Kim hooked her pinky finger between the front buttons of Mathilde’s blouse, and Mathilde did the same to Kim. In her physical encounters with men, Mathilde always felt like she had acquiesced to a norm, not a desire. Now she wanted Kim simply because she was Kim. Her feelings were finally in focus. But there was only so much kissing one could do. When she slid off Kim’s shirt, her companion inhaled briskly.

“No?” Mathilde questioned.

Kim pulled her closer.

“Yes.”

Kim was first to get out of bed for dessert. She took a flannel hanging from a peg and stopped in the doorway.

“Why do I feel like a game animal right now?” Kim asked.

Mathilde growled.

Come morning, though, Mathilde felt something between them, like a downed tree. She carefully retraced the night before for an explanation. She was certain she had said something wrong or missed a sign.

“You look like you’re reading the river,” Kim said as she opened the woodstove and threw in a log. “You never answered about coming to New Mexico.”

Yes, Mathilde thought. Just a downed tree. Tripping hazard.

“You never brought it up again. I thought it was just . . . talk.”

“So this is just . . .?” Kim shrugged.

“No, no!”

“Well?”

“My job?”

“You’re not even happy with that job.”

The tripping hazards were accumulating faster than Mathilde could think.

“What will I do down there? Wait around like a mounted fish on a

wall?"

She regretted her comment the moment she said it, though she could not reel it back in. Everything about *them* felt so right, and she wanted to remain close to Kim, but the idea of hanging around unemployed for a woman she barely knew seemed crazy.

Their time together continued that weekend easily enough, but Mathilde felt like she was role-playing again.

"Next weekend?" Mathilde asked before driving home.

"Yes, but the weekend after?" Kim asked.

"On the river," Mathilde said.

Mathilde had secured a permit for her favourite hunt: expanded archery season. She loved the silence of it: leather moccasins, soft footsteps, whispering arrows. With a rifle, she exhaled before pulling the trigger. In archery, it was the bow that exhaled deep in the draw. That's where she felt with Kim: deep in the draw, wondering where their trajectory would lead.

"We'll hunt the gravel bars. Together."

Before they could, a colleague of Mathilde's came down with a case of pneumonia. She'd scheduled a Saturday interview with a rising female politician from the Gaspe Peninsula. Aware of Mathilde's origins, the editor-in-chief tapped her for the story.

"I know more about bobcats and caribou than I know about politics."

"*Mon dieux*, Mathilde. This is an opportunity." He dropped a folder of research on her desk. "Claudia worked diligently on this. Don't foul it."

The interview started poorly. Mathilde relied heavily on Claudia's notes, passing up opportunities for candour. Her mind was on Kim. While the politician spoke about the changing roles of women in society, Mathilde thought about Kim's ability to connect with the unseen—fish underwater, forests on land—and decided she should at least plan some time in New Mexico.

"Who is the cook in your household?" Mathilde asked, tired of political talk.

"These aren't gender roles that matter anymore. If you like to cook, cook. If it's your husband, he cooks."

"I prefer the traditional fair of *Les Anciens*," she added.

Mathilde's interest perked, and her shift towards the culinary warmed up the politician immediately—so much so that the editor floated the idea of sending her to Ottawa the following weekend for a follow-up.

"No," she said. "I have my Kim. You know this."

“Your what?”

“My permit,” she corrected. But the moment stuck.

A nor’easter buzzed through the region where Quebec and Maine joined. Shifting winds and heavy rains churned up surf as far west as Mathilde’s home on the St. Lawrence. A small road bridge was washed out, sending her on an infuriating detour. Downed trees had been moved off to the edges by utility crews, but a hail of splinters and tide-eaten road shoulders littered the tarmac. The road to Michael’s farm was rutted so deeply from the torrential wash that she parked early and jogged half a mile to the trailhead.

Mathilde was late in arriving. She hurried down the trail, dashing past winterberry and hornbeam, climbing blockades of deadfall, and pushing through the webbed branches of downed hickory. Old white pines were cracked open like celery sticks, fibrous and cellular, nothing but their wide plinths standing upright. She arrived at the shore panting and anxious, but the island was gone. A wide river curved away from her. Giant strainers formed from fallen oaks had shifted the river, its banks freshly strafed. Piles of debris backed up in the eddies, and tumbledown glacial boulders she had never seen before now split the current. There were so many new turns and sluiceways she could barely recognize the riparian edge. She knew she was in the right spot, but checked her GPS anyway.

Her heart sank into a warm pool of relief, hearing a splash in the wide eddy behind her, but it was not Kim; it was the bull moose. No animal had ever revealed itself to her so many times. She set the archery bow on a broken branch and took a deep breath. Then she removed a camera from her pack and zoomed in on the green shoots of vegetation sprouting from his mouth.

Soon enough the moose turned for shore. Mathilde slung the bow on her back and followed along the rocky edges of the St. John, hoping it would lead her towards Kim, as it had done once before. Downstream the St. John turned back on itself in a narrow U-turn and then again not much farther. The moose just ambled in a straight line, sniffing out the shallows. She wasn’t sure what country she was in but snorted at the idea of borders. They had nothing to do with the creatures of the world, and Mathilde realized that’s all she was: a creature of the world seeking a mate. Yes, she decided, she would go to New Mexico.

The decision barely had room to breathe in her consciousness when a

man stepped out from a boulder and blocked her path. Before she recognized the officer's uniform, she reached behind her back for the archery bow and cracked the man over the shoulder with it. Lucky, she later thought. If she'd had more room, she might have nocked an arrow at a federal officer.

The cell door opened with a clank and roll. Far down the corridor, marshals prepared to escort her back across the border. A provincial attorney had negotiated her release, but she had no idea who or how it had been orchestrated. She paused to look at the map on the wall, placing her finger on that point of arrival in her own self-understanding. Ten days prior, at nearly that same point, the border agent was ducking her head into the cruiser just as Kim splashed up the river bed, shouting curses. An officer blocked her path to Mathilde.

"Oh, Mathilde, I'm so sorry."

But Mathilde saw the scene as a succinct display of their potential future: three patrol cars with blaring sirens, lights shattering the bare branches, American flags hung from every telephone pole in sight. Across the river, thick forests stood silent. When Kim's muffled voice came through the glass, pleading about her girlfriend, the agents had snickered.

Now Mathilde was loaded into a white van and driven five hours north, past the countless gas stations and Kwik Stops, past upturned potato fields and ammo dealers, through boarded-up mill towns and the logging hamlets of the Maine North Woods. In Fort Kent she was escorted by foot across the bridge, and a Canadian officer met them midway. The marshal reminded her that she could not enter the U.S. for five years, but she had no intention of crossing again. She remembered the politician from her interview talking about the confines of expectations. She intended to live by her own expectations. A new border had already been crossed and taken down in her mind. She was excited to get to know her new self, and she silently thanked Kim.

Beneath the bridge the river was wide and deep, flowing according to the laws of physics and geography. She followed the St. John with her eyes, meandering without regard for anything but flow. A whittled oak snag stood in the middle of the river like a blank flag.